

The Voice of All the Gods

by R J Lupins Kat

RBHJ: Unwavering loyalty, social propriety, hierarchy of station. Regulus Black knew his place, his purpose, his duty. What he didn't know was himself. Enter the young woman who would make him question everything. Even his own heart. :Romance, Drama:

Chapter 1: III Musings

Chapter 1 of 13

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Author's Note: To all my patrons of The Valiant Never, and all new visitors, Welcome.

Though not quite a sequel, this companion piece is the tale of Regulus Black and his 'lost love' from The Valiant Never. It is not necessary to have read the previous story, but if you have, all the better. This has been in the works for months, yet only now have I the time to even finish the first chapter. It will not have nearly the complexity nor grandeur of TVN, but perhaps will entertain nonetheless.

What began as a promised diversion for a friend has found itself developed into a fully-fledged love story. Though most of Tia's background will be identical to that developed for my group's Marauder Era RPG, the plotline will not be the same.

Without further ado...

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The Voice of All the Gods

"And when Love speaks, the voice of all the gods Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony."

William Shakespeare, Playwright

Love's Labour's Lost Act iv. Sc. 3.

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Chapter 1: III Musings

26 October 1977

Bathed were the grounds far below, forgiving moonlight casting all hideous imperfections into soothing black void. Were his own faults so easily hidden, Regulus mused, a

taste of bitter lacing the thought. Brisk was the October air that chilled his dampened skin with the bite of stark reality on unprotected flesh. He shifted uncomfortably in his side perch upon the deep windowsill. Stone edges dug into ramrod straight back, as unforgiving as the perpetual edges of life upon which he continually stood. Never, it seemed, on the right side of the precipice.

"Why can't you be more like your brother?" Marlene McKinnon disliked his refusal to help her collect the books and notes she'd carelessly dropped in the Charms corridor.

"Sirius would never have done..." McGonagall didn't appreciate his less than congenial prank on Muggle-born Davis.

"Your elder brother..." Aedus Avery his own house! felt his ingenuity lacked in comparison.

Even out of his life, out of the family, his brother haunted him every step and turn. Shunned by all worthy purebloods, Sirius still managed to lay claim to all the adoration and higher comparisons. Disowned and disinherited, the girls still wanted him; the boys still wanted to be him.

Regulus' jaw tensed. Simply thinking of his brother brought out the worst in him, reminded him his faults as though Mother didn't do that well enough on her own. Father was too otherwise *occupied* to give more than a cursory word or glance to Regulus, limiting his verbiage to customary speech in public. Crowned the Heir Apparent for nine on a year, such distinction had only brought out the criticisms to brighter light. Walburga Black had every intention of directing her only *claimed* son's life. To the smallest detail. In such course, she had found fifteen years' worth of un-curtailed poor traits in dire need of correcting.

Then there was Sirius.

A year his senior, Sirius remained still here at school. Seventh year, full of fight and laughter, impudence and scorn. And yet, Regulus always felt wanting in his brother's shadow.

"Fuck," he hissed beneath his breath, though not a soul surrounded him in this tower alcove. Only empty canvas, easel and secured jars of colours bore witness to his uncharacteristic show of emotion. His gaze faltered from its unseeing stare into the Forbidden Forrest. A huge deer had emerged, vague in the surreal moon-glow. Pausing, it appeared to face the castle, long and steady as though in study. Then without warning it abruptly turned, plunging back into the trees. Moments later a large, shadowy beast darted across the landscape, following the deer into the blackness beyond.

Like that deer, Regulus felt the chase from behind, a wild dog nipping at his heels, driving him deeper into the forbidden depths from which there lay no escape. His path lay just as muddled, too; duty to his family, to his breeding, to his status. Yet nowhere did there present itself a map or compass to guide his way. And no matter his effort, no praise was found to be his.

Howling in the distance snapped him from brooding thoughts. It was well past curfew; he'd best return to his dormitory before Peeves caught him out of bed and alerted half the staff. Losing a hundred points would not endear him further to his housemates, nor would it go far in pleasing Mother. The latter, truth be told, was the far lesser palatable of the two.

Stiffened limbs protested his uncurling from the ledge; frozen fingers dutifully latched the window. Even rigid with cold, lean muscles strode with lithe form across the alcove room. Regulus was nothing if not graceful. Social adeptness and nimble step were ingrained in his blood. He was a Black, after all.

Meeting silence at the door, he silently slipped out into the abandoned corridor. Dim with only bluish hues of moonlight, the castle passage reflected his mood: empty, hazy, monochrome. A reflection, perhaps, of more than simply his current state of disposition. This pale vagueness had hung about him for quite some time, leaving him sullen at best, and at worst...

Warmer areas of the castle now, the route between seventh floor and dungeon a long winding trek. Regulus pulled his thoughts from the gloom. Blacks did not sulk. Or, at least, not in public. Though he was alone at present, he was not ensconced in his own chamber or, as the case may be, his own four-poster. In private where all emotion belonged he could brood further, though nothing will have changed by the time he'd reached refuge. No answer will have miraculously surfaced in transit, no brilliant words of wisdom

"Mind you don't stumble over Pride."

Regulus swung around, eyes searching the faint golden glow of fading wall sconces. Had conscience delivered him a message? Surely not; pride was natural, a revered trait, and one he wore well.

Several seconds it took to determine the true source, and he'd not have seen her had she not stepped out of the arching support's cover.

"Prideful. Flitwick's Kneazle. He's skulking about tonight, hunting. Try and not trip over him. Likes to dart about between your legs."

Wary, Regulus did not move. Sixth year prefect and a Ravenclaw. Need she have any more a reason to denounce him, strip house points, condemn him to detention? But it was rude to say nothing in return, however, so he tread cautiously.

"Evening, Jones." Flat; unassuming. Guarded. His back straightened slightly more, formality returning from its short-term holiday moments before. Fingers itched to reach his wand tucked neatly in his trouser pocket. Memory Charms were quite the life saver, he mused. But even half-hidden, he caught sight her own wand, its casual dangle from her right fingers a temptation for laying odds he could outdraw her. Yet rash actions led to foolish results.

She'd taken another step out of the shadows, long black tresses blending into the niche behind her. Ignoring his greeting, she stood without a word, watching him. Always was the hint of cunning smirk to her lips, as though she were laughing secretly at the failings of another, relishing in their shortcomings. Most becoming a Slytherin, really. Her humour at *his* expense, however, would indeed be short-lived. Pure-blood or not, she was little more than common, and he looked down at her with the arrogance of knowing himself above her.

Not that he could not look down, that is for diminutive height brought her no more than to his shoulders. She wasn't slight, but neither was she muscular. If need be, he could lower himself to physical entanglement, long enough to cast a charm and flee.

"Mind the third-floor north corridor," she said finally, eyes still narrowed in her perpetual knowing peer. "Filch is still clearing the remaining slime from the mutant slug races." She turned without further comment, flexing her wrist with nonchalant wand movements as though bored. Several steps more and she paused, back to him, speaking as though to the general air. "And Peeves is redecorating the Entrance Hall. Havers the Ingrate's a much better choice."

Regulus stared in astonished speculation, watching her retreating form fade into the corridor's gloom. Long after she'd disappeared, he trusted himself to move as well. Any Slytherin worth his Sorting accepted such information or suggestion with cautious cynicism. She may well be setting him up; enlisting outside help would not be below Sirius and his mates' methods. Anything to harass Regulus.

Dismissing Jones to a freak of nature or the full moon Regulus resumed his embarkation to the dungeons. His attention, however, was now returned to surroundings rather than inner musings. He'd not be caught off guard again.

Nearly a quarter hour it took in order to reach the ground floor, each oddity of sound a command for silence, for blending back into crevices and nooks. Soft step he'd learned long ago; the better to go about unnoticed. Not that Regulus often was noticed. Not if his brother were in the scene. Or really, even if he were not, truth be told. Regulus was seen when it was time to be seen, noticed when it served purpose. That was the way of things, the proper way. He knew it. He accepted it.

Mostly.

Moving sure-footedly down the corridor opposite the Great Hall, Regulus weighed options for circumventing the poltergeist merrily humming along ahead of him. Damn chit was right, sod all. Peeves' high pitched cackles of laughter surely bode ill for the first students to cross the Hall in the morning. Jones must have seen him on her rounds. Now he was going to have to take another route into the dungeons, leaving him additionally vulnerable to getting caught. He did not need another letter from his mother as this morning's.

Left with little choice, Regulus found himself several minutes later before the fifth floor tapestry of Havers the Ingrate. Relying upon questionable information from untested sources left him queasy with nerves. There was little for it, however; every other viable avenue was closed, it seemed. Never having ventured this way before, he assumed she'd meant a hidden passage lay here, and once found if indeed it existed he would have to take care no traps or ambush lay in wait.

Discovery was blindingly simple. Behind the heavy cloth illusion of solid stone wall covered actual indentation. An immediate turn to the left opened into narrow twists and turns, Regulus' heartbeat quick, edgy. Yet no catastrophe befell him en journey, and minutes later the trap door above opened smoothly not ten metres south the Slytherin dormitory. With odd sense of let down, he pulled himself up onto the damp, rough flagstone of the floor, replaced the door and returned cautiously to his room.

Entering on cat feet, he need not have bothered; four posters all were draped and occupied in soft snores. No one lay the wiser of his late night escapade. A tiny voice within one whose existence he vehemently denied nagged that for a change of pace, it would have been a pleasant intrusion had another recognised his absence, waited up in deference to concern of his well being.

But all lay in slumber, allowing easy retirement for the night. Stealthy change of attire and Regulus slipped beneath an emerald duvet, pale sheets cool and crisp against bare chest. He lay back, arms raised and crossed above his head. No vision befell him upon the canopy of his bed; privately he damned the ceiling for not reflecting its magical construction and imparting wisdom to him. Not that he truly had expected it to do, but he was tired of guesswork. It was not a trait of well bred gentlemen certainly not of a Black and this momentary sense of misdirection. He was letting anger and bitterness control him, affect his judgement and motions. *That* was not acceptable.

Faintest greys paled the castle's mullion panes by the time his eyes closed of their own volition. Last thoughts before sleep won its battle eased him; Regulus decided Saturday was soon enough to answer Walburga Black's post.

Mayhap by then an answer will have found him.

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Bleary-eyed against the fading candle, Horace Slughorn ruminated over the parchment spread upon his private secretary. Glaring red ink ached his weary eyes, and he closed them against the marks' accusing bite. Essays early in the term generally allowed for a degree of reckless apathy. Essays nearly midway through the term, however... And in his N.E.W.T. class, at that.

Right tight was his spot now, and Horace begrudged the fact. Regulus Black had been an average enough student in fifth-year Potions, had managed an Exceeds Expectations in his O.W.L. by some twist of the wombat's tail, but his performance this term had been nearing Dreadful. Walburga Black expected her son to fare well in all his courses, and Potions was a core she intended he master. How rancid it had been to send that owl last week regarding the drop in young Master Black's marks. If it had not been enforced policy, he'd not have done so. The Blacks were a wealthy and influential family; having their connection was paramount. No intention was there to lose such valuable association.

Once more he glanced over the assignment, mitigating corrections where possible. No matter how desirous it was to gift the boy an A in the least, Horace knew it would only cost himself in the end. Matters such as highly inflated marks had a tendency to find their way back to Dumbledore. Thus no, exaggeration and leniency was limited to perhaps a half letter.

Reluctantly, Professor Slughorn scratched the blood-red P atop the scroll, sighing heavily as he rolled the atrocity and set it aside. Rising heavily in his bulk, he turned for bed, nightcap askew upon his thinning pate. Murmuring in his settlement between silver sheets, he cast a limp flick of the hand, outing all flames.

"Hope they don't rescind this year's Michaelmas soirée invite."

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Stifled snorts of laughter emerged from seemingly thin air just atop the staircase currently directed toward Gryffindor Tower. Skittering echoed below the mirth, seemingly a pierce into the silence of pre-dawn. Feeble light marked the rat's course clearly, his aim to keep pace with but not under his unseen companions.

"I'll be sorry to miss *that* sight in the morning," came one hushed voice lined in humour. "Could learn a right lot from Peeves, methinks."

Choked response. "Gods, James. You make it sound as though we've failed in our elder years." Appalled grunt. "Peeves lacks our finesse; quality above quantity, mate. Though I agree I'd like to catch a shufti the first innocents through the Hall in a few hours. Simply too knackered to be bothered, though," came the yawn infused addition. "Moony had too much energy tonight."

James sighed in reply, vocalising effort in their last climb to the corridor. "When'd we get so old, Sirius?" he heaved, heavy in tread upon the final rise.

"Speak for yourself, grand-da," Sirius answered, brushing sweat dampened locks of raven hair from his face beneath the weighty cloak. Near too big were they to share it anymore, now humped painfully over to keep hidden bare feet. Invisibility cloaks were a grand treasure, but sadly all too rare for each his own.

"Give us a step, eh?" he alerted in a hiss, a shove to James as they manoeuvred round a suit of armour just before the former crashed into it. "Besides," he returned to previous subject, affront now lost. "I've a little treat in store for Reggie tomorrow you may enjoy. Will make up for missing Peeves' do. Promise." Mischievous smile in his voice.

Answering chuckles resounded against stone and oak, fading only in lieu of offering up passwords to a drowsy, confused Fat Lady.

Chapter 2: She Said, He Thought, They Did

Chapter 2 of 13

She said what was on her mind - sort of. He thought he knew what was going on - sort of. They did exactly as they'd planned. Well... yeah.

Reviews are much appreciated.

Chapter 2: She Said, He Thought, They Did

Wearily her eyes pried open, burning in regret and lack of sleep. Only a dream as lovely as one boasting such a leading man could leave Hestia Jones in a state of regret for waking. She could well have done with hours more envisioning azure irises that studied her warily beneath black fringe of meticulous cut. Regulus Black did not trust her, to be sure, but hardly could she blame him.

She could nary trust herself.

Of course, their points of view over that questionable trust were in all likelihood quite different, she considered with a muted snort. Consideration of the young man was the bourn of her thoughts. She recollected his look last evening, one wrapped in vague darkness and haunting silence. Leery to her purpose, Regulus had remained poised for fight though he had attempted to hide it beneath illusions of etiquette and social propriety. Those unforgettable Black eyes had never left her form once he'd located her. A rather disconcerting thought, actually.

Of their own accord, muscles about her mouth tightened now, pulling corners slightly upward. Damn her undisciplined face! How ever was she to keep private this ongoing *fancy* she had developed for Regulus Black if her traitorous body admitted to all the world and sundry such pleasure at his memory? Tia shook her head mournfully, though her smile would not be foiled. Simply told, she could not help herself. Every glimpse she managed of her classmate sent her belly into flutters of nerves, her lips into a desperately repressed grin. Eyes brighter than occasions called for, Tia knew her continence to be far more revealing than she desired. Once Remus Lupin had remarked she appeared feverish, and in concern had kindly offered to accompany her to the Hospital Wing. Politely demurring, Tia had had to infer a recent bout of flying was responsible for her flushed cheeks and shallow breath.

That would have been the day last term young Black had had a nasty tiff with his Quidditch teammates at practice, stalking out the players' rooms in naught but trousers and shoes, uniform in hand. She'd been delivering a message from McGonagall to Potter, the Gryffindors being next for the pitch. That message almost did not make it to the Chaser, Tia's mind all but blank fuzziness at the sight of a bare chest and shimmering wet hair.

Abruptly tearing her mind from reminiscence, Tia pushed back the bed curtains and swung tired feet to the cool hardwood. Thankfully she was spared the prying eyes of fellow Ravensclaws and was left to dress in peace, meaning she could allow her mind to wander as it would without unwanted attention. Over the past two months she'd realised any time she'd thought of Regulus for very long, that right silly half-smile of hers would pop up, garnering teasing questions from her friends. Sarah Crosby Muggle-born fourth-year Ravenclaw had pointed out to her on several an occasion that Tia's expression was one of sly devilry, and the girl had humorously begged to know what shifty plans Tia had had in store, and upon whose head. It would hardly do to dispel that notion with the truth: the only plans Tia had been contemplating involved a secluded broom cupboard and chapped lips.

Shaking herself mentally, she set about her morning routine, determined that today would not find her mind drifting to the subject of last night's mental train. Hestia Jones did *not* moon over boys. She simply did not. And, likewise, boys did not think of her. Pleasant enough in features so as to not be offensive, Tia knew herself not to be on the scale of Marlene McKinnon and her famous legs or Maura Shackbolt's curvaceous endowments. Nor was she *friendly* as was Ami Dearborn. Never mind Rosetta Moor's chestnut and teak streaked hair down to her

Well, needless to lament, Tia realised she was not a *coup* amongst the opposite gender. Fortunately, that lack did well in focusing her attentions where they belonged: studies, potions, defence. The Ministry was changing, growing, and Tia would be a first for Magical Law Enforcement. A specialist a *female* specialist trained up in the ways of alchemy and brews. Her part in defeating the Dark Arts and its minions would be rewarding, would be milestones for women in their world. And to do that, boys could not be a distraction. Top marks did not go to girls checking out the talent. Even less was the respect given to those blatant about it.

Actually, Tia was rather proud of herself that she'd gone on this long without anyone the wiser of her affections. Well, not that they'd been all that grand to start out with. Merely an inclination of curiosity towards the tall Slytherin boy who'd presented himself quite formally to Professor Slughorn after their first ever Potions class. By fourth year, he was particularly intriguing, a constant brood and lack of gossipy socialising at odds with his posturing housemates. By fifth, fascinating; his masques slipping only in seeming solitude. And after this past summer...

Good goblins! She might be a late bloomer, granted, but this past summer she'd realised quite suddenly and emphatically that Regulus Black was growing into a very fine young man, indeed. When she'd stumbled upon him

"Oh, thank Merlin, you're awake!" Tia started from her intimate musings at Marlene McKinnon's abrupt entrance. Abandoning hair grooming, she turned to the seventh-year prefect, curious by the mortal tone of the young woman's greeting.

"You all right there, Marli?" she enquired, hesitant lest madness be the case. One black brow rose of its own accord.

"Gods, no," her plea came, distress evident with every subsequent word. Long dark waves of shimmery hair danced with her head shake. "Dugan Chambers asked me to accompany him to Hogsmeade Saturday, and I've a *spot* the size of a grindylow just under my chin. See?" Tip of the chin exposed a long, elegant neck, Marlene's fingers condemning a point just beneath her gently curved jaw.

Honestly, from her advantageous viewpoint of shortness Tia couldn't see much beyond manicured nails and a bit of redness from obvious picking. But she knew Marlene and admitted to herself the uselessness of negating the girl's fears. Ms McKinnon was a true beauty, and though a talented Ravenclaw herself, the older girl tended to see her appearance as her primary asset. A sigh of resignation, a half chuckle, a relaxation of Tia's tense shoulders. Only cosmetically was it an emergency.

"Er, right," Tia finally responded, lips pursed in effort to contain the laugh. Deep breath or two, then she allowed with all sincerity, "I suppose, then, you've already used up the cream I owled you over the summer, eh?"

Affirmative reply sent Tia to rummage her trunk, the small stock of most requested potions, salves and creams buried deep beneath defence charts and recipe texts. Side orders during school were a boon for her, each bit of purchase that many more Galleons set aside for her future. A future that most certainly did *not* include *boys*.

"Thank you, Tia," Marlene gushed, her timbre swinging in pendulum fashion from glum and nervous to chipper, hopeful. Chatty, even, as discussion transitioned in subject.

"You're brilliant, you know. Just like your dad. I mean, he's not one of the most sought after apothecaries for no good reason." Her chuckle came easily, stress of her current situation now draining in light of Tia's saving grace. Or rather, Tia's saving cream.

"Dad's sought after because he's ridiculously obsessed," Tia responded, locating a forest green dragon hide pouch. Rummaging through its offerings, she added, "He's a brilliant mind, yes, but it's his penchant for locating dear quality and the unusual or rare for his clients. I mean, how many other apothecaries do you know who'd happily spend their Christmas hols in the Ural Mountains, jolly to be spotting an overgrown Yeti?" She turned to her classmate, incredulous expression begging to be understood.

"Honestly, Marlene. He offered it roasted porcupine in mint sauce, coaxing it over with promises of treacle tarts for dessert. I feared it'd be Dad roasting on the Tundra whilst I finished my Charms essay in Luxury Cave number seventy-six."

Marlene giggled. "I remember you went there last year, but you never said why your dad was all on about spending Christmas in Northern Russia. Surely he couldn't find it all that exciting."

Grimace and newly cocked brow said it all, and Marlene only laughed more. "Exciting?" Tia repeated, getting to her feet whilst handing over the finally located cobalt jar.

"Dad refers to it as 'a haven of rare, exquisite beasts.'" Scowl this time. "I just called it *beastly*."

With a roll of her eyes and slightly amused sigh, Tia closed her trunk and went to retrieve her ledger from her nightstand. As she recorded the transaction, Marlene chatted

on, an observation leading her new line of dialogue.

"I suppose it's a good thing you're so nice," she commented, fingering the most sought after panacea. "Otherwise, with *your* talents we'd all be cowering in fear as to what next you'd play at." When Tia only threw a cynically quizzical glance over her shoulder then returned to task, Marlene continued.

"Black and Potter are at it again," she clarified, smirk written in her voice. Flecks of pulled threads upon the cloth label now held her fingers and eyes in trance. "Heard their snickers on their way down to breakfast a bit ago. Gods... their new target for the day is Sirius' little brother." Amused *humph* left her and she glanced up in wry smile.

At Regulus' mention Tia whipped about, losing her balance and knocking hip and bum into the stand's corner, sending porcelain miniatures rocking. The older Ravenclaw, however, noticed little and swept on, seeming to envision a scene in her mind.

"I remember Sirius nicking some hybrid Serpent Vine seeds from Herbology last week. Since we were partnering I asked him why and he had just grinned that lovely way he has and whispered something about showing his family's true Slytherin traits. I'd not think more about it but for the fact I could see bits of their violet shells sticking out from his fist this morning when he stopped to ask me about a late study session for Saturday night. Well, *his* version of a study session, mind you. Not that I'd protest much, really, but... Anyway, I think he meant to try out the seeds at breakfast, but really I "

But Marlene McKinnon was talking to an empty room upon glancing back up. She blinked. Hestia Jones had disappeared just as quickly had she Apparated. How odd.

-o-

Tia could never quite pinpoint just why she found herself obsessively protective of Regulus Black, a boy she most *definitely* was not fancying. A nearly grown wizard of Salazaar's house was more than capable of tending himself and certainly did not need a petite scholarly sort dashing to his rescue. Not that she had any idea what sort of rescue she'd be, she admitted, slowing her step once she'd reached the stairs. Just what was she going to do once she located her classmate? Run breathless to him in the middle of an audience, fumbling out words of a plot to prank him? If he didn't hex her on the spot, he'd think her mad, surely. In the least it wasn't going to gain her any points with him. Not that she wanted points with him.

Certainly not. Well, maybe. Just a little. Wouldn't hurt, after all. But dashing to him in saviour mode? What was the point? He'd not pay her a bit of mind. Really, she'd be best to leave him to his own.

Reasoning, however, forced her recollection of the previous night's encounter. As charmed as she had been for the unexpected solitary meeting in the dead of night, Tia had not missed the mood Regulus had been in, the tension vibrating from his wary form. She doubted that whatever had put him in such a state had disappeared by this morning; a nasty prank by his brother was not likely to be tolerated. Tia could just envision acts of retribution and subsequent expulsion...

No. She could not allow Regulus to be expelled. Years of budding interest could not be wasted by a momentary show of temper.

Her steps sped up.

-o-

It was all Sirius could do not to give away his semi-cloaked position in the shadowed nook between the dungeon entrance and the marble staircase. An hour prior Argus Filch had cleared the Entrance Hall of its cobweb traps and gooey puddles of leftover Potions projects, and Minerva McGonagall had gone on her rampage to hunt Peeves down for severe discipline. Though, Sirius considered curiously, how did one punish a poltergeist?

But now the area was clear and he had only to await his prey's arrival to begin his day with an amusing diversion. Little brother had as of late been more prickly than usual, venomous glares thrown in Sirius' direction, haughty snipes about true family loyalty whenever Sirius and James were about. Rather than take his bait, Sirius had merely quirked a brow, knowing it too easy to beat his brother verbally and too tempting to duel him. Besides, Regulus was a coward upon confrontation, had proven it to Sirius many times in their years growing up together. It wasn't worth possible expulsion just for putting his little brother in his place. However, a detention or two was most acceptable.

Shifting restlessly upon feet sore from brambles and stones upon the forest floor the night before, Sirius waited impatiently between flows of incoming foot traffic to breakfast. Flicking his glance across the Hall, a slight nod was offered to James, the other boy lounging nonchalantly just outside the Great Hall's double doors. Nearly imperceptible was Potter's return signal, his eyes seeming to return to a text open one-handed before him, a glass of water filling the other. Alas, the small smirk of mischief went not unnoticed to anyone mindful. Reputation alone should have alerted staff, and simple deduction would have flagged Professor McGonagall that where one was, if the other were not in sight, trouble must be brewing. Luckily for them both, their head of house had other distractions at the moment in another area of the castle.

Hands rammed deeply within trouser pockets, Sirius' fingers flexed about the seeds he'd liberated from greenhouse number five just the other day. If Regulus was so on about loyalty to family and house and all without discretion, then by all means Sirius was going to help his sense of expression right along. Served him right, the prat.

Pity Moony was laid up in the hospital wing; the show would cheer him right up, Sirius mused. Peter had volunteered himself as Wormtail, scurrying about the dungeon corridor to ensure Regulus was significantly alone when he entered the Hall. Sirius needed the moment of clearance behind his brother to avoid detection.

Lost in thought, he nearly missed the Black Heir's entrance. Regulus was striding from the dungeon doorway, his usual ramrod posture giving proof to his inborn self-importance and inflexible personality. The elder brother grinned slyly. It was going to be interesting to see how well Regulus handled or rather, did not handle his soon to be attention. Pompous he may be, but Regulus did not relish the spotlight, Sirius knew. In fact, his little brother went to great measure to keep his actions unobtrusive.

Tut, tut, Sirius mentally snickered. *Quiet and unobtrusive. What would Mother say?* Answering his own rhetoric with a muted snort, Sirius moved quickly, silently in behind his brother. As planned, James moved to block the open doorway as though rambling whilst studying, causing Regulus to slow his pace. It was just long enough for Sirius a full hand taller to sprinkle the seeds of his humour into the nest of perfectly groomed ebony tresses before him. Hit and run, Sirius darted back with a sweep through several confused Gryffindors and a Ravenclaw, taking several leaping steps up the marble staircase before turning to watch phase two.

None the wiser, Regulus weaved in annoyance to avoid James, scowl in place as he made for an opening betwixt the Gryffindor and out-coming Hufflepuffs. It was then James made his move.

Stumbling as though toe had caught on flagstone, the imitation of desperate plea for balance was perfection itself. James' hands rose above his head and away from him, book falling from one outstretched limb, the other sloshing its goblet's contents with forward momentum. Right upon Regulus Black's head.

Sirius grinned devilishly.

Brilliant.

-o-

Slow motion as though underwater, the scene played out before her. Hestia Jones inwardly crumpled in dread, her quick Ravenclaw mind putting together the scheme as she witnessed downfall before her. Just over her shoulder on the stairs Sirius had stopped to turn, his face breaking into immature glee. James Potter was profusely apologising before Regulus, taking the act beyond credibility.

"Oh, dear, I'm most sorry!" Potter was profusing, eyes wide in abject innocence. Using his robe sleeve, he made grand gestures of mopping up the water from Regulus' own attire and face, Black jerking back in irritation. "Here, let me tidy that back up for you."

"*Sod off*, you graceless buffoon," Black countered with several steps back, a mixture of whinging irritation and impatience. Exasperated mumbling continued with fidgeting,

only occasional phrases clear enough for Tia to make out. Not long did he find himself hindered by Potter, though, and brusquely he darted around the older boy, readjusting his shoulder strap of books in an effort to palm his wand. He was prepared for further arrests.

Cautiously but with no little concern, Tia followed him into the Great Hall, ignoring the meagrely suppressed chortles of laughter falling from Potter's lips as she passed. Slowing her steps immediately beyond the doors, she feigned retying her shoelace in order to watch him stalk up the Slytherin table line. Maybe their prank hadn't worked, she hoped. Nothing but a brief drenching had thus far been noted, and as Regulus dropped his bag and seated himself in a frump, he quickly took care of that particular matter with a practiced flick.

Pent sigh of relief coursed through her, and Tia ventured on to her own house's table. Seated so she could keep Regulus in sight (just to be sure, after all), she commenced with pumpkin juice and toast, preparing to spread liberal amounts of strawberry jam when from behind the snickers began. Low, throaty at first, then spreading. Over her shoulder she caught sight of Sirius Black and James Potter, nearly directly behind her. Peter Pettigrew had joined them, and a few of their mates had also fallen prey to stifled laughter. Their gaze, she realised with dread, fell past her to the other side of the room. Turning back, her own eyes sought Regulus.

Oh, no... Embarrassment spread throughout Tia's face on Regulus' behalf. A witch she may be, but she could not shield this intriguing boy from what was about to become, what was already becoming.

Sprouting in flowing grandeur were thick, scaly tendrils of vine, thorns curved in fang fashion interspersed along. Small, green leaves darted about the plant. Each vine tip produced an arrowhead leaf reminiscent of, expectedly, a viper, its own pointy outgrowths reinforcing the common name. Nearly a dozen such tresses grew, their speed mocking with acceleration worthy of a herbologist's envy.

The snickers were increasing now, spreading throughout the Hall as more students were alerted to the show. Strands fell past his shoulders. Stares from all houses were no longer checked. And then... Regulus noticed.

Too far away was he for her to precisely read his expression, but thunderous did seem to fit. Yet unlike she knew most anyone else would do, he remained calm at least by outward appearances and merely rose slowly to his feet. Not once did he touch the foliage, choosing to ignore its presence. Gathering his bag and a cheese pasty, Regulus walked in haughty silence toward the double doors.

"Mummy's precious little snakelette seems a bit shy, suddenly," Tia heard behind her. Sirius was mocking his brother with initially light tones, but a layer of bitterness hinted beneath amusement. "Now, now, Reggie; mustn't forget your manners. Germination at the breakfast table is a definite no-no of protocol."

"Would that fall under personal grooming in public, or posturing one's politics at mealtime?" Potter quipped back.

"Oh, more the lines of insulting the chef for bringing one's own veggie matter to the table. Posturing politics is perfectly acceptable for ancient purebloods such as the Blacks," Sirius replied, slight snort mixing in his follow-up. "Excepting me, of course," he added, flamboyant gesture to himself with theatrical half-bow and fluttering eyes garnering howls of laughter nearby.

"Think he'll get Pomfrey to clear it up without telling?" Pettigrew this time.

"Pomfrey's a bit blinkered with us," Potter replied lazily. "Can't see a naughty bone between us, what with our loyal visits to Moony and all." His smile was cocky but genuine, a faraway gaze momentarily gracing his bespectacled features. Sirius' answer, however, bordered with bite.

"Reggie won't spill; too much a coward for any confrontation. Too inept for equal play, either." Disgust mingled with his words now. "Like a true Black, he'll either just pay someone to do his deeds, or merely disown me in a show of righteous piety to the Black ancestry. Oh wait," he barked in a laugh. "I'm *already* disowned."

More chuckles this time, murmurings of some private humour passing between them, but Tia did not note their meaning. Without conscious effort, she found herself afoot and striding angrily around the tables and toward the trio, bristling in indignation. Once she stopped directly before Sirius, however, her mouth betrayed her. She was no heroine, after all.

"That was mean, Black," was all she could muster. Sirius gave a grin of elegant charm, casual sweep of black locks falling into his eyes. Right fit, yes, but Tia saw too much strutting peacock in him to appreciate the fine facial bones and spirited eyes that pulled her so longingly toward his brother.

"Oh, come now, Jones," he *pshawed*, knowing look to Potter before returning. "My little brother wouldn't give you the time of day, you know. Wouldn't stand up for you to anyone. You may be pureblood, but you're not of his rank. Rather, of Mother's rank," he clarified, more to himself, "but one does tend to equal the other. The prat deserved it, and anything further we can conjure up our last year here." Chortled laughter rose among the companions. One last time his attention fell to her.

"Now go on and play at Mungo Bonham somewhere else for a bloke who'd appreciate it." Dismissively he turned back to Potter, chattering on about some personal joke. Furious but without retort, Tia made a sound of disgust and turned on heel, stalking back to her table. She had Herbology in an hour, and an incomplete assignment calling her. *Mungo Bonham* tendencies would have to wait.

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He was tardy to History of Magic, but Binns neither noticed his entrance nor the parchment of excuse from Pomfrey he'd tossed upon the ghost's desk. Taking his seat in a fume, Regulus narrowed his eyes in contemplation.

Damn Sirius for aggravating his life further, he thought, jaw clenched in anger. His brother simply could not leave well enough alone, could not make do with every-fucking-one's total adoration and worship of him; he had to taunt and nettle Regulus, poking for a reaction. He'd not get one.

After all these years, Sirius still failed to comprehend the code and meaning of family. Regulus would not retaliate, no matter the hungering taste for it now building inside. This morning he'd wanted so very much to stand atop the table and hex his sibling oblivious across the room. But he hadn't. No; instead he'd behaved as a properly reared pureblood should do, dignity in place and verbal lashings held for private audience only. That is, assuming he'd find his brother alone during which to down-dress him.

Sirius could never understand the innate duties and loyalties to family, nor to the bloodlines and propriety of social status. Uncouth and ill-mannered, his brother was still family, blasted family tree limb notwithstanding. Regulus need not acknowledge him, but neither would he actively assault him.

Recalling his own exit from the Great Hall but an hour before, Regulus envisioned the sight granted him when he'd turned back to gather his fallen quill. Conversing quite cosily with said demonic sibling and entourage had been Hestia Jones, her nearness to Sirius quite telling of her blatantly amorous regard for him. Regulus' stomach now tightened. As suspected last evening, she was in with Sirius and Potter, playing her part as both mole and lackey.

A snort caught in his throat. He wondered just what sort of payment she was receiving for her services, then thought better of mentally travelling that path. It wasn't seeming to be sick in class, even if it was a waffle on like double History of Magic. He'd see her next in Ancient Runes, an hour hence. Best to stay his thoughts until then.

Sirius was blood. No matter the circumstances, Regulus would not call outright war against his brother. Hestia Jones, however, was an outsider.

Another matter entirely.

Chapter 3: Subterfuge

Chapter 3 of 13

Regulus takes matters into his own hands.

As always, reviews are much appreciated.

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Chapter 3: Subterfuge

"*Protego!*" she cried inwardly, daring not a sound as her wrist snapped the ash to attention. The curse ricocheted at an awkward angle, and Tia dove to her left behind the massive mahogany desk. In true Slytherin fashion, *Serpensortia* was next, the attack immediate and to her right. *When'd he get so bloody sneaky?* she briefly wondered. But the spell was easily countered, the Ravenclaw having expected nothing less.

Quick rise to her feet, Tia circled the desk, eyes intent on Avery and his graceless wand flicks. Though nonverbal, more than half Avery's spells were mouthed. Those not were, for lack of better descriptions, plain and predictable. Innovation was not his forte, and though she took measures to liven the tête-à-tête, Tia Jones was utterly bored with her opponent. It was nearly a relief when from the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Professor Collins leaving her stool of observation. Tia assumed she would be calling an end to the duel, but to her surprise and subsequent annoyance, Patricia Collins only went on to dictate to the class behind the one-way shielding wall all the 'proper technique' and 'exceptional reaction time' Tia was making. All fine and dandy, to be sure, as it was a class of Defence. But Hestia Jones neither appreciated the catering attention nor did she find herself all that taxed. Truly, if one is to be praised so highly, one should at least be required to put forth an effort. Aedus Avery was not requiring effort.

