

The Lost Phoenix of the Trinovantes Queen

by wittywords

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chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 13

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Ansel Inwood had been found in Knockturn Alley on Monday, close to 3:00pm. Marcia Selwyn, the owner of the pesticides shop, was the one who discovered the body when she went to take out the waste to the small yard located behind the shop. The wizard's heart was pierced by a long, iron stiletto, with the initials DE scraped on the handle. The yard was surrounded by impenetrable walls, with the only entrance through the shop. Mrs Selwyn had not seen anyone enter. She claimed to have maintained her post behind the counter, a location from which the door is visible, since the early morning. How the body got hidden in the yard was unknown. An even greater mystery was the choice of a Muggle weapon and daring of the killer. Mr Inwood was a skilled duellist and Head of the Curse Breaking Department. He was 54 years old, with 36 years of experience.

The folder, where the case outline lay neatly arranged, was placed on Lin's desk at 10:00 in the morning. The meeting began one hour later. Four senior Aurors were present, including Kingsley Shacklebolt. He nodded to her and Lin, taking a seat in the corner, understood that he wanted her to be his representative working on this case. Lin deduced this murder had more significant consequences than the taking of life. This was no accident or a jealous boyfriend murdering his rival; more dangerous murders occurred due to rhetoric or an obsessive idea, whether within a group or personal, in which case more victims were expected. Shacklebolt would not have arrived otherwise.

One year after the defeat of Voldemort, the duration of the top post in the Ministry was coming to an end. Pius Thicknesse, probably with relief, was counting the days until he could pass the post to a new candidate. Shacklebolt was the primary candidate to become the Minister of Magic. His progressive career in politics, however, did not distract him from his current post in the Magical Law Enforcement. He was the top authority there and soon to be, Lin believed, in the country. The others in the room also realized that, but they were consumed by the thought of who would take Shacklebolt's place when he became the Minister. Some of them had the senior position to recommend themselves for the opening post. This is why the discussion was heated, with everyone attempting to outshine each other in the method of deduction. Lin listened, agreeing with some ideas and dismissing other suggestions.

"I do not trust this woman," Leon McLee energetically sliced the air with his hand. "I am not content taking her word for it that she knows nothing about how the body got into her yard. We did not even use Veritaserum."

Lin filed that idea as less probable in one of the compartments in her mind. Most likely the shop keeper was innocent, however, if the Aurors had reasons to suspect her, then dragging her away for an interrogation would have been fruitless. At most, Lin would have set a tail to track Mrs Selwyn for a few days, so the witch might unknowingly

lead them to the more promising suspects, providing there were any.

The others might have thought so too because McLee was interrupted by a wizard in a grey suit, "Certainly, she is worth a second check, but I see no motive. If anything, the news would damage her business. Motive is the most important lead to us."

McLee tried to argue that maybe she had some illegal ingredients in her shop, but he was interrupted by the new Head of the Curse Breaking Department, who was afraid the grey wizard would take all the credit, "We suspect a planned murder, rather than a decision made on the spot. Upon surgery, a small quantity of the Eqlse was discovered in Ansel's blood. He was influenced before he was stabbed."

"That is correct," the grey Auror added. "This substance works to relax the nervous system, but it is available only in very limited amounts, and anyone using the ingredient must sign a special permission form at the specialized Ministry department." Seeing that he had everyone's attention, he unhurriedly produced a document from his own folder, as grey as the owner. Lin decided that he had had a much longer preparation period than she had had and his conclusions were the result of several hours of thought. "This is a list of all apothecaries and their owners in London. They are most likely to possess this substance."

Lin continued to sit still as the other occupants of the room moved to see the document with a primary question, "Any suspects?"

The wizard looked pleased by the effect. "Indeed, Severus Snape also operates in London. Currently, he runs a private business, he has little love for Aurors, the handle of the stiletto has the initials DE, he has dealt with Muggles before and he is a first class duellist with strength and reflexes to be a formidable opponent even for an Auror."

The announcement had a much deeper impression on others than it had on Lin. "Then we must arrest him!" McLee came to life at once. "I can select the best of my Hit Team. They are real lions in a fight."

Lin thought this was too convenient to be true, besides, spies who left knives with their initials at the scene of the crime did not live long, although, the idea about apothecaries in general was the right one. She looked up at the clock. Both hands were pointing at 12:00. She was impatient to begin her own investigation, and more truthfully she wanted to leave when it became apparent that the present wizards were mixing the pursuit of their own goals with the murder investigation.

Finally, Shacklebolt, who did not take part in the conversation, stood up. His movement caused the room to fall silent. "We will split the responsibilities and then share what we know. We have a few leads so far," he summed up. He pronounced every word clearly. "Mr McLee, you will set a tail on Mrs Selwyn and make an investigation of the neighbourhood. I want ideas on how the body got to her shop."

McLee stretched out like a soldier. "Yes, sir!" he barked.

Shacklebolt continued, seemingly in a hurry. He must have been as annoyed as Lin was, or maybe he simply had a meeting at the Ministry. "Mr Colby, I want you to study closely what projects Mr Inwood had undertaken lately; this includes both personal and professional sphere. We need to know everyone who benefited from his death."

The grey wizard nodded. Lin noticed that his folder disappeared in the inner pocket of his suit. He jealously glanced at the tall Auror beside him.

"Mr Ardall, arrange the investigation of the local apothecaries, subtly, I must ask. While you are doing so, check for any possible magic discordance. I assume the stiletto is already being checked for curses." Seeing Ardall's nod, he unexpectedly added, "However, you will not disturb Mr Snape. My own representative will speak to him. Lin, this will be you."

Three pairs of unfriendly eyes turned to her, half in alarm, half in surprise, since the Aurors have forgotten about her presence. Especially hostile was the grey wizard. He considered his theory the most probable one and thought it fair to be the one to investigate it. He even rose on his tiptoes to look at Lin, but he did not dare to argue with Shacklebolt.

Not intimidated, Lin rose from her seat. "When do we begin the investigation?" These were the only words she pronounced since the start of the meeting.

Shacklebolt understood that she was asking permission to leave. "Right now," he said.

chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 13

Lin's background is introduced.

Contrary to her colleagues, who rushed away, each trying to be the first to enter the elevator, Lin did not hurry to speak with Mr Snape. She knew who he was, although she had not taken any part in his trial. The Daily Prophet had informed the public fully, so only an adventurer coming home from a two-year Arctic expedition might have been unaware. Additionally, Lin did not want this specific assignment. She would have begun the investigation by tracking Inwood's files. That was precisely why Shacklebolt had ordered her to check the least probable lead, since dismissing even vague suspicions was not professional. If there was nothing incriminating, Lin would document the case and let it rest on the shelf, thus the investigation would focus elsewhere.

Lin decided that she would ponder the newly received information and compile a list of questions during her lunch. Conveniently, her friend Jenni usually had her lunch around twelve. Lin stopped by her office to get her jacket and then went two floors up to the archives and correspondence department.

Jenni's door was wide open. Nearly her entire office was visible from the corridor. Lin drew attention to herself with a moderately loud greeting.

"Hi, Lin," Jenni greeted her. The concentrated wrinkle at the corner of her mouth disappeared, replaced by a smile. "Are we going out to the café, or you are expecting a letter and about to leave?" she asked, noticing the jacket.

"The former," Lin answered.

"Ah, good, just give me a minute to finish this letter." The wrinkle appeared again.

Lin read the letter over Jenni's shoulder. It was a request, addressed to the Artefacts department, to loan the updated equipment to another department in London, except at an earlier date. Jenni was unsure about the tone of the final request, which was essentially a favour, but it was urgent.

"Make it a command," Lin suggested. "The head of that department is highly indecisive. He will hesitate past all due lines if you give him a chance."

Gladly, Jenni followed the advice. The letter took the shape of a paper airplane and flew out the door. Jenni grabbed her own coat with a sparkling-white scarf, and both

witches followed in the wake of the paper messenger.

"Wait a moment, please!"

Lin put her foot in the closing elevator door and instantly regretted it. A handsome wizard in a brilliant blue cloak and a matching hat jumped nimbly into the elevator. The door closed and they went up.

"Good afternoon, beautiful witches, you look absolutely lovely today," he greeted, adjusting the cloak folds on his broad shoulders.

"The usual," Lin inserted dryly.

Jenni, who accepted the invasion a lot more favourably, chimed in, "Oh, don't be so strict, Lin, and allow the handsome wizard to pay us a compliment."

Lin noticed that Jenni had a habit of smiling at almost anyone.

"You are most kind, Jenni," he added quickly, finding an opening for conversation. "Yet, we all are entitled to our opinions. Dear Lin is a witch of action and thus prefers actions to words. Perhaps, I can redeem myself and offer to be your escort. Surely, the two young witches are in need of someone to look after them."

"Not you," Lin cut in and kicked Jenni's foot, just in case the witch had any inclination to accept the offer on behalf of her friend. To Jenni, who has been happily married since she was twenty, being single at thirty-two was clearly a crime against nature, and she kept attempting to find a match for Lin.

The elevator stopped and the door slid open.

"Thank you, Mr Etchingham." Jenni tried to say more, but she was interrupted.

"This is your stop," Lin added unhelpfully.

Without losing his smile, the wizard retreated.

"Ouch, Snow, you could have been kinder," Jenni exclaimed, perturbed. "I think he likes you."

"Just like he does Amanda from the Third Office and Vera from the Muggle Affairs Office and..." They reached the ground floor and followed down the corridor, which led outside.

"All right, you made your point. But, if you are nicer to him, better candidates might notice that you are interested in a relationship in general."

"Or think I am his girl, as he will no doubt tell everyone, thus scaring them all away. If I ever become interested in bragging peacocks, you will be the first to know."

"In any case, you need to give them a sign."

The witches stepped out onto a Muggle street. It was located in a business area. Moderately tall office buildings were neatly arranged along the narrow street. Various shops, mostly snack oriented, were located along the first floors. The street sparkled with Christmas decorations.

"I have not seen anyone yet to whom I would want to give a sign," Lin mentioned and rapidly went ahead.

Jenni opened her mouth to argue, but caught a cold blast of wind and coughed. She wrapped the scarf tighter around her neck and ran, slipping occasionally, to catch up with Lin's fast strides. "Hey, wait up! All right, I will not talk about Etchingham again, but I can't help picture the right pair for you. He should be extremely serious and eloquent, kind and romantic, and able to read love sonnets in a clear, ringing voice. He would have long, blond curls and a silver cloak with stars."

Lin, without looking back, knew that there were small, impish lights twinkling in Jenni's eyes. She was getting even with her for that kick.

"And he would be riding a white Hippogryph," Lin inserted, matching Jenni's dreamy tone.

"I was going to say a white dragon," Jenni finally caught up to Lin, "to melt your heart, the heart of a Snow Queen."

They both laughed. Lin pulled the door of a small café, fighting the wind and let Jenni slide in first. They have entered a neat, cozy place with six tables and a counter along the wall. This was not the first time they came here. Lin hung her jacket on a chair at a table by the window and further from the counter. Jenni was piling her items onto a free chair. She glanced sceptically at Lin's thin jacket.

"How can you wear that when it's freezing?"

"Will power and I wouldn't be able to chase after criminals in your attire."

"Bah, Lin!" Jenni launched into a passionate tirade, clearly sceptical of the practicality of Lin's philosophy, only briefly interrupted by their order.

Lin got a grilled egg croissant sandwich and a cup of espresso. She sipped the hot liquid with pleasure. The fact that Jenni used the name meant she was no longer exasperated. Lin's nickname, Snow, she used in annoyance, a habit Jenni never noticed. Lin received it due to her appearance. She had bright blue eyes and a very light shade of hair, similar to color of snow. Jenni was excited to learn that Lin's last name was also appropriate. Sneg, in Russian, meant snow, and Snedjnaya was an adjective of snow, with ya indicating a female gender. In English translation it read as, she-snowy. Lin accepted the nickname as inevitable, but inwardly she did not entirely agree with it.

Lin believed that every person had an aura surrounding them. The color of the aura underlined personality traits. Lin associated snow with a white color, which represented friendliness, niceness, but also indecisiveness and self-doubt. In other words, this was not Lin at all. Lin's aura was deep purple. It identified her as proud, mistrustful and also determined, with a streak of perfectionism which manifested positively, to be oriented to achieve her needs. Lin was nearly the opposite of Jenni's emerald green. The witch was vibrant, life loving and wore her heart on her sleeve. These kinds of friends Lin used to have when she was younger and her aura, which changed over the years, used to be burgundy. Burgundy was the color of intellectual curiosity, openness to new experience and dedicated passion to personal interests. This color gradually began to change to purple when at the age of ten Lin's mother received a contract offer in America, which promised her nearly triple of her regular pay. Anastasia accepted the offer and took Lin with her.

The experience in American school was not a good one. At the age of ten, kids were developing their personality, separate from their parents, but they were heavily relying on peer opinion. Anything that oddly stuck out of the mainstream was treated with ridicule, such as the girl who temporarily did not speak the language. Language learning was a process which entailed first being able to understand the conversation and only afterwards being able to form your own sentences. The kids, safely assuming that Lin did not understand because she did not speak, said unflattering things about her when she was right beside them. This is when Lin learned that people have multiple layers and multiple masks. Depending on the situation, they could alter behaviour, but underneath there were always key traits that stuck to them no matter what, some traits clearly visible and other traits that came out in unguarded moments. Lin began to learn how to see past the surface of masks to the core of those key traits, even when people were guarded. More hurtful than petty insults of her peers was the feeling of defencelessness, when she could not answer back. At first, Lin was angry and then became determined to eliminate the possibilities of becoming so vulnerable ever again. In the following years, she solidly learned not just Russian and English but also French and Japanese, and actively practiced them. At the age of eleven, Lin received two letters, one to English and the other to a Russian school of wizardry. Her mother's contract came to an end, and her father was calling them back to Russia.