"Notice how easily Ms Jones deflects Mr Avery's *Tarantallegra*, how fluid her response is, even though she does so without speaking." Tia glared mentally. Professor Collins was babbling, and honestly Tia did not enjoy the overt praise. It was hardly a triumph, after all, to block Aedus Avery's simpleton spells and sluggish movements. Honestly; did the bloke ever bother to move out of third-year instruction?

Tia skirted the haphazard stream of a Jellylegs Jinx with a sidestep, valiantly restraining a face of bored annoyance. What she would have given to have faced Benjy Fenwick, a Slytherin of quality. Fenwick would have challenged her, forced her to improve and learn. But Fenwick had duelled Chauncey Bones at the start of class, leaving Tia paired with the least competent yet biggest braggart of that house's sixth years. Regardless her disdain for him, however, Tia was no fool; he was Slytherin, after all, and not above underhandedness, even in class. Though Collins had stated clearly all offensive spells must be non-destructive, Tia made quite sure her blocks were timed and accurate; visits to Madam Pomfrey were not on her busy Thursday schedule.

"Thirty seconds," Collins called, indicating the timed session was nearing its end.

Avery tossed several more poorly executed jinxes, each more flailing than the last. Obvious he was scrambling to get in a single good shot before time, but that was the problem with Avery: impatience led to panic, and panic fell to rushed ineptitude. A last ditch effort had him throwing jinxes wildly, but in desperation each cast flew more wildly than its predecessor. Just as Collins called, "Time!" Tia swept her wand in deflection and

Hit the hardwood floor face first in a bone-jarring boom. Moments passed as she lay perfectly still, sure she was unable to even think, much less move about. A full seven seconds passed before lungs filled and a gasping inhalation roused her to coherency.

"Ms Jones, are you all right?" Collins was hovering nearby, most likely directly above her, but Tia could not be sure, dots dancing before her eyes.

"Er..." she managed, testing limbs to ensure each responded. "Think so." Gathering slowly to her hands and knees, Tia took stock of body and surroundings, realising as she did the snickers to her left of what must be Slytherins, intermingled with low, throaty threats of her own housemates. Glance about as her feet drew beneath her found Avery had not even hesitated to see if she were all right. Rather, he had regrouped with the class, accepting back pats and cheers for 'dethroning' the perfectionist prefect. Prats. A scowl marred her fair skin, the tinge of pink upon her cheeks now due more in part to building ire. As it became apparent all her physical form was still in proper form and piece, Tia's fleeting sense of embarrassment quickly altered. She'd not fallen by misstep; she'd been diddled of her victory.

Collins waffled on about homework as she dismissed the class and Tia gathered her books and odds, stuffing each item into her bag as she looked about suspiciously. Avery had as he was partial to do mouthed the spell he last threw, and that *Confundus Charm* had missed her by far. Shouldering her bag, Tia fell into queue to leave the room, mingling voices occasionally breaking free to pinpoint her, a "well done" and "sod the luck" requiring nothing more than a smile and nod from her, her eyes still searching classmates as they filed out the classroom. Someone not her opponent had tripped her. Magically.

Conniving bastard.

"Sorry 'bout that last," Neve McMillan offered once they'd cleared into the corridor. Sixth-year Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors waited patiently to the side, their session of Defence immediately following her own. "Hope that doesn't leave a mark," she continued quickly, then sped up into the flow of foot traffic. Bewildered, Tia stood still, cocking her head as her eyes followed Neve. Just as she was about to call after the girl, a welcome voice broke her thoughts, a friendly hand grabbed her shoulder.

"Gods, Tia, what in Merlin's smalls happened to you?" Tia turned at the incredulous voice, giving Rouan Kendal sixth-year Gryffindor and Tia's best mate a wry smile.

"Had a bit of a meet-up with the floor, I'm sorry to say," she quipped tightly. "But I think I had a bit of help, truth be told."

"Well, I hope you gave as well as you got," Rouan commented, looking pointedly at Tia's brow. When the latter cocked an eyebrow in question, the Gryffindor clarified. "You've a nasty cut there," indicating Tia's forehead with a nod. "Might want to have Pomfrey give it a look, mind."

Fingers dashed to the hairline, and drew back sticky with blood. "Oh, Sweet Fanny Adams," she hissed, teeth gritting. "Someone's arse is about to be beaten, once I know who." Enlightenment to Rouan would have to wait, they both knew, as her queue was moving, the last of Tia's class having cleared the door.

"See you at dinner, yeah?" Rouan asked, herself caught up in the bustle.

"Yeah; I'll explain "

"Need a few grace lessons, do we?" The words from her left were soft and velvety, cultured. And though coolly polite, were warm and heavy with disdainful humour. Startled, Tia jumped as she turned. Far too close was she to Regulus to yet gather her bearings, and she could do little more than gape dumbly at him. He, however, had no such qualms, and seemed to not notice her state of ruffle.

Sly smile of questionable intent brought life to his blue eyes, drawing focus from the aristocratic hardness of his facial expression. Tia watched transfixed as his smile grew in tantalisingly slow measures, his gaze boring into her.

"Mind yourself, Jones; there are dances to accept, and there are those to sit out. Best to choose your partners wisely." Then he turned, and in two long strides he was swallowed into the river of robes. Try as she might, Tia's short frame left her blind to his course, and she was left with heat of self-consciousness and numb awkwardness of speech.

"Cor, Tia," she chastised herself under her breath. "Can you look *more* an imbecile next time?" Shaking her head incredulously, she fell in step down the corridor, her afternoon now free for studies. But gone were her musings of foul play, ideas for her Transfiguration essay, or intentions for the next Hogsmeade trip. Sadly, as the ever-unflappable Hestia Jones made her way to the Ravenclaw common room, the corners of her mouth tugged into that half, whimsical smile. Her sole subject of thought: *Regulus spoke to me...*

-o-

He'd not meant to speak to her. Honestly, his intent had been to observe, to celebrate victory primary and keep his cleverness to himself. Casting that wandless, nonverbal Tripping Jinx was brilliant, if he thought so himself. No one the wiser, he'd made her look the fool she was. Anyone joining the likes of his brother and that ragtag clique of his was a fool, and Regulus believed in jesters looking their part. But he'd wanted no attention upon himself, a puppeteer pulling her strings to enact the play he was now writing her. A play that would level the lopsided scoreboard that was him versus the disowned sibling.

So as Avery had botched his last offensive as was known he would, Regulus had covertly ensured Jones' ultimate demise. This act was performed so well as to cast the blame upon her should Avery's miss be overt. He'd not even joined in with the Slytherins, guffawing the Ravenclaw's failure. But once out the door, he'd seen her chatting with that Gryffindor Kendal, and an unknown force turned his feet to drive home her defeat. Satisfaction had smirked his lips, and he'd made no attempt at hiding his amusement. Surprise, however, had come in the form of Jones' reaction. No angry retort, no rush of excuses, not even the grace to be embarrassed. Rather, the chit had looked... stunned.

That had confused him still did and Regulus disliked surprises in battle. Yet even more disconcerting, dare he admit if even only to himself, was his own reaction to seeing her up close. Yes, he'd seen her fall clearly, had even heard the breath knocked from her lungs, and had counted a full eight seconds before she had even twitched. But it was not until he'd run her upon in the corridor he'd noticed the laceration drawn in her hairline, the heavy trickle of bright crimson flowing down her forehead, changing course just before mounding her eyebrow. It shouldn't have bothered him, but it did. Just for a moment, anyway.

Recovery was quick; she'd not even noticed his hesitation. Then previous success was allowed to tamper with control, freeing his smile of arrogant satisfaction. Her biting response to his obvious slander did not come, however, disappointing the eager challenger within him. The same challenger clawing to erupt, to defend his right to be called Black, to be named Heir. To be classified worthy the respect he claimed.

Instead she'd stared at him, jaw slack in an odd astonishment, blood marring the creases her raised brow formed. Briefly an image conjured of an innocent lamb, spooked by his approach but ever hopeful its meaning was one of kindness and care.

Hah. He didn't do kindness. He did, however, do strategy, and it wouldn't do for him to be obvious about it all. At least, not yet. He had much more work to accomplish before laying bare to her his knowledge of her treachery.

That she might not know her actions were of such blatant error did not occur to him even once. Hestia Jones was aiding James Potter in distancing Sirius even further from Regulus, their imbecile, childish taunts blasting away at the canyon walls of their rift. Each insult further distanced the brothers, and Regulus loathed any and all accomplices to that threat against familial sanctity.

And that was all the encouragement he needed. Nothing mattered more than family. That Hestia Jones had fallen as the example, the sacrificial lamb, made little bother to Regulus. Certainly not the last, but she would be the first in his rebuttal. Their relationship would never again be the same; Sirius' rash choices the initial crack, James Potter the augmenting wedge. But time had come for Regulus to ensure no others found themselves interfering in family affairs.

Regulus made his way in swift strides toward the dungeon, intent upon the privacy of his room. Time was needed to think, to plan. A lie down would be good, too, as he had other matters to consider. Mother would be expecting a reply soon, and still one had not presented itself. That was a delicate missive to write, indeed. Frustration was mounting; he had but one outlet, and one victim upon which to dispense it.

Heat two would begin in the morning. He intended to win that one, as well.

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A quarter after Potions began, Tia Jones was characteristically engrossed in her work, her mind solely upon the Blood-Replenishing Potion before her. N.E.W.T. levels were a grand challenge for her, and she thoroughly enjoyed learning all she could in her 'other' favourite class. Having grown up with a father such as Ezra Jones, Tia had been immersed in apothecary as a way of life from the moment she could hold a silver gathering spoon. It still amazed her the power in fauna and other raw ingredients. As perfect example, the brew before her could save lives something accomplished *after* the battle, away from the origin of the injury. So many ailments it could stave off; so many individuals it could sustain, regardless of class or birth. Regardless Magical or Muggle.

Healing potions were of particular interest to Tia, and more than once she had weighed options of a career in the healing fields. After all, honourable and prestigious, a Healing Specialist was quite the coveted post amongst the masses these days. But Tia's heart lay in another direction. Healing was special, but all the tinctures and poultices in the world could not prevent devastation wrought against the innocent. Her mother's death had proven that.

Thoughts of battle-injury recalled Tia to the head wound she had sported yesterday and her fingers subconsciously soothed the inch-long cut. Now healed, remnants still hung of tenderness due to its sensitive location. Madam Pomfrey had *tsked* and fussed, mumbling on about the dangers of allowing sixth years to duel without proper restraint. Obviously she found Professor Collins lacking in that respect.

"By now your colour should be bright orange," Professor Slughorn interrupted, ambling slowly about the room from table to table. "Unless you forgot to add in the liquorice root in five-second intervals. Then it will appear a more beige shade. The potion will still work, but will require more of it to perform its duty."

Tia's eyes darted quickly back to her cauldron, pleased to see the simmering concoction a healthy tangerine. Returning to her text, she methodically categorised what each ingredient contributed in ways of its properties to the medicinal brew. She had just slipped in the feverfew, stirred fully twice anti-clockwise and lowered the fire beneath it when the heavy dungeon door opened with a protesting creak. Looking up, Tia watched with some agitation as Sirius Black swaggered into the room, a roll of parchment held loosely in one hand.

Casting a quick look across the room to the opposite table, Tia searched for any indication of Regulus' reaction. The younger Black, however, appeared to be intent upon his work, head down and fingers busy chopping the feverfew into precise lengths. He'd not even been aware of his brother's appearance. Or had he?

Closer attention gave Tia pause. Regulus was indeed wielding the silver knife blade with precision, but it was only after momentary study did she realise he was doing so too carefully, each slice ending in a pronounced, sharp *thunk* upon the cutting board. His head had not moved, but barely she could make out the sudden tension in his jaw, the unnatural stillness of his body.

When Sirius passed her table, she forced herself to return to her potion, her ears unabashedly catching the low talk of the Gryffindor with Professor Slughorn. He was delivering a message from Headmaster Dumbledore. Slughorn made a curious sound as he read the missive then made his way to his heavy, scarred desk on which he scratched a response. Instructing Black to return the message, he went about searching cupboards as Sirius turned to leave. Before passing, Sirius caught Tia's curious stare and gave her a suggestive wink. Blushing, she looked back down at her cauldron in embarrassment, waiting for his departure.

"Given up the tosser as a loss, yet, have we?"

Tia's head shot up abruptly at the amused whisper, coming nearly nose to nose with Sirius. He'd taken advantage of Hodge's absence today, the chair across from her empty, and leaned clear across the table, his voice so low only Tia could make out the words. Admittedly, Sirius was quite fit, his strong, chiselled face enough to turn any girl's head. Sultry voice and charismatic ways encouraged that feeling, defeating most attempts at immunity to him. He was arrogant, he was conceited, but in all fairness Tia admitted he had earned the attentions bestowed him. Talented, intelligent, compassionate at times. But he was a mean git, too. At least, to his brother. And for Tia, that was all that mattered, regardless if family history forged that hostility.

He chanced a glance behind him, and Tia could only make out Regulus' forehead over Sirius' broad shoulder. He was looking back at Sirius, then.

Turning back to her, Sirius' smile turned knowing. "When you've put paid to your unwelcome and unappreciated protectiveness of my little brother, let me know; I'll introduce you to some real talent. Pretty bird like you should have her loyalties earned." With that, he winked again and strode out of the classroom silently, Tia's eyes following in disbelief.

She blinked. He was mad. Surely. And having her on, he was. She wasn't sure which upset her more: Sirius' implications that Regulus did not warrant her considerations, or that she was pretty. Never once before had he given her a second glance.

Returning to her work just as Slughorn reappeared from his stores, Tia caught a peripheral glimpse of something, and she looked back up, her hands pausing over the powdered moonstone. Regulus was staring at her, his face hard but otherwise indecipherable. Feelings of dread was that *guilt* mixed in? and embarrassment sluiced down her body, suddenly chilling. It was not curiosity or confusion in his measure of her, but an expression of highest disdain. Had he heard Sirius? Had he made out his brother's comment about Tia's affections, and took offence just as Sirius had warned he would? Oh, gods, she was simply mortified at the thought. Now he would hate her because he knew she fancied him. Because she wasn't Cecilia Braden or some other beauty.

Shite, shite, shite.

Ducking her head abruptly to task, Tia tried valiantly to focus, to put out of her mind the catastrophe that must have just occurred. She wanted to slide beneath the table, truth be told, disappear with the heat rising in her fair cheeks. Sadly, that wasn't an option at this point. Her Potions' marks had to take precedence over her ruined love life. Well, the possible future of that slightly credible mirage of a love life.

Concentrating on instructions, Tia dared not validate the feeling she had of still being watched. She could *feel* Regulus' brood upon her, never mind seeing it. Over and over her mind replayed the brief interlude Sirius had created, and with each repeated line in her mind, Tia cringed that much harder at what Regulus' initial reaction to the words had been. Had he been sickened at the thought, blanching at the news of her interest as though she were Lucretia 'the Bull' Bulstrode, seventh year Slytherin. Angry, dominating and unfeminine seventh year, Tia mentally clarified. Tia herself was not quite a lady in action or dress, but one knew she was a girl, after all. Her heavy chest and rounded hips noted so, even if often enough her long black hair was trussed up in a plait and her summers found her knee-deep in river mud wearing cuffed dungarees and a man's plaid button-down.

Sizzling before her drew Tia back to work. Adding a drop of amber, she slowly increased the flame, her mind retracing steps of moments prior. As steam rose, Tia leaned back and inadvertently straightened, only to see Regulus look up at the same time. His face contorted as their eyes met, and had gone from concentrative creases to downright revulsion. Suddenly Tia's self-condemnation flipped, and a certain self-preservation and indignation reigned. She might not be McKinnon or Shackbolt or Braden, but she damn well wasn't the Bull or some horrific mountain troll! She'd not apologise her affections, by Merlin!

Reinforced with a huff worthy the most prominent Slytherin, Tia squared her shoulders and glared in return. Regulus Black was not the only boy in the world, and she didn't need him pointing out her faults of not being McKinnon, Shackbolt or Braden, thank you very much. She'd already had her fill this week of failure and jeers; she would not allow Black to make her feel worse of herself. Shaking inwardly, Tia continued their contact, praying he'd soon drop his gaze to the boiling cauldron before him. But Black had no concern for the assignment, his cold study unnerving her with its directness.

"*Hestia!*" a voice sniped in a low hiss beside her. Robyn Traverse was Ravenclaw's Quidditch captain, and no matter the quiet level, his tone held a commanding essence. Still, she did not leave her eyes' focus. "You and Black can bang each other later. Right now, get back to your work or you'll get us points off. Hear me?"

Nerves rattled now, Tia wet her lips, a dryness robbing her voice. Traverse was right; Slughorn didn't appreciate drifting off in his domain, and Slug Club or no, he'd deduct Ravenclaw points for her inattention. Debating how much longer she could hold his gaze out of self-respect, Tia caught an abrupt flinch in Regulus' face, his head quickly bowing to his work. Immediately assuming Slughorn's undesired attention, Tia mimicked his move, attempting to resume her place. Had she won, even though it was the professor's presence that had caused him to look away first? Yes, she firmly decided. It counted. She'd stood her ground longer, met his scorn and did not back down. There. She'd shown him she was no wilting wayside weed to be trampled just because she did not bloom as the lilies or the heather. She should be most proud of herself.

Why, then, did she only feel like crying?

-o-

Audaciousness bred rampantly in the lower class, Regulus decided. And on rare occasion, it stained the lineage in the upper society. Then again, he mused sourly, what other could he have expected from his elder brother? Sirius' saunter into Slughorn's classroom did not merit Regulus' attention. That was what Sirius craved attention and Regulus had not the stomach for it this morning. He still had yet to compose a response to Mother's letter, and he had plans to form in his new diversion of one-on-one combat.

Briefly it had crossed Regulus' mind the question of why now, why this chit, why this incident? After all, he'd borne the brunt of Sirius' outright contempt for more than a year, now, and honestly some degree of hostility had been present for quite a time before the elder's exodus from the family. But Wednesday's infantile prank had been the breaking point, the dragon's back having given way beneath that last, solitary straw of Serpent's Vine. Regulus was haggard from restraint of emotions. He'd not embarrass the family by equal reaction, no, nor by any public response. But it was well past time for him to strike back, to lay down the laws of punishment should someone outside Sirius' immediate circle decide they wished to join the parade.

Hestia Jones had earned her place of first recipient of justice.

Regulus had been contemplating his next move, mulling positives against repercussions whilst his cauldron's contents faded into a peach colour. He'd managed to spare little more than an awareness glance at Sirius' entrance, but had caught just in time his brother's departure.

Sirius had winked at Jones. Were that not enough, their intimate association was even more damning by his fleeting personal chat with her. The telling was not in the words, but in the proximity that they were more than casuals. Once Sirius had left, Regulus felt the slow burn of hatred rising, their audacity to flaunt their partnership in offending him too much to swallow on a belly full of bile. He stared at Jones, daring her to meet his gaze. And she did, at first startled, then allowing her features to drop their careful mask of polite inquisitiveness into a cheap replica of haughtiness and anger. *As if she has the breeding to pull that off*, he thought, eyes narrowing. He could see the unsure tinge to her eyes, their flickers nervous, wavering. *That's right, Jones. Your over-analytical mind has overstepped its bounds, and you'll rue its presumption to engage war with me.*

Contemplation sped through his brain as he decided what new insult to hurl at her today. First rule of waging war: know your enemy. Know their weaknesses. What greater weakness of an O-level Ravenclaw nobody than to take away their illusion of brilliance? Humiliate her by illuminating her utter lack of intelligence, proving her not the clever witch she prided herself being. What ingredient should he levitate into her cauldron whilst she read? What explosion or meltdown would render her the most of a fool? Regulus debated each option as he challenged her courage, allowing her a view of the malice she'd drawn in him. But in the midst of weighing noxious fumes against a clumsy fall into her own cauldron (and its subsequent superficial burns), he was struck abruptly and surely as though sword-tip had pierced his gut and twisted.

Traverse had leaned to her side, obviously scolding her, his eyes darting to Regulus. But rather than answer, her face had flushed and she'd run her tongue over her bottom lip. A nervous gesture, one of vulnerability and one that should have clamoured for his strike. But instead, *he* was the one who had flinched. Retreating, he'd

returned to his potion, regrouping his thoughts.

By the time class dismissed, Regulus was preparing for his new plan, a bit of Avery's Canary Feather potion tucked in a vial in his robe pocket. It was childish, yes, but Regulus thought a bit more unappreciated ridicule was a lovely enough starting point, and she'd never suspect him as they crowded at the doorway, exiting against the massive queue of third years.

Their samples turned in, Regulus manoeuvred directly behind Jones, hand clasping the vial, thumb and forefinger loosening the stopper. Just a bit more and he'd manage to tip the dirty mustard-coloured concoction into her bunch, alleviating her ability to feel when it first was administered and freeing him from the scene of the crime. Just two seconds more

"Mr Black," Slughorn called, pulling Regulus vocally back with a start. Re-sheathing the stopper, he slipped the potion in his pocket, gritting teeth at the lost opportunity.

"Yes, sir," he rote, sullen though with propriety. Reaching the lecturing stage, he stood rigid, awaiting his instructor's ill-timed message. The room was now filling with underclassmen, and Slughorn motioned Regulus closer to his desk as he moved each potion sample carefully to a rack behind the nearest cupboard.

"I'd not have said anything, it being the weekend and a match for our house tomorrow, but your sample I can see already is rather off." He spoke no louder than was necessary to be heard over the chatter of thirteen-year-olds and shuffling of books, robes and equipment. His chirpy voice ebbed with each turn to the cupboard, giving his words an oceanic wave feeling and causing Regulus' attention to wander in the gentle repetition. He knew his marks in Potions were less than Acceptable, but he had other issues to contend with. One or two directly related to this course.

His eyes flickered over the samples still yet on the desk, Slughorn speaking into the cupboard as he rearranged a particularly difficult set-up for each class' homework. Instantly a plan came and formed, and nonchalantly he slipped his wand from his inner pocket, eyes locating the sample in question.

"Your attention to detail I must say has slipped *stumbled*, posterior over pectoral, if you will," the portly professor corrected, a jiggle of mirth at his own cleverness of phrase. "And I fear it will only get worse as the term goes on. You're an exceptional student, Mr Black," he amended, and Regulus knew without doubt his praise was influenced only by Regulus' family name. Regulus knew he was above average in courses that interested him, but did not deign to be fagged by any subject that did not directly affect him.

Shutting out most of Slughorn's blathering, Regulus honed in on the vial of perfectly bright orange, the grease-pencil 'Jo' cutting off in mid 'o' of the cylinder. Careful aim, concentration, slight flick of wrist...

Were Regulus any less in self-control, he'd have cheered himself his ability. Stowing his wand, he once more allowed Slughorn's words to penetrate as the professor gathered the last of the samples, the final one flaunting its unique powder blue in new individuality.

"So you understand my position, I'm sure." He straightened and faced Regulus, concluding his discussion. "I'll arrange for a tutor over the weekend, and you will commence evening lessons next Friday."

What? Regulus cried inside, his mouth dropping in shock, eyes wide. But no opportunity was there for him to regain his composure, question his ears. Slughorn was already turning Regulus about with a hand to his shoulder, chattering on as he escorted the younger Slytherin toward the door.

"Once we get everything right again, I'll be sure to owl your parents the grand progress you've made. I'm sure it won't take but a handful of sessions to get us back on track, eh?" Rhetorical, Regulus was not given a moment to respond, his words only just forming as Slughorn firmly pushed him through the doorway into the empty corridor and closed the oaken slats.

Turning back to the offending wood, "What the fu" died on his lips as he realised the body leaning against the doorframe beside him. Hazel eyes were icy, a glower reaching him from beneath lowered lashes. How long had she been standing there? By expression, too long was the answer. Wand-work behind Slughorn's back was one thing, even in front of non-attentive, ignorant third years, but to have been caught... Her look said it all.

Hestia Jones was right pissed off. At him.

Behind movements of adjusting his book bag strap across his shoulder, he slipped his hand to his inner pocket and palmed his wand. Perhaps a Memory Charm would be necessary, after all.

Chapter 4: Riddles In the Dark

Chapter 4 of 13

Judgment lacking all information is no less dangerous than riddles in the dark, for they are one and the same. Both end in blind confusion.

Reviews are very much appreciated, as always

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Chapter 4: Riddles in the Dark

Were it any other time, proximity would have left her a jumble of nerves. Regulus was far too close for clarity of thought, a realisation Tia would arrive at later over a midday meal of pork pie and pumpkin juice. Blue eyes so very intense to his brother's playful greys narrowed upon her, unwavering, unreadable. Were she to merely shift her weight forward in a balancing step, her neck would cramp at the forced angle to meet said gaze, he was that near. But Tia's current mood withheld from her these contemplations.

She was right pissed off with him, she was. After all she'd done for him, really. Loath though she was to admit it, Tia had to grant Sirius a certain level of truthfulness to his spiteful words prior. Defending Regulus Black, protecting him from Peeves and detention, overlooking his midnight stroll about the castle... and this was how he repaid her kindness. Her incorrigible half-smile failed its usual appearance, replaced instead with tight jaw and unwavering stare.

Long breaths passed as they stood toe to toe, Tia's low, accusing voice echoing ever so slightly down the deserted corridor.

"Lose something?"

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Hestia Jones stood ramrod straight before him closer than proper etiquette dictated, he thought somewhat distractedly. Held aloft before her was a familiar vial of putrid yellow, her fingertips of index and thumb minimising contact of skin to glass as though the item were particularly repugnant. Immediate was his relief that assignment sabotage was not her subject. But then a dash of something akin to embarrassment rushed through Regulus, and he let his left hand fall as inconspicuously as possible to his lower pocket, its soft material far too flat against his hip.

Ignoring the uninvited feeling, Regulus bristled, taking an offensive approach to the glower before him.

"Obviously not my sense of humour," he bit, drawing himself even straighter in stance. Natural arrogance gave way to nonchalant condensation. "Were that missing, Jones, I'd not have tolerated your tone in speaking to me. Rather..." He trailed off meaningfully, leaving her free to concoct her own scenario. His eyebrow rose, suggesting without words just what sort of alternate course her life would have taken and the pleasure he would have had in it doing so. Granted, he wasn't quite sure himself what he'd actually have *done* had he not been caught off guard by that momentary concern of his previous wandwork's discovery. But that was irrelevant; all she needed to know was just how fortunate she was not to have incurred his ire this time.

Jones, however, was not one to take the hint.

"Rather *what*, pray tell?" she inquired, taunting and low, head tilting slightly to his left.

Some striking of instinct instantaneously urged him to lean forward, to mimic her gesture, and it was only ricocheting footfalls that broke his mindless heeding to close the distance.

"Hullo?" Rouan Kendal's soft Welsh reverberated around them, clearing his tunnel vision. "Tia?" Her voice loomed closer in the wavering torch light lining the damp stone walls.

"Your nursemaid has arrived," he stated, going for a tiny sneer this time. "Think she'll be amused by your playing with pretty little bottles of coloured water, doing your best to gain the attentions of the Black Heir through some silly little girl's game? *Tsk, tsk*, Jones... would have thought you brighter than that." A smile grew a sliver inside at her blanched expression. He'd hit a mark, all right. But then, he already knew no sixteen year old female liked to be called a 'little girl' nor have her intelligence questioned, a Ravenclaw least so.

"Tia, come along. We'll be late for Arithmancy. I waited at the stairs, but..." Gryffindor Kendal had just caught up, quizzical expression darting from Jones to himself.

"Run along, now," he said with a shooing gesture and parental smile. "Don't wish to keep Nanny Kendal waiting." He offered her a laughing look of reproach against her renewed scowl, suggesting she truly was little more than a child seeking his attention. Deftly he stepped round her, manners preventing his shoving of either girl yet status refusing to apologise his way between them.

Best leave on a note of command, he recollected, making his way toward the stairs to the Entrance Hall. He'd made nearly half the distance when his name reached him, Jones' voice quivering slightly. Good; she *should* fear him.

More of curiosity than by command, he paused in step, turned halfway round and levelled a bored yet impatient glare to her.

Kendal still looked confused, but Jones straightened and held out the blasphemous vial of skulduggery. Stronger now, her words carried in a scent of nervous petulance.

"Canary Feather Swill should be pale yellow, like the bird... hence, the name," she said, and even from the distance he could make out her challenging brow, daring him a retort. He almost laughed. Leave it to a bookworm to find details of proper technique suitable for verbal debate. Casting her a slow blink of boredom, he turned to make his way to Divination when her cut came.

"I suppose it's no wonder, now, your Potions' marks are so abysmal. Not quite so clever as you thought."

Regulus stiffened. It had all been a laugh once he'd realised she'd not caught him ensuring her potion a cock up. A bit of wit-battle had been momentarily distracting, energetic in the moment. But her last... His face lost all hint of entertainment, and he turned his head only a quarter, words dark and rough.

"You know *nothing*," he said, then long strides carried him on, his mind flailing in all he'd been desperate to escape. Several minutes later he found himself below the ceiling portal, unaware of just how he'd gotten there.

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Tia's prim posture sagged, her fleeting show of resistance fled the moment Regulus' final reply met her ears, its harsh crumble of dictate foreign to her expectations. He'd been all self-assured prat up to that point, making it easy for her anger to seethe through. But then she'd gone and said that about his marks... Never would she have ever believed him concerned over them. Yet a strange anguish had threaded those parting words, something unrelated to N.E.W.T. courses or marks.

"Are you all right?" Rouan asked hesitantly. Tia turned to her best friend, furrowed brow attempting to relax for the other girl's ease of mind. Rouan's heart-shaped face was pinched in concern, her light blonde locks falling in straight blankets off an angled part. Rouan was one of those beauties rounded out best with cleverness and genuine likeability.

"Yes; yes, I'm all right," she finally got out, noticing only once she fell in beside Rouan toward the stairs how wobbly her legs were, tension releasing from her shoulders. He knew she liked him. Not good. Not good at all.

"What was that all about?" Rouan asked, her quickened pace setting Tia to task to make class on time.

Briefly Tia explained the vial she now pocketed, the fact she'd noticed Regulus with it directly behind her in the queue to leave class. "Of course I knew where he was, I always know where he is, and I've excellent peripheral vision, mind you. Saw the potion move up toward my hair before Professor Slughorn called him. When he tried to slip it back to his pocket, I intercepted it. Never noticed the difference, he didn't."

Free hand to the banister, Tia's efforts climbing the marble staircase improved the further removed she was from the incident minutes before. His spite with the potion was disheartening; his condescendence expected. His dark bitterness, however, struck a dissonant chord. She was uneasy, troubled, though she couldn't explain why.

"What do you mean, you always know where he is?" Tia started from her thoughts at Rouan's question. The girl caught Tia's wrist as they moved to the next flight, a trickle of students passing round.

"What?" Tia asked, improvising her own confusion. But Rouan's quick mind was keen and made connections with amazing speed.

"Oh, gods, Tia," she suddenly blurted, expression of realisation contorting her lovely face into comical fish-like features. Breathy in a stage whisper, "You've got a fancy for *Regulus Black!*"

"Shh!" came Tia's anxious response, looking swiftly about for unwelcomed ears. "Keep it down, Rouan!" But Rouan, compromising only in decibels, kept up accusations with an incredulous look tainted by laughter. So much for keeping it unknown.

"You, the mighty witch's witch of the world, the naysayer of all things bloke, have managed to find yourself ensnared in affections with the root of all your future plans' evil a boy!" Really, now. Rouan was having far too much fun at Tia's expense. Honestly; wasn't *that* amusing.

"Roan, come on," Tia pleaded, turning to make her way up the stairs. "We'll be late for Pythagoras' class. I'd not like to be doing detention for a third run-in."

Though Roan immediately hurried to catch up, dropping the subject was not in her willingness. "All right, then," she conceded as they fled onto and down the second floor corridor to the chatter-laden classroom. "But know I expect a full explanation come lunch," she added as they found their seats, a full eight seconds before tardiness would have found them.

"Absolutely," Tia replied, turning to Professor Pythagoras whilst pulling out parchment, ink and quill. She had no doubt Roan would expect just that a full explanation and Tia had one hour to formulate just how she was going to go about it.

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"Let me get this straight. You saw Black on a horse when you went with your dad to hand-deliver some bespoke order over the summer hols, and since then you've been in love with him." Roan paused for a bite of lamb sarny, brushing from her face flyaway blonde tendrils against the chilled October breeze. Several other souls braved the brisk midday as well, couples intent on seconds of privacy and interspaced across the grounds near shelters of castle or greenhouse. No one, however, neared the two friends, their solitary tree trimming the Black Lake secure for such serious chat.

Well, serious to Tia. She hadn't wanted to discuss this, full stop. But damage already had been done, and Roan would keep her secret, she knew. It was simply the confusion of the day that gave Tia pause in admittance. Had this question arisen even as recent as yesterday, Tia would simply have agreed to Roan's assessment, though without further revelation. Today's events, however, bothered her. She took another bite of her pork pie, stalling for time. Slow chewing, thinking...

"Firstly," she stated after swallowing and a sip of pumpkin juice, "I'd not go so far as to say the word *love*. Quite the overstatement, Roan. But interested, yes. I've always thought him quite fit, Slytherin or not. You know I've never cared for anyone's background or circumstance," she added, heading off comment. Roan's head nodded, conceding the truthfulness of that point. Tia had never bothered with rank or status, worried even less over fortune or lack thereof. Always she had offered pleasant and caring acquaintance with anyone needing or offering the same. Of those interesting, she was ready with friendship.

"And secondly... Regulus' appeal to me was more than seeing him astride a horse. Though that was, granted, a lovely sight... Well, you've the general idea, anyhow." Tia couldn't bring herself to elaborate, to attempt explanation of that dark, grey afternoon two months prior. How the winds had swept in gales, harnessing to them angry clouds full of lighting, full of power. No description could relay the overwhelming sense of propriety binds abandoned, of pure energy and reckless wonder Tia had felt that day. Wandering the footpath of the Black country estate whilst her father spoke business; embracing the oncoming storm all about her, relishing its strength and driving enchantment, advantageous in her solitary state to simply *feel* it all. Only to come upon the sight of Regulus most unexpectedly, most terribly brilliant...

"Your continued silence leads me to believe you've said all you'll say on the matter," Roan interrupted, half-smile upon her pale face. "I know you all too well. But recall this, Miss Hestia Astarte Jones." Here Roan quirked a brow, leaning in to Tia with conspiratorial tones. "As I *do* so well know you, I'm quite positive you will tell me every sweet morsel of detail sooner or later, and for that I am most anxiously awaiting. Just prepare me beforehand," she added, resuming posture and going for another bite of her meal.

"I'd like to take notes."

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Far too blank was the parchment before him, and even Regulus in his succinct manner could tell it was so. *Mother*, was all he'd managed in the full hour he'd sat perched upon the window sill he had defected to last Tuesday evening. In the early morning he could make out better the circular room's canvases, easels and paints, but thankfully their master had not come for them today. Saturdays generally saw lie-ins, and again for that Regulus was quietly thankful. He was of no humour for companionship not that he ever was, mind you. But even scratch of step, shuffle of settling, snippets of noise of everyday life itself he could not bear to hear this morning.

Walburga Black had been *disappointed* by the news Professor Slughorn had obviously shared with her regarding his marks. He'd kept Transfiguration up to prevent McGonagall from owling his parents, though in truth he found the class more than tolerable. But Potions had been a sticky point, indeed. He could do the work if he so chose, if he put to it effort. Regulus wasn't Sirius, though. Never was, and though he'd rather be *Crucio'd* than admit it, he knew his brother was quite the clever, more so than Regulus would ever be. But neither was Regulus stupid. Even N.E.W.T. courses found his marks A to E, generally. All but Potions...

Damn. Why did Mother have to have laid such burden upon him now, before he'd cleared himself of this school, of the politics within the castle's walls? Not until June would he be rid of daily reminders of Sirius, and another year atop that to be shed of this ridiculous place with its upstarts and dirty-bloods. Did she not see his hands were full already? Father could have ceased her one-track musings and plans, but that would have required he take notice of Regulus.

Right. Regulus could not swallow the bitterness rising like bile. Mistresses were all well and good, expected even and generally accepted if handled with all due discretion. But they should not take precedence over one's own blood heir. Regulus had accepted his invisibility for nearly sixteen years. It was the way things were; it was family hierarchy, and if the youngest Black respected anything it was family and propriety within. But once Sirius had gone been blasted from the Tree and Regulus had stepped into his new role, Orion Black should have acknowledged him with the bestowal.

Should have done. But the Black patriarch had other interests, other priorities. Walburga Black, on the other hand, enjoyed a frightful obsession with the role intended for her now only son. Its taste, however, was foreign and not one for which Regulus had yet developed a partiality. There was an edge to Mother's *request* he did not quite embrace, and would give much to be able to toss off the facing of such dealings until his leaving of school.

You are correct, of course, Regulus began writing, searching for phrases that placated through vague insinuation and were most apt to distance him from stone decisions for a time. *Distractions have altered my course and thrown me from my studies. Professor Slughorn has spoken to me of the situation, and soon all shall be corrected.* By a tutor. How degrading.

The silver tie pin was quite engaging a birthday gift. Thank you. The emeralds of the serpent's eyes were most appreciated by my housemates. As always, you have exquisite taste. His birthday had been the third; the gift had arrived only last week two weeks late. Regulus was curious that Mother's owl regarding his declining marks and their effect on her plans had arrived but two days after his last exam. Odd, that.

He was just about to add filler commentary on school particulars when laughter rose in hollow echo, dispersing into the crisp morning. For a moment, the sound lifted him, its genuine ease stark contrast to his days, and memories of his younger years fleetingly roused his humour. Easily drawn from his letter, Regulus shifted his gaze out the window, eyes searching such light-heartedness out of the desolate morn. He needn't look far.

Down on the grounds not far from the greenhouses stood a pair one a slight female, the other a short, pudgy male. It took only moments for Regulus to make out identities, for even at that range there was no mistaking the seventh-year Gryffindor Pettigrew. The inept boy worshipped Sirius, and thus was hard to miss as he kept step with both Sirius and Potter. But only a slight start did Regulus have at recognising his companion, and his eyes narrowed in disgust.

Right nervy, she was. Standing there, hand affectionately upon Pettigrew's shoulder, bending slightly in laughter only to rise again, pulling the older boy's chin up from his downward musings. He knew a smile graced Hestia Jones' face, murmurs of her voice rising and falling in the distance. Animated hand gestures, more laughter.

Regulus' mood dropped further and a scowl replaced mere narrowing of eyes. Now she flaunted her association with Sirius' little gang.

"Wish to play that way, eh?" he questioned under his breath. "Well, then... we shall see if you know how to play by *my* rules, Ms Jones. I believe you shall find yourself out of your league."

With that he gathered his scribbling efforts and departed, thoughts bent upon this last infraction of unspoken law. He would see to it she would cease her role in attacks upon his person. Regulus contemplated options as he made way to the Slytherin dormitory, keeping to paths less likely to be occupied. Choosing Havers the Ingrate's passage, feelings of retribution buoyed his steps throughout the dark.

He failed to notice the irony.

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"Peter, you're so clever," Tia managed between breathless chuckles. Hand resting lightly upon his shoulder, she brought up her left to pull his downcast face aright, his shyness paralyzing to him. "Honestly; that joke was brilliant. Terra Wallace will adore you if you show her that side of you."

Hope lit his face, though restrained by recollection of experience. Tia knew it must be hard for him being mates with Potter and Black; they were wildly popular and charming. And Lupin, she recalled, was ever the soft spoken one, just as Pettigrew, but his good looks and keen intelligence stood him apart, as well. Peter, on the other hand, seemed to know his outrank in all areas against his friends, and his confidence mirrored that belief.

"Listen; I don't believe you actually need it, but try the cream and then go and chat her up. It's not a love potion, so remember that when she says 'yes,' yeah?" Tia grinned affectionately at him. He was like a child in that way of being so unsure of himself, yet at the same time wearing signs of faerie tale hope upon his soft face.

"What's in it, then?" he asked, holding up the leather-bound tin. Popping off the lid, a light scent of musk wafted between them, its pale beige colour pockmarked from the cooling process.

"Never you mind," she answered with a grin. "Suffice it to say that all it does is subtly call notice to you by the girls you're closest to. Like I said, it's not a love potion; more like a fragranced oil. It's pleasing to females, but most won't recognise it's a scent they're reacting to. Rather, they'll simply take a bit of notice to you, and subconsciously to your own distinct scent later on. The rest is up to you."

"Thank you, Hestia. I'm glad you could help me. With your dad and all, I figured if anyone knew how to help, it'd be you." He turned to go, anxious to get on, then paused with an apologetic smile. "And thanks, too, for not saying anything to James and Sirius and Remus. They wouldn't...er... you know."

"Yes, I understand." And she did. Potter and Black would take the mickey out of him unceasingly. It was hard enough for him, competing against them for attention and girls. "Oh, and Peter?" He turned back from his steps toward the courtyard.

"After Terra and yourself start dating," she said, trying not to laugh at his sudden blush, "you'd best put it away. Wouldn't want any other girl's attention, you know?"

His embarrassed head nod replied for him, and Tia watched with a feeling of good as he disappeared into the castle. Invigorated now, Tia turned and made her way down to Hagrid's hut, hoping to help him tend the new batch of late-year unicorn foals. She missed riding terribly whilst at school, and though they weren't for such use, the unicorns would be pleasant stand-ins. Rouan would be having a lie-in, and once she was up and breakfasted, they would go into Hogsmeade together. But that would not be for another few hours, and Tia was truth be told lonely.

Nearing the groundskeeper's home, Tia spotted Hagrid in the pumpkin patch, harvesting for the Hallowe'en Feast Monday night. Calling her *hullo*, he answered with a huge wave, encouraging her. Tia smiled; at least one male at Hogwarts enjoyed her company.

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Minimum wandlight to keep the portraits quiet in their sleep, Tia softly padded down the corridors alone, fellow prefect Edgar Bones having abandoned her tonight for a profitable game of Exploding Snap. He'd eyed a new racing broom attachment in Hogsmeade earlier today and was setting to acquiring the necessary Galleons. Tia didn't mind, however. Solitude bore benefits, and the peace of the castle at midnight left her free in her musings, ones she'd denied throughout the very public daytime.

Rouan and she had had a full, pleasurable day in the village, and though Tia always enjoyed time with her best friend, her mind was not upon the bobbins and beads she and Marlene McKinnon in a brief parting from Dugan Chambers were 'ahing' and 'oohing' over for party dress do-ups for the winter hols. Though she'd not seen him since their run-in after Potions the day prior, Tia could not dismiss from memory the harsh underlay of his words. "*You know **nothing**,*" he had said.

Nothing. Tia suspected it was more than anger at her reference to his marks that had brought that on, and more than marks its true source. Irritated with him she was, yes, but she could not turn off feelings that had grown over years just because of his sudden unpleasantness toward her. And really, why the abrupt change? she wondered. Though admittedly it was wonderful to finally have him speak to her beyond mandatory classroom chatter, his apparent spite was not.

Granted, his mood could hardly be grand after that prank his brother and Potter had done, but it'd been days since, and he seemed to take out his displeasure on her. She had finally confided to Rouan her part in defending Regulus to his brother, and the Gryffindor had suggested that perhaps he knew she'd seen the prank and was consequently embarrassed. Perhaps he knew of her interest Merlin forbid! and used anger to cover his feelings of foolishness before her.

Tia had to admit that part of that made sense, if only because it appeared as if only she drew his active disdain. But surely not in Potions. The dark looks he'd given her over their brews were completely uncalled for, unless he'd already decided upon the nasty prank with the Canary Swill. Even so, she mentally countered, it wasn't as if a childish prank called for such dark attention. Jokes were accompanied by knowing smiles, devilish ones, even that Tia herself had been accused of when she'd thought of Regulus. Relatively harmless doings did not extend themselves to sullen and threat.

Squeak and scurry brought Tia's wand down to investigate, her lazy stroll interrupted out of curiosity rather than concern. She caught only the tail of a rat rapidly disappearing into blackness.

"You poor thing," she mused with a smile as she straightened, dangling her arms to her sides. "Best keep to your den tonight. Prideful's out and about again." She started a slow turn, wand low to check and see if the Kneazle was nearby when her wand was suddenly jerked from her hand.

"Wha"

But both her movement and voice were stopped, her arms bound against her at the elbows, her body brought up hard against another from behind... a wand digging painfully into soft flesh beneath her right jaw. Her wand lay further down the corridor, emitting too little light to be more than point of glow. She was cast into complete darkness.

His arm just below her breasts hampered breathing. Her struggles ceased, breath shallowed. Aces at Defence though she may be, Tia felt innately her best move was no move at all. Not yet. Not until she knew what he wanted, what was going on. Wandless magic she had not yet mastered, and ineptitude could worsen matters rather than aid.

Remaining calm, Tia forced herself to think rationally rather than give over to emotional response. Her first act needed to be gaining knowledge. Of the situation, of her attacker, of her options.

Eyes attempted adjustment, but no moonlight drifted into this portion of the castle. Soft snores of portraits blended with unnervingly close breathing behind. Deprived of sight and sound, Tia gave herself to touch as a means of information. Roughness of whiskers against her outer ear verified his gender, suggested his height. She stood no better than just above his shoulders, meaning even Muggle-based tactics would be difficult.

She meant to determine more of her assailant, his build, his arm strength... but Tia suddenly couldn't think so dryly, so clinically as his breath fluttered across her ear. There was something about him, something familiar, and all she wanted to do was take complete notice of his touch. Threatening though his arrestment was, she didn't feel fear; she felt nervous. And exhilarated.

His scent. It gave him away in a signature no less distinct than his elegant script, and she knew his identity even before his harsh whisper across her skin.

"Hestia Jones... without her wand. *Tsk, tsk*, my girl. A Ravenclaw should know better. What would your dear new friends say?"

Then Regulus Black tightened his grip.

Chapter 5: Enemy of Mine

Chapter 5 of 13

Confrontations do not always play out as one anticipates. The other side of the proverbial coin often times takes us by surprise, for good or for bad.

Reviews are very much appreciated and are always answered

Author's Note: As always, reviews truly are appreciated. Please sign in or use an e-mail address, as I always reply to reviews. Thanks!

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Chapter 5: Enemy of Mine

It was the power he loved. This moment of complete independence, of matters taken into his own hands without direction or instruction by others. What he did with her was *his* choice, and his alone, and Regulus Black appreciated that sense of empowerment more than he could ever have spoken.

Hestia Jones, ace student and all around silly little brown-noser, was under his control. True, he'd disarmed her prior and came in by ambush, but what did that matter? In war, all was fair. It wasn't *his* fault she was careless... too trusting and optimistic to consider possibilities of attack. Silly bint.

What had begun initially as a struggle on her part quickly ceased at his words. At first Regulus congratulated himself upon his ability to strike fear into her sheep-like self. Only ewes would follow Sirius and his ilk so blindly, so flippantly. She played with fire, and now the burning was to commence. Anticipating her scream, Regulus prepared the spell to muffle it from prying ears, but he stayed his wand. A needful part of him longed to hear the echoes of her words when she began pleading with him, begging for her life and virtue.

Hah. Like he would sully himself with her so-called *virtue*, something he was near sure was non-existent as his Lothario brother was involved. Nevertheless, opportunity availed itself at this moment for him to exact physical revenge of sorts, and he relished the thought immensely. After all was said and done, he would of course have to alter her memory a charm which he had studied dutifully all summer as expulsion or worse was not an option. But she would leave with a scar or two of remembrance, some faint recollection connecting Sirius with bad things for herself.

Yes, at first he'd congratulated himself on his power. Digging the wand deeper into soft flesh, he awaited the tears and choked pleas with checked expectation. Reality, however, had other ideas.

"If you wanted to chat me up alone, Regulus," her soft voice suggested nonchalantly, "you could have simply asked."

Undignified or not, Regulus felt his jaw drop slightly at her response. Seeking reply, he found only silent lip service into the darkness, lost for comment. Did she really just *say* that?

Clambering for clarity, it took a moment for Regulus to regain himself. Attempting composure, he returned to nature and his original contemptuous air.

"Sorry, Jones; think I'll leave your *chatting* to my brother and *his* kind. You've obviously gotten so *very* close," he reminded her lowly. Though she'd ceased struggling, Regulus was all too aware her position, and told himself it was wariness for her attempts to strike and flee that kept his hold upon her so tight in hand.

"What the bloody he-"

"What is going on here?" Jones' retort to his taunt was cut short by an all too familiar command from behind, wandlight now illuminating sections of their bodies, casting off portraits and agitating them into grumbles.

Immediately Regulus relaxed the hold on his classmate to her left hip, hiding the securing move in the shadows. Dropping his wand down so as to appear non-threatening, he took on stoic appearances. Last he needed was any indication he was attacking a student. Mother would *never* condone or forgive him.

For being caught, that is.

Searching his mind frantically for excuses plausible, Regulus made to form the words as he turned to Professor McGonagall, her wand now lowered to give ambient light in the chasm of the corridor. But he never had a chance to speak.

"Evening, Professor," Jones answered pleasantly, shifting her weight subtly forward to gain release from his hand as she turned fully. He had little choice but to comply.

"Edgar Bones wasn't feeling well this evening, so Regulus was kind enough to offer to walk my rounds with me. I've been studying so much lately I've not gotten enough sleep. And, being so knackered, I didn't trust my attention to my surroundings, so I asked Reg if he'd keep me company, keep me awake and all."

Shock marred with confusion and curiosity, and Regulus stared at her throughout the lengthy commentary. Part of him wanted to laugh at her rambling *laugh*, mind you as he stared at her finagling her way out of trouble with McGonagall.

Correction: finagling *his* way out of trouble.

What was her scheme? Here was the perfect opportunity to convict him, possibly have him expelled for what she knew he'd tried to do the potion in her hair and his less-than-congenial attitude towards her as of late. Not to mention this attack in the making. And yet... yet she was covering for him, acting as though it was her idea, her request, that it was nothing more than a mate doing a favour.

A mate. A favour. He couldn't quite wrap his mind around it all.

"... all well and good," the head of Gryffindor was answering, "but would you care to explain why your wand is off down the way and the two of you are in the dark, in rather " lips pursed in suspicious question "close confines?" Her right brow lifted in silent rebuke, suggesting the explanation ought to be enlightening.

Against expectation, the witch actually had a ready answer. "I tripped. I'm so tired I faltered over my own clumsy feet." She had the state of mind to allow a blush, a momentary head drop in mock self-consciousness. Her lie flowed so easily, so well enhanced, she might've done well in Slytherin.

"Thankfully Reg caught me before I had a repeat performance of Defence last week." Regulus cringed at the reminder. In light of her silence to his current misdeeds, a tinge of guilt so foreign wafted through him. Vaguely he wondered if she bore a scar beneath the lay of her long black hair. He'd schemed and thwarted her for days, yet even now she protected him.

Regulus awaited her turn about. He needed to concoct a brilliant story so as to protect himself from the professor's certain wrath when Jones abruptly told the truth, confessed her story and claimed him afoul. McGonagall was a Gryffindor, and that itself held her prejudice against him. She doted on Sirius, cast a blind eye toward Potter, Lupin, Pettigrew. It would follow course that she would lay blame at his feet over the Ravenclaw, over the bosom companion to his brother's lot. No questions, only condemnation.

Regulus grit his jaw at the thought. It gnawed his gut, this endless sea of mugs disgustingly loyal to the blood-traitors. Like so many, McGonagall failed to see the wrongs Sirius transgressed, chose to fault in his stead those whose priorities were well-placed, regardless of fashion. Regulus was crucified by such twee-minded folk, all simply for the fact he knew truth of the world, the need for blood purity.

By any means necessary.

"... and in the future, Ms Jones," the Scot was saying, pulling Regulus from contemplations, "if you find your prefect partner unable to fulfil his duties as assigned, you will report to your head of house for a new partner, *as stipulated in the rules*. Rules, I might add," McGonagall continued, a quick, meaningful glance to Regulus. Stern, disapproving. "Which do not include friends strolling about the castle after curfew with you whilst on duty. I shall let it pass this time, but if it happens again I shall ensure your night-time duties include several evenings assisting Ms Vaisey in the Trophy Room, wandless. Do I make myself clear?"

Regulus could only nod reactively, unsure his voice would remain stable in his apprehension and uncertainty. Jones answered for them both.

"Yes, Professor," she replied, a combination of humble versus clever. "Would you prefer I complete my rounds now alone or disturb Professor Flitwick for someone else to patrol with?" She'd played McGonagall well, directing the discussion as though she sought guidance that only the teacher could offer. Regulus was impressed, in spite of himself.

Mollified, McGonagall's voice lowered and softened in reluctant loss of fuss. "I will have a word with Professor Sprout regarding Mr Bones tomorrow. For now, I believe it would be best, Ms Jones, if you would escort Mr Black back to his common room, then finish your rounds as instructed. We'll discuss the matter further at a later date if you need to change your duty schedule."

"Yes, Professor." Regulus was surprised to find his own voice had chorused with Jones'.

McGonagall curtly nodded and took several steps before turn round once more.

"And for Merlin's sake, Mr Black, light your wand." Scowl intensifying momentarily, the professor turned after he'd done so and soon disappeared into the night's void of the castle.

-o-

Her boldness amazed even herself, and Tia found herself vaguely curious the source of her brazen. Typically Regulus' presence would have her jittery with awareness. But circumstances bode ill with such nonsense, and Tia knew only survival prevention of detention, protection of prefecture, side-step of embarrassment. Cleverness worked to her advantage this moment, and it was with a sigh of relief when Minerva McGonagall turned to depart without further ado.

Then Tia recalled her predicament. She turned abruptly toward her companion.

"I don't know what you're playing at, Black," she hissed as McGonagall's footsteps faded. Being lectured over rules wasn't something Tia enjoyed, and Regulus' unwarranted disdain these past days was fast becoming her greatest agitation. "But I don't appreciate being assaulted in corridor in the middle of the night. You shouldn't even be out of your rooms, you know. I let you go the first time, but it could mean loads of trouble for me should I get caught helping you sneak about. This is the last time I'm covering for you. I don't care *how* lovely you are to look upon, it's not worth losing my place as prefect. Some of us don't *have* wealthy families to fall back upon. Some of us must worry about a *job* after school."

Breathing came harsher now, adrenaline coursing, blending with hints of anticipation. Were she outside herself and watching unemotionally the scene they presented, Tia would have taken in the situation as an opportunity. Alone in a darkened corridor with no one to witness but drowsy portraits, nothing but self esteem and overriding annoyance held in check Tia's lightly buried impulse. Only a stride away, shadows dancing enticingly across his aristocratic features, Regulus left her wanting little more than to step once and meet his lips with her own. A reckless impulse, to be sure, and one she might regret not taking in some distant future. But for now, tension called her play; its breaking point had been met.

"There's nothing for it, I s'pose," she continued wearily after the drawn out seconds of silence indicated too well that Regulus would remain mute on the subject. He merely stood before her, rigid with disdain. For her or the situation, Tia didn't know, but she was split between appreciating his regal beauty and feeling insult at his treatment. She disregarded both.

"Let's just return you to the Slytherin common room so I can go on about my duties before McGonagall throws me into detention, all right?" Without awaiting his agreement, she turned and strolled the same path the professor had trod only minutes before, retrieving her wand on the outskirts of his wandlight. Turning the corner, she listened carefully outside her own shuffle and made out creaks of the castle, scurries of its smaller inhabitants. No disappointment, however, as by the time she reached the first secured classroom, quick, measured footsteps approached from behind. Three breaths and he was next to her, brooding and silent and focused straight ahead, but beside her.

Quarter of an hour passed before their mutual reserve was broken, Tia having mentally gone over the previous events in detail twice in that time.

"And what were you on about earlier? Your brother and *his kind*, as you so eloquently put it." Though she was still annoyed, curiosity dominated and her voice was relaxed as they descended the dungeon steps. "I've spoken to Sirius Black perhaps a dozen times at school in six years; I'd not wager he'd know my name were it tattooed upon my forehead, honest to say. Why'd you think we were close?"

Before, she'd often catch Sirius at his home during summer and winter holidays, whenever she went with her father to make deliveries of bespoke orders. But that was only in passing, polite and light-hearted greetings, little more than pleasantries in crossing her path between the staircase and front door, her usual place to never leave the foyer. Tia had always figured he was on his way to meet James Potter on those days, a Muggle leather jacket topped with a mischievous grin and flirtatious eyes swaggering out the door. But never before he cast a wink in her direction, some double-entendre falling seductively from his quirked lips.

Oh, yes; Sirius Black was a fine specimen of male, no doubt, and a wicked jammy beggar to boot! But it was the watchful younger brother perched in the shadows of the landing that had always held Tia's attention. His eyes, however, rarely travelled to her, instead following his brother's wake. Forlorn and hungry and vulnerable they were until he'd note he was not alone, then pompous scathing would replace the guarded affection for his brother. He would toss her but the briefest of glances then and return

above stairs. Never would he acknowledge her on such occasions.

"Come off it, Jones," said younger brother was now biting. "We both know you've been inducted into the Sirius Black-James Potter fan club. But I warn you: assisting them in their little childish pranks could be hazardous to your very health. One day you'll cross the wrong person," he said darkly, casting her a sidelong peer. "If you've not done so already."

They'd reached the hidden entrance to the Slytherin dormitory, and Regulus had stopped, turning to her only to bid her to take leave so that he may utter the password. Tia, however, was not in the mood to adjourn just yet.

"Sorry?" she enquired, fresh rush of hackles rising in response to his less than veiled threat. She turned fully to him, drawing up to her full height. Facial lines drew taut as all reminiscence faded quickly with his words.

"You're not deaf, Jones," he answered in haughty annoyance. "Nor are you ignorant, though that fact is at times debatable." His posture suggested bored, but Tia knew his stance promised immediate fight should such be warranted. She was no fool. She was, however, past the point of caring.

"Are you threatening me?" Her voice fell several decibels, teeth clenched in renewed anger. A step, then she was right upon him, glaring, provoking his ire. Chin raised high, Tia set her jaw and stared into his eyes, fathomless in the failing light of wands pointed earthward. Even his breath upon her face was indistinct, a vague warmth venturing across her skin. Her brows knit.

"Never *ever* threaten me, Mr Black. I'll not tolerate it. In case you've not noticed, I'm not some flitting First Year, trembling at your brooding and your on-airs spite. I can out-duel you blindfolded, as we both well know. And don't even think you're clever with trickery. Though a Slytherin, I too know your sense of propriety and pride would prevent you from ever cheating in an attack upon my person. Barring, of course," she allowed, raising one delicate brow in acidic accusation, "this evening's flanking performance."

She'd not frighten him, she knew, but Tia was slightly impressed his staunch reaction. He'd not given a centimetre to her bullying stance, not flinched once in her invasion of his immediate presence and space. Regulus had, indeed, done nothing beyond look dully upon her, barely inclining his head to do so. Even in her anger, Tia had to fight raising her free hand to brush aside the lock of fine darkness that had fallen across his brow. It was no time to stroke his hair.

Besides; she truly was pissed off at him.

"So choose your words carefully for future reference, Black; your credibility diminishes with empty threats. And as far as your brother is concerned, you needn't worry. If this is how you show appreciation for my defending you against his and Potter's mockery, rest assured I shan't do so again. You can bloody well bugger off and defend yourself."

Two heavy breaths of pause and glare, then Tia whipped about and left, frustrative energy propelling her steps rapidly in leaving the dungeon.

"Gods, Tia," she mumbled in self-berating snips once well away. "Why couldn't you've had got a fancy for a *normal* boy, a *friendly* boy? Why have you got to always pick the broken ones with a chip and something to prove, eh?" She took the steps two at a time, emerging into the Entrance Hall flustered. Had she ever dreamt of something more than acquaintance with Regulus Black, Hestia Jones was quite certain she'd just marred that dream within a sliver of its life. In point of fact, she'd just cast the Killing Curse upon it.

Damn temper.

-o-

Gardenia, like the fragrance encompassing him during their Tahitian holiday two years prior. The scent had softly assaulted him as Jones had raged on, so close to him he'd nearly had to step back for clear vision. But he hadn't, and Regulus had instead found himself chin to forehead with the Ravenclaw, her snapping fire unexpected and yet not wholly unappreciated. It wasn't every day someone surprised Regulus Black.

And Hestia Jones had done just that.

Truthfully, he really *had* expected her to be frightened of him. Members of his own house were wary of him, cautious in their comments and sickeningly spineless in their grovelling. Not that he didn't expect them to show deference to him; they should, make no mistake. But their allegiance swayed with the tide. Their fear could ensure their loyalty, yes; but fear could also instil desire enough to seek a *coup d'état*. Such alliance must be marked with caution.

Yet Jones had displayed no qualms in berating him his suggestion. She broached the subject head-on, unlike any proper pure-blood should, mind you, but without hiding behind allusion or hints. It wasn't proper, her passionate response lacking any sense of decorum or respect for her betters, so it couldn't be called 'refreshing.' But Regulus had to admit her reaction failed to bore him, shaking up his usual disdain into something more... disturbing.

Rather than deny association with his brother, she'd clarified, attitude not one of begging his understanding or forgiveness, but berating him his own response.

Defending him? Had she actually said she had been *defending* him? He, Regulus A Black, did not need defending. And certainly not from his brother by a mere slip of a girl, one too affiliating and assimilating with Muggles, half-breeds, and blood-traitors to warrant a second thought. Yet she...

Inadvertent was the half-chuckle that slipped from his throat as he stood stark still, not having moved since his escort had departed. It was unwelcome as it was foreign, but this unexpected humour found corporeal form at the mind's image of any female underage telling Sirius off, never mind were it in defence of the younger brother. To verbally scorch him over Regulus' well-being and Regulus had no doubt Jones would approach her maligning battle just as passionately as she just had with him... well, it would have been a sight to behold, he was sure of it.

Slight shake of his head, and he turned round, opening the Slytherin passage with vocalisation of ideals. Stepping into the slumber of his common room, ease of breath at its lacking occupancy. Firelight dying, it was with care he made way to his room, wand extinguished, to mutely change into pyjama bottoms and slide beneath cool sheets.

Once more he stared blindly above from behind heavy emerald velvet, awareness too sharp to fall asleep. Right arm curled above his head, he allowed whispers of thought to come to the forefront. Ignore as he might, Regulus could not shed the imprint his body now recalled so vividly, the heat of her backside impressing itself still on his chilled skin. Her hair had tickled his nose, caught on his beard growth. She'd thought him lovely to look upon he'd not expected that and her firm form had softened plially against him once he'd spoken in her ear.

Regulus shook himself in disgust. When he started entertaining easy thoughts of Hestia Jones, it was a sure sign he'd been without a girlfriend for far too long this time. In the morn he'd have to remedy that.

Decision made, he closed his eyes and gave sleep permission to overcome. Fluttering across his mind as conscious gave over to dream...

And what was she doing calling him *Reg*?

-o-

"You can't be *serious*, Peter." Sirius' bewilderment hung in the air, each boy in the fading firelight awaiting their friend's admittance of a prank. When it didn't come, the elder Black broke the expectant silence.

"The chit's taken a liking to my little brother, the Earl of Arse and heir to the bloody fucking House of Black? Un-fuckin'-*believable*," he cried in astonishment, a barking laugh punctuating his incredulity. His amusement overrode everything else current, including the filched pasties and pumpkin juice from the kitchens. Peter's jaunt as Wormtail had not been in vain.

"Looks like she meant it when she chided us for the Serpent Vine, mate," James remarked thoughtfully between his own outbursts of laughter.

Remus smiled, amused, but much more subdued. If Regulus Black could have hope of a sincere admirer, then Hestia Jones was a promising sort to have. The younger girl he had met on many an occasion at school. She was genuine and good-hearted just what Regulus needed. However, he could scarcely ignore the humour of such a shock. It was Regulus, after all.

"As your brother, Sirius," Remus reasoned, his eyes bright, smile tired but very real, "it really shouldn't come as a surprise a girl fancies him. After all, the physical resemblance is there, so he has the looks even if he's a bit lacking in your charm."

Sirius snorted. "Hah! Charm is an unattainable asset for Reggie. His idea of charm is to wipe after a bit of arse kissing."

"Are you sure what you saw?" James inquired of their returned colleague, credibility of the story still eluding him. He'd known Regulus nearly as long as he'd known Sirius, details of the siblings' relationship from the latter's tales filling in the gaps left in his personal dealings with the boy.

The smaller boy nodded enthusiastically, his watery blue eyes wide with excitement.

"I had just come out the fourth floor passage you know, the one with the Isle of Wright pixies mural on the fifth keystone. You know how I love the gossamer trim to their wings, the delicate detail added with silkworm spin mixed in the colour..." All three nodded vigorously, vocally egging him on to continue. "Right. Anyway, I'd just turned the corner to cut a bit of time, and Tia was there." Brows raised in question, and Peter realised his error, moving quickly to correct.

"She's nice, and I chat with her sometimes over herbology and flowers and such."

"To win fair maiden Terra Crosby's heart, we know," James delivered, satisfied smirk following Peter's heavy blush.

"On with it, Pete," Sirius rushed, rolling his hand in effort to speed the boy along.

"So I was sneaking by, trying not to be seen or heard. After all, I don't know how she is about rats and didn't want to get blasted. Which, by the way, I still don't know why I couldn't have borrowed the cloak and map, you know. Much safer "

"Peter!" they all chorused impatiently.

"All *right*, all right," he pacified, shushing their voices with outstretched hands of supplication.

"Lily's borrowing the cloak," James interjected sheepishly. "And the map's undergoing a few... *minor adjustments*."

"Oh, really? What would Lily need with the cloak? I thought she didn't approve of nosing about after curfew, and what sort of adjust"

"Honestly, Peter, if you don't get on with the story," Remus interrupted, exasperated, "I'll turn you piglet pink and *grow* you gossamer and silkworm pixie wings... on your *earlobes*. Now get the bloody hell on with it."

Six eyes stared gobsmacked at the prefect, jaws hanging before impressed commentary briefly surrounded him by the two raven-haired wizards. Peter traded his blush red for blanched white.

"Er, right." Audible swallow. "Well, like I'd said before, that's when she spotted me, but your brother came up from behind and disarmed her, then took hold her body like he was going to kidnap or hex her. But McGonagall showed up, and Tia lied to her, told her Regulus was just helping her out, keeping her company. After McGonagall left, Tia threw a right fit, going on about how he'd been so horrible to her the last few days. Then she said she didn't care *how lovely* he was to look upon, she'd not have it. The horribleness to her, that is."

"Surely you didn't leave her there alone with him," Remus asked, worry creasing his freshly scarred face. "Jones is brilliant enough in Defence I've patrolled with her before but without her wand... And your brother's house isn't exactly known for fair play," he added with a glance to Sirius.

"No; I followed them long enough to make sure Regulus didn't attack her, but they walked too fast and I lost them. But after I left the kitchens and had to slip through shortcuts in my own form, I saw her patrolling and she seemed all right. Not happy, but physically all right."

"I'll be damned, Sirius," James said when Peter's stilled tongue denoted his story done. James' grin widened as he took to the couch before the fire, index finger pushing his glasses back up his nose. "Our little Serpent Boy is all grown up. Think a good shag will lighten his mood?"

Choked coughs answered, and Sirius cleared his throat after a moment to remark.

"Gods; for her sake, I should hope it doesn't come down to that. He'd probably have a manual on proper fornication manners. Besides, she's a Ravenclaw, isn't she? Too intelligent to get involved with the likes of my family. Mother and Father would splinch themselves if he so much as spoke *kindly* to the bird. She may be a pure-blood, but her father's well open about his views on Muggle-borns, Muggles and the like. His reputation as an apothecary genius is all that keeps him from being targeted by fanatics like my dear relations." Dark grimace pulled Sirius' features.

"Besides," Remus added, wry grin emerging. "'Lovely to look upon' is hardly a proclamation of undying love. I think, perhaps, tonight has quashed all traces of amour she might have held for Regulus."

"Perhaps." Sirius' grim expression lightened only minimally. "Nevertheless, I'd feel better if I had a little chat with Ms Jones. I'd like a clear conscience when I leave this school, and it's my Gryffindor duty to protect the innocent."

"Hear, hear!" James concurred, *clinking* his liberated bottle of butterbeer to Sirius'. Heavy swigs of the drink produced sighs of approval all around. "Now, Peter, if you'd be so kind as to pass the roast platypus..."

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"Reeeaaally? How... intriguing."

"I felt it best you be apprised of the situation post-haste, madam. It may only be rumour at this point, but there is rarely steam without a boiling cauldron somewhere. Shall I devise a dark solution to correct the issue?" His voice was velvet, its glee at the suggestion simply covered in transparent gauze.

"No... no," her thoughtful reply came. She clicked claw-like nails in monotonous rhythm against the chair rail. "I've a better use in mind. In truth, why waste an opportunity so delicious, mmm?"

Her smile was odd against aquiline features, a rarity but in the most nefarious of designs. Low, throaty chuckle rose as she turned back to her informant, eyes narrowing in plan.

"Keep watch, and inform me of any relevant changes on her behalf. A little encouragement may be to our fortunes, dear sir."

"But he does not return "

"Leave him to me," she countered, humming a little tuneless melody in her departure from the room. "I *always* know best."

Chapter 6: Assignations

Chapter 6 of 13

...and other things that *go bump* in the night...

As always, reviews are MOST appreciated

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Chapter 6: Assignations

"You're not up to anything rule-breaking, are you?" Tia's tone held more than mere curiosity, but not by much. Suspicion hinted that his plans bordered a fine line betwixt Professor Dumbledore's frown and Professor Slughorn's impressed pride. She could respect that, actually, herself known on occasion to tread that thin needle-eye loophole within the barriers of law. For Tia, it was always more a matter of morality, ethics. Rules were not always conducive to either.

"Suffice it to say, Ms Jones," the reply soothed, his usual condescendence minimised, "my intentions for the Demiguise hair are within Ministry confines..." Here his voice trailed off, a defining indication of carefully chosen words to make the statement true. How like him.

When Tia said nothing, he continued, their solitary presence in the shadowed corridor emphasising the air of intrigue. She knew better than to ask clarification.

"I trust your continued discretion in our dealings." Half statement, half question. Tia's crooked half-smile answer narrowed her eyes in humour.

"As I always do, Severus. Though, honestly, I don't see the need for such lengths of appeared non-association. You're not so ghastly a bloke as some would have one believe, you know." *Some* to be more than three-quarters the students now gathered in the Great Hall, the Hallowe'en Feast currently in full swing.

"Thank you for your rapt observation," Severus replied dryly. His features remained impassive, giving way only subtle exasperation, a feature of which Tia often found herself on the receiving end. "However, in spite of your ideological views of the world and, more precisely, those who live within its planes, I assure you it would not be prudent for your association with me to become a known factor within this school. Aside from ill-harboured questions regarding our transactions which I am loath to answer I have repeatedly reminded you the implications one might make were they to realise we had more than a passing acquaintance. We are not friends, need I point out; we are merely associates in business. Pleasant acquaintances, at best."

Tia's wry smile grew infinitesimally. Indeed, she saw Severus Snape as an individual fascinated as was she with the Potions world, his appreciation healthy for its ingredients and details, its subtleties and finesse. And he had been nothing but respectful to her since their initial one-on-one meeting some two years prior, a business transaction in Diagon Alley during the Christmas hols. She had only just returned from the Ural Mountains, her arse frozen and her mind frazzled from Flitwick's impossible essay. Appreciative of her having delivered his powdered reindeer antler early and personally, Severus had taken it upon himself to teach her a useful nonverbal jinx by means of thanks. This she had since found helpful in her travels.

No, he was right: they were not friends, but they were friendly. In truth, she found him interesting. Terribly cross at times, but interesting. It wasn't a situation she felt to be problematic. He obviously felt differently, though.

"You worry too much about what others think," she finally said, now pocketing the Sickles in her robe's inner lining.