Lin chose to go back with her mother. She went to a new school already cautious, studied not perfectly yet solidly and then signed up into Russian militia, the magic investigation department. There, she was disappointed by a wide scale corruption and bribery. She might have left the profession all together, if it were not for a long term

assignment to England where she met Kingsley Shacklebolt. He offered her a place at the ministry, and Lin stayed in England. The burgundy had disappeared, replaced by dark purple. She thought it was gone, but friendship with Jenni reminded her of a distant echo.

Jenni finished her story and lapsed into silence. Lin's coffee cup was empty. It was time to go and speak with Mr Snape.

chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 13

Meeting the 'suspect'.

The records on Snape, Severus, currently 39 years old, were highly detailed. His teenage years were intertwined with his later spy work. At the end of the war, when he was released from the hospital, he was charged with multiple offences, all of which were dropped. Primary charge, the murder of Albus Dumbledore, was ruled to be a suicide, with the accused being the weapon of choice. Suicide was a category not limited to a scenario where a depressed human jumped out the window. More so, if a child ran out onto the road right in front of a car and if an adult jumped in to push the child out of the way, resulting in the death of an adult, it was also considered a suicide, even if he had no intention of dying. In Snape's case it was clear that Dumbledore wanted to die, the accused did not wish to commit the act, and the great influence of the diseased wizard over the accused was proven. The Aurors kept an eye on the former Death Eater although Mr Snape's name was cleared of charges. He completely abandoned the teaching and made a living by running a private potions business. The copy of the license to run the shop was documented.

Lin considered these facts as she sliced through the crowd at Diagon Alley. The shop of the potions master was located at the end of the alley, where it crossed with another street. The crowd thinned rapidly as the signs, which attracted the customers, appeared less frequently in the glass windows. The last building was the most laconic. It had a dark brown door and heavy curtains. The open sign and the name of the place were set in the left window. The building number was the one Lin was looking for. How to speak with the potions master, who was recorded to have most uncooperative personality, Lin was going to decide when she saw him.

There was no doorbell. She knocked. No sound came where her knuckles collided with the wood. No prank calls to this door, Lin decided and tried the handle. The handle vanished under her touch. Lin cast a detection spell. The building was surrounded by a web of medium security wards. However, Lin knew that the owner was at work, meaning inside. Thus, she had absolutely no intention of leaving or postponing her visit to try and catch him at his home later. Lin considered her options. His fireplace was most likely disabled. She could blast down the door, which someone even with a sunny personality would not like. She could dismantle the wards, but she was no thief to try and sneak in. Since she could not get in, her Patronus would have to. A small, shimmering fox appeared from the tip of her wand. He circled Lin's feet and then hopped through the door. Lin could feel an invisible, silver thread connecting them. If anyone was inside, he would find out. The fox came back, pressed his nose into Lin's hair and melted away. No one came immediately. Lin decided that this was not an apothecary where everyone is encouraged to come in to buy a regular potion from flu. Mr Snape worked with a concrete group of customers, who made orders by owl. They would come to pick up the orders at this building, during the scheduled hours. Therefore, pretending to be a random customer to strike up a conversation to find out everything without confessing to being an Auror was impossible.

Standing outside in the middle of December was not a gratifying experience. After fifteen minutes even Lin began to feel minor pricks of cold. Certainly, she had patience, but she was not going to tolerate rudeness. She selected the ward responsible for the sound alarm and nudged it crudely without breaking it. Within seconds, the door opened.

According to the description, this was undoubtedly Mr Snape. As Lin was too close to the door, he appeared up close, towering above her. Lin had the urge to step back, this is why she stayed where she was and lifted her chin to look up at him. The wizard observed her with a completely blank face. Lin noticed stained fingers, so it was also a laboratory, and black, perfectly ironed robe, thrown over his work clothes. He must have been working on a potion. Too bad, but Lin's time was also valuable. She was not on a picnic either.

"Magical Law Enforcement, Investigation Department," Lin said. She decided direct approach was the best.

The wizard's lips twisted into a snarl, but he said nothing.

"I have questions, Mr Snape. May I come in?" He did not have to take her word for it that she truly represented the law. Lin pulled out of her pocket a brown case with her Auror identification. Surely, he did not think she was going to speak with him standing outside where everyone could overhear their conversation. He looked at her hand like it was something slimy, but stepped aside, opening the door wider. Lin accepted it as a silent invitation and went in.

"Shacklebolt's," the wizard summed up his opinion of her.

The combination of his voice and the door clicking shut gave Lin a feeling that someone brushed an index finger along her spine. She did not like it, and she certainly was not going to play Doctor Watson, from the old Muggle stories, although she wondered what made him think so.

"Please describe, hour by hour, what you were doing yesterday between 10:00am and 3:00pm." Lin went straight to the point, deciding there was no way she could ease him into conversation.

"Between 10:00 and 10:20am, Mr Clement was here to pick up his order; until eleven, I was in a bar located down this street; until three in the afternoon, I was in the company of Laurence Wartsmith and his secretary, negotiating an important contract. Does this satisfy you, foreign Auror?"

"Snedjnaya," Lin said, not about to dwell on her neglect of giving away her name. It was written on her card as well, and he could have read it.

Lin hired a pronunciation specialist in the same month as when she decided to stay in England. Due to her studies, her accent was hardly noticeable, and majority of the people did not detect it at all. Majority of English speakers also had great trouble pronouncing her name. This is why she usually introduced herself as Auror Snow, but she wanted to see this wizard fumble, if only for a moment.

He did not. "Auror Snedjnaya," he pronounced the word smoothly, "I am positive these wizards will guarantee that they have seen me; although, you will have to accept my word that I do not have a habit of leaving my name engraved in blood beside newly killed Aurors."

Damn the Daily Prophet. The wizard was baiting her again. The observation matched her earlier scepticism, rather ironically, but Lin did not smile, even if she had to give his logic some credit. Asking him which signs he does leave seemed petty. There was no need to insult his intelligence. "Bloody letters never made my search any less thorough or easier," Lin replied neutrally, not giving him a clue that he had guessed the reason for her arrival correctly. "I assume you have recorded both visits in your books." Judging by the perfect state of his robes, his records would be kept well organized.

"They are in the visitor's room," his reply came reluctantly with realization that she will invade his lab further. He gestured for her to go ahead, but Lin was not about to turn her back on him. The potions master went ahead. Lin cast a cleaning charm on her boots and followed.

"When was the last time you have met Kingsley Shacklebolt, and what other Aurors have you contacted recently?"

"I do not socialize with any Aurors." Mr Snape's expression might have been giving away nothing, but Lin noticed how his voice contained a spectrum of intonations which poured specific emotions and gave life to his every word. According to it, he was annoyed and had rather low opinion of magical law enforcers, but was uncertain what to make of Lin yet, just as she was uncertain yet about him. "As for Mr Shacklebolt, I have worked with him in the Order. He advocated patience and politeness when invading private property."

He was referring to the Order of the Phoenix and her way of contacting him, Lin realized, but could not tell whether he was telling her that she had the patience or the opposite. Once again, she was not going to confirm or deny that he understood correctly the reasoning on which her questions were based. "Do you have a complete list of the ingredients which are stored in your laboratory?" she asked to throw him off track. The Daily Prophet knew nothing about the Eglese.

"Are there any questions I am allowed to ask which by law you are required to answer?"

"Yes. You will find the list in volume five of The Magical Law, Article 173. Also, you have the right to remain silent, but I encourage you to answer my questions."

Dead silence met her words. They stopped in a room, the center of which was dominated by a large table with an armchair on one side and three chairs along the opposite wall. Lin folded her arms and studied Snape again. He was looking at her with an identical posture. She noticed that his lips were no longer curled in a snarl. They formed a firm, straight line, making her aware that besides being a suspect, this was also a male of similar age, social status and even temperament as her. The color of his aura was similar to Lin's. She saw the same mistrust, practicality and unwillingness to tolerate foolishness.

These thoughts were unwanted, unprofessional and irrelevant, and Lin blamed them entirely on Jenni. Lin pushed them away. "Do you want me to find the files I need, or would you prefer to find them yourself?"

"And if I choose neither?"

"I will leave."

"And the Ministry will send someone here who will break down my door."

There it was again; the smile tried to creep to the corners of her mouth. Lin frowned. There was little humour in their conversation, in fact, none at all.

Snape brushed past her in a quiet rustle of robes. Within five minutes Lin had the necessary information. Although there was no outward hostility and the potions master was being agreeable, there was something in the atmosphere that made Lin's senses prickly, just as she would feel before a dangerous Auror operation. "Thank you, Mr Snape." Lin was not going to delay her stay. If she was still listening closely, she would have heard a new intonation entering his voice, as if it was contradicting their mutual desire to be in the company of each other no more than necessary.

"36 Prime Lane, Witchford."

Lin realized that what she had initially was the record of Mr Wartsmith's business address, in the warehouse section of London. Witchford was a different place where he lived. A small voice told Lin to stop, look at the potions master again and thank him. "Good day, Mr Snape," Lin said.

He did not answer.

Once she was outside, Lin realized that she had turned her back on him after all.

chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 13

Lin gets an important document from Arvel.

December had the shortest days of the year, Lin thought. It was not five in the afternoon yet, but the street lamps already enveloped the roads in their light. Lin was both apprehensive and mystified when objects became lost in the darkness, or changed their appearance, seeming to be what they were not. It was her job to reveal them to be what they were, sometimes beautiful, but more often ugly. The snow crunched under her feet. It sparkled in the colourful lights of Christmas decorations. She was returning to the Ministry having visited everyone Mr Snape had mentioned and concluded that he had an alibi. The request of her boss was fulfilled, and she could carry on with her investigation the way she wanted.

She turned into a dim alley, barely noticeable from the street that had a dead end. Lin walked right through the wall without a pause. She had used this exit earlier with Jenni. The profile of Ansel Inwood interested her a lot more than that of Severus Snape. Her suspicion that getting Inwood's file would be considered classified information, due to his rank, was correct. Unfortunately, she had to speak with the new head of the curse breaking department to get it. He should have given a copy to her earlier. Did he really expect to slow down her investigation? Lin hurried to get to his office before five, before all the departments began closing by the standard official Ministry working day although a few would stay working overtime. Lin was not going to ask for the file as if it was a privilege, it was her right. She was aware that the higher stations could give her official and meaningless abracadabra for excuses why the files were not ready. If getting it straight away did not work, Lin had an item to trade. Ardal suspected the potions master, and he was interested in her investigation of this day.

Lin received the clearance to enter the floor and proceed to the head office. A secretary was there managing the correspondence. "What can I do for you?" the wizard asked, looking alert when Lin entered. His desk was beside the door that led to Ardal's office. A loyal type, weakness for authority, dull but he imagines himself to be important, Lin decided.

"I am Auror Snow. Mr Ardal should have a folder for me, Mr Inwood's case."

The secretary pushed his large glasses up his nose and searched his records. "I am sorry, but Mr Ardal left an order to prepare the documentation for you tomorrow."

"Then he made a mistake." Before the secretary became stubborn and blocked her way, Lin swiftly walked right past him through the next door.

"Madam, you cannot go in there!" He tried to follow and grab her hand, but Lin was already greeting the Auror behind the door.

If Ardal was surprised, he did not show it. "Auror Snow, what can I do for you?" he asked, dismissing the secretary.

"I have a report about my meeting with Mr Snape. Since we work on the same case, I decided to file it today."

Ardall nodded, eyeing her like he was trying to decide where the item he was interested in was. Lin on purpose left the documents hidden in her pocket. "Your quick work is admirable," he agreed, discovering nothing. "I am surprised how fast you found him. Mr Snape is a highly elusive subject. Last time our agent needed three days to contact him, although Mr Snape was not purposely hiding from us. Not to mention another week to make sense of his testimony. I absolutely despise working with the subjects who answer like they are under Veritaserum: very precisely, leaving all the important details out, but without lying. Don't you hate having only part of the information?" He alluded to the folder she had mentioned but not handed over.

"Mr Snape wasted none of my time," Lin hinted as well. The knowledge that the potions master had cooperated so well with her deeply satisfied her. It proved that her methods were better than those on Ardall's team. "Speaking of time, I'm about to head home. I would like to take Inwood's file with me. I would like to make the trade quickly, if you don't mind." If he told her that he did not have it, she would pretend to have forgotten Snape's file in her office.

Ardall budged first. "I wish I could do the same," he said far too mildly to be genuine. "My wife is preparing old country soup today, and I will be staying here another hour."

She thought he only shared this information with her so she might pass it on to Shacklebolt. Lin, however, was not planning to support Ardall when he tried to show off what a diligent worker he was. She did not offer her empathy while they exchanged the folders. Lin was glad to be satisfied with her lot in life which had mostly flexible work hours. She could leave ten minutes early, before all the office doors opened with the witches and wizards filling the corridors and elevators in a hurry to get home. There was no line for the Floo network either. Lin threw a handful of powder and vanished in the green flames.