"On the contrary, Ms Jones," he parried, his own pocket being filled with the small, brown paper wrapped parcel. "It is you who do not worry enough. Far be it from me to attempt to direct your life, but might I advise a little more caution from you; there are those here who do not agree with your *ideals*, as it were. Myself included." Here he cut a look to her, one mixed in chastisement and regret. Then his eyes returned to their surroundings as though he considered himself in danger of being caught.

He continued.

"But I have no quarrel with you. That does not go to say the same might be said for "

"Well, well... if it isn't Snivellus, out for a trolling. Fancy yourself better luck with the girls in the dark, eh? All the better to not see you, I suppose." A malicious edge tainted the voice, its usual jovial cadence tense.

Tia started at the presence to her right, her wand drawn quickly, though she noted with certain self-deprecation Severus' much faster draw. She would have to practise.

"Evening, Black," the Slytherin countered smoothly, vague light revealing a face tight with hatred as he spoke. "Wandering about the castle without your pet, I see. And no audience for your attention-hording preen show." His upper lip curled. "Pity it's so dark outside this evening; perhaps Potter could have been a *howling* success, don't you think?"

Sirius Black broke violently from the shadows then halted suddenly after two strides. It was as though instinct demanded fighting reaction, but an inner, cooler head reminded him to mind his step. He froze, knuckles white in their wand grip. Severus' hand had risen in defence, steady and baiting.

Conflicted in behaviour, it was heartbeats before Sirius spoke again, this time all humour vacant from his voice. "James has more pity for the weak and helpless than do I." Carefully chosen were his words, slow, intent. "I've no qualms thinning the herd of its darker rubbish."

"Then perhaps you should start with your own fa"

"Stop it! Both of you!" Tia's yell startled not only the brawl-ready boys but herself as well. Her wand had flicked between them, unsure whom she was to be most concerned about. It was obvious they hated each other, and more so than mere house rivalry. There was an intensity that stood hairs on the back of her neck, left her uneasy.

"I'm still the prefect here," she continued, voice more courageous sounding than she felt. Inside a certain nausea rose, a sense there was more to fear here than childish

hexes. "And I won't allow fighting in the corridors."

Both sets of masculine eyes peered at her, their look slightly incredulous. Taking advantage of their off-guard, Tia straightened her back and strove for her best McGonagall tone, too aware of the surrounding solitude, distant from help.

"Now," she began, turning to the Slytherin of their group, "Severus, please return to the Great Hall. You've been gone a while," she interrupted his queued objection, "and you *know* your absence will be noted to Professor Slughorn if you do not return post haste.

"And as for you," she went on, turning to Black, "kindly state your business for roaming the corridors before I take points." Point-taking was the only threat she had at the moment, her hope being he'd not realise her own venture into the deserted landscapes was most likely not endorsed by the powers that be.

"Ms Jones," Severus Snape took up, his gaze only briefly flitting to her from Black, "might I caution you strongly against meeting with Black here without appropriate, er, second?"

"Oh, yes, Ms Jones," Sirius cut in, snide imitation of over-the-top propriety carving his words. His own peer was primarily for his rival, as well; chin tucked, head cocked, forcing his eye contact from below a heavy brow. "Best you're not left alone with the big, bad lion. *Tsk, tsk.*" Silky black tresses danced in the head shake. More a tight growl, "I'm known for taking advantage of defenceless girls in the dark wee hours of the night... and attacking classmates with dirty-handed spells."

"Your entire *modus operandi* revolves around defenceless girls and dirty hands in the dark, Black," Severus quipped with a sneer.

"Severus, *please!*" Tia had had enough. "Go back to the Feast. *Now.*" Exasperation gave freedom to her speech, a looseness of which she otherwise might not have given. He poised as though in further argument, but Tia held ground with a look. He knew she was serious, and apparently chose to take up any additional issue at a later time. A curt nod to her, glare to his opponent, and he snapped a turnabout, the Great Hall his destination.

She turned on Black.

"And you you shut your mouth before I seal it*permanently.*" Wand poised in silent affirmation. Fading low chuckles reverberated from somewhere down the corridor. She ignored them.

Sirius Black's scowl darkened further this time on her his stance ready to inform her the difference in their skill levels. But suddenly an odd thing occurred: his lips turned slightly upward, a smirk replacing threat, eyes narrowing in... *amusement?*

"Feisty little thing, aren't you?" he asked, pose relaxing. Eyes studied her brow to toe and back, pausing momentarily at her wand. He must have come to some unspoken conclusion, for when his gaze returned to hers, a grudging respect echoed in their depths. He appeared thoughtful. "You'd give him a right run, I give you that."

Tia bristled, off guard at his strange remark.

"Give *who* a right run?" she asked slowly, wary. Trust was not in her vocabulary... not where Sirius Black was concerned, at any rate. Suddenly Tia recalled herself before he could comment, and original subject returned. "And what are you *doing* out here, Black? No one is to be roaming about needlessly tonight, you know. Professor Dumbledore was quite clear about "

"Clear about what?" he broke in, smug now. Arms crossed his lean chest, bunching robes, loose tie and shirt open in display of tanned neck and smooth, taut skin. His wand lay limply across a fair bicep. Fleeting Tia wondered if the hairless sternum were hereditary. She blinked rapidly. *Not now, Tia*, reprimanded her conscience. *Get your mind*

"Everyone staying put?" he interrupted once more, continuing lazy sarcasm. "Prefects such as yourself being the exception, of course." Raised, quizzical brow left Tia honest enough to blush. She glanced away. He went on.

"Watching out to ensure none of us lowly delinquents were out meandering the castle, eh? Associating in skulduggery with the wrong sort?" His eyes narrowed here, mood shifting.

"Ms Jones," he began, all humour lost. "Generally I'd say what you're up to is none of my concern. If you want to pass trinkets with Snivellus," sneering once more, then dropped, "that is your affair, not mine. Merely shows your lack of taste or poor use of judgment. But Remus finds you a good sort, so I doubt you're exactly in league with the enemy."

Taking exception, Tia snapped. "In league with the enemy? Are you bleeding *serious?* We're all Hogwarts' students, and just because you're house rivals "

"Come off it, Jones," he interrupted once more, drowning out her, *Stop doing that!* by continuing on. "I'll not get into a fuckin' feel-good chat with you with that how we can 'all live together in peace' shite Dumbledore goes on about. I respect the man, all right, but he's blind if he doesn't see certain families for what they are. But that's beside the point I came to make, actually, and if you don't mind, I'd like to get on with it. My venison's getting cold and if I don't hurry back, James'll filch the last of the crumble."

He looked honestly put out with the concept, and Tia was just shocked enough by his odd line of thinking that she conceded him the floor.

"All right, then," she said carefully, wand still trained. "What exactly *did* you come to make a point about?"

At first she thought he'd changed his mind, silent as he was for several moments. "As I'd said, normally I'd not give a bloody damn about what you do or with whom you do it, but word has it one of those *whom's* is my little brother, and *that* I do care about." His hand rose sharply, palm outward, warding off her open mouth of protest. "Doesn't matter how I know; just do. Aside from the fact I'd think you could do better than the snipe, I can't in good conscience allow you to get involved with Regulus.

"You don't know what you'd be getting into, Hestia," he elaborated, switching easily to her given name. "Reg my whole damn family, nearly is fanatical about Voldemort." Her twitch went without comment. "His little lap dogs, they are, and are all about blood purity and name. They're not your type, and you're not theirs. It's too well known what you and your father think about Muggleborns and the like, and that's not their views at all."

"What do you mean it's 'too well known' what we think about Muggleborns?" Defensive now, Tia's back straightened further, indignation tightening her features.

He sighed loudly, eyes rolling. "Gods, Jones, stop being all touchy about everything I say. Everyone who knows your father is well aware he has no problem doing business with non-purebloods, Muggles, even, and Remus says you're kind to most everyone at school. Therefore," he concluded, a sideward head bow in gesture, "you both are *obviously* not of the same thought as my... family." He stumbled over the word, disgust lacing his voice.

All sorts of thoughts whirl-winded through her head. How in Mordred's name did he know of her interest in Regulus? And really, what business of his was it if she chose foolishness for a boy so little inclined to give her notice that he'd *threatened* her? He obviously disliked his brother immensely; suggesting *she* leave Regulus be wasn't going to hurt Regulus, as aforementioned did not want her. So there could be no spite to prevent the younger sibling's happiness. And she and Sirius were not friends, either, so it was not in protection of her, surely.

What was going on here, then?

Ignoring the blush she knew had coloured her fair skin, Tia took control her voice and spoke in steady, lofty tones. She'd heard the type in the older families' homes over the years.

"Your concern for my welfare is admirable, Mr Black, and your opinions duly noted. However, I cannot see whereas anything of my personal doings your information correct or not are any of your concern. I have not set upon your brother nor have I interfered in his life, aside from requesting your cessation of antics about him. Thus, you need not fear for his... safety." A pause, a breath to stop the trembling of nervousness belying her approach. Confidence had left her, but she strove not to allow him that bit of knowledge.

"In the future," she continued, refusing intimidation by his bemused expression. Her vision moved to just left of his piercing grey eyes, eyes that laughed at her with quiet superiority. "I would appreciate it if you would refrain from worrying yourself with me. I am quite capable of caring for myself, thank you, and I've not caused your brother any grief, either." Well, not counting two nights ago, but in all honesty, Regulus had been the one to start that row. Not that she figured Sirius knew of it, anyway.

It took a bit before Tia realised Sirius had not yet responded to her edict. Chancing a look, his thoughtful smile unnerved her. Lower lip found its way betwixt teeth, and she had to concentrate to keep her wand steady, face otherwise impassive.

"I'll give you an *O* for effort, Ms Jones," he began, a small, dry chuckle escaping from deep within. "You're right opinionated and stubborn. Just what the little bugger needs. But if Reggie were really stupid enough to involve himself with you, then understand your *own* safety would be greatly endangered. You'd not be welcome in the Black family, I assure you." Though serious, a brightness danced in his eyes, suggesting underlying humour.

His weight shifted as he turned to leave, but lips parted once more in murmur.

"But it's a fight I'd *pay* to see with Reggie." With that, he turned back and strode away, leaving Tia open-mouthed in a search for response. Soft laughter floated behind him.

Well... *that* was unexpected.

-o-

The shadows were rapidly becoming his friends, cloaking his interest and allowing him solitude even when not alone. Regulus needed the anonymity, particularly as of late. Too much was being asked of him. He wasn't bloody *Sirius*, after all. He knew his limitations.

Not to be taken wrong; he *was* the good son. He would do as required of him, what was right and honourable. But Regulus' talents only went so far. And this new *request* of him... A discomfort overshadowed and unease bled through. Disappointment, as well. Such silly feelings should not be issue against duty, and he despised himself for such weakness. Obviously it was going to take time to gain the control over himself necessary. Solitude allowed reflection, and shadows allowed his unnoticed observations.

Regulus paced in the shallow corner betwixt the marble staircase and the entrance to the dungeons. Distant scuffle was all that remained to denote those final students exiting the Feast for their rooms. And yet here he remained, waiting impatiently for a chit too undisciplined to ensure her immediate departure.

Staying true to his word that it was to himself was moot he had spent Sunday choosing a diversion of feminine nature. Success resulted in fifth-year Slytherin Lystra Davies, statuesque dark blonde daughter of Ezekiel and Kasha Davies. The family was political, ties steady with upper Ministry echelon. Mother would approve, if only as a diversion. And diverting she was, too, the whole of the day. Particularly in the alcove off the fifth floor North staircase. But the girl was too headstrong, her family not financially well off enough for something serious. But Regulus wasn't looking for serious; he was looking for an outlet. Frustrations needed to be exorcised. And soon.

During the Feast they'd made plans to meet, to walk together for a bit of solitary confinement of their own in the dark corridor before entering the Slytherin common room. He needed it, needed the physical misdirection to avoid thinking. But then Lystra had gone and acted grossly improperly, tossing bits from the serving trays across the tables. Edgar Bones had taken up the challenge, his place as Hufflepuff Chaser and captain justified with each reached target in retribution. Flitwick had not been amused, however, and had asked to speak with them after the meal. Childish, really. Maybe Mother *wouldn't* approve her... for even entertainment purposes.

She was still in the Great Hall.

So Regulus paced. He was still hoping for some distraction this evening, some invigorating snogging perhaps to clear his mind. Apparently in that alone he might have shared with his brother, dare he admit it. Sirius had been busy already this evening, slipping out of the Feast at some point during the more rambunctious of the festivities, only to drift back in casually in the middle of pudding. Smug grin only enforced the obvious of just what he'd been doing during his absence. Vaguely Regulus speculated *whom*.

Footsteps drew his reverie to a close, and Regulus stilled, schooling his face for Lystra. Though not stupid, the girl was not particularly observant. She made an exception, however, for Regulus' expressions. All day yesterday and between classes today, she'd repeatedly asked his mood, her guesses changing against every fluctuation of his tense facial muscles.

Finally, he thought as she rounded the staircase. Hood up, she apparently intended to seek him out unobtrusively. After all, ghosts were notorious gossips. Blinded by said hood, though, she didn't see him and made for the antechamber on the other side of the Entrance Hall. He'd not been in its confines since the start of First Year, awaiting Sorting. Had she thought him clever enough to arrange a rendezvous in there? Granted, she had been quite *excited* at the prospect of an illicit meeting just prior to curfew.

Very well; he'd meet her expectations, if only to stave his own energies from other routes. Agitated pacing or restlessness in his bed were not his best options. Not when there was a willing girl not a metre away with an exploratory imagination.

His strides were quick and quiet, coming up behind just as she ducked into the room. He caught the door and allowed it to softly enclose them into poor light of two low-burning sconces. Part of him thrilled at the dodgy flavour of her sneaking about. This could indeed go well for him tonight.

"Looking for something?" he asked lowly, focusing himself on the now. "Or, perhaps, someone?"

She turned immediately, hood dropping with a flick of her hand.

"Regulus!" she breathed, a heightened air to her and slightly unnerved. Golden tendrils glimmered against flickering flames, shadowed eyes wide, mouth in an 'o' formation. Had he surprised her?

In private, his answering grab for her arms was acceptable, something he would never do in public. But even following his lead, her sudden shift into amorous attack left him momentarily off balance. Then all confusion left in lieu of her very willing lips dining ravenously, her very long legs rubbing between trouser leg and robes, her hands frantic in their search across his back and shoulders. It all made it easy to forget everything else, forget the unsettling post of this morning. A distraction she was, indeed, but not enough to miss muted sounds of verbal scuffle outside the door.

Lystra stopped, drawing back quickly. He moved to speak but her index finger found purchase across lips she'd just violated. Eyes to the door, they listened but made out only rustling and undertones. Turning back to Regulus, Lystra gestured her intent.

"Sorry," she whispered, barely audible. "Left mine in my room." With that, her slender hand traced down his collarbone before transferring to his robe pocket. Wand withdrawn, Lystra raised her hood and edged along to the door. Quietly, cautiously she exited the room, pulling closed the oak behind her.

Precisely what he needed more interruptions and solitary time. Glancing about, Regulus decided better mood could be set for her return. He didn't want her distracted again; he needed her attention on him, strictly him, no ghosts or poltergeist luring her focus from him. Lower lighting, a warming charm against the cool stone of the walls. He considered the brilliance of conjuring a settee, but decided against it. That might be going too far, and something he did not need to be caught having should the worst happen. Wand-tipped weddings were not acceptable.

A sense lurked that perhaps appearing as though he was going to seduce her would not be suitable for the evening, though Lystra's previous performance suggested little

effort required. The physical release would be grand, but Lystra was not one to yet be trusted; he didn't need another Galleon-seeker crying foul in order to latch her claws on the Heir. Regulus knew better than to fall in that trap; he'd learnt from the best, hadn't he? Orion Black kept mistresses in line, and more importantly, in the background. Regulus scowled. For the moment he didn't want to be reminded that he was the Black Heir, that he was sought after for his position and would have to monitor his dalliances for the sake of appearances. He had enough to mind, thanks.

Reminders of his shortcomings as the Black Heir family expected only fuelled him further. By the time staccato creaking alerted him of Lystra's return, Regulus was overwhelmed with need for escape. Allowing not even the door to close, he jerked her to him hard and found the heated wall, throwing her against it and securing with his body. She would be his escape, if only for an hour.

Gasps and breathy half-words met his hungry advances, this time Regulus taking control as she had earlier. Foregoing her lips, he instead commanded her neck, shoulders. There was anger in his movements meant of passion, a frustration breaking free its reins. All sides, demanding of him what he himself knew only loosely might be there. Expectations Mother, Father, the Dark Lord, Society...

Everyone wanted something from him even Lystra here, giving her body but demanding his in return and the pressure was unbearable. Why had they not given him time to know himself, to realise what he could offer and *then* allow him to offer so himself? Grant him time and growth to confidently say, 'This is what I offer you,' and leave him to his work so that he may prove himself without direction or mollicoddling from those around. Was this so expensive a gift to expect, to request? Or was their faith in him so lacking they felt hovering mandate? To instruct his every move, assume he'd not think of steps himself, come to conclusions on his own, dedicate himself to the True Way without prodding?

Disgust raged through him suddenly, self as well as directed toward others. Tired he was of their nursemaid attitude, seeing him only as a witless pawn. He had much to contribute to the Dark Lord; he did not need it drawn out for him what each move he should make for Society's sake. Regulus had been brought up properly, knew his place in the world and expectations upon him. He was a grown man, for Circe's sake! Time had come that he be treated like it, and not a house-elf on a mindless mission.

Pent emotions poured out in faster, heavier, stronger movements. He gripped Lystra's petite body tightly, abusing its soft flesh. Breathing ragged as he burrowed into the neck of her robes, kissing her neck, raking his pristine teeth over pale skin, suddenly too desperate to release the frustration in some form. Pinned between himself and the wall, her body moulded his own, and deep inside a reaction unbidden stirred, but he ignored it. Never mind he hadn't felt it yesterday, a day spent with rapt attention between them. But once more he cast it aside, pressed on by ever-consuming internal screaming, demanding he be taken seriously, be seen as the man he was, be heard, be

Several moments passed before realisation soaked through the fog amidst his brain. The moans of pleasure were not eagerness at all; they were hisses. Desperate yet pissed off. Feminine arms were not encompassing him, but shoving at his chest, seeking separation. Dazed, he eased his controlling hold to step back, coming round to himself in the process.

"Regulus Black, if you don't unhand me this instant and find your scruples," she bit in an angry hiss, voice still low as to not be heard otherwise, "I swear to Merlin on high I will hex you into a Romanian Demiguise!"

She was irate. Livid. And she was not Lystra.

Regulus' stomach dropped in understanding, his face blanching. All previous toil and torment disappeared in a *whoosh* of silent breath. He had attacked attacked Hestia Jones. Dear Salazar... he'd lost awareness, lost control. Regulus closed his eyes slowly against the frail candlelight, knowing when they opened once more he'd see the face before that had haunted his dreams but two nights prior. Numerous reasons existed why this was not good, not the least of which she could have him expelled he didn't even have his wand with him for a good Memory Charm, and he simply didn't have it in him tonight for Muggle fisticuffs. Suddenly every bit of him felt worn out, his energy dissipated.

His shoulders drooped.

"Are you all right?" Genuine concern in her tone brought Regulus' eyes warily open, disbelief in what he thought he'd heard.

She was near him. Too near him. In the poor light he could still make out her features, the hood caught raggedly to the side where he'd blatantly jerked it down in haste. Even in the dim, her flushed cheeks stood out, her much shorter stance soft in embarrassment. Lips tugged awkwardly in shy smile, eyes varying from self-consciousness to worry and back again. She bit her lower lip.

"I'm fine." Hardly recognizable was his own voice, and he realised with some trepidation that it wasn't only concern for being found out that had him unsteady. Even if he'd been up for the fight, hexing her or causing her any distress in any way was not allowed. Not after this morning.

Damn it.

Another slow blink and deep breath, and Regulus composed himself. Couldn't have her pissed off at him. No. He had to make things good, else he'd be in further trouble. Why must it be the gods looked down so nastily at him as of late? What wrongs had he done? He had obeyed orders, remained loyal to family and cause, understood and acted his role in Society...

And this slip of a girl before him had just become the bane of his entire existence. His teeth grit, and he brushed aside true feelings. For the moment.

"Simply overwhelmed by your beauty this invigorating night." Words formed and were forced from his tender lips, face schooled to project abashed sincerity. Years of societal gatherings had taught him smooth words of placation. "I couldn't take my eyes off you the entire evening. When you'd fallen behind, I'd let myself get out of hand and had to see you alone, so I had..." He trailed off, immediately aware the corner into which he'd talked himself. Did she know about Lystra? If so, he had to claim error of identification. If she'd not seen the girl leave the chamber, then she'd wonder what he was doing here. But then, why would she have come into the antechamber herself...?

He knew he was outed the moment he caught her face again. Singular brow raised in annoyance and disbelief; lips perked in a tight, disapproving reproach. She knew.

-o-

"Is that so?" Tia asked lightly. The simple fact she'd been gone nearly a quarter of the festivities made out his lie easily enough. Watching her so closely as he claimed, he would have noticed. But he was attempting denial, and a devilish part of her the part Rouan Kendal always proclaimed would get her in the worst of trouble drew her to silence. Let him suffer, she decided, but let him believe himself free at the end. Vanity begged to be stroked just a bit more, even if falsely. Hearing words of interest from Regulus whilst his imprint still remained on her body, the soft points of her neck, was still part of a dream come to life. Only thing better would be their authenticity.

Time to up the ante.

"Sorry, then, I took so long. Had the prefecture duties of sending along a couple who found the night too alluring to say good evening so early. Just outside this room, moments ago." She allowed a knowing smirk to relay the insinuation. Intently she watched his face, ready to capture evidence with her next phrase.

"Seems a bit hypocritical, actually, considering I'm allowing this," she continued, a glance about to suggest their clandestine meeting. "But I suppose it's not that bad here. Not like Davies and Bones, you know? *They* weren't merely sneaking in a quick snog goodnight, eh? Five minutes more and frostbite might've taken a delicate bit or two from each." Here she allowed her eyes downcast, catching beneath lowered lashes the fleeting look of horror on his face, quickly followed by anger. So... he was meeting Davies here, and she meant to meet Bones, instead. How... interesting.

Tia quickly hid her amusement as Regulus covered his own irritation. It wouldn't be until later that Tia's humour would die down, leaving in the cold night air a sense of sadness, of loneliness. A right scoundrel he was, but she couldn't help it; he still made her belly jump and her cheeks tingle. But for now, she'd play his little game. At least

it would get her mind off his brother's cryptic tellings.

"Honestly, as much as the idea of staying here with you all evening appeals to me," she went on, tidying her clothing. A tone light with secretive, girlish mischief fed her words their credibility. "We really do must be getting on. I'd like to keep my place as prefect, and McGonagall's still right pinched about the other night with me. If Filch or Peeves catches us out, I'll spend the better part of next term in the Trophy Room. So let's be on, all right?"

"Yeah, sure." Caution still evident, yet he attempted grace and boyish flirtation in return. For a moment, Tia allowed herself to believe it, to accept the faerie tale. Then reality reminded her the game, and she moved on to appearing to believe him. Perhaps she should go into theatrical performance, she thought sadly. Then she shook her head, disheartened chuckle swallowed as Rouan's pronouncement reverberated in her ears. *You wear your heart on your robe sleeve, Tia Jones* she'd once said. This was one time Tia adamantly hoped her best friend had exaggerated profusely. Regulus Black did *not* need to know her true feelings. Not now; not ever.

Resistance futile, Tia slowed in her turn toward the door, one last spark of spunk returning. Dropping her chin to gaze longingly beneath long lashes at him, she cocked a crooked smile and put on her sweetest, most innocent of masques. Might as well get *something* out of the deal.

"One last kiss goodnight, shall we?" Eyes closed, lips puckered.

Let him squirm.

Chapter 7: Rise by Sin

Chapter 7 of 13

When even the most inspired of plans go awry...

Reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 7: Rise by Sin

Horror swept through him, the pit of his stomach tightening in sheer panic. She was actually standing there, eyes closed, lips pursed. Waiting.

For him.

For his kiss.

No, not panic, he corrected. Blacks did not *panic*. Blacks *abruptly reassessed*. Taking a half-step back, he critiqued her form in the dim light, shifting his attention from defence to offence. Chin now up to meet his imaginary touch, she reflected the image of tactless, silly little girl, wishing childishly for the wizard of her dreams to whisk her away. *Pfft*. How desperate.

Regulus bunched his nose in distaste. Were it yesterday, even, he would have at minimum strode right past her, a scathing remark left in his wake. At worst for her he would have ensured she realised just how pathetic she really was, how unworthy as well. Worry over curfew be damned; she was out just as he, and it was doubtful she would be believed were she to reveal him. He wasn't even sure she was on duty, making her just as out of bounds as he.

But it was not yesterday; the rules had changed. Objectives had changed. He was bound, now, by alternative measures. And he was not pleased.

Resigned now, he set his mind to chasing down a way out of the obvious. Casting about furtively, Regulus sought some diversion, some excuse to forestall or even circumvent touching this girl intimately. Twitches darted down his limbs consciously; even the thought of going through the charade repulsed him. Conveniently he forgot the episode just moments prior: his roaming hands, body, lips... all strewn about her in a possessive need for escape. Mistaken identity did not count.

"I'm afraid you are correct," he finally said, deciding on a course of action. He was a Slytherin, after all; survival was ingrained. "It would be most grievous were we to be discovered this late, particularly in such isolated confines," he smoothed. Her eyes opened in confusion and concern, posture relaxing to normal. Regulus pulled a placating, knowing smile.

"Besides... I don't wish to be rushed or otherwise distracted," he added in a lazy tone, taking a step toward her. A soft knuckle stroke slowly down her cheek; thumb pad pausing on her jaw line. Let her buy it; it would buy him time, her assumptions. He will not have to suffer the indignation of following through with a kiss to her. After all, a small token often performed the deed of much greater sacrifices. Surely by such a time as a follow-through act would be required, sense will reign with his world once again and he'd not be forced into playing debonair admirer to this temperamental know-it-all. But until then, he had to play nice, gain her affections.

It was demanded of him.

"Our time together warrants total concentration and privacy." He could blarney with the best, having grown up in a world of soirées and intrigues, of double meanings and hidden truths. Father's lead aided Regulus well at this moment; Jones' eyes grew wide in astonishment, her acceptance of his lies belittling to her supposed intelligence. Tentative smile, shallow breath, quickly shy eyes flickering to him and moving instantly away.

Regulus grinned slightly, tightly, struggling against the grimace now demanding to take over. This was too easy.

Obviously she read his small smile and direct eye as his intention, a blush creeping high up her girlish cheeks. A sudden morose assaulted him. Irrelevant his objective, Regulus somehow had expected hoped, even Hestia Jones of all people would see through the charade. Would read him past the airs, snap at him in her knowing little way that he fooled no one. Spearated him with her expressive face that continued to surprise as she called him his trickery of self-protection. A flare of temper, combined with some hidden secret in her eyes, just as she had done Saturday night outside his rooms. Verbal sparring, full of false bravado or stupidly real bravado forcing him, forcing his hand. But she was merely as gullible as the rest.

How disappointing.

But he should not care. Really, he should not. Her reaction only concerned him in as much as she considered him pleasing, believed him partial to her, even. It would make his chore more bearable, if he did not need to work at convincing her. Perhaps it would only be a little while before that duty was rescinded.

Already moving toward escape, Regulus paused to bid his adieu, a small part of him still holding out for her rebuttal.

"Perhaps another time, *mon petit terrier?*" he cast half over his shoulder, refusing to see her face again. The vision of her weak will was nauseating. He could not abide such vulnerability. Had nothing of her pure-blood status made it through her upbringing? Had Ezra Jones really neglected his only daughter's training so woefully? Resentment flowed powerfully through him, directed now at this pint of a Ravenclaw chit. Damn her malleable will, her disgustingly trustful mind. She should have fought him, should have called him out on his lies and manipulations.

"Your little terrier?" she asked in a voice soft and high with bedazzlement. Regulus kept his face toward the exit as he moved through it, hiding his scowl.

"Yes." His voice gave away none of his anger, coming out instead an indulgence. "Tenacious, you are..." He turned and fled purposefully. Long strides to the dungeons' entrance, then under his breath, "Tenacious little bitch."

-o-

Flame dwindled and Hestia Jones continued to stare unseeingly at the hearth, caught up in visions of memory. The Ravenclaw common room was dim in the late hours, solitaire with its previous occupants all snug away now in their four-posters. But sleep eluded Tia, her confrontation with Regulus Black still fresh in her mind.

Of course he'd been waiting on Lystra Davies. She knew that. She also knew full well his act to cover the situation, how he'd pretended his attraction was for her. Hestia promising a continuation at a more conducive time. The first did not surprise her; self-preservation was expected of any student caught breaking the rules. But his extra effort at convincing her he was merely *postponing* a goodnight snog...

He made no sense to Tia.

What didn't help was her attraction to him. Oh, sure; she knew his affections were not for her, nor was he being more than stiffly polite as she *was* a prefect and he didn't want to get on her bad side. But for a moment this evening, Tia had let herself fantasise that it was *her* he had been waiting for, wanting. She had allowed herself this fleeting indulgence, just to know what it felt like. And what it *had* felt like...

Honestly, she was going to wind up no better than her worst nightmare: smitten with a boy to the point of exclusion of her ideals, her future. Ezra Jones had raised a forward-thinking girl, smart in her own right and able to do whatever she desired, regardless if mere witches were supposed to be able to do so or not. But Regulus Black had taken all her focus away.

With one... intimate... touch.

Circe, she was hopeless.

Another unbidden sigh escaped, forlorn in its drawn-out singularity. Disappointment in herself; there was no way she could deny the truth. For once, she wanted to be the girl the boys thought of in *that way*. She *wanted* to be the one girl *Regulus Black* thought of in *that way*. Forget house allegiances or her father's work; forget his family's status or even the rumoured associations with darkest wizard of them all. For a moment, for a breath, Hestia Jones wanted to forget about the school and the rules and future, and simply be locked away in a darkened antechamber, secured in a grip tight with possessive nature and hungry need.

This time an eye roll accompanied a resigned, self-deprecating huff. Shake of her head, long black locks swishing in a fine curtain. Madness, it was. She was starting to sound like one of those single-minded, buxom witches in the silly romantic tales her friend Clio Harper read. For a Slytherin, Clio was strangely drawn to affection over propriety. Oh, how Clio would break down in laughter were she to see Tia now. Good thing the girl was studying abroad this term.

The crux of the matter, entirely, was what Tia should do about the odd, suggestive behaviour of this evening. She had no intention of causing him detention or other school punishment. Honestly, she'd no desire to share the event with anyone. Well, perhaps Rouan, but any other soul was not to ever catch whiff one of it. Not only would it draw attention to both Black and herself, but Tia knew she would not be able to hide her blushes at reciting such a tale. Even were she to leave out the antics of the antechamber, her mind would not dismiss them in the telling. Evidence to her unrequited interest in him. She would be found out, her embarrassment complete.

A low groan escaped her, remembrance of commentary she had made to Regulus in an attempt to play her role. Confession, as it were, really. Tia had admitted as much that to spend the evening in close quarters with him would be most appealing. And this following their harsher words just two nights before. What must he think of her? She knew he'd been playacting for self-serving reasons, but he did not know that *she* knew he was. And, well... ultimately it did not matter that she had said it for the sake of deception, for it had been true enough.

Never would she be able to look him in the eye after tonight.

Humiliation aside, it was the strange manner in which Regulus' attempt at convincing her that bothered her most at present. Almost as though... as though he were up to something. To fathom just what took more insight than Tia had left this evening, her nerves already on end over the sensual assault of his misplaced amour.

A scowl replaced her musing expression. She'd prefer not to think on that. Lystra Davies was not a subject she wanted to consider; Regulus' partiality to the loose girl was not a contingency of hope for Tia. The two girls were none alike. Comparatively, Tia ought to be sequestered in a convent. She'd had nearly equal experience.

"Are you all right, Tia?"

Vaguely startled, Tia turned distractedly from the glowing grate and her reverie. Marlene McKinnon had just returned from patrol, weary and yet... as beautiful as ever. There was no wonder as to why every boy in the school stared after her. She was stunning.

"Er..." A night for oddities, Tia once more found herself at a loss for words. Regulus' kisses had done that, and without ever having touched her lips. "Oh, *bollocks!*" she hissed indignantly under her breath. *Get a bloody grip on yourself, Hestia!*

"Just musing," she finally said, contemplating how she could ever explain her state of mind at the moment, or if she even wanted to do. She settled on vague summary. "People can be so difficult to understand."

This elicited a knowing laugh from Marlene, the older girl's eyes brightening in delight. "People, Tia? Sounds more like a boy problem, to me." Marlene spoke as she made her way to the dormitory door, pausing before disappearing through.

"When in doubt, I've always found a thawing cup of tea to do the charm." Pause, step forward... "With a splash of brandy, of course." With a wink, she drifted into the darkness, muted chuckles ebbing into the night.

Tia stared after her, one brow creased, the other raised in confused speculation. Well, now... *there* was a thought.

-o-

He would have *incendio'd* the letter had his wand been on his person. Regulus scowled more deeply. He would have to retrieve it first thing in the morning, in the common room. Early. He would not give Lystra the opportunity to brandish her possession of it before the multitudes. Besides... her rash behaviour this evening would be the end of her. No one cuckolded a Black and stayed for an encore of his attentions. She would be duly reprimanded.

Edgar Bones, indeed.

Regulus watched with subdued pleasure as flames distorted, darkened, then destroyed the missive in the grate. He could ill-afford another coming upon the letter, claiming knowledge to his most galling of instructions.

Garner the Jones girl's affections, Regulus, Mother had written but this very morning. Do whatever you must however appalling or beneath your status this may be to hold fast her complete trust and preference. Court her as though she were fit for the privilege, properly and equal to Society. Treat her as an intended. It is to our great advantage and to that of the Dark Lord that we lay claim to her father's talents. It would be quite the feather for the family should you secure her loyalties, my son. When we've all we require of Ezra Jones, you may dismiss the girl however you wish, under the guise of her scandalous behaviour. Until then, betroth to her as it benefits. You will not fail me this, Regulus.

As for that other matter...

Jaw tensed, released, and tensed again. He did not wish to think further on the horrid task. Nor the other matter, really, though that one caused unease on a much deeper, disturbing level. As for the former, Mother was commanding him to manipulate Hestia Jones with faux affections, to make her believe he had an interest in her. An interest disassociated with her father's status as an acclaimed apothecary. It was revolting.

Manipulation of the girl did not bother him in the least; it was the manner in which he would have to do so. Fawning upon the silly chit, displaying forced signs of besottation... He released a shuddering breath of distaste. Worse yet, Regulus could not see getting by with this without the assumed role becoming public.

Damn it all.

Flame collapsed, its withered fuel spent. Regulus stared into the darkness. Angry. Resentful.

Resigned.

-o-o-o-

Professor Babbling was late dismissing class. Her delay only improved his plan's success, and Regulus paused in his text collection, allowing the other students to queue and file out the Ancient Runes' door before him. Surreptitiously he watched Jones, gauging his own speed of departure to hers. Two weeks' worth of consideration it had taken to come to this point, the point at which he would put into action the proper seduction of Hestia Jones. It was taking longer than Mother would have preferred, but Regulus had been more than hesitant at the task. A certain amount of subtlety would be required at any rate; Jones would be highly suspicious if Regulus had suddenly grown blatantly amorous.

Again.

She'd not bought his performance on Hallowe'en night as he'd hoped. No; the next day her attitude toward him had gone guarded, however still civil if not at times friendly. She had not acted like a girl newly involved in a secretive tryst. Rather than blushing shy or excitedly animated, Jones had been polite, quiet, hesitant, confused. She never approached him, never intimated their intimate rendezvous had ever existed. And so Regulus had done the same.

For the briefest moment he had been thankful for her distance, but as time had worn on, the realisation had struck that her lack of acceptance did not bode well for his mother's instructions. Walburga Black's insistence was unceasing.

Jones was now moving toward the door finally, alone as was her custom. Only Cecil Patton was left shuffling along beside her, the Gryffindor's distracted nature a fortuitous prop. Regulus needed interaction with her, something as natural as possible to avoid questions. Something of a catalyst to their new, impending relationship. Something soon. Mother was becoming impatient.

But Jones was smart; she would need coaxing into the relationship, and Regulus had every intention of drawing her into his web... of her own, willing accord. She just needed an introduction to the idea.

"Oh, fuzz-buckets!" she suddenly exclaimed as the stack of books and loose parchment in her hold scattered about the classroom floor. Regulus internally scoffed; she couldn't even *swear* properly. Her entire essence bled naïveté; avoid blatant errors of moving too fast, and she would ease as first-year Charms.

"Gods, Cecil, *please* mind your step," she chastised the boy, limiting her checked irritation to his stumbling upon her fresh notes rather than to the fact he was the cause of said destruction. Not that the boy hadn't had a bit of help in that little episode...

"Sorry, Tia," he apologised self-consciously. He set his own stack upon the floor and commenced to rounding up Jones' notes, only making the situation worse with crumpling parchment, smudging ink. "I really don't know what happened "

"Really, Patton," Regulus now chimed in from behind, haughty and disparaging. "Take leave of yourself before you cause any further havoc." Only the Black glare swayed the boy to give up his role of making amends. With a panicked glance to Regulus and quickly spoken words of defeat to Jones, Cecil Patton retrieved his items and fled. A satisfied smirk tugged at Regulus' taut lips.

"Honestly, Jones," he turned toward the girl with a heavy sigh, her hands attempting to correct Patton's beefy pawings. Opportunity was now presenting.

A flick of his wand, and books, documents, notations... all flew into an organised pile, levitating before her. Perfect arrangement. As so it should be he'd practised the very spell for nearly a full week.

Jones gaped, first at the waiting items, then at Regulus. He knew she would never have bothered magicking them straight herself; he had heard more than one story concerning the horrors of her Charms work.

Realising her ridiculous appearance, Jones' mouth snapped shut directly. Brows furrowed in consternation, but she quickly turned away, taking hold of her waiting books. He knew what she was thinking, the oddity of his unexpected assistance sure to raise a brow. At what other time in their history would he have ever collected her displaced books for her? But for this he was prepared. He'd considered his role quite thoroughly, quite convincingly.

"Come along, then," he huffed, working in just the right measure of annoyance. "Kettleburn will have us *all* in detention if a single student is late again, you know. I've more engaging distractions to occupy my free time, even if you haven't." He took only strides enough to pass the doorway into the open corridor, turning to impatiently await her. Her bewilderment turned to annoyance of her own.

"I can find the grounds on my own, thanks," the retort came to his unspoken intentions. Regulus had to smile; her flash of temper was long overdue, and were he to admit such, well welcomed.

"I'm afraid I must insist an escort for you, Jones," with his own breath of bored aggravation. "I'll not let you endanger my weekend plans for your clumsiness. Best I myself ensure you arrive timely." Bitten back smile, careful schooling of features. He needn't give away the amusement he now found. Her expression crossed lines, battling between dismay and something unsure. Was she impressed with his chivalry?

"Very well," she murmured through gritted teeth, and strode past him without a glance.

Her short strides were easy to match, even easier to overtake were he of allowance to do. But the intent was to form an attachment, however loathsome that task may be. So he walked beside her, casting clandestine glances at her petite, athletic form. He'd give her this: she was quite the feminine figure. An upper torso that exceeded expectations... Too bad her loyalties lay elsewhere, and she had no lineage to speak of. Under the right circumstances and complete silence from that opinionated mouth

of hers she could actually be worth a second look. For a distraction, that is.

Regulus considered this. Perhaps there was a more expedient manner in which to acquire her affections, thus giving Mother what she wanted, the Dark Lord some gift on his part, and in return receive some measure of respect. The transfer from 'spare' to 'heir' had not been without its snags, and he was anxious to assume some part of the appreciative consideration Sirius had been blessed with merely by the elder's very birth.

It struck Regulus then that Mother had been rather confident in his aptitude within this endeavour. Come to think of it, whereas her plans for him often well exceeded her expectations of his abilities, this case was different. He would easily find Hestia Jones in his persuasions, she assured. Did Mother find his qualities to attract the opposite sex reminiscent of Father's? Did she feel this was one area in which he need not labour in order to excel? Or was there some secret knowledge she possessed, something that would ensure success? Or was she merely trying to give him confidence, for she had none in him herself?

Walburga Black had held little more than resigned annoyance for him ever since Sirius' betrayal of the family. It was as though she were an artist condemned to working with inferior materials. Were he to admit the truth to himself, he would note this had always been the case. Until his brother's defection, she had taken little notice of him. Upon the scorching loss of yet another name from the tapestry, he had become the lesser plan. And he'd simply accepted her condescending instruction, her continuous disappointment. Never was she satisfied with him, detailing his every move as though he were incapable of coherent and critical thought. Kreacher his house-elf found greater favour than he, and under less stringent direction.

Was Mother pressing him with surety because she had gone to greater measures outside himself? Had she her own secondary scheme to guarantee the ensnaring of the girl? Because she expected him to fail on his own?

Suddenly the desire to play the game Mother's way dissipated in a rush. She did not believe him capable solo; he would prove her wrong. Prove them all wrong. And he would do so his way.

They were nearing the stable on the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest where Professor Silvanus Kettleburn taught Care of Magical Creatures, and Regulus knew they would soon be too near the other students not to mention the professor to act on his new-found rebellion. Some voice deep within warned him Mother would not like this change to her instructions. Father would never take notice, but the matriarch had quite strict plans she would not wish altered. And she had her own way of exacting punishment.

Yet another voice a low, growling echo in the darkest recess of his chest began to drive him. A voice growing in volume and intensity, overshadowing the cautionary tale of restraint and reconsideration. A year's worth of dissection, seventeen worth of obscurity, all came crashing down in this one moment of clarity, and Regulus Black had had enough. He would fulfil his obligations, but on *his* terms. And he would succeed where others had and would fail.

He would show them all.

-o-

Disconcerting to say the least, but accepting the company of Regulus Black once more left Tia torn between infatuated swooning and nervous fits. No matter the fact that by now she knew he held nothing but contempt for her their tense interactions leading up to Hallowe'en night... the leery glares later in the few instances he would meet her eyes... It all did not matter, for whatever his issue with her, only one vision continuously returned to her mind's eye. Tia could not forget the raw emotion of a young man astride a stormy grey horse beneath a frenzied sky. A boy so troubled, yet for once freed of his masque of propriety, and what had lain beneath was an image she could not dismiss. And yet still, despite his aggrievance with her, he remained the distraction to her otherwise uncomplicated life. He fascinated her, and did the most disturbing things to her peace of mind.

She didn't trust him his bouts of over-friendliness. But what choice did she have? Spurn him? Call him out? With anyone else, she would have. But a selfish little portion of her soul demanded otherwise; why tilt the precarious balance of the scales and tip his direction into total dismissal of her? Even if it were a lie, even if ulterior motives she could not fathom were responsible for his bizarre associative moments, Tia Jones could not bring herself make them cease. Live in the fantasy a bit more, she reasoned. Reality would strike soon enough, and she was needful of memories on which to draw her comfort in the days to come, in the days after which his purpose was gone... as was he.

In the least, they would graduate in but a year and a half, and Tia was not ignorant of distinctions between his circles and her own. Her ventures into his were and would always be in the form of service. In this very time now, they were the most equal they would ever be.

They were closing in to their group, everyone milling about just outside the barn-like structure Kettleburn configured in order to teach. Today's lesson must involve a trek into the Forest. A fine mist hung heavily in the air, shrouding the lower regions of the grounds in dirty white. Tia's assumption of their plans was reinforced by the sequential conjuring of glowing lanterns beside the doors; their light would be necessary only once the group passed deeply into the trees.

Tis shuddered. Her love for some magical creatures did not extend to the depths of the Forest this forest and the desolate Scottish landscape and bleak atmosphere unnerved her. Only Regulus' presence steered her mind from worry. A darting glance told her his own thoughts were otherwise occupied, eyes narrowed in concentration. Or determination. Or anger. It was difficult to tell, his refined features tight with warring, flights of conflicting emotions playing across his face. But swiftly they were contained, leaving a nearly impassive slate behind as he and she joined their classmates.

Oddly, he did not leave her side once Kettleburn appeared, took quick inventory of faces, and called the class to order. But neither did he face her or speak once when just as she had ascertained they deposited their books on the work bench and filed warily into the veiled forest.

Regulus walked just behind her. So very aware of him, Tia could hardly concentrate on her own feet, on the unnerving stillness of the trail. The fog grew heavier as they went, and packs of two and three and four were separated from individual distinction, outlines sighted only by the lanterns aloft with each group. Tia realised she was paired off with Regulus and he alone. No lantern brightened their way. Cecil Patton was encompassed in the group ahead, their light glimmering vaguely in a cloud. Behind them shadowed figures whispered in muted *guffaws* and *giggles*, revealing Neve McMillian and Clarice Hodges being properly frightened by Chauncy Bones.

Under general circumstances, Tia would find their antics exasperating, but their playful flirtations ebbed through the heavy air, bowing around the trees and foliage and unknowns like wisps of a future life Tia could not seem to emulate. Their light-heartedness was too free, their teasing shallow compared to the conflicting affections harboured now in her, all thoughts of school-ground fancies fleeing in comprehension of something much more

The action was so fast, Tia's mind could not register just what had occurred until several moments after the fact. Only her body took immediate notice: a sense of failed equilibrium, the pain of blunt force along her spine, a jarring, a captured *whoosh* of forced exhalation. The muted *crack* of skull connecting with a solid object. A sturdy and warm form hard across her mouth, stifling her nose. Claustrophobia. Pressure, binding. Immobilisation.

Warm breaths across her left ear. Low... close.

"Remain absolutely still..."

Chapter 8: The Best Laid Plans

Chapter 8 of 13

When even the *best laid* plans go awry, imagine those formed in a flash of... brilliance.

As always, reviews are much appreciated

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Chapter 8: The Best Laid Plans

Though little more than heavy whispers, the voice was ingrained in her thoughts even now. Recognition, however, did not release the unease in Tia. Regulus was far too close – pressed full body against her, weight solid and immovable. She was in a vice between him and the large conifer he had her backed into. His voice was compelling; it was not light in the play of their classmates, nor wary and contrived like his previous attempts at pseudo amour. It was low and strict, brooking no argument, as though he had no question she would do as told.

And she would.

And it frightened her.

This was not a Regulus she knew, nor was the situation familiar or expected in any sense. Tia could not see him; her eyes blurred with the black of his robe as her nose pressed deeply into his left shoulder. But from her thighs upward she could *feel* him. Solid; unyielding. He was not a weaking; her right wrist ached in his ever-tightening grip above her head. Tree bark scraped at the exposed flesh of her wand hand, her left crushed between their bodies in a vain attempt at distance. There was no reaching her wand were she even of a mind to do, and her head was light with lack of oxygen. She twisted slightly to clear her nose of his fevered hand.

He must have realised her intent, and merely slipped his grip lower to allow her breath. Grateful for air, Tia remained still, unsure the gravity of the sudden bizarre situation. Behind her in the grey mist she could make out giggly chatter as Bones dutifully protected his two damsels in distress. It would not be difficult to make enough noise in struggle for them to hear; the path was only steps away. But above fear, what kept Tia in place was a thrill of excitement she simply could not justify with reason.

Any sane girl would cause a ruckus and demand Black's explanation and punishment for his rough-handedness. Any sane girl would case non-verbals in desperation to flee. Yet Hestia Jones longed more for exposure of a hand played out than any retribution. Infernal curiosity and interest overrode any instinct for self-preservation.

For a moment, an image flashed through her mind. A memory, born of a stormy summer day with a powerfully emotional young man breaking his carefully controlled façade in seeming solitude. He hadn't known there was a witness to that event. Just him, his horse, and an energy beyond magic. This time, he knew she was there. Nothing could be more compelling at that moment.

-o-

Keeping close, he pulled back from her ear, the roughness of his jaw a loud scraping against her soft cheek in the eerily quiet moment. The class had bypassed them, no one the wiser, and suddenly Regulus found himself quite alone with the chit so recently the new bane of his existence. He moved to face her, just far enough away to study her expression, his own carefully composed.

At first disoriented and confused, the girl before him remained nearly limp in his hold, his hand tight against her mouth to prevent even the most unintentional of cries to give way their location. But only seconds did it take for coherency to enter her expression, and she peered at him through a sceptical hazel gaze. He was surprised – yet not – she made no attempt to fight him. Rather, she appeared... *curious*. With a more than slight hint at demanding annoyance, he mentally corrected. Without permission a crooked smile tugged slightly at his lips. He should have expected nothing less from her.

Recollection hit then, and Regulus' face tightened once more in concentration. His rash decision – and he never made rash decisions – already had invoked consequences. Mother had instructed him to woo the girl, court her properly, gain her affections and loyalty. In turn, Ezra Jones would follow suit, his allegiances following the happiness of his only daughter. The Cause could use the gifted apothecary, and use him well. After Jones' purpose was gone, Regulus could cease his nauseating game with the younger.

Fine. He would do his duty to his family, to the Dark Lord, but he'd be *damned* if he was going to take instruction on how to do it. No, he was not bloody fantastic Sirius, but Regulus knew himself to be quite able to construct his own efforts without handholding from Mother or anyone else. Bright, talented in his own right, he'd long been passed over for his elder brother. And yet somehow even after the scandal his brother proved himself last Christmas with his departure, Regulus remained a side thought, believed a mere shadow of the defunct Heir.

Resentment grew in him. He could prove himself once and for all, accomplish his task without anyone's direction. Maybe then even Cousin Bella would cease her infernal baby talk. He deserved respect; he simply had to remind everyone else that fact.

Renewed with purpose, Regulus' temper eased and he evaluated his current position. A few soothed feathers were in order. After all, he'd not meant to scare his prey with his sudden attack. Come to think of it, he'd not given much thought at all as to what he'd do once he'd gotten Jones here. They'd been walking along – her focused on their path, he watching her surreptitiously, contemplating his new battle plan. The impulse had simply hit from nowhere, and for once Regulus hadn't thought – he just *did*.

Now that he'd acted on such a mad move, Regulus had to salvage his plans.

"Hallowe'en will not leave me in peace," he finally managed in a low, strangled voice.

True, at least. That night had not strayed far from his thoughts in the fortnight since. But whereas he would insinuate to Jones the confession meant her charm had held him captive, reality was that he had missed a grand opportunity with Davies that evening. That loss had plagued him for weeks. Because of Jones and her snooping about, he'd gone to his bed unsatisfied that night, and every night thereafter. Lystra Davies hadn't spoken to him since, and he blamed Jones. If she'd curtailed her damned curiosity and gone straight to her dorm like a good little prefect, Lystra would have not strayed from the antechamber, and Regulus would have had a much more pleasant ending to a day begun so repulsively.

Or perhaps not. Lystra's duplicity had indeed come to light because of Jones, and even had the Ravenclaw not interfered, Lystra's plans had been to meet up with that obnoxious Hufflepuff. Regulus grit his teeth at the admittance of being – or nearly so – cuckolded.

He turned his attention back to Jones. Schooling his features, he continued his unrehearsed speech, eyes boring into hers.

"Each night I go to my bed, close my eyes and see nothing but you... that night..." Yes. And he cursed her in the darkness each night for it as well. He closed their minute distance further, stepping just past her leg and leaning in. Head bowed, closer. He freed his hand from her mouth, catching in its stead the jut of her hip beneath the woollen cloak. Barely could he see her, he was so near, but the move served to deliver his lines with the perfect level of intense whisper. Voices carried in these dark woods.

"This face, these eyes of autumn," he added, releasing her raised arm to lightly brush stray black tendrils across her forehead. His gaze raked blushing skin, soft features. "They haunt my dreams." Like a plaguing sprite, he mentally qualified. But his true feelings didn't matter; what he presented – how it was taken – did.

Jones' eyes widened, mouth opened in surprised 'O' with a choked sigh. Indeed, perhaps Mother was right; he was particularly talented at this endeavour. He'd feared the sentiments too overboard on the dramatic, that a Ravenclaw would never be taken in by theatrically sweet words. It appeared she could be, however. And more importantly, was. No playwright could be more impressive. She was fantastically malleable to his words.

Gods, but he would rejoice the instant the sham was over.

It couldn't come soon enough.

-o-

Shifting his leg just past hers, his weight fell into her heavily. A slow, methodical readjustment that brought his face ever so closer to her own. Painfully close.

Tia forgot any indignation Black's violent arrest had brought. At this point, it was all she could manage to not hyperventilate. Every dream she'd had since summer was falling into pale shadows compared to the very real experience of Regulus Black pinning her in the misty solitude of the Forest with only his body binding her in place.

Hestia Jones was no imbecile nor weak debutante given to fits of fainting, though honestly the action called to her now. But she knew she should speak, break the alluring spell that was hazing over her like sleep. It was dreamlike; she abhorred to awaken.

"Spoken like a true master of tongues," she managed, a dry swallow tearing at her throat. She forced a light smile, but the effort was transparent. "I should wonder what other talents you have hidden outside of fancy turns of phrase."

Rouan's coaching echoed inside, her best friend considerably more at ease with the male persuasion. For years she'd pushed Tia with lessons in flirting, but for the first time in recollection, Tia was desperately trying to succeed in the attempt. If there ever was a time to charm, this was her moment.

"Talents with your tongue, I should revise," she added, bottling courage and inner feminine wiles. She licked her bottom lip nervously. Gods, Rouan would be chastising her now; everything was coming out pitiful and weak. Or so she believed.

Fleeting expression passed upon Regulus' face, his head jerked back slightly in startlement. She couldn't be sure, mind you, but a sudden sense of pleasure flowed through her as Tia tentatively identified his reactions to her studied comment. Off guard. Wary. Reluctantly intrigued.

Good. A round of butterbeer with Rouan's name and Tia's Sickles were in the immediate future, she planned. Regardless his initial agenda, Regulus Black had just been caught unawares, and Tia relished the knowledge that he'd soon not forget this encounter, nor expect so little of her in the future. The boy had a game, to be sure, and she didn't quite know its rules, but Ezra Jones' little girl wasn't the sort to blindly follow someone else's lead. Even if he *did* warrant a little intentional path crossing.

Intent on keeping the upper hand, Tia's mind raced for more clever quips, another double entendre to set him further off balance. An opportunity like this was never to be seen again, and she had to make the grandest impression possible. Several blatant remarks crossed her thoughts, and she blushed fiercely at their consideration. It was difficult to remember her affected nonchalance, her bite. Unfamiliar territory left Tia quivering in nerves and excitement. And fear.

"You know," she began, attempting allurements with a sidelong look beneath half-closed lids, "you really should consider –"

"– rejoining your classmates and teacher, as expediently as possible."

Tia's head whipped about to her right, just over Regulus' shoulder. He himself released her in a start, spinning about with wand raised, fighting stance in place. She had to lean to the side to see round him, noting with great concern the drawn bows before them. Reading up on Centaurs was one thing; it was quite another to have an uncordial meet up with an armed three.

"This is no place for foals," the centred one continued gravely, his black body massive, solid in the ever increasing mist. Not striding from them, Tia glanced cautiously at the flanking two, their faces set in grim focus, their recurves disturbingly taut, their quivers full. "Your presence is tolerated only for your age and obvious ignorance. Leave now, and no harm shall come to you."

"... *this time*," the bay on the right threatened. "Leave not, and it shall be taken as an act of aggression."

"Enough, Bedwyr," the leader reclaimed. "Dumbledore knows our laws well; it is apparent," exacting look at them, slight disparaging scowl, "his charges are less inclined to adhere. Nevertheless, we shall be generous and allow them passage away. If they depart *now*."

"And if not?" Regulus taunted, his arrogance rising in true Black fashion. Tia nudged him hard with her thumb along his spine. He took no notice.

This time it was not Bedwyr who expressed retribution. The dark grey on the left stepped forward a pace, the subtle *ttttuh* of a full draw echoing in menace. "Then your actions will be assumed those of grown wizardkind, and your lawlessness will be punished as deemed fit."

"Then I would dare you –" Regulus' words cut abruptly as Tia's palm found his firm mouth, clamping hard. It was her turn to silence *him* before he brought them grief they could not escape. Even Dumbledore respected the rule of the Centaurs within the Forest.

"Yes, sir," she answered at once over her classmate's muted protests against her hand. She had to lean to the left now, Regulus' body still primed before her as though her guard. Her right – wandless – wrapped quickly about his torso, preventing his jostling to relieve her hand. His own free hand had flung back to her waist, holding her in place. What a sight they must have made.

"If you would but point us in the right direction of the path, we'll return to the grounds. Sorry, but we'd gone a bit lost when we stepped off the way." Tia knew their trespass a grave transgression, with all the magical world in temper and extreme caution in wake of the Dark Lord. These times did not bring leniency from those who blamed all wizards and witches for the war destroying their world.

Though visibly peaked in agitation, Tia was thankful Regulus fought no more and threw no spells. Perhaps beneath his quick temper there was a rational mind at work. For both their sakes, she hoped such.

"Five paces, directly behind you," the leader advised curtly. If possible, his face became even more menacing. "Now, before our good humour has expired."

Needing no further suggestion, Tia released Regulus only to grab hold of his wand hand, turn and flee the few steps to the path, Slytherin in tow. In fact, she did not slow down as she swerved to the right to follow the veiled passage back to the grounds, stumbling over hidden roots and jagged rocks and clinging foliage and trapping vines. Vice grip upon his wrist, she did not look back, did not question as to his well-being or, much less, his opinion on the matter. Obviously his self preservation instincts were on holiday.

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He wasn't sure quite why he was letting the girl before him drag him along like piecemeal bait, but Regulus followed dutifully, pondering instead the *Incident* they'd left behind. He was no fool, but damned if he'd bugged himself by forgetting himself, forgetting the chance he'd been taking with his rash behaviour. Now everything had gone that much more complicated.

The Centaurs' arrival – that may have been his saving grace. Granted, their presence was a nuisance best ignored when possible, their half-breed state a blight on the magical world. But their unearned airs had managed to salvage the plan, breaking the moment – the *Incident* – and clearing his head.

A good strategist knew that to play a game meant to consider all aspects, even those of instinct. A clever strategist even used those instincts to further his mission. A talented strategist, however, did not allow their interference. Ever. And yet, precisely that had crept into his scenario without permission. All was well, according to intent, and then the chit actually *propositioned* him! Well, not in so many words, but words enough.

A thorn in his side she might be, and he held nothing but contempt for her and her Muggle-loving ways, but Merlin he was only mortal and no priest! Held in check, his body merely acted as a device to continue the charade, to mesmerise the girl and ultimately gain her affections. His duty, after all, lay primarily in that sphere of influence. But then she'd gone and said that about his tongue – by all that was magical, did she understand just what she was up to? – and ran her own in invitation across a lip promising too much sweetness.

It was then control fled, and male instinct blinded him to his cause. He did not like her, but in that moment he wanted to taste her. And he despised her for that. Exposing a weakness in him that could spell downfall in his life, she climbed immeasurably high on his list of enemies. Only the Centaurs' interruption had slapped him back into his mind, and for that alone he was grateful. It was disconcerting, however, that his initial move even then was to protect Jones.

He chose not to think on that.

By the time they'd cleared the trees, he was drenched with the heavy vapour clinging to the very air. Jones stopped once to the barn, releasing him to grasp her knees in an effort for breath. It gave him moments to collect himself.

"The very hounds of hell were not upon our heels, Jones," he commented dryly, perhaps more harsh than necessary. After all, he was attempting to gain her favour.

Wasn't he?

"We hardly needed to plunge headlong into the abyss over a few ignorant horses."

She whipped about, just as he'd expected, challenge in her eyes. But her words surprised him.

"Do you ever give consideration to your actions, or are you honestly that blindly courageous?"

Courageous? Did she confuse him with his bloody brother? He'd not feared the Centaurs, if that was what she was on about. But before he could clarify her view, her next remark struck, well too close to his condemning musings of earlier.

"I don't know whether to kick you for nearly getting us killed, or kiss you for your defence of me."

Her face paled as the words left her mouth, followed by a blush, wide eyes, and a flashing turn and pace. Read correctly, he'd say he wasn't the only one unsettled by that proclamation.

"Oy! Reggie!" Oh, *fuck*. Not this, too! Damn, his day was drowning in a cesspool.

Regulus turned warily, disgruntled, toward the approaching pack. Fist tight about his wand, he suppressed the extreme desire to throw hexes en masse, concentrating on the first two of the quartet.

"What the fuck do you want, Sirius?" he growled. He was aware Jones had stopped her embarrassed pacing and was staring open mouthed at the group. Lovely.

"Now, now, Reggie," Sirius answered, coming to a stop mere yards away. "Is that any way to treat your dear elder brother?"

As always, he stood straight and commanding, heedless of any opposition. Potter was a step away, tossing a damn snitch about lazily and fingering his wand with amusement. Regulus was no first-year, and he'd not ignore the mousy boy to the back, nor the hesitant prefect on Sirius' other side. Already today he'd made a tactical error; he wasn't about to do so again.

"I've not a brother any longer, haven't you heard," Regulus replied, eyes darting betwixt the seventh-years. Pettigrew seemed cheered by the confrontation, eager to play. Just like a Gryffindor: bravery when the odds are in their favour. "Didn't you get the condolence owl? Oh, perhaps not. Kreacher was too busy cleaning the stench of smouldering tapestry."

To his credit, Sirius didn't take the bait.

Damn. Regulus needed a fight.

Instead, he made matters worse. A duel would have been preferable.

"Fancy meeting you both here," he went on, drawing Jones into the conversation. A queasy sensation mottled his stomach. This could bring no good.

"Skiving off class, Reggie? I'd be right proud, I'd have to say," he went on, now walking idly before them, catching Jones' eyes and offering some knowing smirk and silent question with his brow. She seemed to understand, her answering expression a bit defiant. What the hell was going on with those two?

"We got separated from our class in the Forest," she answered before Regulus could snap. "We're waiting for their return." Pettigrew noticed her for the first time then, and his temperament turned to one of shamed regret, casting apologetic eyes to her. Regulus had known there was some relation there, as well. But Jones had denied her association with this group.

"How curious, Ms... Jones, was it?" he inquired, tossing a glance to Potter, whose snitch had been pocketed, the older boy now casually walking toward Lupin. An effort to flank him.

"Ah, Sirius," Potter quipped, a sly grin growing. Regulus backed up a few steps, eager to keep both boys in his sight at once. "Can't you see the bloke's just needing some solitary time with his bird? Aren't you, dear Regulus?"

"James, please, let's just go." Lupin. "Hestia has enough to be going on with without our crass disturbances." He smiled shyly at the girl in question, who in turn smiled warmly back. Prickles of irritation darted down Regulus' back.

"Yes," Regulus cut in to Lupin. What was it and the blasted courtesy they showed Jones?

His gaze jumped back to Sirius. "Hang about more if you'd like a detention for your own failure to show to class. You're safe from worse fates with two prefects about, I'd imagine."

"Sorry, Reggie," his brother answered, cutting another appraising look to Jones. "Early dismissal on account of toxic error on Snivellus' part." Potter guffawed, Pettigrew snickered, Sirius barked a laugh. Only Lupin seemed uncomfortable, but even so a smile he was fighting as he ducked his head, studying the browning turf.

"But enough about us," he said slyly, sidling over to Jones directly. "So you've taken the plunge and gone after said damsel, eh, Reggie?" He said this to Regulus, but his gaze remained fixated on Jones. Once more silent communication of a privy nature passed between them, egging Regulus' thirst for violence.

Sirius flicked at some imaginary figment of clutter on her robe, just above one of those full breasts he'd been too aware of minutes ago. He seethed.

"My personal intentions are of no concern to you, Blood Traitor."

"Ooh, touchy," he replied, mock surprise on his handsome face. He turned back to Jones. "Shall be mighty fascinating to watch this play out, after all." Quieter, thoughtful. A sombre tone narrowed his eyes as he stared at her, daring her to contradict him. Strangely, Jones merely met his stare, jaw tight, and said nothing.

"Just think, Sirius," Potter chimed in with humour. Regulus had nearly forgotten him again in the bizarre speech from his brother. Another step back to bring him into view. "You could be a loving uncle in another year. At least with this one, there might be hope for the sprogs. Jones is as much a blood traitor as the rest of us."

"Oh, that's *right*," Sirius bantered, a gleam forming in his grey eyes. *This* was what the unease had precluded, Regulus knew. "What I'd give to be a beetle on the wall for the introductions to the family." Stage horror and an exaggerated step away, staring at Jones with an 'O' to his lips, fingers held in propriety against gossip to that bedevilling mouth.

"He's not yet properly acquainted you with the Black clan, has he? No? Oh, Reggie-boy," he went on, patronising, and the dread increased. Sirius was about to ruin him. He didn't know how, but the threat was tangible. "Then you'd best get on with it. Mother will be so *delighted* to welcome her to the family. And the best opportunity is, of course, the Black Christmas brunch, not a month away. All the blackest of the Blacks will be there."

Here he paused dramatically, taking in the entranced witnesses for whom he acted. Then his eyes settled on Regulus, narrow, accusing, daring.

"Unless, of course, you're too ashamed of her."

Chapter 9: Spoken Places Feared

Chapter 9 of 13

Where we go with our words is sometimes the scariest of places in the world.

As always, reviews are most appreciated

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Chapter 9: Spoken Places Feared

Tia felt the heat rise, flushing her cheeks hot with embarrassment. Sirius Black was eyeing her with wry amusement, the tightness of his eyes relaying unspoken reminders of Hallowe'en night. Warnings against his family, against involving herself with his brother... And now he silently dared her to follow up on what appearances suggested she'd already done gotten involved with Regulus Black. Recollection echoed in her mind, Sirius' foretelling the turn of events should her daydreams come true.

"But if Reggie were really stupid enough to involve himself with you, then understand your own safety would be greatly endangered. You'd not be welcome in the Black family, I assure you."

Stupid enough. Were Regulus *stupid enough* to get involved with her. Tia's euphoria of moments prior deflated with the remembrance. Regulus was not stupid; he would never be involved with her, either. Intelligence aside, he held no interest in her, aside from whatever bedevilment he was currently on about. He was trying to *convince* her his attraction to her, not admitting it. And Sirius knew it. After all, he was practically provoking Regulus to confess the deception. An outright challenge for the younger boy to invite her to meet the family the same family who'd not welcome her.

It was humiliating. But Tia held checked tightly her emotions. Now wasn't the time for the tears at bay, their rising sudden and inopportune. She could hold out until privacy was at hand. It would only be worse to fall apart now, disgracing herself not only before the boy she was hopelessly and ridiculously enamoured with, but in front of Peter and Remus, as well. Peter had been shy himself, and what words of encouragement she might manage to convey to him now would disintegrate in her fragility. And Remus... his soft kindness would indubitably resort to a look of wizened pity. She had to patrol with him, after all. It just wouldn't...

No; she would not set loose the saltwater of shame. Not yet. Time would be enough once Regulus found his excuse from the familial introductions. Morbid curiosity bade her attentive muteness; his refusal would have to be well-worded if he wanted to upstage his brother, avoid the commitment, and yet still retain the illusion to her that he *did* fancy her. Setting aside her personal stakes, Tia focused on the strategic quandary. If she watched clinically, she could pretend this wasn't about her and instead treat it like a particularly interesting study in Defence. Still, she couldn't meet anyone's eyes.

"My affaires with Ms Jones are of no concern to you, *brother*," Regulus parried, tone malignant on the last. "Suffice it to say, I shan't be having her over for tea with *your* company. So exclude yourself from any further my life's business... I already have."

Tia jerked her gaze unintentionally up to meet Regulus' face, then Sirius'. She couldn't help it; so final and cold were these words between brothers that she simply could not have heard right. But inwardly, she knew she had. How could such animosity or, even more so, rejection be bred between siblings so close in age and temperament? Her heart dropped.

Sirius, however, did not falter in his gleeful grin. Only minimal tightening about his laughing eyes betrayed a wholly differing reaction to Regulus' cool dismissal. For some reason, Tia doubted it was anger.

"Such big words from a boy whose primary occupation and ambition in life are to please his mum and finally get some attention from his whoring father."

Though said lightly in a bait, an undercurrent shifted beneath his words, and Tia felt sudden tension that'd not been there before. Regulus' reddening face and fists taut to his sides confirmed this new level.

"Think he knows your name yet?" Sirius continued, eyes narrowing further in sceptical scowl as he languidly paced. "Or does he still call you 'boy' without regard, eh? Assuming his attention is pruned away from Mistress of the Week enough to *notice* you, that is. Doesn't it simply gall you when Bulstrode's nanny garners greater affections, and she's a *half-blood*?"

"You know nothing of "

"*Nothing*? My God, Reg; are you seriously mental or did you grow up in the same house I did?" Sirius' façade of frivolity abruptly dropped, replaced by incredulous annoyance. Their display had turned to a private one, the audience banished from their awareness. Tia felt ill, the images Sirius created were both disturbing and somehow cathartic. They explained so much.

Squared off, facing each other in confrontation perhaps a long time in coming. Regulus' unruffled exterior breaking down was a sight Tia had been unprepared to witness. The leaking anger and frustration? humanising him, crumbling the pedestal she'd once put him upon unknowingly, the same one his kind had perched all their mindset followers. And Sirius wasn't finished.

"Mother is a fanatic on the verge of a breakdown; but she's got more stones than our whore-mongering father, hell bent on shagging every two-Knut piece of ass available. Cousins Bellatrix and Narcissa are the epitome of your own precious arrogant nature. The whole damn family's a veritable product of hell. How the bloody fuck could I have *not noticed*?"

Tia's heart fell to her stomach at the jerk Regulus' hand made for his wand. Body tight and tense, a lock of hair falling from place in the start. Peripherally she caught three other gut reactions, but their hands only came away with wands prepared; Regulus' hand had stilled before arming himself. Instead, his face had grown were it possible even colder, eyes never leaving his brother. She didn't know why, but it wasn't Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew that had stopped him. He'd reined in his reaction... solely for his brother.

"You are no longer a part of the family," Regulus said several long moments later, his voice calm, collected, nearly matter-of-fact. "My invitation to Ms Jones for the Christmas holidays is strictly between Ms Jones and myself. Your interference is not necessary, nor is it appreciated. I wish you well in your end-of-term exams and subsequent holiday. Now, if you'll excuse us."

Regulus turned, hand outstretched in entreaty. "Ms Jones?" he enquired flatly, face expressionless.

Tia stepped forward, perplexed but willing to follow this strange new stage direction as far as it would play. Placing her hand lightly into his, the warmth spread through from his palm to a blush upon her face. Purposely she avoided Sirius' warning gaze. She could not, however, avoid his condemning words.

"If you want to rebel against the family, then by all means do so." Regulus froze, back ramrod straight to his brother, chin raised. "For once in your pansy little life, show a bit of intelligence, independent thought and backbone. Defy them all outright, if you've the nerve. But don't throw Hestia into the middle, Reg. Don't make her your sacrificial pawn."

Regulus did not respond, only paused a moment more before continuing their path back toward the castle. His only falter fell at Sirius' parting call.

"Don't ruin an innocent life in your quest for personal gain, Reggie. You're it's not worth it."

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His mind was screaming at him. Half in Mother's tongue; part in his own. Part in a voice unfamiliar, a nagging call pleading him to see matters differently. Honestly, he didn't know what to think.

Regulus was rightly pissed off, and mostly it was at his brother, but Sirius' too-close-to-the-truth taunts had nothing on Regulus' own reaction. It had been too easy, too natural for him to secure his wand, to prepare to curse Sirius not in a boyhood hex or inter-house rivalry prank but to leap for a command far too unyielding. Perhaps not an Unforgiveable, but not too distant a stray from that path.