Knowing how many break-ins had occurred in recent years at the Ministry, she had no intention of connecting it to her home. Instead, she chose a pub two blocks away. She lived in a townhouse, in a Muggle part of the city. She had no car, but her neighbours had seen her walking during business days and assumed that she worked nearby. They were not curious or overly friendly. Lin made sure it was so before she rented the place. It was a small home, set in a row of terrace houses. Inside there was a corridor with a bathroom to the left, past it, a living room and then a kitchen. Two rooms were upstairs, her bedroom and her office. The place was clean, but it looked like it was hardly lived in, which was fairly true.

Lin tapped the heater, and it began to rumble after nearly two days of inactivity. It was Tuesday, which meant the soup she cooked on Sunday was finished.

Lin set the potatoes to peel themselves and placed a piece of chicken into the frying pan, after adding a few basic spices to it.

She studied the files, meanwhile the food hissed quietly in the pan. The last six months of Inwood's service was a basic routine, even awfully boring for a curse breaker. A chronological line of various incidents was laid out neatly and perfectly. Lin impatiently flipped to memorable cases which distinguished his work, such as the one when he was given an order of Merlin, second class. Nonsense, she decided. Or was it? The hissing and the blue flames on the stove were distracting. Lin was reluctant to work on this case.

This situation reminded her of Russia seven years ago, when there was no cooperation either. Everything ended in a disaster back then. There was no point in leaving the country just to encounter the same situation elsewhere, more so alone, without a lieutenant who had dark blue eyes. She tried not to think about him.

Michael was alive less than seven years ago. He was an optimist. He firmly believed that when faced with danger all the opposing factions would come together for the greater good. They merely needed an example of selflessness. Lin did not believe him, but he meant a lot to her, more so than her job or even her family. She had long accepted that Michael was gone and rarely thought about him, but the memory of him was like ice covered by a thin blanket of snow. Sometimes, his absence made her imagine that her heart was an ice palace, lost in the wind among arctic snows – far from the world and empty.

chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 13

There is a robbery attempt of the potions lab.

The following morning Lin was at the Ministry on her way to her office. Inwood's file gave her no leads. She was considering a different approach to the investigation when she saw the fireplaces in the main hall blaze, and McLee appeared with three more Aurors. His face was coloured from spending what looked like hours in the December wind. The snow covering his team was quickly melting, and they trailed multiple puddles. McLee's frustration was clear. Not expecting him to say hello, Lin greeted him first. "So, where is the trooper who caused so much excitement, that you personally led the chase?" Lin was not intending to tease him, but she was curious. She disagreed with his hack and slash tactics and him not being able to think outside the square, but in general she saw him as a decent man and a professional. He had never used any underhanded tactics to destroy anyone's work to satisfy his pride or ambitions. His tactics were to outdo whoever he competed with, but never to drag them down.

"It's your Snape." McLee looked at her in a way as if having spoken to the man once incriminated Lin in his doings. "My ears are frozen off from chasing ghosts in Diagon Alley all morning."

"What about Mr Snape?" Lin interrupted.

"Someone tried to break into his lab and triggered all his traps and alarms. The commotion was loud enough. We could hear it all the way here."

Lin did not listen to the rest.

"Heeeey, Lin! Lin? What's the rush? It's not like you are responsible..."

It was too late. Lin disappeared in a flare in the fireplace.

Even in the early hours there were already some people at Diagon Alley. Lin ran all the way to the already familiar building, dodging numerous obstacles and people along the narrow path. The ground by the door was covered in foot prints. Lin counted four pairs. The prints then split up in opposite directions. Obviously McLee had ordered a search of the area.

This time Lin did not have to wait. The Potions master opened the door as soon as she came. "Miss Snedjnaya, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

If there was an award for having the best collection of most sarcastic remarks, his tone would have guaranteed him first place on the list, Lin thought. Suddenly, she was at a loss for words. A stray breeze picked up a strand of her hair and threw it in her face. Lin brushed it away. Lin was uncharacteristically puzzled. She could have found out everything from McLee. Yet, she came running. "I was not told what it was exactly that got stolen, only about the break in." The justification did not sound very convincing even to her own ears.

There was such intensity in Snape's scrutiny of her, as if he could read her mind. "Nothing was stolen. They were unable to get through the wards and left."

"Then why did you call the Aurors?"

"I did not. Aurors have a tendency to do more damage than the would be thieves. Local residents heard the alarms and called them."

"McLee broke your door."

A large snowflake fell on his eyelash, and Snape brushed it away instead of replying, but Lin instinctively new the answer. She noted that white snowflakes, falling from the clouds were in stark contrast with his black hair and cloak. Lin shook herself. She wondered why she was having trouble concentrating. Before the potions master could close the door Lin spoke. "Still, there must have been something in your lab that the robbers wanted."

"There are a lot of rare ingredients in my lab which present a lot of interest to the robbers. But you are overestimating my importance; the break in could have occurred at any lab, since even the most basic ingredient can be mixed into a deadly potion. Take the recent delivery of lizard claws, for example, they are harmless, but grinded into powder they are a part of a highly explosive mixture." Snape stepped closer and looked down on her, as if he knew everything and wanted Lin to confess her wrongs immediately. Lin figured this habit must have come from working many years with the students. "In fact, this is what your dead Auror had asked me about two weeks ago. So, why don't you stop wasting my time and tell me your suspicions directly, instead of pretending that you care about the robbery."

Only years of long training helped Lin hide her astonishment. She knew absolutely nothing about Inwood's project that included explosives. "What else did he ask you?" she questioned.

Snape's patience however had already run out. "Nothing! I told him to mind his own business. I do not take part in making such dangerous substances, which you can check by the used ingredients records! After your dead Auror tired of his questions, he quickly left, as should you, now that I have nothing else left to tell you."

Snow fell off the roof from the force of the door slamming shut. Lin guessed this was the last she would see of this wizard. The thought was unpleasant, but also she had seen much worse reactions to being questioned, and she learned long ago to ignore it when necessary. How much representatives of the law were respected depended on how the laws were executed, and sadly during the war faith in the Ministry's laws had been shaken badly. The Ministry was recovering in the last half a year, but it had a long way to go.

More importantly though, Lin was consumed by desire to find Ardal and hex him into the next century. Lin had an easy explanation as to why she knew nothing about the explosives. There were two types of files; one kind was a cover file, made up with minor modifications to exclude important facts of secret projects. It contained only part of Inwood's work. Lin should have known earlier that everything was far too properly arranged to be a full account.

Her murderous intention must have been clear because no one tried to talk to her as she stormed through the Ministry.

"Mr Ardal is not here. He will return in the evening." The secretary warned her as soon as Lin walked in.

"I know exactly where Mr Ardal is!" Lin named a wing farthest from the office. The secretary hunched his shoulders, feeling danger in her tone, like he was a kid scolded by a strict teacher. "He told me that he wants to see you immediately." Lin noticed writing on one of the folders on top of the pile. "He said something about a clock. I would hurry if I were you."

"Yes, yes, of course!" The secretary hurried to grab the necessary folder. He mistook Lin's anger as something Ardal felt for him. He did not want to be in trouble with his boss.

"Hey, open the office please, before you go," Lin commanded, pointing at Ardal's office. "I'm supposed to wait for him to come here, as soon as he settles the clock business."

The secretary obediently opened the office for her and hurried away.

Lin was certain that she would easily find Inwood's file before he returned. Ardal would keep it nearby because he was working with it. For all his intrigues and manipulations, he had an average intelligence, and therefore he would hide it in one of the most obvious places that regular people deemed suitable for hiding. Lin found the file in three minutes flat. The file was tucked between two books on the shelf. Ardal would have to ask Colby for a copy of his copy, because Lin now had the original. Lin was going to keep it at home. Although she did not think it was very likely that he would try, she was not going to give Ardal the chance to get it back the same way she got it from him.

At first, Lin locked herself away in her office to study the documents. This file proved far more enlightening. According to it, before his death Inwood was working on uncovering one of the most dangerous groups in London. When Voldemort was alive, the majority of the Ministry was focused on fighting the Death Eaters, which in turn gave an almost free reign to other factions in the city. Only in the last half a year did the Aurors, under Shackbolt's leadership, began to seriously track and eliminate activities of a criminal nature. Why this gang was Inwood's responsibility was explained by a separate note. Once, the Ministry had tracked down the headquarters of this group. However, the Aurors did not succeed in the capture. They were met with a fierce resistance. Two members of the gang were killed in the crossfire, and the rest got away with the help of a strange artefact. The Aurors had discovered more artefacts in the gang's headquarters that clearly radiated dark magic. A group that was willing to use dark magic and explosives was serious. Could this group be responsible for killing Inwood when they felt that he was close on their tail once again? If so, she had to find them, but where to begin looking for them? Lin felt that she needed new leads. The only other location left was the scene of the crime. Earlier, she ignored McLee's ramble about not trusting the shop keeper, but perhaps he had unintentionally stumbled onto something. She had to find out. It was time to visit Knockturn Alley.

chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 13

The shop keeper speaks about something important.

A middle-age woman, thin lipped, brown eyed and with lank, undistinguishable hair, came into Mrs Selwyn's pesticides shop early in the afternoon. A long, brown dress was visible underneath a similarly coloured coat. Dark-green beret and gloves completed the neat but definitely poor look. Mrs Selwyn, who was afraid that the representatives of the Ministry would come to visit her, again, took an immediate liking to the woman. The witch paused uncertainly, looking lost, then made an unsure motion towards the door.

Mrs Selwyn, who had the reflexes to keep the customers interested, honed by years of practise, rapidly blocked the escape route. "Good afternoon, madam. Is there anything I can help you with?"

The woman nodded shyly. "I am looking for something to help me get rid of the attic pixies. They appeared a week ago, and they are such a menace. I have my grandmother's things in the attic, paintings and tapestries of sentimental value. I'm afraid the little villains will damage these things."

The shop owner tasked sympathetically and then nodded sagely. She approved of the woman's sentiments. "I know exactly what you need, my dear. Come in, come in and let me show you."

The woman obediently followed, with her arm trapped in the shop keeper's grasp. She was offered a full set to defend her attic from the pixies, a spray, a powder and sparkling wires, which shocked upon contact. Mrs Selwyn guaranteed that the full set would exterminate the pixies within two days and offered a discount for the entire set. The woman however examined it all and took liking only to the spray. She eyed the rest uncertainly. "Thank you so much," she said most sincerely. "I don't know what I would have done without your kind advice. A shop closer to my home was all out of sprays, and I was somewhat anxious to come to Knockturn Alley. I mean, you are a most respectable and intelligent woman, but some rumours about this place are most unkind."

"Oh, pay no attention to them!" Mrs Selwyn was clearly stung although her liking of the woman did not diminish due to the 'respectable' comment. "Most of us here are completely honest people. It is only a few who give us a bad name, such as that awful brothel down the street. I told my late husband, bless his soul, not to set our shop near such an immoral place, but he said that taxes here are much lower and the land is cheaper to purchase, which is all our Gringotts account could afford." She sniffed, truly sorry for her predicament.

"This is awful," the woman agreed, "that the reputation of such a good woman as you must suffer due to those wizards who shame our society."

Mrs Selwyn seemed very touched. She glanced at the unsold powder and continued. "I do not have many customers as it is, and now this horrible murder will completely ruin me. No one comes here anymore besides the Aurors, and they do not come here to buy anything."

The woman's eyes widened. "Oh, goodness, so this is where that recent murder happened! How terrible for you. I hope your relatives are supporting you through this!"

"I'm all alone, except for my nephew." Mrs Selwyn wiped a tear away. "But I haven't seen him since that Monday, before everything happened." Her eyes darted uneasily, and she hurried to correct herself. "I mean Friday, silly old woman, I'm so bad with week days. They all seem the same sometimes." She stole a glance at the woman, who still stood quite astonished, and hurried to change the topic. "You know, it must be a pixie season. My nephew bought numerous boxes of exactly the same spray that you are holding. You are most lucky that I have some left. Of course, I'm glad that he buys from me. His occasional purchases help to keep my shop running. It brings a small income, and I would hate to see it gone. I need to support myself somehow."

The woman must have been greatly affected by the predicament of Mrs Selwyn because she rubbed her eyes. "I'm sure your nephew loves you very much and will come to see you soon."

Mrs Selwyn sighed. "I doubt it. He comes rarely. He runs a business and even owns a spot at the warehouses in London, something to do with cloths. I keep telling him that work is good, but he should try to find a fine, young lady, such as you, but it's always work, work and more work with him. Why, I don't even know where he lives these days."

The woman shifted her feet restlessly. She assured Mrs Selwyn that her nephew must care about her and then claimed she was anxious to use the spray as soon as possible, before those pixies did something irreparable. To the regret of the shop owner, she only purchased the spray and was on her way. The woman tossed a small coin to a beggar that sat by a shop and pressed her nose into her scarf to hide her smile. It was a rather convincing disguise for McLee's agent, but very cold and unenviable work. She rushed through Knockturn Alley to a more respectable street, pressing her coat close as if she was highly uncomfortable. Only when she walked through the fireplace at the Ministry did her features change into the usual white hair, round chin and blue eyes.