But he'd stopped himself, the moment he'd realised where his instincts were taking him. He'd paused, taken breaths of clarity, and refrained from allowing Mother's harping to lead his actions. She'd gone on and on in his head about Sirius' unworthiness and the insult to family, about retribution for the blight, but Regulus' heart chanted in the background, drowning her out: "But it's truth, it's truth..."

Though he'd curbed the reaction to curse him, Sirius had still pissed him off. And it was for more than making him face the reality of his fucked up life. Sirius had single-handedly ruined his plans with Jones, forcing Regulus' hand. Now a quandary had enveloped him: let the matter drop and let Jones believe he'd lost interest, thus failing his scheme, or break down and invite the chit to the holiday gathering... and pray his family all would be willing to overlook her.

Perhaps he could convince her his interest without actually introducing her to anyone but Mother, for whom he had worked this 'love match' entirely. Save face and pride, and meet duty in the process. The game was all about perception, really, and that he could manipulate to his hand. He was, after all, a Black.

"Ms Jones," he broached, stopping midway to the castle. Privacy was imperative, though he doubted the girl could keep the coming conversation to herself in even the minutes ahead. A Ravenclaw pureblood with a penchant for overtly, indiscriminate affection did not encompass a discrete philosophy.

As he still held her chilled hand, she was forced to turn at his halt. Flushed cheeks, eyes bright... Regulus needed a breath to recollect his mind. She exuded energy, an optimistic air that hit him like winter gusts, and he had to drag his gaze from hers before continuing.

"Though I must apologise for the impudent manner in which Sirius introduced the subject, I did wish to speak with you." He chanced a look only to find her eyes wide, cheeks reddening further, a nervous hitch to her breath. A fleeting desire passed through him, wishing to alleviate her obvious discomfort. How silly, really. He needed only her agreement, not her happiness.

"As I had stated," he began again, slipping back into charisma and flattery, "you've kept my very thoughts occupied this past fortnight. Your absence from my daily life over the upcoming holidays has already left a pain inside me. The only remedy for which I can envision is to secure your company during this long hiatus."

He waited, expecting her gleeful answer, but Jones merely stood there, something akin to shock her expression. Annoyance manifested in a suppressed sigh. Was she a Ravenclaw or not? Need he spell it out for her? Regulus bristled inside, repressing the urge to roll his eyes. Why couldn't Mother have chosen someone a little less dense? He would have a hell of a time passing her off as a potential dare he even think it *girlfriend*. He'd be laughed out of the Ministry Ball. One chat up with her and Abraxas Malfoy would petition Regulus' placement in the Dark Lord's employ.

Unless Malfoy were already privy to Regulus' purpose. Hmm. And if that be the case, of how much else of Mother's directorates was he aware? Or others, for that matter. An uneasy feeling washed through him; no one else need know of Mother's primary task for him, this one loathsome enough. As matters lay now, of that instruction he was unsure if he could even

"What did you have in mind?"

Her query jarred him.

"Er; accompany me to the Black Michaelmas soirée, the Ministry Ball..." he responded absentmindedly, grasping for coherency. Finally he focused, shoving aside even less appealing intentions. "Several other events over the holidays. If you would not mind," he added with a practised smile. He met her bewildered gaze with sensual appeal, confident her response.

"Mmm... That would be lovely, Regulus. Let me consider it, eh? Dad may have plans already, you understand," she said, her face now thoughtful, friendly, smiling, but not the mooning adoration of the forest. Jones was composed; no girlish giggles and fluster suggested the overwhelming pleasure she *should* have displayed at his invite. Had he not made clear his intentions?

"Jones, what I am asking," he went on, clarifying so that even she could understand, "is for you to act as *mylate* at each of the Society gatherings this holiday. Christmas, New Year's..."

"Yes, Regulus, I quite well understand you," she quipped. Though her words were slightly sharp and exasperated, her face was indulgent, brows raised in humour with dancing eyes. It became her, really, and Regulus found himself captured by the secretive glint of her expression. Again she was silently laughing, but this time not at him. Not... really.

"Let me think on it, owl Dad," she continued, stepping backward then turning to leave. She'd made several steps before calling over her shoulder, "I'll let you know next week." Then she was gone, most likely on to the Great Hall for lunch. For long moments he stared after her, perplexed. She was a confusing creature.

"Slumming, are you?"

Regulus started at the pomp behind him. Turning, he caught Aedus Avery's bored sneer, the fellow Slytherin's attention drifting about the grounds before returning to Regulus. His class must have concluded early, then, just missing Regulus' spat with Sirius. Small luck.

"Avery." He jerked a quick nod of greeting, hands pocketing to prevent their tension showing.

"What are you on about with Jones?" he asked, cutting his chin toward the girl's retreating figure, now disappearing into the Entrance Hall. "Skive off class to go off for a snog with the chirpy mouse, eh? Can't say as I blame you for wanting out of Kettleburn's, but really, Black; you don't want to be *seen* associating. Diddling with that sort needs to be kept in the dark. Didn't you learn anything from your father?"

"She's *business*, Avery," Regulus retorted lowly, a sudden bristle hitting him with Avery's verbal sneer of Jones. "Don't concern yourself with her."

"Really, now? That's some way to conduct business, I'd say. Intending to show up with her on arm, are you? Display her about the crowds? Shag her on Malfoy grounds to an audience of house-elves?" Scoffing laugh.

"If need be," Regulus retorted, an oiliness to his words. "I do not presume to question the Dark Lord's motives, Avery. I should hope you shan't, either."

Dark satisfaction rushed through Regulus at Avery's sudden pallor and gape. True to his breeding, the boy did collect himself quickly, but he was no Black, and was easily intimidated. Playing Avery was simple, his reactions predictable. Unlike Ms Jones...

"If you will excuse me, I find I'm rather famished," he said, dismissing Avery with a turn toward the castle. Time to think, to revise. His plans had taken a turn unexpected; owls to be sent, preparations to correct, stories to be created. A girl to woo.

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Sirius was brooding, again. Remus knew better than to impose upon his mood. Without James to break his state of mind, the best scenario was to sit back and simply be there should he choose to talk about it, which, in truth, he seldom did. Oh, a good rant, perhaps, to get it all off his chest. But now was not one of those times, and Remus sat back wearily against the huge, shady oak, drawing his cloak closer against the nippy wind.

Peter had gone in for lunch. James had spotted Lily Evans, and currently was off pursuing her and all her perfections. And indeed, Lily *was* perfect. And so incredibly kind, Remus oft found himself longing that things might have been different and he himself had caught her eye rather than James. But no, he did not begrudge his mate his happiness, and the two were obviously in total bliss. He, Remus, would never be so lucky, he knew. And he accepted his fate with a certain level of resignation, past girlfriends short-term in light of the illness he could not reveal. Not to anyone aside his closest friends, select teachers.

But he was grateful for his friends, and as such, remained loyal in their times of need. Or rather, in Sirius' case, their times of moodiness.

"That little prat is up to something; I can smell it." Sirius paced a metre away, hands pocketed or flinging about in wild gesture, dependent upon the force of his words. He wasn't precisely speaking *to* Remus more aptly speaking *toward* him. But Remus lay his head back, closing his eyes and murmuring vague responses nonetheless, notifying Sirius he was listening. It seemed enough.

"I warned Jones," he went on, frustration lacing the words. "I specifically told her not to get involved with Reg. Not that she wouldn't be a great improvement over his sort, but my family doesn't behave well with nice and generous people. They'd eat her alive, make no mistake. And Reg is too fucking *weak* to think on his own, and he'll do as told. Wouldn't protect her against them, no. He's swallowed that shite they feed him, scavenging for seconds and thirds." Sirius turned disgusted, finally stopping. Remus opened his eyes, wary to his friend's sudden change.

"Is Hestia Jones party to Voldemort's followers?" he asked tightly, scepticism evident.

Remus jarred as though slapped, shocked by the implication his friend made in complete seriousness.

"Sirius, Hestia Jones is about as dark potential as... as Lily. She's not a mean or prejudiced bone in her body. Any infatuation she has with your brother is in *spite* of his ideals, your family's ideals, I assure you. I've known Hestia two years; she's a sweet girl, Sirius. She's not in league with Voldemort. If anything, she's so set against that lot, she's liable to make a target of herself in a few years."

"That's what I heard," Sirius replied, ire resigning to a sigh and weariness. Shoulders drooped and he turned a scowl of bewilderment crossed with anger.

"I just don't don't *get* it, Remus. Reggie had the chance to leave, to become something above our blasted blood-obsessed relatives, and instead he flocks to it. I tried to get him out, offered him a different course with my help. Do you think he listened? Hell, no; he embraced the cock and bull stories and is so thick headed he won't hear anything different. Pure damned stubbornness."

Remus smiled, eyes crinkling. "Oh, *that's* out of character for a Black," he chuckled. Sirius threw him a withering look, but a corner of his mouth twitched.

"Honestly, Sirius," he went on with some sombre. "You can't save him. You can offer him choices, but ultimately he must save himself. I know you're unhappy with him right now, but you have to recall that he's lived in your shadow for so long, he can't compete but on a whole other playing field."

"Unhappy with him?" Sirius questioned with a snort. "I'm right pissed off at him, is what I am. And disgusted. I gave him every chance to " He stopped short, reconsidering. "Well, it doesn't have to be this way, but you're right his choice. But if Jones is as you say... really, I can't let her fall into his trap. He's using her for something; just don't know what, yet," he added, eyes narrowing in shrewd consideration.

"Then fine." Remus resigned himself to some sort of agreeing action, anything to pull Sirius from this funk he'd lapsed into. "I'll speak with Hestia. We've a co-patrol coming up Friday evening. I'll chat her up, see what's what. Maybe even learn what Regulus is contemplating, eh? Will that ease your mind?"

"Yes. S'pose that'll have to do." He glanced up, spotting something of interest over Remus' shoulder and broke into a mischievous grin. "There's Gemma Kinsington. She keeps slipping a shufti over here. Wonder if she still fancies you, Remus."

Remus blanched, unable to stop himself a quick glance back at the beautiful Hufflepuff prefect. Her lithe build and long, soft blond hair were appealing, but their history together was anything but.

"Gods, I hope not."

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"What'd you do to Gemma Kinsington?" Tia couldn't stop the laughter in her voice, particularly when she hazarded a sidelong glance at Remus Lupin, the older boy catching his foot and stumbling at her question. "She's been right peaky every time your name's mentioned. Gets all dewy-eyed and trembly. I'm concerned she's going to have a fit or something, force me to have to speak to Alden Mockridge just to heal her up. You know *that'd* never do."

Appearing to gather himself, Remus steadied his stroll down the dimly lit outer corridor. Tia noted he stared straight ahead as though unprepared to face her, lest he give something away. She smirked.

"Can't say," he finally replied, a little too forced to be casual. Tia chuckled lowly, absentmindedly flicking her wand loosely as she walked, the late hour giving a peace to the castle greatly appreciated.

"I might ask the same of you," he suddenly queried, and Tia's right brow rose in amused confusion.

"Me? I rarely speak to the girl." They turned left, down the darker Defence corridor. Far ahead Tia swore she caught the Grey Lady drifting into the practise chamber, a room cleared for defence wand work. The romantic in her wondered if the ghost was really on a secret rendezvous with Sir Nicholas. Something about the image of love after life appealed to her, a love lasting above and beyond breath itself.

Bollocks. Tia cringed inwardly. It was all Clío's fault, her and her blasted ripped bodice, velvet cloaked kissy tales. Gave Tia ideas best left alone, they did.

But it was Lupin's turn to snicker, apparently, and Tia's romance-indulged fantasy life to be dragged further in the open.

"Not Gemma, Hestia," he corrected, swishing another warming charm upon both their cloaks. "Regulus Black."

If her heart hadn't literally stopped, it had at least jumped rhythm. Blush, stutter, averted gaze, regroup. Lupin's amusement floated mutely around her.

Following his lead, she stared straight ahead, forcing her body to relax and let her wrist return to its casual wand twist. "Regulus Black?" she asked, feigning disinterest. The high squeak in her timbre betrayed her. Throat clearing, breath. "Can't imagine what you mean."

"Oh really now, Hestia," Lupin chortled. "You've unnerved the boy. It was apparent the other day when we met up. Incidentally," he went on, apologetic, "I'm sorry about Sirius. There's, er, some bad blood between them. Surely you've heard."

"Ah, yes. Gathered that," she agreed, thoughtful. "But as to your observations, I'd say you need to see Madam Pomfrey, get your eyes checked. There's something going on with Reg, make no doubt, but I've not unnerved him, as you put it. No," she went on, melancholy, "I've made no memorable impression on him a'tall, sad to say."

"You say that as though it is, well, a bad thing. Unless..." Remus paused, turning to face her, granting them a sliver of privacy from the portraits on either side. Worry etched his features, a sadness blending seamlessly with weariness. "Is there some reason you'd, well, *prefer* that he take notice of you? I'm sorry; none of my business," he hurriedly added, turning from her and moving on quickly. Tia could barely see the blush on his pale face. Impression told her he somehow already knew the answer, but was seeking confirmation.

She sighed; Remus Lupin was a kind sort, and he was in a position to help her discern Regulus' motives for his sudden change of amour. After all, he was close mates with the brother Black and privy to a more personal take on the siblings. She jogged to catch him.

"If you tell anyone, I'll be totally mortified," she prefaced. Keeping pace, she once more stared straight ahead or to her outside, just as he. Heat flooded her cheeks. "But yes, I do, mmm... *fancy* Reg, if you must know." Her words came swiftly now, a measure to keep from freezing up by humiliation.

"It sort of started last summer. I saw him out on his horse and, well, something about him was different. I can't quite place my finger on it, but it was fascinating and I've not quite gotten past that. It's as though he's a different person when others aren't around, like he doesn't have to wear a mask. And I really want to know that person, that boy that's not the wealthy Black Heir." Sigh escaped, words slower. "It's silly, I know, and you've every right to laugh at me. *I'd* laugh at me. But..." She trailed off with a shrug, suddenly at the end of her bravado. They'd reached the stairs to the Astronomy Tower, and without conscious effort or agreement they turned to climb them.

"Don't think you're silly at all," he finally responded, quiet and low. Out the door onto the tower's roof before he added softly, "In fact, I think that's the most noble reason I've heard in a long time for taking an interest in someone. To notice something behind the façade, to look past it and long to know the real person within... No, I don't find it silly one bit."

Though biting was the wind and the air close to the freezing point, the two prefects stood in companionable silence for a long time, staring at the bright stars lighting the night. It was easy to talk to Remus, Tia realised; he was genuine, and wouldn't tease her these girlish affections she shared. Trusting this new unspoken bond, she spoke the niggle of her past few weeks.

"Remus," she began uncertainly, falling easily to his given name. "Regulus has gotten a sudden supposed fondness for me, something not quite natural, if you understand me." She glanced at him, shy but determined to get her concerns aired. He was older, and with a male perspective might have better answers than either she or Rouan.

"At first I thought it was so I wouldn't take points or expose his breaking curfew to chat up Davies on Hallowe'en, but it's gone on longer than that, and I get the impression he's trying to convince me he's taken a fancy to me, but I can't figure out why. I've nothing to offer him; he's the one with entitlement, fortune, name, looks... not me. I'm not even popular, and he's bright enough not to need my help with classes. So I've not quite sussed it out yet what he's on about.

"But worse..." Nervously the bottom lip was bitten, worried, brows furrowed in anxiety. She didn't want Lupin to think her so horribly desperate.

"Is it truly terrible that I don't care much his reasonings? I mean, I do care, and I want to know what he's really up to, but... I'm more than willing to put it all aside and for the time being, play along, if only to pretend he really likes me. To live my fantasy, I guess." Suddenly the constellations intrigued her, and Tia pressed her lips tight in effort to save some pride. Remus must think her a right pitiful fool. "Pathetic, I know," she managed quietly.

He didn't answer, and Tia's embarrassment embodied her. She finally looked back at him, ready to suggest they return below. But he wasn't mocking her, wasn't eyeing her in that way boys do when they can't understand some mad scheme a girl's thought up. No; he was staring at her, a sad expression curiously absent of pity.

"I..." he began, but then seemed to change his mind. "We should get back. Fenwick will be taking patrol." With no more than a tight, fleeting smile, he turned and led the way. They didn't speak again.

Chapter 10: Ambushed

Chapter 10 of 13

Sometimes you just never see it coming...

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Chapter 10: Ambushed

Shadows danced against foreboding stone walls, the cauldron's fire a weak offence against the chilled night amid the dark castle dungeons. Regulus Black stared unseeingly into his mixture, a brew of some nature as to diminish warts... or lure crimson-eyed beetles to feast upon your flesh. Something like that.

Half-ten at least, and they'd been working less than an hour. Traverse was restlessly tossing through an aged copy of *Witch Weekly*, bored in his role as tutor. Regulus was as well, but had the propriety not to display his annoyance publicly. Besides, he had much more on his mind than improving his Potions marks.

Hestia Jones was an odd creature, and one he'd found himself mulling over more than a few times in the last month. Since he'd bestowed her with his escort offer, she'd kept her distance. Oh, she was pleasant enough, speaking with even a genuine if distracted smile when he would enquire as to her acceptance to said offer. And he *would* enquire, yes. Regulus was not familiar with having to repeat himself to would-be suits. Not that he honestly wished to court the girl, but appearances had to be kept, the illusion nurtured. Yet Jones was not playing well at all. Coy, manipulative he would believe from most anyone but her. She seriously reacted as if preoccupied, holding him lesser in the list of priorities. Though she was quite the annoyance, he had to admit if only to himself she was far from the socialites to whom he was accustomed. She did not mingle in the circles he did do; she impressed upon him neither inclination nor desire to climb the marriage ladder, join rank amongst the privileged.

Yet here he was, giving the girl far too much consideration. Matters were not going as to plan. Why hadn't she answered him? They were a week to holiday break. Surely permission from Ezra Jones was forthcoming, granted already if only in principle, even. But Jones said her father was away on business, traipsing to some niche in a desolate mountain range, a bespoke order pressing, and had yet to answer her owl. Still...

Were he actually interested in her a real attraction rather than means to a purpose he would have ceased bothering. No girl was worth the effort. Nor headache.

Regulus could feel the pull of tension through his back, neck, head. As if he did not have enough with which to contend. Mother had expressed increasing agitation at his slow improvement in Potions; Father had Flooed last Friday merely to remind Regulus his duty to charm the ladies Mab Harper and Dina Winterwell in the coming social events. Rather, sway their approval so that he may later lay claim to one's daughter. Father always did have his priorities straight.

"For the thousandth time, Black, you've got to *mind your brew*." Traverse had bounded up from his leisured pose, stumbling to the cauldron in a frantic move. Bodily checking Regulus, Traverse positioned in to counteract the menacing, glowing bubbling now threatening the gloom. The Ravenclaw tossed in handfuls of several powders, roots and a strange liquid Regulus had not before noticed, stirring hurriedly clockwise whilst mumbling beneath his breath. He was worried, but irritated as well. So be it; Regulus had not asked for this scheme in the first place.

"Sorry." Tone flat, reactive only. Regulus really could not have cared less, but grooming took over, even with nerve grating Robyn Traverse. Scenarios crowded his mind, leaving little room for boiling pots and foul goos.

"I've a pressing engagement," he went on, snagging up his rucksack and turning toward the door. Barely did he get the words out before the heavy oaken door was swinging back behind him, his long strides brisk down the echoing blackness.

-o-

He was driving her mad.

Like a princess dream Regulus had routinely been following up, asking again in that cultivated husky tone of his if her father had given consent for her to accompany him all holiday break. Were Tia the gullible, simpleminded type, she'd accept the attention as romantic intention, as face value overtures of affection. But Tia was though a hopeless romantic a realist. No obvious reason had surfaced as to his goal. Regulus wanted her to be with him this break, but to what purpose she had not quite figured. An underlying sense warned her he was using her. But how? And... *why*?

Regardless this sense, regardless this cynicism, Tia's heart desperately longed to pretend, just as she'd told Remus Lupin. She wanted so badly to give in and live in a world where the boy whose affections she'd craved these past five years pursued her because he felt the same. Mind versus heart; which was stronger?

Which was right?

Ezra Jones had just this evening replied to her owl; he was ecstatic his nearly-grown daughter had been invited by a prominent family heir to spend the holidays outside of the snub of Tia's mother's relations. Or even the fortnight of private time between father and daughter. It was no secret that her dad longed for Tia to be a bit more feminine, to date and desire a happy marriage and family. Ezra and Helena Jones had been most happy; he only wished the same for Tia.

But though Tia touted only intents and goals of career and studies, she did long for love. Memories were old and faded, but Tia did recall the laughter and fondness between her parents, and wanted more than anything that same love for herself. She just could not admit it not to her father, her friends... even Rouan. Barely herself. It was too disheartening when one wasn't legendary like Marlene's legs or Maura's smile. That didn't, however, mean that only proving herself equal to a wizard was important to her. Just as needful, Tia envisioned a certain wizard there beside her, comforting in her failures, pleasuring in her successes.

That wizard just happened to be a handsome, brooding young heir to a wealthy, powerful family of seemingly psychotic purebloods.

"Gods, Tia, you're absolutely pathetic." Matter-of-fact, clinical observation. Tia took another swig of the opaque bottle before her crossed legs, continuing to berate herself as she stared balefully at a collage of leather, cloth and wooden spines. They towered high above her floor seat, the antique bookcases drifting into shadow, out of her single candle's poor flickering reach.

"Mooning over a bloke so bloody oblivious to you he'd have to stumble arse over tea kettle to see you standing there is *not* healthy. Nor sane." Another toss, fiery soothing coating her throat, chest, belly. A clearer picture was presenting itself as to the pleasures of proper drink. Marlene was right it really was a preferable solution to unfathomable boys. Already the biting heat blended stark lines of proper and safe with reckless, emotion, wild. It was sort of like meshing walking dream state with the stress release of a good gallop through the Highlands. Confiscating this bottle from Gemma Kinsington had been a joyful relief in disguise.

Noises resembling shuffled steps and cautious placements picked sharply at Tia's head. Someone, it seemed, was about the library, out of bounds for this hour. Never mind that Tia was, as well; as a prefect, she had plenty excuse to be out and about, having just finished her rounds. It was the holing up amongst musty texts of fuzzy potionatic intent that might call into question her allowances.

A closer creak of carefully shifted weight drove Tia to a straightened pose, alert now to intrusion most inopportune.

Peeves was off to the Muggle Studies classroom. She'd overheard the observation earlier when she'd first slipped into the library, a familiar voice stating that fact echoing in whispers against the chilled stone. Remus was not on prefecture duty this evening, and the answering commentary held only one other qualified voice, though the Head

Boy was not scheduled tonight, either. Peter Pettigrew's tone was jovial but anxious; Sirius Black's response a barking laugh only.

But calling them out for curfew and boundary breaking would have been most uncouth... considering her own desire for a bit of unacceptable escape for the night. So she'd let them pass, stowing away the curious details of how four Seventh-Years could slip about unnoticed. She had greater, more pressing needs at that moment, thank you.

That had been hours before, however. In theory, Peeves could have finished his tasks already and gone about seeking rule-breakers, but Tia doubted it. Even hazy, she had clarity to eliminate folly. Peeves made grand, smashing entrances, not clumsy attempts at stealth.

Stumbling to her feet, Tia steadied herself, palms to table and shelving. Fearing her wandwork would go awry in current state, she bent to snuff the candle betwixt dry now burnt! fingers, nearly toppling over out of balance.

A giggle inadvertently escaped. "*Shush*, now. No need to tell everyone you're here." Choked snort, fingers slapped to a quickly closed mouth. *Ooops*.

Perhaps word had been correct in the dangers of partaking, she considered as she righted herself methodically, a quick grab for the bottle off-shooting her equilibrium. Gravity was not her friend this evening. Particularly not in the recently reclaimed darkness.

Skreeeeeeek.

Tia froze. Balance regained, she paused breaths to listen. Concentration upon the sound did not differentiate it between innocent settlings of a castle and possible harm. In her attempt to flee the mental minefield that was Regulus Black, Tia had ceased to recall the fact a war was going on, that there were reasons why even in the safety of Hogwarts one did not trust in the honesty of all people. Families of those attending the school were rumoured as affiliates of Lord What's-His-Name, and just as easily could one such affiliate's protégé flick a nasty curse upon her in this isolation. No one knew she was here; no one would miss her until morning.

With care she stepped toward escape. It would be best for her not to be cornered, no matter how curious she was as to whom else would be out roaming the castle. Fine lot of good it would do her knowing which aforementioned family heir was mischief-making if she were dead.

Ever closer now, Tia could actually hear breaths of controlled paranoia nearby; someone was attempting stealth, and Tia could barely steady herself against a run-in with a table edge. Peripherally she noted the fact that alcohol *indeed* was not her friend as she slowly shuffled ahead in the pitch, eyes desperate for particles of light amongst the suffocating chamber. Libraries were once refuges to her; after tonight, they would be pits of murderous tome obstacles.

Something flighty and slight fleeted across her chilled cheek.

"*Ah!*" her soft inhale of surprise came, breaking the silence in a harsh start as she jumped backward. Feet stumbled without purchase, arms thrown out to catch a fall against unseen surfaces detrimental to bones and flesh. Unbidden, a squeal of shock broke free as some sharp edge sliced along her arm, another, rougher angle dug violently against her back as she dropped along the offending object in a rush. In the back of her mind, clarity recalled rather dispassionately that she must have fallen into the study nook at the end of aisle twenty-three, meaning her head was directly approaching the heavy bookcasing. In a matter of seconds, she would bust her skull open with the force of impact, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it; nonverbals didn't count when the witch casting was too befuddled to think them straight.

Whiplash, a sudden jerk, redirection... Tia slammed into her right side, waist high, curving just above the hip over disjointed slabs of planes and edges. A falling stack of books dug into her ribs and chest, and she flung out in desperate grabs to steady, catch herself in the encompassing void. Instead, her right hand found only air, and, overextended, Tia twisted again, her feet tripping against each other.

This time the abrupt jerk came at her left arm, hauling her semi-upright, nearly one-eighty. And in the darkness Tia came jarringly against a solid body with an "*umph!*", a second gripping arm wrapping at her side to steady her.

"Let *go* of me!" she cried in sudden panic, breaking the otherwise stillness of the cavernous room. Struggles of arms flailing and hitting and feet kicking and lunging away were met with strong physical refusals for release.

"*Shhhh! Quite!*" came the hiss with a nervous edge. "Hush, you bird," the male voice continued in a forceful whisper. His grip tightened on her arm, the hand at her waist transferring to the free one she was punching his chest with. Movements were heavy with effort, and Tia could feel him attempting to shake her literally into sense. But she was having none of it; this was twice this term she'd been brutally grabbed and tossed about like a kidnapped rag doll, and she'd had enough. Never mind that she was far more inebriated than she'd first thought, her reflexes slow and off mark. This was not good, and Tia realised a sense of true fear and panic.

"Release me... *now!*"

Determined not to go down without a fight, she decided her full weight was all she had left in terms of defence. A four-year-old could have done no better, Tia's manoeuvre simply kicking her feet from beneath her and practically sitting on the floor in petulance.

Caught completely off-guard, her assailant flew into a stream of whispered obscenities as he fell forward with her in a half stumble, lunging a step forward to keep from falling upon her.

"Going to be like that, is it? Fine, you little beast," he declared breathlessly, trying to hold her just above the floor, and Tia could detect a thread of anger in the vaguely familiar voice. "I'm done playing with you now."

-o-

He'd been sure she was patrolling tonight, half hopeful he'd run across her when he left his place on the tower window sill. He'd sat as he had that night in October, when he'd run upon her unintentionally, expecting to be detained and detentioned. But instead she'd warned him of Peeves, given him a safe passage to his dormitory, and went on her way. Tonight, he'd taken to his refuge amongst the canvases and paints, partially complete artwork depicting the politics of the state of things.

Regulus had run a cursory glance over them, recalling distractedly Stella Gardner's penchant for such statements through artistic means. The former Ravenclaw had graduated two years prior; it said something about how often this room was visited. For Regulus, the isolation was ideal. It offered him time and space where he could fail to keep checked his exterior appearance, leaving free all energies to battle the war within.

But tonight that war had subsided to the background, blurred against the dichotomy Hestia Jones had become. How dare she delay him his plans! Really now, the chit must think herself higher than her status allowed. In point of fact, she barely favoured at all in his circles, and only by means of pureblood birth and her father's uncanny abilities. Yet her lack of excitement or anxiety, even a sense of priority, annoyed him. He, the heir to the Black family fortune and grace, had invited her mere merchant's child she was to spend the holidays with him in Society. And in turn she'd treated the coveted position as an afterthought, something she'd politely get around to when she had the time.

Regulus bristled. It was brooding for hours in that curved, desolate room which had led to his leaving solitude, actively seeking her out. Her cornered in the recesses of the castle at this late hour would yield him greater power, his influence stronger in witness-free shadows. He could be charismatic, woo and beguile her without distraction, impress upon her the rare opportunity presented her. And then she would realise the honour bestowed her, adamantly agree to accompany him, and allow him to cement the plans he had reconciled with each passing day of delay.

But he'd not yet come across her. Over the past weeks, he'd made a point to learn her routines, classes. This evening she should have been patrolling alone along the third and fourth floors. But more than an hour yielded nothing but gossiping paintings (they could be made to keep quiet; the Black name still held sway, even in oils). Even cursory pop-ins throughout the upper floors proved only that other prefects were about. Had she switched nights, floors? Had he mistaken her usual routes?

Soft chatter suddenly broke his musings, the indistinguishable words muffled from the deep catacombs of the library. Regulus slowed. With measured breathing, he crept near the door ajar, straining for clarity of sound.

Mumbling, giggles. So, some lucky bastard was having a go this evening, in the library of all places. Not his first choice for a rendezvous, to be sure, but generally he'd hold no grudge. This night, however, Regulus was in no mood to be generous; he had his own troubles with a girl, and the last he wanted thrown in his face was someone else's connubial bliss.

Slipping in, he made his way in measured steps, allowing his eyes to take in any and all sources of light. Daring not to light his wand, Regulus moved as cat, prowling. He'd decided the couple would have their night ruined as was his, and yet be unable to distinguish the executioner of their folly.

Movement ahead drew his focus, and he crouched below any potential horizon.

They were randy tonight, all right. It sounded as though half a case of texts had fallen to the floor in a slam, rattling the furniture. Moans drifted. Ducking lower, edging closer, Regulus could make out shapes against the vague reflection of moonlight bouncing off highly polished rosewood panels. His wand hand raised of its own volition, mind racing for some quirky spell to break the mood. But as he weighed several options - pail of Alpine stream water; swarm of fleas; disembodied cries of a banshee - the scene before him altered. Or rather, his interpretation.

"Let go of me!" The action before him was not impassioned groping as he'd initially assumed, but a struggle. Breathless and sounding panicked, the girl was twisting forcefully, her wrists or forearms secured by a bloke considerably bigger and stronger than she.

"Release me... *now!*" Hestia Jones? Regulus suddenly felt flush. His intended means to an end was being manhandled by someone vaguely familiar, though in the sliver of light and hushed tones he could not make out just who. But evident was it that Jones was aggressively fighting. It was no tryst gone wrong, either. She didn't know her assailant, either.

Abruptly she dropped from sight, and Regulus nearly hurled himself from hiding until he realised she dropped her weight like a child, trying desperately to escape. Frantically he searched for a way to confiscate her from the brute, but it had to be without wand work. It would never do to be searched in the morning and the last several spells from his wand revealing him involved.

He despised Muggle fisticuffs.

Muffled voices of surprise and energy came from behind him, and Regulus knew he had to act now before the prefects reached them. He'd be found out, most likely, and Jones for sure. Too much relied upon her eligibility as escort for him to allow her to foil his plans by her own stupidity. He had to act instantly.

"Fine, you little beast... I'm done playing with you now."

An urge unbidden rose in him to call out, demand with authority, "Unhand her, you filth!" But Regulus trampled down the battle cry, keeping instead to dark, mental epithets as he approached the couple in a panther's stalk.

A pitiful cry of pain issued from Jones, and no thought prefaced Regulus' launch. The swing was wide, un-tempered, but his fist found its mark somewhere about the cad's forehead. Coming from the side, the strike made contact just a second before Regulus' full body collapsed the assailant to the ground, knocking numerous books off the nearby table onto them. Thankfully most hit the unknown boy, leaving Regulus free to collect himself, grab for Jones in the dark, and sprint out the library opposite the main entrance, using the secret passage just behind the unit on magical cooking. Grabbing the lever between *Sautéing with Strangelove* and *Brains, Brains, and More Braaaaaains: What to Do With Your Zombie Leftovers*, they were soon through the short, narrow passage and in the dungeons. *His* territory. It would give them time.

Dungeon Number Five was reached, its darkened recess of an entrance locked but well hidden, before Regulus paused. He'd yanked Jones into the alcove with him, tossing her against the opposite wall. He leaned back himself, closing his eyes, catching his breath and errant thoughts. Gods, what a mess he'd been gotten into now.

"*Regulus!*" Her voice was strained, surprised, yet oddly pleased. Regulus slowly opened his eyes, wary.

"Whom did you expect?" he drawled, cautious. Her own irises glistened in the scattered flecks of scone light. They were excited, her lips parted in an animated smile. It was bold for Jones, really. Her typical humour was of a sly appearance, a knowing look and grin. This was... different.

"Don't rightly know, exactly," she chuckled, "but didn't rightly care all that great, either." Giggle, and not a nervous one. She swayed, fidgeted, too energized to hold still. "You got me out of a bad spot, and I'm entirely grateful. My hero, you know. My knight in shiny silky armour," she corrected, plucking a section of his black silk shirt from his chest and rubbing it, testing its thin, breathy texture betwixt forefinger and thumb. She looked up, a toothy smile now, leaning so forward he could make out her features clearly, even in the gloom of the deserted corridor. "How will I ever repay you, kindest sir?" Even closer. Tiptoes.

Regulus would have stepped back, but pinned to stone already decided distance of another kind was due. He changed subject lines.

"Who was that knave assaulting you back there?" Great; now he was speaking like he *was* some bloody knight she was dubbing him. Irritation rankled him. "And what was it all about? I thought you were supposed to be on duty in the upper floors tonight, not hiding out in the library." Her change of plans had him nearly ruining his own. She needed to be clear of scandal for his intentions to work. Situations like this were not beneficial.

Chin dropped and she pulled away slightly, face apologetic like a scolded child. What was with her? This was not the Jones he'd come to recognise. Then the bottom lip stuck out, less petulant and more pouty. Had she gone mad? Had that fiend in the library plagued her with a curse or potion?

"I left my patrol early; needed some time to myself in the library." Deeper pout, eyes a sad plead like a beaten boarhound puppy. He nearly expected tears any minute.

"Then I heard someone sneaking about, and when I went to investigate, I *got attacked*." Brows furrowed, hurt and confusion pulled at her pale face. "Wasn't very nice of him, now was it? *Nooooooo*... Wasn't a'tall."

It was the drawn 'no' that had done it. Clicking into place, the pieces now explained the oddities of Tia's manner, an answer he'd not faced since just prior to Sirius' mutiny. Hestia Jones was pissed. Thoroughly. Some sort of whiskey wafted upon her breath, her exclamation directing it straight to him. Suppressing a groan, Regulus closed his eyes once more, a silent plea for some deity to correct the situation and send him on to his dorm without a care. Unfortunately, when he deemed to peek, Jones stood before him still, a drunken bundle of happiness. A problem to be handled.

He sighed irritably.

"Listen; we've got to get you to your dormitory, all right? Before it's noted you're out after curfew, and not entirely sober." He could recall grudgingly assisting his brother to his room after an entirely too energetic celebration two New Year's Eves ago. As they had been staying at an extravagant country manor house of relations at the time, the duty had not been a slight one. Casting a glance at his new responsibility, Regulus knew he'd not regulate himself to a repeat of that scene were it not for the efforts already expended upon her for his plans. That, and Mother's controlling need to choose his routes for him.