Lin had studied the shop owner at a distance before selecting her disguise and glamour. She had gathered that Mrs Selwyn was a widow, old fashioned and more poor than decently off, but she would get deathly offended if anyone had suggested it. Her envy, revealed in her outspoken dislike of aristocracy, had been evident. Thus, she had reacted well to someone who was not outwardly bright and appeared gullible enough to take advantage of. The shopkeeper had lied to the Aurors earlier. She had slipped up about the day of her nephew's visit in conversation with Lin. He must have visited the shop the same day the body of Inwood was found. This did not incriminate the shopkeeper however. She usually considered her own judgement and instinct as to whether someone was capable of committing a crime, more valuable than facts. Mrs Selwyn considered her nephew a good person, because he supported her business, thus she could have been sure that he was innocent and readily provided cover for him. Lin suspected the nephew. Her earlier conversation with Mr Snape came to memory. Lin thought that he must have had some influence on Lin's perception. When she had looked at the list of ingredients on the pixie spray bottle while she was in the shop, she had found lizard claws in the substance. Mrs Selwyn had been misled in her deduction; there was no wide spread plague of pixies in the city to explain the spray sales. Lin wondered what the nephew was going to do with all those boxes.

She had a hunch that meeting Mrs Selwyn's nephew was a good idea. But first she had to get out of her disguise. She did not relish looking like an old maiden, and the long dress sleeves were terribly itchy.

chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 13

In this chapter Lin attempts flying.

The London Warehouses were a remarkable maze of buildings, both old and modern, some dating back several centuries. They served as points of trade and supplied the needs of the large city, linked by trade with various parts of the country and even with other continents. The buildings were erected randomly, over the centuries, as they were needed, without any construction plans in advance. The territory was covered by magical protection shields. It was considered the responsibility of the Ministry to look after them, although the majority of the place was owned by private entrepreneurs.

Lin had obtained a pass to this area. She came after six, when the place was nearly deserted. The guard, having seen hundreds of wizards during the day, indifferently checked her ticket and let her through.

There were numerous cloth industries set in the area, but one of them specifically captured Lin's interest, due to its recent origin and lack of motion within the business. Three times the maintenance of it exceeded its profits. It was suspicious that the owner of the new enterprise would care so little for its initial success.

Lin found the building, after a hard search, nearly in the middle of the maze. It was grey and rectangular with sharp corners stretching up to the low sky. A heavy lock hung on its front door. Lin did not tamper with it just in case a passing security guard might notice. She searched for a less conspicuous entrance. The building was totally closed off like a stone block. Its only window was out of reach.

Nearby, Lin noticed a heavy waste container and tried to move it. There was a limit to spells. Normally, wizards could not levitate an object that exceeded several times the

weight of what they could physically lift. The container shuddered and clanged in protest, but the frozen ground released it and it lifted an inch. Lin dragged it to stand right underneath the window. She hid the tracks where the container used to be and then climbed on top of it. The window was dirty, but it was made out of normal glass. Balancing on a slippery surface, Lin removed the glass from the frame. She squeezed through the narrow gap. It was dark inside. Lin hung there, holding onto the frame and then jumped. Due to a stealth charm, her landing was soundless, but the window turned out to be far from the floor. She landed rather uncomfortably on her behind.

The warehouse room was small and had two large containers along the walls, bolted to the floor. There was light seeping in from the next room where Lin could hear voices. She snuck along the wall to peek inside. The next storage area was much larger. It had various tables, set with cauldrons and bottles. On the floor stood boxes, the labels on which were ripped off. Four wizards were present, and one more voice was coming from the depth of the room.

"Three days is the minimum before the substance becomes stable. You do not want to risk it."

"You don't want to risk Aurors coming here either. They are circling around the old bag's place. If that son of a newt had told us earlier that it was not his shop. Never mind, the boss told us to move the lab to another place and fast."

The bass voice of the speaker was menacing. His back reminded Lin of the garbage container she'd just moved. However, his cooperative argued.

"You did not tell me this on Monday. You brought me these and said you want them soon. These sprays have a low concentration of the explosive ingredient. They need to simmer longer before they are ready for use."

"What is our target this time?" another wizard interrupted the ongoing squabbling. "He keeps promising to get rid of him, but when?"

"Not him. The boss wants to use these for something else." The bass voice seemed to have the greatest authority in this group.

"Damn, better be soon. I can't believe that idiocy, to be fined or jailed for beating that worthless shit of a house-elf that I own. Should I get jailed for misusing my toilet paper too?"

Lin backed away. Common sense told her to get out of here and call for backup. Alone, she was not going to deal with five wizards who were willing to kill. Only then Lin realized that she was trapped. Apparating with protection shields in place was too risky. The window was out of reach. The only exit that she saw was located in the next room. Perhaps, she could risk it while their backs were turned? No.

"Enough!" the bass ordered. "Nox, go to the next room and get the equipment. It's in the left container. We will begin by moving part of the items. The alchemist doesn't need them all."

Grumbling, the wizard, who complained about the house-elves, complied.

Lin had nowhere to hide. She pressed her back to the right wall. The wizard entered without seeing her, and then lit his wand to dig through the left container. He cursed, not finding what he needed and turned right to continue the search. Lin Stunned him, but before falling he yelled out a warning. The wizards reacted at once, charging with drawn wands. Lin grabbed the Stunned wizard by the collar and pushed him into the next room, where he was instantly hit by several hexes. Whatever spells the wizards expected and shielded from were not thrown at them. Blinding flare illuminated the place.

"Careful! The equipment!" one of them shouted.

Lin bolted towards the exit in a white blur. Surprisingly, this was not the way out. There was a corridor with a narrow staircase, but she could not go back. Without a choice, Lin ran, jumping over two stairs at once, pursued by a shower of curses, both verbal and magical. There was a heavily bolted door at the top of the stairs. Lin blasted it down. Cold wind met her. She fell and on her butt rapidly slid along the icy roof. She stopped by grabbing onto a ledge. The ground below was far and dark, and she had nowhere else to go.

Great wizards of time had the ability to fly. The power was not equivalent to flying a broomstick, but they could lift off the ground and travel short distances. They could jump down from over eleven meter heights as the spell slowed down their fall. The spell was part of Auror training, but almost no one could perform it. Lin was in the larger group of those who could not. She remembered this when her pursuers appeared on the roof. They did not hurry to step onto the treacherous surface and regarded her from a distance. The victim could not run from them anymore.

"You sprint well, bitch. Can you also fly?" asked one of them. He laughed along with the others.

Was jumping off the roof any better then being hexed into oblivion?

"Hex her already or move so I can," the bass voice insisted.

Lin jumped before the blue lightning reached her. Her stomach compressed, making concentration difficult. She could feel the air temporarily thickening around her, but her wand hand trembled from the exertion, never fully managing the spell.

Lin hit the ground hard. The world blinked out of existence, and after a few moments, Lin realised that she lay on her stomach with her face pressed into snow. Landing into a large snowdrift prevented her immediate death. "Move," she told herself, "move at once," but her body hurt terribly and refused to cooperate. It was as though the earth was holding her down with a binding spell that Lin could not shake off. They will come downstairs and finish me off, was the last thing Lin thought of before the darkness descended on her again.

chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 13

Where Lin gets very lucky.

The awakening came reluctantly. At first there was a tiny dot in the darkness which grew in size and intensity as it turned into a dim light. Lin's awareness extended to scents and soft, rustling sounds until her mind nudged her to wake up. Lin only partially opened her eyes and tried to make sense of the unfamiliar surroundings through her eyelashes. She recalled falling, but she was no longer outside. This place did not seem like a hospital, and it was not how she imagined a gang hideout to be either. Yet, someone must have found her and moved her away from the warehouses. She did not get to wonder long because her cautious awakening was noticed.

"Congratulations, Miss Foreign Auror Snedjnaya, you have not broken any bones."

Lin registered the familiar voice, but her reaction was instinctive when she summoned her wand, which flew obediently into her hand. The sharp movement was not a good idea, and her body protested it. The room tilted alarmingly. A hand descended onto her shoulder to steady her.

"Try not to faint again," Snape told her.

Lin shot him a displeased look, but her mind was still too sluggish to come up with a respectable retort. Her hurt ego, perhaps, caused her to interpret him wrongly, and it was not exactly a mockery. She noticed that Snape was holding a glass filled with some brown substance, which was clearly meant for her. Lin accepted it, but sniffed it suspiciously.

"This potion will help you focus and clear your mind. I have drunk it many times before, so it has been very much tested," he assured her impatiently.

Lin tried it. She ignored the bitter taste and sipped slowly while stealing a few glances at her host. This man could become vindictive, she decided. He was clearly mocking her for a reason only known to himself; however, on the other hand, his remarks felt more like he was testing her limits, and if she snapped back at him, then he could say, 'I knew you were only pretending to be polite, but you are the same as all those dullards I have had the misfortune to meet throughout my life.'

Lin was more willing to generously deduct that he was not a people hater in general. There was no mockery in his gestures when he offered the potion to her, and he apparently cared enough to put her on a comfortable couch under a warm blanket. She had met her share of gossips, 'old Aunt Sally's,' as she liked to call them, who would go to their best friend, Tina, to put their other best friend, Shida, down, just to tell Shida the same thing about Tina. People like them had a lot more hidden disdain and hate for society than Snape ever could muster with his sharp remarks.

"Thank you." Lin returned the empty glass to him. The sharp taste snapped her awake as she felt the potion working through her system. "My name is Lin or Snow, but I prefer to be called by my name." She hoped he was paying attention.

"I presume, Miss Snow, you would like to learn what you are doing in my house."

Lin nodded. She respected his wish to maintain a certain formal distance. To be called Miss Snow was an improvement. The Potions master did not take well to being interrogated. He was going to tell her what he found appropriate, and most likely he would give away more information if she had the patience to listen without pressuring him.

Snape's tone was flat like he had prepared his speech in advance. "As I informed you earlier, I had an arrangement with Mr Wartsmith to provide me with high quality unicorn blood. I went to meet his personal assistant at the London Warehouses at six thirty in the evening. When I was returning home, a blue light, which I have long since identified as a duelling curse, had caught my attention. I recognised you when its light illumined your most distinguishable white hair. I therefore reasoned that no well-meaning civilians would be firing upon an Auror, thus following up on my utterly foolish instincts, I had to get involved. I ran around the next corner and down the narrow alley to where you had fallen. I cast a spell which triggered security alarms in the warehouses which would be tracked to your wand. Unfortunately, there was no guarantee that the alarm would scare away your ill wishers or even slow them down before security arrived. I was forced to get us both out of there since I was not planning to get caught by the Aurors or indeed anyone with your seemingly dead body on my hands."

"That's quite a feat getting us out of that maze filled with security and criminals coming after you. If I didn't believe that turning both of us invisible would have been impossible, I might have suspected that you had done so," Lin said, quite impressed. The competitive side of her wondered if she could have done the same in his place.

"Perhaps I flew away without turning invisible," Snape said. He did not take the praise bait, leaving her curious. "In any case, I would appreciate it if you could keep this matter private, without passing my imprudence for a great prowess."

"You're right. You were foolish. It was not your job to get involved. As a good civilian, you should have immediately left the scene of the crime and contacted the security station nearest to you. Then from the legal standpoint, you would have absolutely nothing to fault yourself for and I would be dead."

"You have the strangest way of thanking me for assistance."

"I haven't yet," Lin said. "Thank you for saving my life, Mr Snape. Now, if I heard your request correctly, you want me to keep your participation in this event a secret."

"Preferably, yes."

"Well, I do not write reports to anyone except for one person, so I do not have to share any information, although in this matter I was asked to cooperate with other stations," Lin said, pretending to think about it. "But this event is not directly linked to my investigation, so I suppose I don't have to tell anyone, providing you tell me how you got out of the warehouses' maze unnoticed."

"You are bargaining with me?" Snape seemed incredulous. "Your threat would be more convincing, however, if you weren't smiling."

Lin was not aware that she was. She just noticed that Snape's voice lost the flat drawl customary to him as he was drawn into their conversation. He was right, however, that Lin was not planning to give him away. "Either way, I have important information which I must pass to the Aurors immediately." She drew attention away from her temporary defeat.

"There is no need for you to hurry. Last night the security had already uncovered a secret explosives lab. It was in the news this morning."

"This morning!" Lin exclaimed. "What time is it now?"

"It is after four in the evening. You were out for nearly twenty hours."

Lin was astonished. She must have pushed her magic and body too far. She tried to levitate a pillow and was encouraged when she was successful. "At least my magic has had enough time to recover," she said, relieved. "I cannot say the same about my body. I feel weak like I'm floating in the air."

"The symptom will vanish after you eat and rest some place warm."

Lin thought about her cold house devoid of any cooked food. "I sure hope the line at Burger King isn't too long."

"That Muggle food is not what I had in mind. I don't know how anyone eats that rubbish."

"Hey, it is unhealthy, but it tastes all right. Sometimes I eat it when I don't have time to cook. There is no need to pretend that that stuff is lousy just to help myself become more disciplined in not eating it. Right now I sure don't want to cook, but I want to get back to earth fast, so I have to eat something. I don't like this weird feeling."

"You'll get down to earth and below it, right to the graveyard, should you continue eating that junk."

"Do you have a better idea where I can get a quick meal?"

"As a matter of fact, right before you woke up, I was about to eat my dinner. I would like you to consider accepting an invitation to join me."

"Oh, that's what smelled good when I woke up."

"I presume this means you are not opposed to the idea?"

"Yes, thank you. I accept your invitation," Lin said bluntly. Exactly what she thought at that moment was, I would like to have your dinner and to keep your company longer, especially since you were about to tell me how you escaped from the maze.

"You should consider adapting a motto, 'stubbornness is a necessary evil', Miss Foreign Auror."