Blast whoever gave Jones the drink! They were all in league, they were, to drive him out of his own skin. But he mustn't, he reminded himself, show his annoyance to her. That would defeat his efforts to win her affections, and right now he needed her cooperation very soon, and very much. Taking her wrist gently but securely, he slipped out to pull her along the way, anxiously darting glances about to ensure their privacy.

Low flame flickered from wall sconces, separated by several strides, leaving the dungeon corridors alive with nooks and crannies. For once Regulus felt nervous traipsing his domain; this was not a situation of which he wished anyone's knowledge. Beyond public knowledge of this pitifully horrid display of drunkenness (by a less-than-

favourable association), there were inklings of a desire to keep their togetherness private. Not for embarrassment's sake, but for time to distinguish just how he felt about this part of the plan.

Initially Regulus found annoyance, disgruntlement with involving yet another variable. Forced to court a girl not of his choosing for a non-marital purpose seemed a waste of energy and time, not to mention irritating considering the chosen girl. But as Hestia Jones or rather, situations involving her had continually surprised him, Regulus found himself curious above all to determine just what Jones was capable of, what underlying factor influenced her decisions. She was unpredictable at the moment, and that was not a benefit to his success. Best he get a handle on things now, in the quiet, before notifying the masses of their involvement.

"You know," came Jones from behind, a breathless little chuckle, light and airy and all-too-unconcerned. "If you're my knight, you *should* be upon your *horse* to rescue me. 'Course," she continued, thoughtful in her voice, "were you to rescue me astride your grey, I'd not think Mr Filch would be too chuffed about it, horse in the corridors and all. Not that I'd mind, mind you; I've seen you sit a good "

"*Shush!*" he hissed, aggrieved in his glances back. Could the chit really not stay silent? All her chatter would reveal them right up. He had to find an alternate route, somewhere out of all ears.

"Jones," he directed in low, commanding tones, "I'm going to take us back to your dormitory, or thereabouts. You will go into your room, speak to no one about this evening, and quickly and quietly make yourself indisposed. I highly suggest," he added, turning to face her. She stepped ungracefully right into him, his free hand catching her upper side to steady her, as he braced for impact. Innocently wide open eyes stared amusingly and childlike at his, their hazel flecks of green catching in the flicker of a nearby sconce. Shadow and flame warred for her rosy cheeks.

"I highly suggest," he repeated, voice lower, strained. Why was anger not driving him to settle this matter? He could demand she cooperate, even hex her, levitate her to the North Tower and leave her to be found by her fellow Ravenclaws. A Memory Charm to boot and all would be finished. He'd not be bothered any further with her disreputable antics. Chance of being caught would be drastically reduced.

Should he be bothered to admit such, Regulus didn't take the swift, efficient way out because truth was... she entertained him. No, not in a chuckling, nor even sardonic way, but in a curiosity to be quenched manner. Unspeakably gauche, terribly unfit for company, Hestia Jones most certainly didn't *bore* him. Perhaps that was why he fought this inopportune incident with her conscious and mobile, talkative.

He simply was curious as to what she'd do or say next.

Not a good sign, Black, he warned himself. Playing fire by testing Fate, living in the thrill of getting caught. *Because subconsciously, you want to get caught. Then punishment dealt would leave you without the obligations you've been assigned. Obligations you've grown to despair. You fail at Potions to free yourself. If you could fail here, as well...*

Sharp internal shake and Regulus drew back to present. Would's and Could's meant nothing; Already Done and Must Do were reality, and he needed to get on with it. Staring fiercely down at his encumbrance, Regulus fairly growled with renewed intent.

"...you cooperate like a good girl and help me find your rooms. It wouldn't be prudent or *safe*," they were in Slytherin territory now, "for you to be found wandering alone. In your cups, no less." He had no intention of being found with her. Self preservation, always.

If he expected a docile 'yes sir' from her, sorely mistaken was he. Or rather, wholeheartedly taken aback.

"You don't like me much, do you?" she enquired, lower lip pouting with a fatigued aura about her. All previous pep and vigour were gone. Brow furrowed in a failure to comprehend as she elaborated. "Sort of a shame, really. I like you. Very much, actually."

This last was spoken not in girlish giggles, shy admittance, or even matter-of-factly. Rather, Jones little more than whispered her words, taken to be thinking out loud were she not staring directly into his eyes. A weariness swept her features. Resignation, as well, perhaps. But some flavour of Ravenclaw intellect composed her speech, and she removed high emotion and commented from afar.

"Why?" It slipped out before he thought, and Regulus cursed himself his untamed tongue. But she looked at him really *looked* at him for a long few breaths before answering.

"Helena Sampson once wrote, 'Of all the Masters my life has found, only to one I've truly been bound.'" Eyes dropped to his lips, chin. "'And were I ever to account the cost, in reconciliation I might have lost. But never into thought did I once give, let instead my foolhardy heart live. And a servant I shall always be, to the Master to the Man who so beautifully... completes me.'"

Silence echoed their breathing; so unprepared was he for this seeming change of subject. Yet, somehow, maturity grasped the realisation she actually was answering his question. No random drunken chatter; her expression was too concentrated. Still inebriated, yes, but aware.

"Who's Helena Sampson?" he asked, grasping for something to pull him from thinking too much her meaning.

This time strangely worried eyes met his, nearly fearful.

"My mother." Weak, quiet response. Gaze dropped once more, her free hand rising, seemingly of its own accord between them. As no wand appeared, Regulus disregarded the movement, concentrating instead on digesting this turn of events. He simply did not know how to react. This bafflement paralysed him, and inside he struggled for clarity, comprehension. What to say to that?

Typical Black fashion would warrant quips and insults to a slip of girl like Jones. And perhaps were he not needing her appreciation for ulterior purposes, cutting remarks may have found their avenue. Jones, however, was necessary, to say the least. A required endurance. That she thought him a *completion* to herself hah! well, that was just... foolhardy. Ridiculous. They were nothing alike, and she not worthy to his status by far. In truth, she and her kind were the very essence of his family's troubles in their world. Completion, inde

Fingertips most gentle plied at his lips, pulling the lower slightly in their slow, careful study. Thumb pad grazed stubble. Her own mouth had fallen slightly open, incredulous at her own digits, perhaps? But he was frozen, too, lips parting of their own volition.

Then she spoke, but two words, in a haunting voice so riddled with fear it came little more than a formed, wafting exhale.

"*Kiss me.*"

Chapter 11: Temperance

Chapter 11 of 13

To lose yourself to the moment is a fate most grievous. Temperance is the only viable solution.

Reviews are most appreciated

-o-o-o-0-o-o-o-

Chapter 11: Temperance

Kiss me. How long she had desired to say those very words. The fact that she was saying them now disturbed her self-conscious vulnerability, but a certain relief also swept across her. No more playing about with innuendo and sly looks, quirky smiles due to daydreaming quietly about him. The request had dashed unbidden through her mind; belatedly Tia Jones had comprehended that her thoughts had not been the only medium through which it flowed.

Never mind. Didn't matter, really. Tia was tired of games, weary from keeping face around him. Mayhap she was halfway round the twist, but at this very moment, Tia Astarte Jones was glad to admit in so direct a fashion how she felt about Regulus A Black.

How she'd felt for a long while now.

Admittedly, it'd not have come about vocally had she been entirely sober. Yes, a thank-you was in order for McKinnon and her advice when all was said and done. For even were he to dismiss her outright, call her on the carpet for her unworthiness, plainness, lack of connection or fortune, at the very least she would not have 'might have been' ever her misery.

All this she considered as the silence weighed heavily about, between them. Had time paused, reined itself in to absorb those syllables?

Tia let her hand fall slowly, heavily, sight filled with dancing shades across Regulus' jaw. It was tight. Twitch of muscle. View dropped to his neck – mistake for her? – a beautiful neck with corded muscles straining. Why? Was he now grasping to control his temper? Whatever he had been playing at with her these past weeks, it might just be he was now rethinking its worth. So repulsed by her, her spoken wish caused re-evaluation and – as always – she was found lacking, not worth the prize he'd been after.

A sudden sense of hurt washed over Tia, mingling comfortably with her fear, sapping energy and faith. She watched his quick succession of swallows and then closed her eyes, not desiring to see the obvious disgust on his refined features. Gnawing her lower lip, desperate to hold tears at bay, Tia felt true regret begin to form. It was one thing to know in one's heart one was unwanted.

It was wholly another to hear it confirmed.

-o-o-o-

Nothing in Regulus' upbringing had prepared him for the gut-jerking spasm that sluiced through him at her command. Momentary immobility held even his very pulse and breath. Not that he was new to feminine attention – not at all – but Hestia Jones, intoxicated and irritating and inferior and improper, had just failed any speck of decorum, had shown her true inadequacy of breeding, her lack of propriety and respect.

In abject horror he stared incredulously at her flushed face, pale even under the warmth of nearby flame. Eyes downcast, she refused to face him, as she *should* fear to do. But even as Regulus scowled at the chit's abashed features for her brazen and ridiculous words, odd sensations rose in spite, stemming from navel outward, blurring his inner sight. Vision of who he was, his responsibilities and edicts assigned, emphatically dissipated in the wake of rosy cheeks and non-scheming admirations. Hestia Jones wanted him – at least his kiss – without plans for status and fortuitous marriage.

She simply wanted him.

Gone for this brief interlude were his duties to all and sundry; he wasn't Regulus Black. He didn't want to be. And without consideration to consequence, Regulus cast himself into the shadows of existence and became simply a seventeen year old boy in a solitary corridor, intimate lighting and a willing (if inebriated) girl in his grasp. Shrugging off his identity with a violence, he closed his eyes tightly, sucked air in through clenched teeth and bridled restraint, then looked once more down upon his little sprite's fallen face... her mouth... the delicate tongue darting nervously over worried lips...

They were moving; he pressing forward in steady, ethereal steps, while she fell back in clumsy shuffles 'til her back braced hard against cold stone and her head dared raise in angle in bewilderment. A flicker and her nervous eyes met his.

Then there was no thought, only her parted lips, a heady wisp of breath laced in whiskey, and then supple firmness, a contrast of cool flesh and warm recesses... intoxication...

Coherency disappeared, and Regulus was aware only of the yielding beneath his lips, a delight so unexpected he felt a jolt of shock dart through him. Without conscious effort, his controlling fingers relaxed, pushed upward to nearly her shoulders, then convulsed again in a grip far more possessive and needy than dictating. Response from her was almost immediate, though tentative. At first. She met his slow, cautious movements with ones filled with inquisitiveness. Fleeting Regulus wondered if she'd ever been kissed before. Himself, loads of times, but never in such an awkward position of confusion. He'd not been fancying the girl; so why did his desire to meet her request come as a high-bidden demand to his body?

No answer, however, would ever be forthcoming. Venturing with hesitation – he did not trust her or the situation – Regulus had no more than coaxed her mouth open but a sliver more when gentle, wet, curious, her tongue ghosted across his bottom lip.

Circe, Merlin and Morgana!

Explosive in fervour, his body reacted without permission, tightening in a quivering snap like a plucked bow, pressing her full body into the wall, delving deeper into her mouth. Gone were all indications of caution or reserve, and Regulus cared not. For this moment he would not consider Jones' inferior place – nay, he could not *think* a'tall. It was sensation – solely *feeling* – all about him right now, and nothing else in the world mattered. Her generous breasts flattened against his ribcage, rise and fall of their chests suddenly heightened, and everything within him screamed to be freed, to dive into the oblivion and find release.

From everything.

Mewling reached his ears, needy sighs against his skin, and he took a conquering pleasure knowing it was he who had elicited such want from the girl. Distantly it registered that her fingers were digging into his hair, clasping desperately to the back of his neck, pulling him down to her. All he knew was simply a driving call to complete this sensation began. Right hand dropped heavily along her side to find the edge of plush flesh. Without any sense of gentleness, the heel of his palm kneaded into her breast, eliciting a whimper deep in her throat. Regulus felt empowered, larger than physical form.

Forced breaths, teeth bare, raking fleetingly across her jaw like a cat demanding attention. Marking its territory.

Return to mouth, hungry and coercing fiercely. Closer, closer – he had to get closer. Press against, press in, deeper, closer, become one –

Another sort of shock snapped through him this time, crashing down violently with reality. Regulus leapt back in a jerking motion, a flash of fear, then control.

What the bloody hell had he just done?

It would not be until later as he lay restless in his four poster that recollection would invite him to ask that same question of the actual kiss, of the wonton need within him for such physical interaction. But immediate circumstance demanded of him to know what had he just done, and why? Why and how? How could he have lost sense of himself, control of the situation, lose sight of his duty, of the scandal just waiting in the wings had or should anyone of import witness his target's flagrant misbehaviour? Mother, Father, the Dark Lord himself – they expected him to handle his missions with aplomb and circumspect. Bugging them up for an instant of gratification and roll on the dungeon floor would gain him no praise.

Would it have really come to that? Regulus dismissed the idea, too self-berating to even consider the prospect. He did not take with whores, nor with lowers of caste. Just a flash of extraneous thought, was all, he reasoned.

Reining himself and his stray thoughts in, Regulus composed to a proper façade and looked upon Jones with slight contempt and boredom. He would not acknowledge the fresh tinge to her skin, the swell of plucked lips or the rough respiration. Stepping only close enough to reach for her, he snagged her wrist in a no-nonsense grip, pried her from the wall and turned about, walking in long strides quickly down the way. He would not get side-tracked again.

"Your dormitory," he stated succinctly, determination righting his course. "Immediately."

She stumbled behind him, caught up only by his unwavering hold dragging her along through shortcuts, passageways rarely used. He had to present her to her dormitory with expedience, and this time definitely invoke a Memory Charm.

They were lucky, indeed, reaching the spiral staircase he knew led to the Ravenclaw common room, without crossed paths of human or entity. Dropping hold of her hand unceremoniously, Regulus made an about face to regard her stoically.

"You'll remain here, seated on the floor, until you've the coherency and coordination to climb to your dormitory. Do you understand?" His tone was harsh, but it was better as such. He needed to flee – no, Blacks did not need to *flee*, ever. He needed to... distance himself from the girl. Time and clarity of mind and position to think. Besides, he was not her nursemaid.

So why didn't he just leave now? Jones had lowered herself fluidly to sit quarter-lotus beside the first step, just as he'd dictated. But he did not leave.

Simple; he had to be sure she was found before she went and did something totally unacceptable, or worse yet, get caught out of curfew, much less inebriated. Wouldn't do well for his plans, that. His luck of late, and the moment he gave her leave she would try to climb the stairs alone, only to trip and fall in her foxed state and break her blasted neck. That wouldn't help his cause, either.

It absolutely had nothing to do with the pitiful look she was giving him, the silence of her bruised lips, even now displaying a bit of chap and abuse. Hazel eyes did not peer up at him in wordless plea and despondency. No; he was merely protecting his assets he'd worked too long to gain.

Echoes of some nameless tune floated upon the draft of the fifth floor corridor, and Regulus made out the feminine ring to be nearing.

"Your assistance is coming, I do believe," he informed her flatly. "Do be smart and take it. Go to your bed and sleep it off." A quick, meaningful glance up the stairs beside him, "And try not to break your fool neck in the process."

With that final piece of caution, Regulus turned and stalked into the shadows, opposite the nearing voice, without a look toward his responsibility's mournful face. He'd done his duty, seen her to her own kind, ensured her safety. A Ravenclaw would not rat their own.

Regulus stopped just outside the ring of firelight, stepping into a shallow alcove. He had to be sure, after all, the girl was actually tended, just in case the late night roamer was someone other than her own. It took less than a minute before he recognised a seventh year prefect – McKinnon, it was – toddling into the oblong realm of light.

"Tia!" the girl cried in surprise and, suddenly, in worry. She knelt to study Jones' face, and the latter must have mumbled something, for McKinnon abruptly chuckled and appeared to relax.

"Oh, gods, Tia," she went on, laughter in her voice. "Can't say as I've ever seen you out of sorts before. It's right funny. C'mon; let's get you up to the dorms, shall we?" she asked, hefting her housemate to her feet. "I just hope you've a remedy in your stash or you're in for a nasty hangover in the morn, I'll grant you."

With more light-hearted cajoling and effort, the older girl wrapped her arm about Jones and began trudging up the stairs. When it was apparent Jones was safe from herself, Regulus slipped out and covertly made his own way to his bed. His steps were automatic, born of years of need for stealth, leaving his errant mind to wander where it shouldn't.

And it wouldn't have been the floor, but against the wall...

-O-

"There we go," Marlene was telling her softly as they slipped undetected into the deserted Ravenclaw common room. A low fire still barely burned, embers glowing in promise of more to come, of warmth not dependent upon a boy. A boy who was slowly but undeniably driving her to the very brink.

"Whatever brought this on?" Marlene went on, trying to hold in the laughter that was pressing against restraint and the enforced whispers of secrecy. She was settling Tia on a divan near the hearth, gathering a rug from the corner and draping Tia neck to toe. Probably didn't trust her to make it up the stairs to her own bed.

"I've never known you to drink much, Hestia Jones, so don't say you were just out for a bit of fun. Not that I would ever condemn you for that very thing," she hastily added as she poked the logs, livened the fire. "But I'm at a loss as to your sudden overindulgence."

Tia frowned. Lifting her head from the pillow Marli had tucked beneath her, she considered a moment before answering slowly, sure the prefect must have forgotten.

"You told me to." At Marli's confused face, Tia elaborated. "Weeks ago. You told me that you'd found the best way to deal with – er... certain problems, was a cup of tea with a splash of brandy. Though I must admit," she added quietly, looking away from her housemate's patient expression and into the stirring flames. "At a loss for brandy I could only find whiskey, and, well, sort of left out the hot cup of tea entirely."

The spitting laugh was not what she had expected, and Tia looked up to Marlene, the seventh year beauty fighting to quieten herself.

"Oh, cor love a duck, Tia!" she stage whispered, gobsmacked. "I wasn't talking about *you*. I was talking about getting the *bloke* drunk!" Further laughter broke her speech, and Tia could feel flames of shame heating her already warm cheeks. "Makes them more pliable, more susceptible to logic and reason, you know. And of course less resistant to feminine wiles."

Suddenly Marlene's arms were about her, hugging even through the shivers of silenced chuckles.

"Love bless you, Tia," she managed in high humour, rocking Tia. "You naïve little thing, you."

Tia simply wanted to melt into the furniture. She really was a little fool, just as Regulus had said.

But mercy... that *kiss*.

-o-o-o-

"You tosser. You won't nip up to Pomfrey 'cause you want Evans to see it. Get all motherly hen over you." Playful snorts of derision times three followed Sirius' explanation, Peter's sniggers throwing him into a coughing fit on the juice he'd just ingested.

"Nooo," James argued, eyes averted, tone just a little too squeakish for credibility. He prodded the small gash on his forehead, just above his left eye, and winced. Sirius took no pity.

"Serves you right," he added, stabbing a sausage with his knife and chewing quickly as he scanned the Great Hall. They were running late as far as breakfast went, having remained out much later than planned.

"How so?" James demanded from the opposite side. He, too, was scanning the room, but only in an obviously pointed attempt not to stare at Lily Evans who was currently visiting the Ravenclaw table. It wouldn't serve to prove Sirius' point; that would only lead to more ridicule.

"If you would have not deviated from the original plan and gone directly through Filch's toiletry cupboard," Remus answered calmly, gaze intent upon a propped tome whilst absentmindedly grazing his meal. "Then you'd have avoided all dualistic tendencies and subsequent physical maladies, and merely have shown up on time last night at the agreed upon meet-up. Thereby assisting through your own assigned duties that which would allow for certain unmentionable items to be unmentionably cocked-up in unmentionable fashions, giving rise to an incredible yet understated work of unmentionably brilliant hazing art."

James stared in bafflement, Sirius in dry amusement, and Peter looked away before the faces of his friends sent him again into fits. Remus' expression remained casual, attention on the eggs he was scooping a-fork.

"Thank you for that clarification, Moony," James finally replied.

"Don't mention it," said Remus.

"Shan't."

"Really, James," Peter piped up, laughter under control. "You should let Madam Pomfrey tend that before it gets nasty. No telling what might've actually caused it."

"What caused it, Pete," the bespectacled boy offered dryly, "would be a rushing corporeal form smashing violently into my person in the bloody dark. Whilst my hands were quite full and busy at the moment, thank you."

Sirius smirked and turned back to his friends. "Thought you were saving yourself for Evans, Prongs. Wouldn't she be so delighted to be enlightened otherwise?"

James blushed furiously, grabbed the closest projectile off the table and hurled it recklessly at Sirius, the latter falling into devilish chuckles. Really now; digestive biscuits?

Whilst Sirius shook the food from his freshly trimmed hair, he surreptitiously checked the double doors. Why had an uneasy feeling invaded his senses at the story James had told them last night? Once he'd gotten to the part about the girl... *"Don't know what was really on, mind you, but I'd lay odds to swear it was Hestia Jones. Sloshed, I tell you; talking to herself. Then she tried to walk through me, destroy the library, had a right fit that would alert the entire castle floor, screamed and attacked me, and then someone rushed me from the shadows and took off with her..."*

Rushed him from the shadows. Took off with her. Hestia Jones. A chill of foreboding nipped down his back. Sirius couldn't relay why – nor would he admit such to his mates – but a dark, heavy intuition told him the culprit might not be as anonymous as all that. But to what purpose? It was that which worried him greatest.

Whip of feathers brought Sirius back to present, just in time to save his jammed toast from the parchment rushing toward it. Gathering the thick letter as it dropped, he glanced over the feminine script and grinned in delight.

"Post from Clio," he told the others, and they all commented with how each wondered how she was getting on in the States, how much longer she'd be, how they'd missed the banter she'd often trade with Sirius. To an appreciative audience.

Clio Harper was the one and only Slytherin Sirius and James got on with. Remus and Peter were not quite so prejudice based on house and spoke to several. But Clio was a rarity among Slytherins with her political views not *totally* in keeping with the obsessive trends of her family and housemates. Rarer still, she did not fall for Sirius' rakish charm, but yet could argue points with him without becoming shrewish or hateful. A tentative friendship had established itself these past two years.

Scanning the missive, Sirius relayed bits of news with his own commentary painting the scenes.

"Huh. Says she heard my dear cousin is quite along with child. Narcissa," he clarified in a side, an annoyance marring his good mood for a moment. "Well, there's another arrogant bastard of Black blood to carry on the *family code*." The last came in a sneer, and Sirius forced himself to return to the letter, seeking something more affable to share. He settled on a rousing tale of someone's hen party gone out of control.

He had enough to think about regarding 'family' and pureblood fanaticism for the moment, thanks. *And that* little bastard hadn't come through to breakfast yet this morning.

-o-

Denial. Yes; that was the ticket. It had worked for generations; no reason it shouldn't suffice for his own detrimental actions of the previous evening.

Regulus had brooded his entire morning preparation, terse and short with his dorm mates and their greetings, more preoccupied than usual in his sojourn to breakfast. A foul mood hovered just in the wings of his humour this day, and not without reason. Deprivation of sleep and sound mind had robbed him of any modicum of patience. Were Jones to suddenly end his torture and come to him with an offer of fealty to the Dark Lord – hers and her father's loyalty – he'd probably tell her to sod off and leave him the hell alone for the rest of his life. It was her fault, anyway, that'd he'd gone to his bed tense and painfully needy.

Crazy bint.

Worse still, he'd not gotten a Memory Charm cast before McKinnon had shown up last night. Yes, he probably could have managed afar and not roused suspicion, especially in Jones' pissed state, but he'd not wished to chance it. Something told him Jones wouldn't speak of their interlude (which was good), assuming she even could remember it. Best of luck would prove she didn't, that the heavy intoxication had robbed her of recollection.

Somehow the thought did not ease his troubled mind.

Settling distractedly and quite alone at the Slytherin table, Regulus helped himself to tea and rashers and looked up and around. He was most decidedly *not* looking for Jones. Not unless it was to ensure she'd not drowned herself along with her sorrows last night after he'd taken leave. Huh. Wouldn't that just be the frost on the cake? Mother would never let him forget, and Father would never show him respect. Not to mention how unamused the Dark Lord would be...

Intent stare at his person stopped Regulus' musings cold. He knew those eyes, that stare, that loathing and distinct air of superiority, and he resented it thoroughly.

Ah, bloody fuck! Why couldn't this damn war of animosity just *fucking disappear*?

Sirius had neither right nor cause to pull that silly shite today. Regulus wasn't in the mood for sibling rivalry this morning, and he'd done nothing of any sort to earn renewed contempt from his elder brother as of late, either. Nothing, in fact, to even garner the attention of even the strictest of rule makers, much less rule breakers. Nothing out of the ordinary –

Oh, surely not. Regulus' face fell from disdain to exasperated annoyance. Jones wouldn't have run crying to Sirius. Not if all she'd sworn was actually the case, and there was nothing betwixt them. Nothing there to gain Sirius' possessive anger over last night's escapade or – Well, no. In any case, the Black brothers wouldn't be fighting over a girl. And most ardently not Jones. Even if they *were* involved and she *did* tell him and he meant to fisticuff Regulus then toss him in the tumbrel for his head. Sirius teased, toyed, and tossed girls away. And he and Regulus were polar opposites in taste, to boot.

No, Sirius had to have some other bee in his bonnet...

Pointedly Regulus turned from his brother's glare with a raise of his chin, a statement of acknowledgement laced in displeasure. Really, he did not have the tolerance for Sirius' attitude today. He had enough to contend with.

With great effort he ignored the morning post, hoping earnestly there was nothing for him. A missive from Mother would only upset his digestion. Also ignored was the continued look of hostility from Sirius. The elder'd not dare make a scene with all the teachers present, or mistake the Slytherin table as a neutral or forgiving battlefield.

Regulus instead lingered over the abandoned *Daily Prophet*, absorbing the tales, gossips, and dire warnings of the Dark Lord and his followers. Truth was, he learned much more and more readily by publication and rumour than he did from the inside. He hadn't yet gained high position – any position, actually, as he'd not even taken the Mark nor been asked for such – and only had two current duties to fulfil. Even so, he was failing in the most mundane of assignments. Though only one was crumbling in spite of his efforts.

Sensing more eyes, Regulus glanced up from beneath hooded eyes and bent head. Down the table he noted nearby housemates had abruptly ceased their chatter and were staring in his direction, wary and somewhat spiteful in expressions. It was then he felt presence to his right, a body standing at his side, awaiting his attention. As his right arm was already crossed before him upon the table, it was a simple matter to tuck into his robe and palm his wand.

Apparently Sirius *did* have the cheek to approach him here and now. Regulus clenched his teeth in deepening anger, a growl burning in his throat. Fine. It would prove a fitting diversion to his cocked-up-already day.

He whipped about suddenly, wand poised, rising from his seat simultaneously with menace and lost patience... jaw clenched, voice low.

"You're pressing your fucking luck this morning."

Chapter 12: Conflict

Chapter 12 of 13

Regulus sees his life as a 'follow the directions' journey, and when its straight and planned path is threatened by non-conformist Tia, all that's left is an unnerving sort of conflict.

Disclaimer: Were it not the fact JK Rowling commands his very existence, I'd most certainly and happily take Regulus home and heal his woes.

Author's Note: Life gets in the way. What can I say? Thank you for staying with me, being patient.

One other point: besides the obvious, there are / will be a couple or few timeline alterations made for the sake of the storyline. Neither currently are Pottverse majors; Regulus' age (he became a Death Eater at 16 in canon, and I've got him 17 and not yet a full DE), and the eventual appearance of a minor character who should also have already died, but in VAG, has not. Your understanding, please. :-)

And your reviews are very much appreciated. I LOVE hearing from you all thank you!

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Chapter 12: Conflict

21 December 1977

A cold rain fell in steady, subdued metre, lulling Tia's thoughts softly along a path best left unventured. But it was too late now had been for ages, really and so with resignation she chose not to stop them. As the rocking sway of the carriage kept time with the *pitter-patter* of raindrops, recollection returned to her mind's eye, always looking for some meaning not yet derived from expressions, gazes, tone...

*As if her day had not already started poorly, the throbbing just on the edge of her consciousness was accentuated by a single letter in the morning post: her father's. Mortification had apparently not been dealt with Fate's approval yet, and was increased at the knowledge that now Tia had express permission no, **great encouragement** to attend all ceremonies and events with Regulus A Black, heir apparent and social catch. But after last night, after her horrid behaviour and utter wantonness...*

To her further dismay, Tia had this morning found Regulus across the Great Hall, a murderous stare passing between him and his brother, Sirius. Lovely; that meant his mood would be simply ripe for the plucking. Admitting her stalling for what it was (cowardice), Tia had finished her breakfast leisurely before demanding of herself to get it

over with, to face Black. Only, when she had looked up to ensure his continued presence, she'd spotted Sirius from the corner of her eye, his glare actively intent upon Regulus. He was rising, speaking softly to his mates without breaking his attention to the younger Black. Then he was moving toward the younger sibling, purpose in each stride, a festering hostility sloughing with each step.

There would be war, his expression said.

Damn.

Tia couldn't allow it, and chose to head Sirius off at the pass, darting through dispersing students to make her way to the Slytherin table before him. Perhaps her presence would forestall the imminent confrontation. She had to admit that Sirius, despite his rakehell attitude and overbearing directness, had been little but kind to her, regardless his cryptic warnings. And Regulus... needless to point out, her feelings for him demanded his safety and security. Tia had little doubt Sirius would easily best his little brother in a duel, and at the very least he would be punished for fighting on school grounds.

The latter's reaction to her intervention had been worse than expected.

"You're pressing your fucking luck this morning," he'd growled as he whipped about. Tia had found herself horrified and alarmed, his wand centred upon her face, his housemates casting visual snarls at her. All the cleverness she was at Defence, and all she had been able to do was stare wide-eyed and worried, gnawing her lip and fiddling with her letter in hands.

It had taken but a moment, then Regulus' face had morphed from battle-ready to a fleeting and nearly imperceptible shock, then on to a mask indecipherable once again, the same sort she'd studied for over six years.

He'd not apologized his bark; merely straightened his stance, lowered his wand, and asked politely, "What may I do for you, Ms Jones?" And she had stammered quietly her father's just-received approval, and he had with indifference acknowledged it, and they had made appropriate plans.

And a fortnight later...

Tia recalled quite vividly that he'd spoken no further to her since that morning. Polite half-smiles and nods of semi-greeting were the sole extent of his attentions, outside the one owl he'd sent with travel arrangements. Travelling she now did quite alone, quite subdued. Just like the continuing rain, bleak skies reflective of her mood. What would once have been to her fantasy come to life had since turned into something... strained.

Yes, that was it. Strained.

Rouan had told her she was being ridiculous. Regulus Black was a societal creature, reared in a family high on status and breeding. Tia couldn't possibly expect him to go about spouting love sonnets or nicking her from the corridors for an alcovian snog. Of course, Rouan had giggled uncontrollably at that lecture, finally admitting her wish for just such for herself after Tia had shared the story of her ambushing him in the dungeons. And the kiss...

Well, of course Rouan had cheered encouragingly at that tale, 'accidentally' nudging Tia into a stumble when they passed Regulus between classes. She was often jotting notes on parchment and passing them to the Ravenclaw with tips on luring her man into a sense of blatant desire.

Er... no.

Rather than desire, Tia had grown forlorn, concerned that Regulus' attentions to her were more and more forced. What if he didn't like her in the least? She knew his romantic attentions were not genuine there was a hunted look in his eyes at times that bespoke volumes of calculations and resentment. Yet beneath she'd always felt he had a certain level of mild agreement to her personality. Oh, yes, they did quarrel, but honestly, those who never disagree could hardly be said to be entertaining to each other, could they? Yet it seemed to have all changed, ever since her unwelcome advances by means of copious amounts of alcohol.

She was never drinking again.

They'd slowed, and Tia gazed out through curtains of honest English weather at the stone, brick and beam Tudor rounding into view. The Black country estate was not the grandest she'd seen for she'd seen many but it had always held a catch to her breath upon first sight each visit. No doubt it was everything to do with a single occupant, one she had rarely caught sight of in the master and mistress' haste to rid themselves of Ezra Jones and child. But each moment she had espied him, Regulus had never failed to snap-to her curiosity, fan the flames of ever-growing fascination.

Alighting unaided from the carriage, Tia approached the front entrance with trepidation, her mouth suddenly dry as cobwebs. Peripherally she caught an aging house-elf struggling with her trunk and the harness latch holding it to the carriage. Her nature bade she help him, but little time had she for such worries now. Greeting her host held her taut with nerves. What if he treated her just as he had this past week, all formal and distant? Dearest Merlin, that would be awkward. Or worse, he informed her he'd made a terrible mistake, that she could never pass for his guest-in-arm in Society, and she should turn right back around and depart with the carriage?

She needn't have fretted so, however. Not at this time, at least. Without a knock, the heavy double doors opened to reveal merely another house-elf, this one elderly and frail, silent but for a request she follow him. The cavernous foyer was desolate, and Tia was far conscious of her dripping attire marring the clean hardwood floors. A strange sense of disappointment settled over her with each step, numbing her once-fraught nerves. Grand, polished stairs, twists around rosewood panelling, lemon oil drifting through heavy, stale air. Evidently the house had not been opened and aired in some time. Corridors grew dim with low sconce light, shadowing shabby carpets, threadbare opulent drapes... The house gave the impression of a family projecting a wealth not backed by Galleons. Appearances were everything, it seemed.

Shown a compact room in the recesses of the third floor, Tia was left alone to contemplate her situation, allowing fears to well again in her stomach's pit. A fire blazed, warding the chill of her damp denim and jumper as she removed the latter from a tee beneath, blotched with rain. It also gave light where the slit of a casement window failed its revelations. As she unpacked her trunk, Tia mused upon her accommodations, the four poster with emerald duvet and black silk drapings. Honestly, could the Blacks not release the hold of house loyalty in adulthood?

Tia shook her head in bemusement; she'd never understand some people.

It was in transferring evening attire to the modest chiffonier she would have to steam out the wrinkles later that the fold of parchment drew her gaze to the single pillow propped against the headboard. Addressed to her in an elegant script she'd forever recognise, Tia sat abruptly on the bed and tilted the note toward the flame-light.

Ms Jones,

I hope your journey was pleasant and uneventful. Shemar Concierge's Floo is well tended and conveniently near for travel, and should have been performed satisfactorily. You understand the need for security preventing a direct Floo-in, I am sure. These days are fraught with peril.

As well, I do hope you find your room accommodating, though in reality you will spend little time within its confines. There is much to do in the coming weeks, and I expect you shall find yourself pressed for a moment's peace. Please find at your disposal the bell pull to your right. Should you find yourself in need of a house-elf, ring at your leisure. Do not be concerned you will intrude upon anyone's privacy or rest, for the bell is tuned to a frequency only the house-elves can decipher.

So, the house-elves don't deserve sleep or privacy, do they? Tia mused, brow arched and mental scoff. She read on.

The evening meal will be served promptly at seven. Dress will be informal. Until then, please feel free to tour the back gardens or peruse the library. Kreacher will show you

the way.

R Black

Well, then. That was some sort of... welcome. Tia shook her head, disappointed. His words were polite but curt, formal and distant. She had hoped they'd crossed such barriers and were on perhaps first name basis and more personable language. His note only reminded her his upbringing, and the great social chasm between it and hers. Oh, she was well enough in 'breeding' primarily due to her father's talents and renown reputation thereof but Tia was not accustomed to some of the finer points of propriety, and hardly had need of them in any case. Great Aunt Hepple would be pleased immensely if Tia were simply able to not cause a scene or scandal during her stay with the Blacks. Tia's mother's aunt had taken over Tia's 'girl training' after Helena's death. Too bad that training had not included how to sway a boy's affections.

-o-

He'd seen her arrive. Drenched head to heel as she stood ridiculously out in the rain, looking about wide-eyed as though expecting some sort of spectacle or attack. Silly chit hadn't enough sense to cast a single charm upon herself to remain dry. But then, he had to recall she was not yet seventeen. Unlike his own family, he doubted Ezra Jones would tolerate his only child breaking the law with underage magic. The Blacks... well, needless to say they were of another cut altogether. First water, the lot of them.