He only pretended to be exasperated. However, Lin had a feeling that he was enjoying their banter. Perhaps another woman in her place might have considered the situation too awkward, but she learned long ago that surprises were not always set out to bring her down. She took advantage of any cards that life had dealt her. Thus, she followed Severus Snape to his table without hesitation.

chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 13

Lin has an unexpected visitor.

The evening bustled with activity in both Muggle and magical worlds. Everyone was busy in a pre-Christmas rush, leaving their footprints across the soul of the city. This state of affairs suited Lin who preferred activity to stillness. She left Mr Snape's house after dinner in good spirits, feeling that her well being was restored. Her trained body usually recovered quickly, but this time she knew her thanks lay with the Potions Master. She never got to use his first name throughout her visit, nor could she have claimed friendship or even a casual acquaintance with him afterwards. Their meeting was intriguing to her. They parted on good terms without any promises for the future, although she felt a strong pull of events bringing them together again and again, ignoring their resistance.

Lin found that Mr Snape had a sharp perception of the social events past numerous daily stereotypes. He was judgemental, with a running streak to be prepared for the worst, but it didn't mean he lacked irony. His likes and dislikes often coloured his manner of expressing his opinions. He was unapologetic for his views, and they had to be either accepted or left alone. Lin appreciated how he could get to the heart of the matter without surrounding it by a superficial shroud to appear to be kinder. She was doing the same quite often, but she knew the weakness of this relationship with the world that they had set up. It lacked flexibility. What happened when two people like that clashed in encountering a problem where their views opposed? Still, it would have been interesting to speak to him again.

A car went past Lin, its wheel fighting against a slippery road. Lin shook herself at the sound. She had more important things to do. On the steps of her house lay a newspaper. Right beside it lay a present also left for her by a delivery owl. The present smelled bad. That must have been for forgetting to replenish her mailbox with the owl treats again. Lin removed it, regretting her lack of dedication to spending a few minutes each day to oversee such matters. She wiped some snow off the front page, revealing a headline. 'Revolutionary change, and freedom for the house-elves,' it read. Lin found it like all other loud statements inaccurate as she scanned the article:

The "Revolutionary statement" had been made by Kingsley Shacklebolt, currently the favourite candidate to be elected to the post of the Minister of Magic. During his public meeting with a representative for the Rights and Liberties of the House-Elves Union, H. Granger, Mr Shacklebolt had announced his intentions to introduce a new article to the Code of Laws. The wizards or witches who have house-elves in their service will be held responsible for any violent abuse, whether verbal or physical, of their servants. Violators of this law will be held accountable either by heavy fines or imprisonment. His statement was welcomed by H. Granger who promised on behalf of the Union to support him as the running candidate. "We understand that house-elves wish to stay in servitude, which has in the past had a long history of abuse," she stated with determination blazing in her eyes. "Our Union members will do our best to bring the message to the house-elves that we have no intention of taking away what they desire to have, their work, but they must be convinced to report any abuse to the authorities because their Masters have an obligation to treat their servants well. There are many house-elves who have yet to realise that freedom does not imply loss of work for them, but instead it would bring improved conditions in their working environment."

It looked like the group was going to get their opportunity to advance their project, Lin thought. There were many politicians talking about the right steps their government must take for the betterment of society. Shacklebolt was made of a different material. He was actually going to take these steps. The huge improvement in efficiency within the executive branch, especially the Auror department, stood as a monumental proof of his organisational skills.

Lin pushed the door open and was met by the unpleasant chill. That was the least of her concerns, however, because two luminescent orange globes stared at her from the darkness.

"Mistress!" Lin heard a high-pitch squeak. The eyes shifted closer, and a small shape like a lollipop with a large head and a wiry body, appeared. The house-elf bowed to Lin very low, nearly scraping its forehead on the floor.

"Who are you?" Lin asked strictly to cover up how startled she had been.

"I am Totty, Mistress." The house-elf bowed again.

"All right, Totty, I am used to greeting my guests when I am inside my house and they are coming with some warning from the outside. Surprises like this in my residence can get a newspaper thrown in your face."

The house-elf trembled so much that even her floppy ears shook. She tried gracelessly to take the newspapers out of Lin's hand. "Totty understands. Old Master beat her every day. Newspaper is nice. It's softer than the hitting stick."

Only now Lin noticed numerous bruises on a skinny body visible under the rags. "I am not going to beat you," she said. "I don't like it when something jumps out at me from the darkness. If you were a bandit trying to attack me, I would have to defend myself."

"Oh! Totty understands now! Totty was very bad scaring Mistress. She will not do it again." She finally pried the newspaper from Lin and began hitting herself with the thick package. "Bad Totty! Bad!"

Dealing with the unpredictable mood swings and twisted thinking of the house-elf was frustrating.

"Firstly, give me back the newspaper please," Lin tried to get her world back in order. "Secondly, tell me what you mean by 'again'. It sounds like you are planning to live with me."

"Yes!" said Totty suddenly excited. She returned the tattered paper to Lin. "Mistress freed me from my old Master. Now, Totty will live with you."

"I don't think that fall had tampered with my head so much that I would forget about freeing someone," Lin argued. "Are you sure you are addressing the right person?"

"Yes! Totty felt your magic through her bond with Master Nocultist. Yesterday your magic hit him and then he died. Totty is sorry she didn't come to Mistress earlier. It was hard to find you."

Totty's tangled up statements finally began to form an explanation in Lin's mind. "Hold on," she said in disbelief, recalling a cloaked wizard talking about his house-elf before their confrontation. "Are you talking about the criminal I fought with at the warehouses? I only Stunned him. His friends are the ones responsible for hexing him it

seems to death."

The house-elf looked at her unblinkingly. "The Mistress freed me," she repeated.

"Fine," Lin capitulated, seeing that this was a dead set point. "I still have no idea why you came to me. I thought you would become a servant of your Master's blood relatives."

Totty hesitated. She shifted from foot to foot, whining a little like a puppy.

"Are you sure someone didn't send you here just to spy on me?" Lin grew suspicious.

"No! Totty will not spy on Mistress!" she yelped. The house-elves could not act that convincingly, so it seemed she was telling the truth. Totty spread out on the floor, grabbing Lin's leg. "Bad Totty, saying bad things about her Old Master, but she will tell Mistress. He cursed them all because he didn't want relatives. It is a horrible, horrible curse, and it broke his connection with his family, so Totty cannot go to them."

Lin sighed. "I only heard about the Elder Wand being transferred to a new Master in the outcome of a duel. I didn't know it was possible with the house-elves. What am I suppose to do with you now?"

"Totty can do a lot of things!" Totty said happily. "She is a very good elf!"

"Maybe you can cook."

"Yes, I will make very tasty meals," Totty assured her.

Lin decided to deal with Totty's situation on Monday. She was going to find out more about it by talking to the professionals in the related law department at the Ministry. The house-elf was not going to leave her alone even if she ordered her out of her house. The logic of gaining this servant so unexpectedly was unconvincing. It seemed that Totty randomly had chosen a new owner that she liked, but made up an explanation from the scrapes of the rules that she knew. The law of being transferred down the blood line seemed like it existed only in the house-elves' mind, rather than being a magical-bound contract, Lin suspected. Lin also realised that Totty's appearance was fortunate, even if it was inconvenient. "Totty, I have a very important question for you, and you must answer it very, very honestly in as much detail as you can remember," Lin said candidly.

"Totty cannot lie to her Mistress," the house-elf responded.

"When you lived with your previous Master, did he have friends?" Lin asked hopefully.

"No." Totty disappointed her.

"Ok, did he have acquaintances: wizards or witches who would come to visit him, perhaps to discuss something important?"

"Rarely, Master had visitors. Totty was scared of them. They were very bad to Totty if they saw her. Master sent me away when they came."

"What did they look like?"

"Totty does not know. They were wearing capes and hoods."

"Do they at least have names?"

Totty wrung her hands desperate to remember. "Stun, Anap, Serpen..."

"I get it. They all have abbreviation of curses for their nicknames." Lin's disappointment was clear. "I suppose there are no associates you can tell me about."

Totty hit her forehead with a fist, trying to be more useful. "There is one witch," she said suddenly. "Master told me her name or Totty could not find her. Totty is very ashamed she had to look at what this woman was doing."

A lover perhaps, Lin considered. "All right, start from the beginning," Lin ordered. "What is her name?"

Totty sat down on the floor, feeling the importance of the moment. "Her name is Arpina Belsmock."

chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 13

Lin meets Arpina.

Lin had no idea she would be returning to Knockturn Alley so soon. This time she went there without a disguise. She might have drawn a few curious looks, but she ignored them. Those who did not live in the narrow gap called the Alley would stand out as strangers anyway and drew attention no matter what. Dark buildings loomed above, pushing each other to get a small breath of air from the barely visible sky above, shrinking an individual who passed below them into a grey mass like the road slush. Such places ceased to intimidate Lin a long time ago who in her hard leather boots and a dark jacket felt quite confident.

Her destination was a rectangular, four storey building. Its sightless windows were drawn shut. A sign, Rachelete's Retreat, hung above wooden doors. This was where Arpina Belsmock made her living. This place was selling intimate services which Mrs Selwyn despised so much and wished to be gone. Perhaps it might have shut down, except that in the last couple of years the place had gained popularity due to its new performance program every evening. The first floor of the building, past the lobby, was converted into an auditorium with a long stage in the upper part and small tables in the lower half, where during the performances drinks were sold cheaply and liberally. For the majority of the visitors, the performances ended when they chose a partner to please them in the rooms upstairs. Not all of the call girls were offered for services, however. The most talented performers who took part in the program had the possibility of choosing which customers they preferred more than others, and they did not lack offers. Arpina Belsmock was the most talented dancer of the Rachelete's Retreat.

The shabby façade turned out to be a disguise to blend in with the rest of the street. On the inside, the building was, although not rich, at least well maintained. The lights were half-dimmed. Clean carpet absorbed the sounds footsteps might have made. A front desk dominated the foyer. Behind it stood a wizard with short blue hair set

fashionably with slanted bangs. Up close he turned out to be older than Lin initially thought.

"Good afternoon, Madam," he greeted politely. "How may I help you?"

"I am here to speak with Arpina Belsmock."

"Do you have an appointment?" The blue haired attendant tapped the desk and a leather bound journal appeared.

"No."

"In that case, you must book an appointment."

"I prefer to see her today," said Lin, showing her Auror identification. "I must speak to her as soon as she is free."

The attendant looked at the identification dismally. Staying out of trouble with the law was very important for establishments like this. Any trouble would shut them down.

"Arpina Belsmock should be available right now. She has two free hours for herself before each performance," he explained. "Please give me a minute to tell her about your visit."

Lin wondered whether he went to Arpina or perhaps to his supervisor, but she let him go. Either way, she owed no explanations to anyone yet, although she regretted any possible delays.

The attendant came back very quickly. "Arpina Belsmock is waiting for you, Auror. Please follow these stairs to the second floor. The suite number is 42. It is the last door down the corridor."

"Thank you." Lin followed the instructions, going past many similar doors. Her certainty had increased that she was dealing with the former lover of Nox, or rather Declan Nogent, the former owner of the Rachelete's Retreat. She had paid a brief visit to her office to find out what had happened at the Warehouses. The Ministry had been put on alert by the local security that evening. One of the buildings had been set on fire. Upon entering, the Aurors had found a dead body and a lab filled with explosives. The body had been identified as Declan Nogent. He had a previous record for violence a few years ago. The area had been surrounded by a ring, meanwhile the Warehouses had been searched. When Lin came, the Ministry was in the process of checking the identities of everyone they had arrested, but it did not look promising. The arrested witches and wizards had to be released with apologies. The department responsible for the find wrote a promising report about how they had foiled a dangerous plot, whereas they had in actuality been fooled as the conspirators had fled after all. Lin was going to fix that.

She knocked, stopping by the last door, and it flew open immediately.

A petite witch let her in. "Please come in and take a seat. You must be from the Ministry. Ambrose warned me that you wanted to see me." She motioned Lin to follow her to a small room with a coffee table and soft furniture mostly for sitting.

"You do not appear to be surprised to have a visit from law enforcement," Lin commented, taking a seat across the woman.

"I am not," Arpina confessed simply. She folded her hands and looked down in shame. Her neck craned elegantly. Many men would be attracted to this display of femininity, Lin considered. She would not have guessed that this woman was selling her body for a living if she didn't know better. Arpina in her clinging dress was like a well carved statuette. Her body moved fluidly. Her small size and fluidity of movements took away a sense of vulgarity. Lin could see why these movements would be considered desirable for a dancer.

"So, you have anticipated this visit concerning your murdered lover?" Lin thought that it made sense. It was normal procedure to question the relatives whenever someone did not die a natural death, but there seemed to be more.

"Yes. I hoped that no one would find out because he wanted to keep our relationship a secret. I understood how important it was. I think he was trying to protect me." Arpina straightened her shoulders. It seemed that she gathered her courage to speak and willed her voice not to shake. "I'm afraid there are no secrets in the wizarding world. Someone always knows them."

If only these secrets fell into the right hands, and if only there was a key to unlock this source of knowledge, Lin continued the thought, but then pushed it aside. She did not have an ultimate key, but she had a set of lock picks, such as her training. "You said you understood the importance of keeping your relationship a secret. Does that mean your lover had informed you of his plans?"

"There was only one plan. He said he was involved in the most dangerous project of his entire life and that many lives were at stake. He promised me once it was over to put everything aside and propose to me. I can't say I had no doubts about us. It is bad luck to build happiness on another's suffering, but perhaps you understand as a woman how devastating an empty heart can be and how degrading it would be to exist cut off from an opportunity to leave the place you loathe." Arpina spoke beseechingly, but her amber eyes glowed with determination. They were beautiful and more than able to capture the hearts of men. Lin noticed that the witch's aura was also amber. The fragile femininity was an act underneath which lay an unbreakable will.

"I would not link my destiny to another only to solve my problems," said Lin bluntly, but also willing to provoke her. It worked.

"It's not what you think." Arpina was stung. "I loved him. Otherwise, I would not have agreed to make my future reliant on the mercy of another. That would not have given me respect or my freedom. I did not agree to his proposal just to make my escape from here, as tempting as it is. It is not a good life that led me here. Those born in debt will spend their life repaying it, even when they have a talent like I do. To advance, the talent needs to be noticed by those who can afford to nurture it, and then hard work is required to better it. Right now, my talent is being used, but with my job I cannot better it nor is my employer interested in anything other than exploitation. I have negotiated a few privileges in exchange, but in time they will be gone as I grow older. Then I will end up used and unwelcome anywhere. Initially, I had a plan. I was going to save up some souvenirs and money the clients choose to give me in private. The House gets the rest. All customers pay at the front desk a full sum. The employees only get a room to live, food and some clothes, but we cannot choose our clothes or even food for that matter. With my popularity, some gifts were rather expensive. I kept saving up, hopeful that one day I would gather enough to buy a place for myself, an apartment or a small house, as long as I had a roof above my head. Then I could abandon this place. I was a tenth way there when he showed up. At first, he was just like any client, but he kept coming back and asking for me every time, and something between us was changing. It was not about sex anymore. We both realized that he saw me as more than an entertainment instrument. Eventually, he had an idea to take me away. I did not push him towards it. He came to it by himself, but he was not free, and now he is gone."

Even the strong feel the pain, Lin thought, observing as a tear like a silver snake slid down Arpina's smooth cheek. It was difficult to tell how old she was, thirty or fifty. It took someone to cry genuinely to be believed that their emotions were real.

"This mission, which took him away from you, why was it so important? What was he trying to accomplish?" Lin asked softly.

"I don't know," said Arpina, "although I have done my best to find out. I even refused to see him once, but he kept repeating that it would be safer for me to know nothing." She grabbed Lin's arm suddenly. "Perhaps it is not my right to ask, but I would give anything to find out. If you learn something please, tell me, please."

"I cannot make any promises, although it would be easier for me to find out if I had more information," said Lin, rising. Arpina had to let go of her. "I'm sorry I made you re-live unpleasant moments." She paused, waiting to see if Arpina had anything else to add, but the witch was looking down sadly, perhaps contemplating how to revive her hopes. "Good day," said Lin.

She had let herself out, thinking. She had trouble believing that a woman like Arpina would not have eventually wrapped her lover around her finger and got him to tell at least something about his project if she was concerned so strongly. On the other hand, love was the strongest seal to guarantee a woman's silence. Nothing would work if she was convinced of his innocence, because even Veritasium only gave away what the person believed to be true, not necessarily the truth. Cruel, Lin thought, to be in

love with such a bastard. It could play a bad trick on anyone to fall for some unworthy goat.

A tall witch in chunky high-heels with her red hair gathered in a towering style, waited for Lin at the front desk. Apparently, Absonim had notified his superiors about Lin's presence. The witch came directly to Lin. "Auror, I am Gilda Strant, the current caretaker of the Rachelete's Retreat," she introduced herself. "Has Arpina done anything which might effect this House that I must know?"

It must have been a ploy to get some answers. Lin wondered why the caretaker, the second most important figure in the House after the owner, would suspect nothing about her worker's relationship. In any case, Lin was not about to report to her the progress of her investigation. "There is no action of your worker up to this date which could influence your business negatively," Lin replied, aware that curiosity aside, this was Mrs Strant's main concern.

"Still, I hope to be notified should anything of significance occur," the witch persisted. "Arpina is our lead performer."

Did she really think that Lin was to explain to her why she came? She could have been at least more diplomatic. Seeing that Lin was not going to answer, Mrs Strant tried a different approach. "To be honest, we were expecting that someone from the Ministry would show up to make inquiries about Mr Nogent," she said significantly.

"Is that so?" Lin asked as amusement lit in her eyes. Since the witch had insisted on playing a detective game, Lin didn't mind. "Actually, there is a matter of greatest significance," Lin began forebodingly. She took hold of the witches' elbow and pulled her aside. Mrs Strant did not expect such a strong grip. "I trust for the good of everyone you will give me your unconditional cooperation. I must know what sort of people used to visit Mr Nogent prior to his death. You are good at reading people, so was there any who struck you as dangerous? Perhaps they were wearing strange markings on their clothes or spoke oddly? Did they carry any heavily nailed boxes with them? Those are very bad people, if not stopped, and they can get a place they visit to shut down. Were there also any cryptic markings on the wall of his office, or documents talking about eternal treasures that would lay forgotten on his table?"

Mrs Strant stared at Lin wide-eyed. It would have been a great find had she actually remembered something like that, but Lin did not wager much on that and primarily wanted to poke fun at the arrogance and mix of ignorance the witch had demonstrated. None of that humour, however, was reflected in Lin's gravely set face. It made Mrs Strant feel very scared.

"No! I haven't seen anyone like that!" she exclaimed. "Mr Nogent didn't even have an office. He hardly ever socialised with anyone except me around here. Why would anyone come to visit him here when he has his own home? He only came to collect profits and to gather the records so he could check their accuracy. He has never left any belongings here either."

"Do you know where he lived?"

Mrs Strant shook her head bitterly. "It is none of my business to ask him that."

"And you are absolutely certain that you cannot remember anything of the sort?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

"The Ministry workers have assumed that this was the case," Lin said ironically, although Mrs Strant missed it. At this point she no longer wanted Lin to follow her around with her questions. She was most relieved when Lin released her and headed for the exit.

Lin might have looked serious, but she was satisfied with having put the witch back in her place. Mrs Strant had the commanding role in the House and was not used to being denied answers.

Lin was only marginally disappointed that she did not learn much about Nogent's plans. Not yet, at least. Sometimes working with the lovers and family of the suspects required patience. They might remember something eventually. Also, Lin wanted to know whether Mrs Strant would go to Arpina to find out what Lin wanted. If so, their conversation was worth hearing.

Lin went through a narrow gap to the back of the Retreat where she studied the windows. The half-closed one on the second floor belonged to Arpina. A rusted fire ladder ran up the wall, passing close to the window. Its iron bars were cold and sticky. Regretting that she had forgotten her gloves, Lin stretched out her sleeves and went up. Luckily it was not a long climb as the windows were set low from the ground.

When she was at the window, Lin got a small box from her pocket. In it lay two Squishies. They were semi-transparent jellies, resembling more than anything round stickers that attached soap-holders to the wall. A pair of Squishies shared a telepathic link. Due to their surface, they picked up even the slightest sounds, allowing an owner of a pair to overhear a conversation from a short distance. The sound was slightly distorted, and the Squishies were unreliable, disintegrating in a couple of hours once they were out in the air, but Lin always tried to have a pair. She placed one Squishie in the corner of the window and attached another to her upper ear shell. There was static as her mind adjusted to sharing the link, and then she heard voices.

"You should be careful with that meddling adventuress. She will not hesitate to make this public," someone was saying.

Although there was a distortion, the voice definitely could not have belonged to Mrs Strant. It was distinctly male. Lin wondered if she had gone to the wrong window when she recognized Arpina's voice.

"I just want it all forgotten and sealed in a grave as it should be," she was saying tiredly. However, Arpina did not sound resigned.

"I don't think it will be possible until his work is complete," the male said mildly. "Until then I can only offer my condolences."

Lin wondered who it was and tried to peek into the room, but she couldn't see either of the speakers. She was told by the attendant that Arpina did not accept visitors. This must have been someone important if he was allowed to see her. His arrival had a precise timing, getting to Arpina while Lin was walking around the building. It was possible that he had been waiting inside the Retreat until Lin had left. She must be an adept liar, Lin thought, annoyed that Mrs Strant must have concealed his presence.

"I wish I knew what he was risking his life for," Arpina said bitterly. "When he died, I didn't expect to find support from anyone. I know you came because you are interested in his work too, but thank you for keeping me sane."

"He was a good friend of mine, and he saved my life. I owe it to him to find out who had destroyed his plans. Perhaps both of us could end this faster if we could put together what we know. I realize he never told you any details, but perhaps he has given or told you something of significance? Have you ever received any unusual gifts from him? You might not have paid attention to something like this, but it might be of vital significance.

Lin heard a splash and a clang of glass. "No," Arpina said finally. "He gave me things like this dress. There is nothing that can help us."

"Then I will have to solve this on my own for our sake," said the man, resigned. "Can I help you with anything right now? Money, perhaps?"

"You do not have enough to repair what I've lost," Arpina said sadly.

"You are too upset right now to think like the pragmatic woman I assume you are, however I will impose on you no longer and bow my retreat. Good bye, Arpina."

Lin was already on the ground, in a position where she could see the front door without becoming visible herself. She planned to follow the man who claimed to be a friend of Nogent. Lin had a hunch that both Arpina and this man had concealed part of the information from one another, and even Arpina had figured out that the man had appeared to get another piece of the puzzle more so than for attempting to help her.

The mysterious stranger, however, was not in a hurry to appear. No one was coming in or out of the Retreat. Even with a minor delay he should have come outside

already. Lin approached the entrance and pushed the door open. She peeked inside. The corridor was empty and even the attendant was missing. Silently, Lin ran up the stairs, meeting no one on the way. Although she knew there were many people inside the building, not a soul was in sight. The silencing charms on the doors must have contributed to the eerie quiet. The tracking charm revealed only Lin's footprints coming to and from Arpina's door. Lin continued the search, but she knew that the owner of the low, distorted by the link, voice was gone.

chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 13

Lin speaks with Inwood's family.

The home of widow Inwood was dominated by prim stiffness. The straight lines of the shining furniture seemed unmovable like in a museum; so much so, that even sneezing in her home felt like an offence. This was not how Lin had imagined Ansel's home. He always had a thick rug on the floor of his office and many objects crowding his desk and the walls. Here, the floors were bare, and only occasionally did odd statuettes, made out of marble or copper, decorated the surfaces.

The mistress of the house also reminded Lin of a statue. She seemed to be just as untouchable emotionally, which was visible in her perfectly set hair, an oval brooch on a high-collar dress, and her stiff posture as she sat in her chair with her hands folded on the table.

Speaking to the victim's family was not a task anyone had ever favoured. Therefore, all four investigators had agreed to go together. Currently, they were sitting behind a rectangular table on the chairs that seemed to be designed to force people off them quickly rather than for rest. Lin avoided the conversation, falling back on her observational role. Mrs Inwood was primarily speaking with Mr Colby anyway. His grey suit had made a good impression on her, whereas Lin's non-feminine apparel went against the widow's acceptable dress code.

"I am not certain why you would ask me about this when I have barely seen him in the last few years due to his work. A few colleagues of his dropped in occasionally," Mrs Inwood was saying. "I do not know whether my husband had any enemies who would specifically target him; however, I believe it is impossible to serve as an Auror longer than thirty years without making enemies. Ansel could have been killed by someone who kept a grudge against him; thus I assume there should be information in his profile about the kinds of subjects he dealt with. I had always hoped that he would get over his curse breaking obsession and apply to a less risky post at the Ministry where his administrative talents could be used successfully. Unfortunately, he was stubborn to the end."

"Mr Inwood was in charge of one of our most important projects in the last six months," Mr Colby explained. "Unfortunately, he had no chance to share what he had discovered. We suspect however that he must have kept records somewhere, and that information is of great importance to us."

The widow, despite her stiffness, had quite a sharp mind. "Ansel had his private office. He had been spending most of his time there lately, that is when he was home. Do I understand correctly that you wish to examine his papers?"

"If it is not too much trouble for you; that information is invaluable," Mr Colby confirmed.

"I will show you to his office then," said the widow.

Lin, fed up with the unfriendly chair, was more than happy to turn her attention to searching the office, which turned out to be very similar to Ansel's office at work. It was completely different from the rest of the house where apparently his wife had a free reign.

The investigators had dealt with this organized chaos by piling anything they did not deem useful in the center of the room. There were all sorts of items, including half-solved crosswords, no longer working quills, and quite a few hobby-related objects, with the exception perhaps of anything that would tell an outside observer about Ansel's family. There wasn't a single photograph. Lin could not recall seeing those in his office either, now that she considered it. She had certainly known that Ansel was married, but had never seen his wife before.

Mrs Inwood did not appear to be concerned with the decimation of the office. She inquired whether the investigation required her presence, and receiving a confirmation that she was free, she left the group to turn inside-out anything they wanted.

The four of them were doing quick work, checking the room for hidden compartments and pulling out double bottom drawers in Inwood's desk. They were gathering anything that seemed either important or cryptic to examine it closely at the Ministry, which went on for a few hours.

"This should be the last of it," said MacLee, adding a thick roll of parchment to the considerable pile they had gathered.

"I'll notify Mrs Inwood that we are ready to free her residence," said Lin. Going into the corridor, she dropped on the table the latest book she had been examining that related to Ansel's hobby. Its brown cover had partially rubbed out gilded letters, and its pages were covered by circular diagrams and rows of symbols. Decrypting such books seemed like an appropriate hobby for a Curse Breaker.