Rubbish, a familial voice inside chided. Regulus' teeth grit in reaction, tamping down Alphard's traitorous remark. The Blacks were a noble and worthy line. They were. Just because he Regulus did not wholly agree with certain dictates forced upon himself did not mean they were not for the best. He merely had not been privy to the reasoning. Nor asked.

And why should he? At this moment in time, he still had not proven himself to the Dark Lord and could not expect an inner circle knowledge of his own role. Mother was aware of enough for a non-inductee, and in turn, that should be quite a contentment for himself. Father was well-informed by associates, but had no time to be bothered with sharing guidance with Regulus. As it was, Regulus would be surprised if Father managed to return for the festivities these coming weeks. The south of France was a heady drink when stirred by a languid mistress of unspeakable talents.

Weary of the exasperating picture before him, Regulus waited only for her entrance into the house then turned Mistoffelees back over the embankment and deeper into the woods. It was not Black land; no, their estate was sadly limited. But the old Muggle McCutchen minded not when Regulus rode on his lands, appreciating that a horse once more traversed the fields. Too often the gelding had been Regulus' only respite, a moment's peace from his life. It was astride where he could think clearly, or not at all, depending his need. Only once since his last ride of the summer had he found such release of self-imprisonment, and he'd felt

No. There was no benefit to revisiting that night in the dungeon corridors, and he'd not do so. Hestia Jones was nothing to him. Nothing. No more than a means to an end, one that presented him in high praise by the Dark Lord, respect from Mother and Father. He must have been mad to have kissed her, to have fallen into a physical need directing his actions rather than his head. It had not been in his best interest to lose sight of his instructions, though truth told, their intimate moment furthered his objective quite nicely.

Brilliant.

Verbal clicks, shift forward, and Mistoffelees lurched into a gallop, icy rain biting into Reg's face as he removed the Impervious Charm.

-o-

Tick... Tick.... Tick.... Tick....

"I trust your soup is adequate?"

Tia started at the words. Not loud, but so ear-splitting in the grave-silent air of the dining room, broken only by the seconds marking passage by grandfather clock. With only the two of them present, the lack of conversation was oppressive. She glanced up from her mindless stirring.

"Yes; yes it is. Quite delicious, thank you," she replied, hoping for a courteous and equally formal and correct modulation. It wasn't Tia's forte, this censored way of speaking. She was much more apt to reply animatedly, "Rather good, thanks. But I could go for a quick fry up and picnic it in the parlour before a nice fire. What do you say, Reg? A couple butterbeers, toasty rugs, scary stories?" This, of course, much to her great aunt's dismay, and her father's disappointment. He was hoping for a grand match for her, she knew. He and Helena had married for love, not wealth or social standing, and when her mother died, Ezra Jones knew nothing of raising a little girl. Really, he only wanted what was best for her, for her not to have to work or rely upon the unstable politics of their world. Tia's dreams of magical law enforcement though respected were not encouraged by him. Simply put, Ezra wanted his little girl to be pampered and respected and want for nothing, in a way he could not provide as her merchant father of flexible means.

So for his sake and perhaps Regulus' comfort, Tia minded herself, choosing words carefully and dusting off manners brushed aside years ago.

"And yours, Mr Black?" she queried in return, watching Regulus' features at the head of the table, just to her left. Unexpectedly, his brows furrowed. Had she said something amiss?

"Quite acceptable, thank you," his articulate tenor answered.

Again silence, and Tia grew uncomfortable with Regulus' continued frown, his gaze finally pulling reluctantly away from her as he took another bite of the cooling mixture.

Right, then.

"Your house is lovely," she ventured, hoping to coax out of him some semblance of communication. "I've never been farther than the foyer, before, but I had on previous occasion glimpsed part of the gardens." *And you with your horse, the moment I fell completely smitten with you* she reflected.

She'd been naught but proper and gracious; even Great Aunt Hepple could find no fault with her chosen subject and delivery. And yet Regulus' immediate response took her aback. Intent stare growing darker, more vexed each passing moment. He seemed *angry*. For the life of her, she couldn't fathom why.

"Er, when will your parents be joining us?" she ventured further, licking her lips nervously and reaching for the goblet of watered wine. Met with his growl, Tia felt herself flush.

"Mother will be arriving day after tomorrow," his clipped answer came. "Father is undecided for the moment; business has called him away on the Continent. As for additional guests, those staying will be relegated as needed during those events we will be hosting here." By the final words, Tia questioned if she were about to be cursed. What horrendous faux pas had she inadvertently made?

Tension drew taut her neck and back muscles, a headache waiting impatiently in the wings. Hestia Jones was a rather confident sort of girl, traipsing about unusual foreign lands whilst accompanying her father to conferences and sheepish holidays his attempt to make right any shortcomings as a single father. But nothing gave nerves like sitting alone in the ancestral home of one's object of affection, and in the course of trying to maintain expected conduct, receiving instead scorn from said object of affection. What on earth had she done wrong?

An answer flashed wickedly across her mind, a reminder she'd have preferred not to receive. Could it be he was still disturbed by her exuberant ardour that unforgettable (sadly) night? Was he becoming agitated with her ramblings because he was awaiting a proper apology? Oh Circe, that had to be it. Here she was, pretending nothing of consequence had occurred between them, when it was the greatest insult to not have requested forgiveness for unmentionable actions on her part.

Oh what seven kinds of fool she was! She'd hoped that he'd not recalled that shameful wantonness on her behalf, but really! She'd been the one foxed, not him! Hot blushes fired her cool skin, and Tia looked away, attempting to compose herself. She had to speak properly and respectfully, but without appearing meek or grovelling. Great Aunt Hepple had warned such weakness would repel respect of the upper class.

Gathering her wits and courage, Tia turned to face him, back straight, chin slightly raised in an effort of courage. His expression was now black as his name.

Swallowing tightly, she began, "Mr Black, it appears I owe you an apology. Please do not allow my poor behaviour some weeks back to reflect upon my general "

"God damn it, Tia!" he roared as his fist came down hard upon the cherry table, rattling dinnerware and knocking his reposing soup spoon out with a flip. He'd shot up from his seat, murderous yet... unsure?

"I don't want to hear some bloody apology over some imagined wrong in your intellectual head. Nor do I wish to converse about my family's time-honoured traditions, lineage, dying gardens or the goddamned soup! Who the hell are you tonight, anyway? The lower class' answer to Mademoiselle Manners? You're fucking one of *them*, now!" A blink of her eyes and Tia caught only the dishes and liquids as they flew through the air. Regulus' violent sweep of his arm already pulled in, his body stalking out of the room before she could react more than a shriek and a duck.

In no more than three heartbeats, the room was silent once more, the table drenched and spotted with broken pottery, glass, meal. Only the steady drip of soup runoff onto the Turkish carpet broke the stillness.

-o-

He was angry. No. He was *furious*. Seething. And logic could not offer as to why. Why he was these dark things, why he'd lost control, why he'd reacted so violently and to what purpose. All Regulus could decipher was that the longer he'd sat there watching Jones in her concentrated primness and textbook propriety, the greater his agitation became.

It made no sense, really, he argued as he faded through the house in near blackness. She was behaving according to dictate, to Society, and as a Black he should expect nay, demand such from a guest. But the whole time she further resembled everything he was brought up to revere, everything that was Hestia Jones had begun to grow fuzzy, sway, reshape. With each syllable her mouth turned from cutting clever to malleable memsahib. Muggle courts couldn't have complained.

And therein lies the issue, doesn't it? A slight stumble in his path before he righted himself, slowed his hostile pace. Yes, indeed. Her invitation had been of purpose, but within such he had unconsciously sought out one singular respite from the whole deception game.

Hestia Jones' refreshing challenge.

She wasn't the pale of his circle. Gods, no; Jones had her own rules and opinions and felt no earthly recall from sharing such emphatically. She may curtail herself in an attempt of kindness, a sense of manners, or even shyness or frustration. But attempt to conform to a rigidity she abhorred? Oh yes, he knew of her distinct dislike and disregard of social class and its etiquette within the upper echelon. Ironically, she was also one of the first to attempt perpetual kindness, the last to give in to rudeness. But regardless of her temperament of the moment, Jones was a passionate thinker, and he had to admit the draw of something different.

But then she'd acted the timid mouse of a high-societal debutant this evening, and each insipid, mousey utterance from that provocative mouth only infuriated him more. Could she not just be herself tonight? Was it too much to bloody well ask?!

Until Friday, he was stuck practically alone with her in this suffocating mausoleum. Mother had pointed out succinctly that he was to use the private time to ensure Jones' complete adoration and loyalty. Translation: seduce her.

Mother was vicious.

Regulus had no desire to seduce Jones, nor did he believe Mother would have preferred that line of action if she thought it would lead to any real sort of relationship. After all, it was playtime. An act. But he had to be convincing in order to get her father's talents for the Dark Lord. Never would Ezra Jones offer fealty to him, but once in his grasp the apothecary could be persuaded to remain in service. It remained Regulus' duty to get him there through his mercurial daughter.

Admittedly it had been some time since Regulus' dabbling with Bertha Jorkins, his first kissing partner. Since then technique had been acquired, refined, but it had been with the intent of bestowing upon a mistress or other lady of pleasure. Not, it was becoming clear, on his duty-driven imp guest. Were he to marry a witch of his mother's choosing (or rather, *when*), he would be expected to beget an heir and a spare how he knew that philosophy well upon her. But affection or true desire of said mate was negate. He was prepared to force himself for the sake of lineage, but really, how could she expect him such sacrifice for a such a small return? Especially when he could undoubtedly accomplish just as much without the labour.

Regulus stopped. Quick glance in dim firelight revealed he'd wandered into the dustily stocked library. Kreacher was there, saying nothing but stoking the flames and producing a woollen rug and feather pillow upon the extended loveseat. Kreacher knew him, remembered his traits well, it seemed. When faced with a night of restlessness, Regulus would often stole away into the library, reading or studying by the fire, playing Wizarding chess against himself, eventually tiring to sleep before the fire. His refuge indoors, it had always been. Tonight would necessitate a bit more, and Kreacher had foreseen that as well.

"Thank you, Kreacher," he responded flatly at the sighting of aged bourbon and a single glass.

The house-elf made a non-committal sound then asked as he straightened the makeshift bed, "Would Master Regulus desire anything else of Kreacher this evening?"

Suddenly melancholy, Regulus sighed heavily, running his hand through ever-lengthening black locks. "No, I s'pose not."

"Very well. Kreacher bids Master Regulus a restful night."

Regulus missed the *pop* as the house-elf Disapperated, his mind too jumbled with conflict. Sitting wearily upon his night's comfort, he drew the amber liquid toward him, poured two fingers and tossed back the medicinal burn. Mordred himself couldn't have created a more maddening conundrum.

What the bloody hell was he going to do?

Tossing back several more shots, Regulus settled beneath the covers, hands clasped behind his head as he stared unseeingly at dancing shadows on the ceiling. Feeling the invitation of the whiskey, its warmth driving blushing cheeks and potions demands and the fall of a brother from his thoughts, Regulus lowered his eyelids receptively.

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She'd been hoping for a respite, something instructive or entertaining to clear turbulent emotions from her night. But at two in the morning, Tia had not expected a sight of pity to wash away anger and indignation.

In the dim light of a banked fire, Tia sat gingerly at the edge of the velvet settee, turned to gaze at Regulus' sleeping form. In repose, all signs of haughty spite drifted away, leaving behind only a pucker of furrowed brows, a line betwixt them still taut in some worry even sleep could not rid him.

The dark rug had fallen askew from his shoulders, revealing a bare chest unexpected. Even in poor lighting, Tia could make out a hue marked from holiday in warmer climes, a physique not comparable to his brother, but yet the beginnings of a fine form to be had inside a decade of maturing. She couldn't help but respond with pleasure at the sight, but desire was heavily tempered by pity. Gooseflesh rose on the bared skin, his troubled look that Tia wished only to spirit away.

Maternal warred with something undefined, and Tia's hands rose unbidden to secure the duvet back in place across his scarred? shoulder. Moving upward, index finger found the brow's tension and gently rubbed to loosen it. Successful at some level, glance and finger found the raven locks that had fallen haphazardly across his brow, tips to his eye. Softly, reverently, she brushed it aside, revelling in its texture, recalling with shameful joy the feel of his hair as both hands had found their way, intertwining with need.

Unable to resist curiosity, Tia's hand floated across a rough jaw to the jagged white niche at its lower bone... then to the distinctly more notable one on his left shoulder, just shy of his collar bone. Tracing lightly, Tia's forbidden enjoyment disintegrated in lieu of empathy, of protectiveness, of

Fitting the creature for which his house was represented, a hand struck in sudden and accurate motion. Tia started, but was aware before movement that she could not escape the vice grip Regulus now had on her wrist. Raising her sights, Tia's ardour cooled to a vague fear in the mirror of Regulus Black's narrowed, black intensity.

Chapter 13: Contradictions of Want & Will

Chapter 13 of 13

RBHJ: Unwavering loyalty, social propriety, hierarchy of station. Regulus Black knew his place, his purpose, his duty. What he didn't know was himself. Enter the young woman who would make him question everything. Even his own heart. :Romance, Drama:

Disclaimer: Humbly borrowing Regulus, Tia, and the HP Universe from Ms. Rowling. Think she'd be willing to lease Reg to me on a more permanent basis?

Author's Note: As always, your reviews and thoughts are very much appreciated! They're encouraging, and remind me that someone is actually reading. :-~) Please take a moment and drop a comment, eh? I really do reply.

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Chapter 13: Contradictions of Want & Will

Heartbeat held in her throat, stomach somewhere other than its domain, Tia froze in ever-increasing fear. Instinct forced her acceptance that she'd never be able to pull away, and so she remained motionless but for her laboured breathing.

Regulus' grip was solid, his large hand easily encircling her wrist. Wandless, Tia doubted she'd have used a spell at this moment regardless. It was a fine line, this instinct for defence, this thrill of foreboding. A place she'd never been before, Tia could not help but let curiosity win; why fight when you longed desperately to know what would happen next?

"Even here, you haunt me." His voice was low, husky with sleep and subdued anger. Eyes accusing beneath heavy lids, never leaving hers; his free hand reached up slowly to her neck. Swallowing hard, Tia realised only at the last moment's change of course that he wasn't going to strangle her. But the alternative was perhaps little better.

The grip at the back of her neck was strong, measuredly forcing Tia's yield to be pulled down toward him. Her steady resistance was vain at best, and just as she felt her balance giving way to him, he suddenly turned his back to the fire as he flipped Tia onto her back in a whirl. So fast; so unpredicted. Breath lost, it was a moment before she could orient herself in the failing light.

He was above her now, his weight heavy, driving her deeper into the cushions of down and velvet. Regulus' form blocked most of the frail firelight, but flecks of red-gold reflected off the high cheekbone and jaw line mere inches above her face. His eyes, however, had drifted into shadow, leaving her unnerved more than the precarious position she now lay in. She hadn't long to ponder this vision, however.

Hard and rough and vicious, his lips crushed down upon hers in a violent attack. There was no other way to describe the assault on her mouth, her senses. Tia knew damn little about intimacies between men and women, but it was evident these were not kisses of affection, longing, happiness. Desire, maybe, but even if so, it was a desire separate from the version she knew. And yet...

And yet she didn't couldn't fight him. Shock held her back in the first moments. And his powerful hands gripping either side of her face, half strung through her long black hair. Locks pulled painfully tight, even their hold was negligible compared to the flood of sensations preventing her escape. The kisses if they could be called such were hungry, angry, breathless. She could taste the bourbon whiskey on his lips, intoxicating in its intimate lingerings. Tia could feel her own bruising under the abuse, but could do no more than dig her fingers into his ribs with what little room she had from his body's pinning.

And *that* was the greatest paralyzing sensation of all.

He was solid, his weight a confusing pleasure. Somehow the rug lay half between them, exposing him here and there, one partially bare leg shoved betwixt her and the back of the settee, the other mostly covered but firmly ensconced between her knees. She could breathe that was a plus but neither her hips nor chest could be disengaged for flight, the latter flattened by his own.

Just beginning to rationalise her abrupt, current status, Tia gasped at the sudden, unexpected alteration of his attentions. Regulus' right hand no longer securing her face, it had instead found her tender flesh over floating ribs, now grasping, fingers digging, clawing. Painful, but... delicious.

Teeth raked along her jawbone, hovering for a breath at her earlobe before claiming the bared juncture of neck and shoulder. An unbidden squeak of surprise leapt from her gasping mouth. Thoroughly unholy, it was.

A hand released from intertwinement of her hair - was grasping desperately now for the hem of her pyjama top and, not finding it in satisfactorily time, sufficed with kneading her unhampered breast through the flannel. Like all else, there was no gentleness about him in this new revelation of sensation. He was frenzied, as though something more than she truly haunted him.

Oh, *Morgana, what had she done?* Genuine fright began to grow in her belly, warring with desperation for what this boy upon her promised with his unrefined soliloquy of caresses.

Awoken a sleeping giant, m'dear, her conscience quipped dryly.

Panic abruptly set in, and Tia found her voice. She was only sixteen! Yes, she was attracted desperately to him, but she wasn't ready for this. Had only vaguely ever held

the attentions of another, and had little more experience than the inebriated plies of adoration she'd thrust upon an unwilling Regulus weeks before in the deserted dungeons. Regulus was obviously greater versed in this sort of thing, but Tia wasn't, and the thought of actually

Squirming valiantly beneath him, she shoved and pushed at his solid form, a strangled cry breaking the peace of fire crackle and laboured breathing.

"Regulus," it came, mixed with pant and fear. "Regulus, you've got to stop," she added, shoving to remove his weight, wriggling beneath in an ever-growing alarm. At his persistence, Tia could feel herself bordering on panic. She couldn't do this. No, not now. She wasn't ready, and he was *scaring* her.

Words louder now, more pleading.

"Please, Regulus! Please, *stop!* Let me up," her frightened voice asked, fists now punching at his side, chest...

He didn't fight her it was more like he simply wasn't aware of her protests. He didn't seem aware of much at all, really. So intent on her, on his ministrations upon her, that when Tia managed to free a leg and used it as leverage against the side of the settee, he only switched to her right side of the neck, his body remaining stationary. Dragging herself sideways to escape, Tia shoved his chest away, squirmed, panted, flung wildly her remaining tangled leg. All in violent disarray...

Finally she fell heavily to the floor in a *thump*, alone, slipping from under him only through great effort. And she'd paid for it, fabric burns she could feel reddening in a myriad of intimate places. Regaining her feet quickly, Tia faced the fire, tugging haphazardly at her twisted clothing in order to put everything to rights.

"Regulus," she squeaked, unsteady. Distractedly she noticed she didn't cry he hadn't forced her, per se, at least but a closed throat full of repressed emotion gave her voice a weak flavour.

"Please, understand." Throat cleared, breath forcedly steady. Her body shook, her vocal chords catching. "I *do* like you loads have for a very long time, actually, but..." She bit her lip, tensing again. "But I'm not ready for that sort of thing, you know. Not *yet*," she stressed, willing him to understand. He needed to realise that when she was ready, it was him she wanted. Just the timing was off.

Or maybe she was the one off.

"Please don't be angry with me. You're not terribly... are you?" Pause. Pause. Pause... silence. "Are you?"

When he still didn't answer, she turned abruptly, afraid of the dark, brooding look she'd see, his ire further engaged than at supper. But when she whipped about, stepping aside for the firelight to cast upon him, his expression was... peaceful.

He was asleep.

Combination bewilderment and relief flashed through her. She didn't think he hated her, else he wouldn't have just collapsed into oblivion so quickly, would he have? No... surely not.

But the longer Tia stared at his utterly relaxed face, his smooth facial planes soft in the firelight as he lay on his side... She could almost believe he looked... *content*.

Gathering her wits about her, Tia silently fled the library, not bothering to pause long enough to pull the wool back across his bared chest and shoulders. She didn't trust herself. Even her sore lips chapped and surely reddened reminded her not of the power he had just taken over her, but of the pain she'd seen in his previous sleeping expression. A fierce sense of protection came out in her, and more important than need of self preservation was her need to heal him, to erase that hurt.

Anything but fleeing immediately would have been a poor idea, indeed.

-o-

Something woke him, pulling him to surface from the deep of heavy sleep. One eye peering wearily open, Regulus blearily caught a repeat of the noise, watching this time as the log broke at the snap of flame, falling disjointedly against the others. He sighed deeply. The dream had been disturbingly realistic, and he was mildly surprised to find his body languid. Tension of the day of the term had dissipated. Crediting a dream about his assignment was stretching matters a tad too far, but Regulus could admit the subject of the vision may have had a point. And for once, it hadn't been repeats of plans, duty, or concerns. That in itself had been a pleasant alteration.

Drowsily he tugged the twisted rug semi-straight over chilled shoulders, turned away from the fire, and fell instantly back to sleep. A soft smile faded in time.

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Dawn's breaking and then some found Tia Jones surprisingly well rested. After her hasty exodus from the library in the night, she'd expected furtive dreams to plague her sleep. On the contrary, Tia had slept soundlessly if not dreamlessly until half eight. Clear-headed, relaxed, energetic... It was only when she faced the mirror in her bath that crystal reminders of the evening's events slapped her back into reality.

Her lips were puffy, bruised. Whisker burns blotched her jaw, cheeks, and other less-visible delicacies of flesh in scrapes of red. She'd not thought to bring any of her salves with her. Where were Marlene's glammers when she needed them?

Requesting medicinals of Kreacher or another house-elf was ill-appealing. Then again, facing Regulus with prominent evidence of the incident was even less appetizing. She'd have to colour her request carefully so as to not draw attention to the purpose or need. Perhaps if she only asked for common ingredients...

No, that wouldn't work. Not well, at any rate. She had not the time nor circumstances to properly brew anything, and without permission for wandwork, she was honestly out of luck. Best go for a solution that was common and varied in its uses. An aloe would be a start, but she had no windburn nor extensive sun exposure for a reason...

In the end, however, the best solution turned to be a different sort of cover-up, and Tia foregoing breakfast slipped silently out of the house into the back gardens for a stroll. Recalling something of their layout, she ensured her first destination to be a covey of gargantuan prickly pear, and a proper accidental tumble into the cacti and various bushes sufficiently marred her skin of face, hands, and neck. There; she had a plausible alternative cause.

Duty done, Tia slowed her walk to a leisurely pondering throughout the rest of the garden, mostly tangles of bare limbs in the stark bleak of the winter. Hidden in the countryside of Muggle farms, she wasn't surprised at this; how unobtrusive could one be with a garden in full bloom in English December? But a beauty lay in the austere lots, edges trimmed neatly against the grey flagstone, empty fountain. It was peaceful, a distinct carbon aura to the Black family.

Outside of Sirius, Tia had never seen much in the way of genuine smiles or relaxed happiness in the folds of the Black clan. Always it seemed a layer thinly veiled lay just below the surface of their gleaming teeth, mocking the unworthy, calculating.

Tia sighed, melancholy. Honest with herself, she took the objective view and accepted the fact that she'd seen the same fake look on Regulus' face more times than not. He wasn't happy. Not really. Instead he seemed to rely on arrogance and social status as a crutch, something he fell back on as his guideline for behaviour. He didn't react to life; he played a scripted role in it.

And she was a courtier's handmaid to his crown prince.

Dashing away the stray tear from her cheek, Tia shook off the encroaching depression with a sniff. He wanted her. On some level, he really wanted her; that she believed. Perhaps he saw her as a mere distraction, slumming so to speak, or maybe it was just a physical attraction brought on by her own inept but possibly effective flirtations. But she couldn't comprehend why he continually acted as though he hated her wanted her, but hated her. It was like something out of one of Clío's novels, but Tia knew

herself not to be a strong-willed heroine. Strong-willed... yes. Heroine? Hardly.

Eye rolling and heavy sighs aside, she had but one choice: she was going to have to owl Clio.

Rouan was her best mate, wands down, but Tia knew Rouan was highly biased and extremely optimistically romantic. Her view would be that he loved her beyond words, that his reaction was that of a man angry with himself for falling so hard, and he was merely trying to distant himself from her, but finding himself unable to stay away. Yes, Rouan was great for making Tia feel better, but wasn't very helpful for finding the reality of a situation. And right now, Tia needed truth.

"Truth, but not depression," she murmured to herself, taking a cleansing, deep breath. Her gaze left her path and she brought her head up, forcing a lightness to her air. After all, she was spending the hols with Regulus, and as it currently stood, they were alone, together, with only house-elves in the portrait. She was being spared the not-quite-subtle condescension of Mrs Black, the below-notice of Mr Black, and the downright hostility of his cousins. And, well, the impropriety and seductiveness of his elder brother, though that was not particularly a disagreeable presence. Sirius did at least make one feel better.

Though, Tia considered, she'd never quite made out his meaning from Hallowe'en. For whose sake did he warn her off?

A shake of her head and Tia dismissed the recollection. She needed to enjoy the here and now, and cease worrying over trivial matters that she may or may not ever come to understand. After all, if Regulus were more like his brother, then she would be a passing fancy, and as it were, she had no security on how long that fancy may last. "Besides," she emphatically told herself, lifting her chin in defiance of her own insecurities. "You're just as worthy as the next lot of them."

"If you're speaking to the azaleas, I promise you they're not."

Tia jumped at the voice, unexpected and oddly loud in the desolate morning, and she froze in mid-stride with a breath before turning back about. His face was impassive, his demeanour as unforgiving as the winter-whipped foliage.

"If you're referring to rumours of their supposed cross-breeding, that was merely the jealous accusations of the petunias," she retorted wryly, longing to cross her arms in a protective gesture to his stoically solid stance. With effort, she affected the move into one of haughty annoyance. "They've never forgiven the azaleas for taking their spot at Sandringham House. Petty envy, really."

Tia held her breath, suddenly unsure how her quip would be met. Regulus had little tolerance these days for humour, much less if he took it to be a mock upon himself.

There was a long pause, then slowly, carefully he strode forward, blue eyes narrowed upon her, grim set to a shapely mouth. Her stomach clenched, and with great effort the tingling remembrances of last night and the triumphs of that mouth were kept at mind's bay; she had no room for such thoughts now.

With some surprise he did not stop before her, casting that arrogant measuring upon her. No; he stepped to her side, facing behind her at the shells of vine and skeletons of blooms. Peripherally Tia witnessed the long, elegant fingers caress a dead bud. Brittle ghosts of sepals crumbled at his touch, drifting on the breeze to flutter across the worn stone path. A shiver darted down her spine. But she did not turn.

"I see," he finally said, grave in his calm baritone. "So then, all claims suggesting the poppies were launching an escape plan are false accusations as well, yes?" His expression remained grim, but a flutter danced through Tia at the hint of playfulness. A moment passed before she could reply, exhaling a heavy sigh of relief in a mingle of her words.

"Case of mistaken identity, actually," she explained, turning slightly more to view him better. "Was the Wandering Jew, taking a walkabout?"

Had she just seen a twitch of his lips? It was brief, but she swore a smile lay beneath the stern exterior.

"And the row between the geraniums and the daisies?"

"Broken up immediately after the Black-Eyed Susans were inadvertently hit."

"And the nocturnal prowling about?"

"The lupins, but they were too ravenous to stay out late."

"And any immoral behaviour?" This time he turned his head to look at her, fingers toying with the crumbings of browned bulb remnants. A single brow was raised in condescending question, but she was sure now that he held back a laugh with great control.

A bubble of excitement rose in her before she could tamp it down, and Tia forced herself again, this time to remain straight faced rather than giving in to this new sensation.

"Curtailed by the primroses straight away, though the Lady's Mantle tried a cover-up."

"Except for the catting about by the Leopard's Bane, eh?"

"Precisely," she confirmed matter-of-factly. A silence held between them, strained, until neither could restrain themselves any longer. Tia burst out with a laugh, Regulus sputtering a chuckle right behind. They laughed easily for nearly a full minute, and in that minute Tia saw a transformation that left her breathless.

White teeth gleaming against sun-kissed skin, peeking out from a genuine smile on a relaxed face. Azure irises were merely glimpses through the eyes narrowed in crinkles of amusement. He wasn't looking at her at anything, really just giving in anonymous humour in the moment. This was a Regulus she could easily fall in love with...

"Come along," he suddenly said lightly through that up-curved mouth. Still buoyant, he took her arm in gentle pull and turned along the path to walk, chatting as they went.

"I'll show you those deviant blooms that survive the dark of winter." Entering a lattice and vine-laced greenhouse, Tia realised it had been magicked in size, the outside a small shambles, the interior a vast garden in bloom in its own right. The warmth was welcome, the scent intoxicating.

"Freesia."

"Pardon?" she asked, startled from her closed-eye admirations.

"The springy aroma it's Freesia. Tarkin tends the hothouse whilst we're in town. I admit it's one of my few joys over the holidays when we take up residence here. If you'll look over here, there's a beautiful miniature cherry blossom tree..."

-o-

He couldn't name the exact reasoning, but he could pinpoint the second when the façade fell with a muted thud. She was clever, quick to subtle laughter, and in a singular moment he saw that knowing-grin that always had left him paranoid as to what she knew about him that he didn't. But this time, this time he knew it wasn't him, but her.

The corner of her mouth had quirked at the end of her smart jibs, and it was then Regulus could no longer hold the amusement she'd stirred in him. And something inside released, refusing to concern over propriety of the moment. In truth, it was only them and the house-elves here, no one else. No one to dissect his every move, to debrief him after each foray into 'the plan,' as it were. Even the portraits had left on holiday to warmer climes. And for this time, he need not answer to anyone even himself. The overwhelming urge to let go formality and laugh truly laugh and forget himself had done just that: overwhelmed him.

At her quirk, he'd chuckled. That had led to loss of composure, the break in the dam. It was a release of a different sort than his dream last night, but just as potent. And Merlin knew, he needed this detachment from his world. It couldn't hurt to allow it, he reasoned. To be someone else. At least until the others arrived.

This he repeated to himself as his hand slipped from her arm and into her own chilled palm, warming it with fingers drumming a pulse of unfamiliar euphoria.

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...and then he held my hand as we walked around the grounds. He told me the history of additions and memories of his childhood with Sirius. He's never talked much about his brother, but what little he said today was said without the usual bile I hear between them.

Oh, Clio what do I do? He was so happy, so un-posh. I've no idea what's come over him, whether it be today or last evening that was strangest. I'm out of my element in more ways than one; you're so much better at this socialite thing, what with your upbringing and all. And you know my record with boys. Eek!

Must hurry on, now, if I want to get this posted to you today. The house-owl Sebastian is looking rather put out at the delay, and I'm to meet Reg in a few minutes for supper. Hope your holidays are going well, and the Americans haven't driven you batty yet. I've sent your Christmas pressie by general owl, but can't attest as to the estimated arrival there in New York. Hope you like it.

Miss you terribly,

Tia

Post Script by the by, I've saved enough from sales this term that I'm going to commission a small piece from you. Your design, as I've faith in your taste. I'm thinking a necklace or pendant, as a ring may be lost each time I'd have to take it off for medicinal brewing, but I'll leave it to your good judgment.

Hurriedly sanding and folding the letter, Tia sealed and addressed it, gave it to the menacing looking bird in the window, then closed the leaded glass against the cold as he took flight. Turning to the looking glass, she ran a brush through her long, inky locks and scrubbed dryly at her face, wishing her pink blushes did not show so readily on pale cheeks. Supper was a matter she was going in blind, unsure the reception. Would it be last night's dinner, late last night's rebellious passion, or this afternoon's boyish charm?

Hurrying down to the dining room, Tia was surprised to find it empty and dark, only the barest of fires in the grate to keep the winter at bay. Confused, she wandered into the kitchen, calling for Regulus.

"Evening, Mistress," a grated voice greeted from behind. Tia whirled to find the elderly house-elf who'd hauled her luggage was it just yesterday? from the carriage. Unlike Kreacher, he seemed pleasant enough with her, though more a matter of uninterested civility than friendly.

"Trivan is to tell Her Lady Guest to follow Trivan. Master Regulus has altered supper plans." Succinct in his message, Trivan endeavoured a path, assuming Tia's compliance, for he never looked back.

Through a few twists and turns, Tia soon recognised their direction and, though puzzled, felt a giddiness as they entered the now-darkened greenhouse. More circling through arbours and a water garden, and a dim glow ahead soon appeared. Rounding a rock-shelf of tropicals, into view came a sight her romantic heart swelled with.

On a carpet of springy moss, beneath the potted miniature and a full-sized cherry blossom, and surrounded by juniper, ivy, freesia, palms... Tia's breath drew in sharply, and she barely acknowledged the departure of Trivan. Wrought iron candlesticks of varying sizes displayed beeswax fuel flames, seemingly haphazard in their placement. Scents assailed her, the only sounds those of the distant waterfall and reflecting pool. Blackwatch plaid lay across the moss in invitation, emerald pillows beckoned.

Tia seated herself on one of the overstuffed velvets, eyes travelling over the elaborate display of chilled wine, succulent dishes, beautiful layout of tableware. A visual feast, to be sure, and perhaps an answer to her trepidation of what direction Regulus would go this evening. The only thing missing

"Shall we begin with drinks?"

-o-

The slack jawed reaction had not been wholly unexpected. Her eyes shot wide with his words as he stepped from the shadowed forest to her right. She started, her breath quickened for a moment. A blush tarnished her pale skin. He was not surprised at any of this. However, Regulus found an unexpected sense of pleasure nonetheless, and his mouth pulled to one side, hinting at a rare smile.

Rare. His smiles. Always had been since the days after Sirius first began Hogwarts and created a new family for himself. New best friend... new brother.

Regulus shook off the dormant recollections, concentrating instead on the girl and the stage before him. It was excellent work the props, the scene judging by her expression. The picnic theme was Lystra Davies' creation, actually, dug from memory of some languid remarks Lystra had made late one evening in the courtyard. She'd been going on about romantic situations she'd simply adore for Saint Valentine's Day. Apparently she'd thought Regulus would be the one to demonstrate these scenarios for her.

She was wrong.

But the detailed act had stayed buried in his head, and what perfect timing than the need he had now in which to put it to good use? All he had to do at this point was fall back on his training since childhood. Dinners, house parties, soirées... he'd been bred for this.

"Y-yes, that would be... lovely. Thank you." Jones' response was delayed, hesitant. She still wasn't sure what he was on about. Then again, her confusion could work to his benefit.

He poured the vintage wine just as Father had done each Black Michaelmas Feast. Gracefully lowering himself to his own pillow, he offered her hors d'oeuvres in the style of Abaraxas Malfoy's house-elves. Barnabas Cuffe's editorial powers had been committed to memory, and Regulus gifted Jones with a medley of world and local events (minus the Dark Lord) as opening chatter. Offered her a poetic and romantic toast penned by the Druid goddess Cliodna. Cast the Devlin Whitehorn gaze upon her as though she were the Nimbus 1000.

And she gave herself away. Shallow breaths, intent focus, dilated pupils... she bought the performance fully. His effort was working. He would prove them all wrong; Regulus Black was worthy of the Dark Lord's trust. Even now he had complete control over the situation, had a plan for each and every detail to lure her further in, gain her trust. He Regulus A Black was a seducer to be reckoned with, a talent she could not ignore. She could not would not resist him.

He stared across the blanket at her, his wine glass tipped and chin down so that her view was one of intent desire. It was a trademark of de Montmorency. Weaken her knees, he commanded himself. Fascinate her; dominate her.

Timidly she lowered her own glass and eyes, licked her lips clear of residual Sangria, and fought to meet his gaze. Jaw worked to form vocalization, and missed several times. *Precisely*, he thought with growing confidence. He had her to rights; all previous, traitorous imaginings of his inferiority and fear flew from his mind in the light of Jones' defeat. Yes. Yes...

Finally her mouth worked, and the words flowed unsure, carefully.

"Regulus... if you could have any three wishes granted realistic or fantastic and no one would ever know, what would they be?"

His slack jawed reaction had been wholly unexpected.