Lin recalled how her mother used to believe that for good health people should pick hobbies opposite of the type of work they were doing. Active jobs required calmer activities such as reading and building ship models, whereas sedentary jobs had to be balanced by active hobbies. Her mother had been a regional rocket witchball champion. It was a game similar to tennis, except the ball was bounced off the wall and the rackets had a web-like net inside the loop which had to be filled by amplified magic, gathering it at a focal point, similarly to a wand.

Lin's thoughts were interrupted by a quiet call, "Excuse me, Auror."

Lin looked around and saw a woman who stood half-hidden in the shadow of a large vase.

"Please, I would like to speak to you," the woman repeated her call.

Lin approached as she studied the woman with interest. She was approximately as old as Lin. Her face bore resemblance to the mistress of the house, with the exception of a square chin and minus the age lines even if some were already planned at the corners of her mouth set in a frown. She looked like she frequently lacked joy in her life.

"What would you like to tell me?" Lin asked her.

The woman looked up the hallway nervously, in the direction where Lin had been going. "Please, let's speak some place else, less noticeable." She pulled aside a heavy curtain behind a vase, revealing a small nook filled with jars and candles. "It's about my parents," the woman said rapidly, seeing that Lin had followed her. "Please don't think that my mother is concealing from the investigation anything which she would consider dangerous. My mother is co-operating the best she can, but I think she is making a mistake."

The woman reminded Lin of Totty, who also seemed just as unhappy and had a tangled up speech pattern.

"What is your name?" Lin asked to cease the waterfall of words, although she already knew it.

The woman blinked in confusion at being interrupted. "My name is Nancy Inwood," she said.

"I am Auror Snow," Lin introduced herself.

"Ah, yes, I thought so," said Nancy. "I wanted to speak to you specifically when I saw the four of you coming. I remembered that my father had spoken a few times about you, saying you were a good specialist. To be honest though, I would rather speak with a woman."

This was the second time in two days that someone was appealing to her femininity, Lin thought. She didn't allow Nancy to get further away from the original topic. "Thank you, Miss Inwood. Perhaps you can tell me first about the mistake, and then you can explain why you believe it to be so?"

"Yes, you are right of course," Nancy agreed. She seemed like a child who desperately wanted to explain why she had taken a candy from the cupboard without permission in a manner which would gain her compassion. "My parents belong to that group of couples who were married right after their graduation from school. Their parents had thought of it as an appropriate match and had encouraged them. I think they were happy at first, but eventually they grew apart. My mother always had different expectations and pushed for changes, whereas my father was never the type to live under his wife's heel. That's why I believe they never had any other children. They must have grown tired of this two way struggle and retreated each into their own world, becoming more indifferent to their relationship. They were fairly content with such a position in life because they were long used to each other and having a family to return to each day, even if it was not all warm and welcoming. However, my father's position changed during the last year. He began pushing for a divorce. He was very subtle at first. He wanted to do it without a scandal, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. She would become furious whenever he brought up the subject. She is very proud, and it would have been considered disgraceful in her family, where we have never had a single divorce. I don't think it is possible though to hold a man when he is determined to leave. I had a feeling that he was planning something radical when his diplomacy failed, but he was murdered before he could act. What's important though is that we both suspected that his sudden attitude to his status had changed because another woman had appeared in his life. He never gave us any direct evidence, but I think women have an intuition about these things. Before the Ministry could pay us a visit, we searched his belongings and discovered one photograph. It was hidden in the upper pocket of his jacket. My mother thinks this is our private affair, but I suspect that some of my father's work was linked to this woman, and my mother's pride won't allow it to be revealed."

"You have done right to tell me this," Lin encouraged her. "Do you still have the photograph?"

"Yes. I have managed to save it although my mother wanted to destroy it."

Nancy passed a small paper rectangle to Lin. The photograph looked like it belonged on an official document. The woman on it was serious and nearly motionless, but even on it, her dark amber eyes were lit up with lively sparks that pulled the men closer. They were the eyes of Arpina Belsmock.

chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 13

Arpina's final gift.

Lin's presence in Knockturn Alley no longer drew curious looks. She passed among its residents not in the least perturbed and paid more attention to her inner voices than to the nervous vigilance which tended to disturb those who never ventured into the twisted alley before.

Her last conversation with Arpina had suffered from a misunderstanding, as they had been thinking about different men. Arpina had not said her lover's name because it was painful, and Lin had deemed herself poor at consoling crying women and thus had avoided anything upsetting that could interrupt her questioning. To her regret, she could no longer spare Arpina's feelings because the woman was in danger and had to be placed somewhere within the Ministry for her protection. Following Arpina's initial explanation, Lin could believe that Nox would not confide in his lover whose neck he would readily cut if it expanded his power. Ansel had been completely different. He would have told Arpina something to prove his honourable intentions to marry her.

When she reached the brothel, Lin went through the familiar gap to the back of the building and climbed up the ladder. She had no desire to be delayed by the attendant again. A small circle where the Squishie had been attached was visible on the glass. Lin peeked into the room, only to withdraw swiftly when she saw a man moving towards the window. He did not notice her. His silhouette swept past the half-closed curtain. Lin peeked inside, noticing a turned over table and a broken glass on the floor. The man appeared again, kicking the shards aside and kneeling to examine the floor. He did not look like anyone from the Ministry. Lin recalled a man who had vanished on her who had also attempted to get Arpina to confide in him. Perhaps, he had decided to search Arpina's room, but Lin had yet to find out what had happened to the woman. The man was in a vulnerable position with his back to the window. Lin decided to stun him and then determine who he was.

The wizard jumped unexpectedly as she reached for her wand and turned around directly to face her. The ladder shook from the force of the explosion. The window and the frame went flying outwards. Lin released slippery bars, falling. A shower of broken glass followed her. A curtain fell on top of Lin, obscuring her view. She sensed that more than one person was running past her.

"Hold it! You're under arrest!"

She recognised that voice. McLee! Lin instantly pushed the curtain aside and jumped to her feet, but she only saw someone disappearing around the corner. Cursing him for the ill timing, Lin climbed into the window carefully, avoiding multiple shards that could cut flesh.

The room was a disaster. The paintings were ripped off the walls, the flower pots turned over, with the earth soiling everything near by. Part of the wall was damaged and grinning at Lin like a large, toothless mouth. It was the work of a maniac, single-mindedly bent on finding one thing. The smell in the room was revolting. It was the smell of burned flesh.

In harmony with this chaos, Arpina's body lay on the floor. Lin recognised a golden hairclip that was set in the woman's hair, which was now burned and mixed with the earth. Magic bonds that had held her in place during the torture no longer existed, but she had no power to get up, nor would she ever.

Lin crouched down beside Arpina, discovering that she was still alive, but that nothing could save her. Green mist surrounded Arpina up to her waist, and it was slowly rising. It was a decay curse which painfully ate away the body. The only one who had the power to stop the curse was the one who cast it; otherwise, only an amputation of the stricken area could stop its progress. The interrogator must have used it as a last resort. That man had wanted information, so he had kept her alive as long as possible, until she broke from pain. Arpina was going to die in agony.

"Arpina," Lin said loudly, "can you hear me? I am Auror Snow."

The woman's mouth half-opened, revealing still unbroken teeth, perhaps the only part of her that was not damaged. Lin looked away from her face. The sightless eyes that used to sparkle with life were gorges of abscesses and blood, cut vertically in half with a nail.

"Who was that man who tortured you? What did he want from you?" Seeing that her words caused no reaction she continued stubbornly. "I know Ansel must have told you something important, told or perhaps given. Do you think this man was the one who killed him for that information before coming to you? You need to tell me, so I can find his killers. His soul cannot rest in peace until this is done. It will keep returning to earth because everyone keeps disturbing his memories. Help me free him from this burden."

Arpina stirred, affected by her last words. Lin nearly gasped when Arpina brushed her mutilated fingers across her wrist. The maniac must have twisted and broken them one by one.

White fog surrounded them both, bringing forth new images.

There was Ansel, standing in the same room they were in, except it was still intact. He was smiling, looking happier than Lin could ever remember him looking.

"I have done it," he told Arpina, who sat across from him. "I only need one last clue." He laughed briefly and waved his hand to an open bottle of wine. "I thought we deserved a small celebration."

Arpina smiled at him, dropping her shoulder charmingly. "Ah," she said knowingly, "so this is why you warned me in advance to prepare for your coming."

The gesture had an effect because Ansel went around the table and sat beside her, kissing her hands. "Soon," he promised seriously, "you will have a real celebration."

Arpina wrapped her arms around his neck, and the room fell into tender whispers, rustling of clothes and soft cries.

At the height of their passion, Ansel suddenly pushed her away. In confusion, Arpina tried to embrace him again and then recoiled in mute horror. His face was distorted by an anguished grimace. His body bent in half, and a strangled cry escaped his lips that were rapidly turning blue. He rolled off the bed in convulsions, clutching his throat. Bloodied foam appeared on his lips.

Arpina fled the room, clutching her own throat. In the corridor she bumped into the caretaker and flailed her hands wildly, making strangled sounds. Mrs Strant grabbed her and dragged her back to her room. There, Arpina finally shrieked, but Mrs Strant pressed her hand firmly against her mouth. "Be silent," she ordered in a deadly voice. "Stay here and put something on while I call for the Healer."

Arpina followed her order, but she kept glancing back at the body of her lover.

The caretaker came back soon, followed by the owner. "Are you certain that we shouldn't call for a Healer, Mr Nogent?" she was asking him uncertainly.

The owner of the brothel examined the still body. "It's too late," he informed them coldly.

Arpina shrieked again, and Mrs Strant slapped her. She grabbed Arpina's shoulders and shook her, although she, herself, was shaking from fear. "What have you done? How could this have happened? Do you have any idea what will happen to us now? We will be shut down because of you! We'll be lucky if that's the worst that happens to us! Where will we go? What will we do?"

"I don't know! I swear I didn't kill him!" Arpina sunk to the floor in a hopeless heap. "I would never hurt him! I didn't kill him, I didn't, I swear!"

"Then who did?" Mrs Strant hissed at her.

"Be quiet, both of you!" Nox barked at them. "Has anyone else seen this?"

"There was no one else in the hall when Arpina ran into me," said the caretaker, calming down somewhat.

"Then we have to clean up this mess before anyone sees it," Nox decided. In his life, he must have dealt with many similar circumstances that involved victims. He knew what to do with them. "Take care of the room, and I will dispose of the body. We should be able to hide the evidence. I don't think anyone knew that he came here. I doubt he would broadcast his evening plans." He looked at both women as if to determine whether he could count on them. "I don't need to tell either of you to keep your mouths shut. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said Mrs Strant.

Arpina slowly nodded.

As she did so, the memory became clouded by fog, bringing Lin back to the mutilated body.

"I confess," Arpina whispered, "I killed him, but heaven knows I would have died for him."

"You are not the one who killed him." Lin put as much conviction as she could into her voice. "Someone used you to get to him. You are not the one to blame."

"Do you think Ansel will forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive."

Arpina smiled as unexpected hope took root in her heart. "Then you should take this as I won't need it any longer. No one could have found it without my permission."

"Take what?" Lin wondered, seeing how Arpina was slipping away from the world.

"Put your hand on my heart," Arpina requested. "I will give it to you."

Lin did as she was told, wary of the green mist that hovered so close to her hand. It was an unpleasant sensation being near it, although she knew that the curse focused on only one living being and did not spread to others.

Arpina gathered her strength to whisper the chant clearly, "Come forth, that which lies within me, in between dead and living."

Lin felt something materialising under her palm. It was a key, as small as a little finger. "What is this?" she questioned.

But Arpina no longer owed this world even a second of her attention. Her mind was flying away to re-connect with her missing lover. "He called me his Trinovantes Queen," she whispered as the green mist touched her heart.

Lin hid the key in her pocket and got up. She approached the window for a gulp of fresh air. The alley was dim. She wondered if McLee had managed to catch that man.

Someone behind her cleared his throat, and she unhurriedly turned around. It was a Healer, judging by the white robes with a crest of St Mungo's engraved on the pocket.

"Hello," he greeted Lin, looking at her suspiciously. He had no idea who she was, found at the scene of the crime.

"This is our operative," said McLee, coming up behind the Healer.

The Healer accepted the explanation and went to examine the body. He muttered a few diagnostic spells and then materialised a white blanket, throwing it over the corpse. "She must be taken to the morgue," he told them. "It is up to you to request further analysis, but the cause seems more than clear."

"Go for it," said McLee, making a point not to stare.

Lin approached the Auror. "Did you capture that man?"

"One of them. The other injured David badly. I had to stop to take one to the hospital and the other to jail. I got the Healer to come with me from the same hospital."

"Unlike the Healer, you weren't surprised to see me."

"You always have plenty of luck in stumbling onto random clues. I have been keeping a close eye on you since we went to Inwood's house."

"In other words, you have eavesdropped on my conversation with his daughter."

"Yes, and don't bother looking for the picture. It is no longer in your pocket."

"I didn't expect that from you."

"Don't try to make me feel guilty. You should have shared that information with us. Remember, those were Shacklebolt's orders, but you were always fond of playing with the exceptions to the rules." Noting Lin's expression, he added more peacefully, "I knew I had to beat you in finding this woman. I told David to come with me after we established her identity by the picture. When we got here, that door attendant got all dodgy and refused to let us in, even with the identification. He called his manager, rather unpleasant witch with red hair. I smelled something wrong and acted accordingly."

"She is the caretaker," Lin corrected him, accepting the situation. There was no point in getting angry, even if she was tempted to ask McLee how much information he had shared with her up to this moment. "We better talk to her before she decides to run for it too. The victim made a confession before her death. Ansel was murdered in the room next to this one, and the caretaker took an active role in disposing of the evidence."

McLee seemed satisfied that he was right about Lin's luck. "I think we should talk to her too."

Leaving the Healer to do his work, they both headed to the lobby. The blue-haired attendant was absent.

"Why are you stalling behind that desk?" asked McLee.

"Hold on, there was a journal somewhere." Lin ran her wand across the surface of the desk and then tapped it twice. The journal appeared, hovering above the desk. Lin grabbed it. McLee did not waste his time observing. He found a person who showed them the way to the caretaker's office.

Just like Arpina's room, it was at the back of the Retreat. It looked similar, with the exception of much larger windows. Mrs Strant was not present. "There she is," said Lin as she pulled aside a curtain to check outside. Mrs Strant was out at the back, frantically covering up a hole in the ground. Lin opened the window and jumped outside, closely followed by McLee. "Can I help you?" she asked loudly.

Mrs Strant turned around and gasped, dropping a bottle that was soiled by dirt. McLee had excellent reflexes. He caught the bottle before it hit the ground.

It was simple. When people panic, they always hurry to grab their most cherished possessions, or in this case, an item that caused Mrs Strant endless fear of it being discovered. "Hold it tight, McLee," said Lin. "Ansel was poisoned by the contents of that bottle."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Mrs Strant paled.

"Luckily, we do," said McLee. He was quite intimidating, towering over the woman. "Murder and covering up the clues of it is enough to be locked up for a very long time. Only complete cooperation will lessen the punishment."

"But I didn't kill him!" Mrs Strant exclaimed. She was not particularly clever, but had a good understanding when her well-being was concerned. Her mediocre mind turned slowly to a new track. "I swear, when that client died, Arpina came to me, and I instantly wanted to call the Healers, but Mr Nogent forbade me from doing so. He came to get the Retreat's revenues that day, and he was in the lobby. He saw me, and I had to confess to him what had happened. I would have behaved differently otherwise. He was in charge, and there was something about him I cannot really explain, but I was afraid of him, not just because he could fire me. Afterwards, I was afraid to confess."

"Why were you hiding the bottle then?" asked McLee, not any kinder than before. His pity had long been dulled by numerous lies he had heard from those who had tried to save their skins from justice.

"Mr Nogent left, taking the body with him. Arpina was of no use, so I was cleaning up the mess by myself, and I found this bottle. That wizard had had unnatural blue lips. Whatever was inside that bottle was to blame, I had thought at once. But I'm not the one who made the wine. I didn't know what to do with the bottle because if I tried to destroy it, there was no way of knowing how the product might interact with magic. I didn't want it to explode. So, I just buried it and tried not to think about its existence until you showed up."

"How did this bottle get into Arpina's room?" asked Lin.

"We have a wine cellar. Mostly, it is ordered by clients who watch the show, but sometimes they request a bottle to be taken to their room."

"So, Arpina went to the cellar, took the bottle..."

"Not really. She doesn't have the key. We have a manager, Melvin, in charge of the drinks and food distribution. He controls access to the cellar."

"With the exception of you and the owner, can anyone else borrow the keys from him?"

"He is not supposed to give them to anyone else."

"I have been informed that Mr Nogent collected his revenues each Tuesday. Did he explain why he came here on Sunday?" Lin shot McLee a surprised look. How did he find out so much detail in such a short time?

Mrs Strant was surprised by the abrupt change in conversation and took a moment to reply. "He told me that he would be busy on Tuesday and he wanted to get the money in advance. He must have had some business with that man who came with him, but who chose to wait for him outside."

"What man? What did he look like?" McLee looked like a big anaconda about to swallow his prey. He was a hunter.

"I didn't see anyone. I just suspected it was so because when the journal with the accounts page went missing, Mr Nogent was displeased and told me that someone was waiting for him. He was not always alone. Not that day, but I have seen him, a few times, walking towards the Retreat with a companion, but then his companion never went inside and has walked past while Mr Nogent came in to collect his money."

"I think we can return to the Ministry now," said Lin, thinking that Mrs Strant should not be informed who they were suspecting. McLee's questions were too obvious. "You will have to come with us, Mrs Strant."

The woman tensed, only for an instant eyeing the narrow alley like it was her only escape, and then hung her head in defeat. "As you wish," she said flatly.

Lin felt about the same way, even if they had uncovered an important clue. She suspected this capture would not go unnoticed by others and a long meeting would be called to discuss the sad results. She knew this meeting would not bring her anything positive.

chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 13

Lin talks to her boss.

Lin knew severe consequences were waiting for them when the Head of Magical Law Enforcement found time in his busy schedule to summon the four Aurors in charge of Inwood's case to his office. He had not personally checked any other investigation in the entire organisation, although there were plenty of significant cases to trouble the authorities.

Currently, Shackbolt was up, measuring the room with deliberate, long strides. The Aurors might have banded together, pressured by his newfound scepticism in their abilities, but it only caused a deeper rift between them. McLee and Ardall were openly at war with each other. More attuned to trouble, Colby pressed deeply into his chair and craned away from the fight, but didn't resist the urge to contribute inflammatory comments to fuel the fight.

Lin wished she could follow Colby's example and melt into the woodwork. Only pride urged her to observe with false calmness as her colleagues tested Shackbolt's nerves. Those nerves were made of steel, but dangerously at the breaking point. If he did snap, Lin hoped he'd reprimand the loudest first.

"I will not allow you to blame Declan Nogent for the murder and close this case," Shackbolt warned them. "Three corpses, not counting Inwood, and a couple of arrested accomplices in the aftermath. This is not how the Ministry must operate to re-establish the respect we deserve. Finding out how the murder took place is not our primary objective; we are to use this knowledge to deal with the responsible group."

"Everything is not as grave as it seems," Colby muttered from his corner. "We have new suspects. We hope to find some clues from the offender Mr McLee arrested, even if we can no longer question him."

"I swear, I have no idea how he got hold of the knife," McLee repeated for the hundredth time. "The Body Bind was strong, and I searched him myself before turning him over to the prison guards."

"You were in a hurry to get back," Ardall reasoned. "Maybe you missed something."

"I would never..."

Lin tried to block out their voices. When she and McLee had returned to the Ministry, leading Mrs Strant along, unpleasant news had been waiting for them. The man who had been arrested by McLee was dead. The attention of his guards had been diverted only for a moment, but it was long enough for the prisoner to end his life. Lin had no doubt he belonged to the group's inner circle. *Whatever they are after must be of enormous importance if the group members prefer death to betraying the secret.*

The circumstances of Ansel's death had seemed clear. The group must have been tracking Inwood at the same time that he had been looking for them. Nogent had recognised the Auror visiting his brothel. From the journal at the front desk he had determined Inwood's visiting hours and had developed a plan to kill the man the group could not risk attacking openly.

Speaking to the manager, Lin had learned that all bottles set aside on order for the rooms were marked accordingly. Nogent had come to the brothel one day, early, supposedly to collect the pay. He had poisoned the wine and removed the accounting journal from its usual place. He had created a reason to stay longer and watch his plan executed. Nogent had waited at the front desk, where he could see everything, while the attendant was away looking for the journal. When the right time came, Nogent had sent Mrs Strant to the second floor, intercepting her as she returned and feigning innocence. He had threatened Arpina and Gilda to keep quiet before carrying the body outside where Mrs Selwyn's nephew had been waiting. They'd walked it along the street, pretending to support a heavily drunk friend, then hid the body in the shop where they'd pierced Ansel's heart with the stiletto. The poison had served only to paralyze the system temporarily, creating the appearance of death, but it had not killed the victim. It was a precaution in case they have been caught before they could hide Inwood in the shop. The potion would eventually wear off without lasting harm to Inwood, so they could claim ignorance.

Another unique property of the potion was, after several hours in the body, it dissolved without a trace. It was simply bad luck that Mrs Selwyn had discovered the corpse too early at 3:00 p.m. By 8:00 p.m. the poison would have been gone, and the murder could have been passed off as the consequence of a common street brawl.

Had that been the case, Lin and the Heads of the various Ministry departments would not be sitting in Shackbolt's office, locked in a fight none of them could win. Their voices were rising in volume, and Lin was forced to pay attention to her colleagues again.

"Who knows what else Ms Belsmock told you that you are concealing," Ardall said loudly.

"I wasn't even the last one to talk to her," McLee retorted.

Lin felt everyone's attention suddenly turn to her. She pointedly looked back at Ardall, daring him to accuse her. They continued to stare at each other, as if looking away was tantamount to a confession of guilt.

Shackbolt interrupted their silent showdown. "I did not gather you here to listen to your childish accusations at each other! Detectives operate with facts: he went, he stole, he passed to, and that is all. You cannot put someone in Azkaban based on suspicions. You are counted among our best operatives; it should not be for me to remind you what we must do, much less how you should behave. You are dismissed. Next time I want a better insight into why Ansel was killed."

His four subordinates rose and headed for the door, thoroughly scolded.

"Lin," Shackbolt stopped her, "I want a word with you. Stay five more minutes."

Lin closed the door behind the last person to leave the room and faced her superior. She remained standing, feeling more comfortable on her feet than looking up at him from the chair, and instinctively crossed her arms over her chest.

"I would like to know whether Ardall is right."

Although the key was small, Lin suddenly felt its weight. She resisted the urge to place her hand in her pocket. Still, she was reluctant to confess, worried that the key would be taken from her and given to the curse-breaking department for a check up; then she would never see it again. She settled for a half truth. "There is something; I am not sure whether or not it is important. Arpina told me that Ansel had a pet name for her: the Trinovantes Queen. It could be just an endearment, but it is worth checking."

"You are planning on looking for this queen; meanwhile, everyone else is looking for Mrs Selwyn's nephew," Shacklebolt guessed. "I will not force you to tell others about it, yet, but I might in the near future if you are not successful."

Lin bit down her contradictions. She was sorely tempted to tell Shacklebolt how Ardall had concealed Inwood's full file from her. But she was confident she could deal with Ardall on her own, and it was not a good moment to present her boss with another problem. He had plenty to be displeased with, and unfortunately he was able to see that Lin was not at all remorseful about her own actions.

"I cannot say that I'm pleased with how loosely you are interpreting my orders," he told her when she voiced no objections. "To be honest, I have had doubts whether you are the most suitable candidate for the job and nearly chose someone else, precisely because you are not a team player."

"I work well on the teams that care more for the results than personal interests," Lin parried. "I find it odd that anyone would force different people to work together when they clearly show no interest in doing so."

"What I find odd is that McLee would neglect the job of searching his prisoners thoroughly. Most people do not choose their co-workers, and those co-workers don't always make a wonderful match, personality-wise, so this is not strange at all. Still, they find ways to co-exist."

"You believe that someone helped McLee's prisoner end his life?"

"Don't change the subject! It is your turn to listen to criticism, Lin, not mine. Please do so carefully, especially when it is deserved. I would hate to have to remove you from this case, but you must have realized by now how important it is."

"I am not the one changing the subject."

"Lin!"

There was so much menace in his voice that she involuntarily gripped her wand tight, looking into his eyes attentively.

Sharply, he turned away and went to the window. She didn't dare move an inch as he gathered his thoughts. His tone was no longer menacing but rough and unforgiving.

"Many dishonest individuals poured into the Ministry when Voldemort was a threat. They have jobs here, they have power, and they don't care about the laws. We are trying to root them out, but we cannot do it in a day or even in a month. However, this is too broad an observation to make any concrete accusations. You must realise how weak our current position is. Imagine if journalists, just like Rita Skeeter, were to get even the slightest hint that someone at the Ministry took part in a murder of a high-ranking member of law enforcement. Not only would this discredit us but if there really is a guilty party among us, they would hide so well that we would never catch them. This requires a lot of discretion and sensitivity. I know you can keep a secret, but you place your task above diplomacy and sensitivity towards our political position."

"Then why did you choose me?"

He didn't answer. As the minutes ticked into eternity, she realised that he didn't know what to do. Meanwhile, his pride didn't allow him to confess that. He hadn't intended to let her know his suspicions just yet. His accidental slip was a testament to how angry he was. Once, she had watched a TV program about martial arts where the master was showing his students how to fight blindfolded. Shacklebolt reminded her of that master. He couldn't see his opponent, but he felt the blows coming and defended against them. He must have chosen Lin as his defence based on his feelings, even though he could not justify them rationally.

"Your intuition has long earned a lot of credibility," she said as peacefully as she could to calm him. "It does seem overly convenient for the group that as soon as we catch one of them, he dies before we have a chance to question him."

Tension didn't leave his shoulders, but she guessed right. He had thought of the same thing.

"I am not convinced, but you may continue as you see fit, Lin, since you have not let me down before. At your own risk."

It was as good an explanation as she was going to get as to why he chose her. Realising this was her time to leave, Lin slipped out of his office.

On the other side of the door, Lin put her hand into her pocket. Her fingers gripped the cool metal strip that was the key. The touch of the small but tough piece was reassuring. Her will had to be just as strong if she hoped to solve this mystery.

Lin wasn't afraid to speak her mind, but she valued her job. She didn't want to be fired. She could take steps towards a compromise, but this requirement to please others would restrict her movements; meanwhile, the delay could cost lives. Somehow, she had to uncover the threat without getting too close. She was too deeply involved now to retreat. Most importantly, she had learned vital information from Shacklebolt. Someone at the Ministry was helping the group.