

Serpent in the Moonlight

by Celestial Melody

Nineteen years after Voldemort's defeat, a young girl named Riana is living an innocuous life with her adoptive Muggle parents *until* she receives her acceptance letter from Hogwarts.

Escaping the clutches of her loving but stifling parents, Riana travels to London and from there to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There, Riana is viewed as mysterious, cunning, sly, and—though her parentage is unknown—is chosen for Slytherin House.

The two halves of her life clash, as her anorexia battles with the disdain of fellow Slytherin students for Muggle-born witches and wizards. Follow Riana on her journey through the world of wizardry and her search to find a true home, the identity of her real parents, as well as her inner conflict with anorexia.

Skeleton Hands

Chapter 1 of 20

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Author's Notes

IMPORTANT ADDITION/BEWARE OF LIGHT SPOILERS

Due to the release of *Deathly Hallows*, I decided to clean up my story in order to fit it into the epilogue that JKR wrote. The epilogue will not have much to do with "Serpent," but I really needed to reconsider certain aspects of my story. I feel that this reconsideration has actually made "Serpent" into a better story.

The biggest change I made (discounting small changes made throughout the chapters) is the deletion of the original chapter 18, Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. If you have read DH, you'll realize that this chapter could never have taken place.

The original characters in this story are my own and I reserve the rights to them. This list includes (at the moment): Riana, Fabian, Hyacinth, Evertrue, and Amaryllis.

In addition, this story contains material that isn't suitable for young children or those with delicate, easily-offended dispositions. There is a conflict with anorexia throughout the story, and this should not be taken into consideration lightly. If you are an individual who is squeamish about such matters, this is not the story for you. I say this in order to protect *your* feelings. Thank you so much!

Now, and for the remainder of this story, I would like to thank my wonderful beta, Evie, for her wonderful editing and guidance. I love you!!! :)

Too, I express my gratitude to Magical Maeve, SummerSolstice, Dani, notsosaintly, and the administrators of both MuggleNet and TPP for their help in editing my chapter.

That said ... enjoy!

P.S. After this, no warnings will be given unless absolutely imperative to the chapter. Thanks!

P.P.S. If you're wondering why Riana seems so mature, please understand that at her age (the tween years,) such mature behavior is perfectly normal. If you've never seen *Now and Then*, please do not complain about Riana's behavior. The young girls in that movie act EXTREMELY mature for their age and they're normal kids. Most eleven and twelve year old girls I know are very "mature," and many seem to take life seriously. 'Tis a pity, but that's how it goes... Thanks for not judging! =)

Skeleton Hands

A soft breeze gusted throughout the small, residential community of St. Mary's Green in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire. Each house, seemingly identical to another, was silent and dark. All except one.

Riana Carrington held her hands out her second-story bedroom window and noted with satisfaction how each individual bone stood out in the ghostly blue moonlight. The dark, filtering moonbeams gave her already thin hands a skeletal appearance. Turning her hands over and over, a small frown suddenly creased Riana's brow, and she quickly passed her right hand...middle finger to thumb...around her left wrist, breathing a deep sigh of relief as her thumb and finger overlapped.

"Riana? Darling?"

Suddenly, from the dark shadows on the opposite side of the room, came the soft, dulcet tones of her mum, Leanne, drifting into Riana's silent contemplation. Biting back a gasp of surprise, Riana whipped her slight body away from the window as her five foot four, pixie-like mother entered her room and approached Riana hesitantly.

"Sweetheart," Leanne began, worry lines creasing her brow, "are you all right?" Riana's mother's pale brow stood out, framed by clouds of chestnut colored hair in the moonlight. The dark merino wool shawl she clasped around her shoulders gave the impression that her delicate head and neck were suspended in the air.

"I'm fine, Mum." Riana glanced quickly up at her concerned mother, then guiltily flashed her almond-shaped eyes down and bowed her head. Her mother walked closer, continuing to frown, sincere worry exuding from her very stance. She reached toward her daughter with one long, pale hand but stopped as Riana shrank into the window cushions and once more turned her slanted gaze out to the street below.

Leanne sensed that something was wrong with her daughter, but she could not fathom what a loved, eleven year old would have to worry about. She closed her eyes momentarily and opened them again to see that her daughter was still staring out the window. She sighed and turned to leave, looking back over her shoulder once more; Riana still stared out the window, her shoulder blades poking through the thin nightgown she wore. Leanne shook her head, opened the bedroom door softly to leave, and murmured, "Try to get some sleep, Sweetheart."

~~Sometimes, loving eyes cannot see the imperfections in those they adore.~~

Riana was painfully thin and getting skinnier every day. Her obsession with food was noticed by her mother, who only thought that her daughter was being picky and that her childish preferences would disappear with age. Little did she know, however, that her daughter was not suffering from simple childish precociousness, but a truly horrifying, life-threatening eating disorder.

*

Cold and damp ... This is odd ... why would anybody want to live down here? Live? Do people live here? Do I live here? Ugh! This can't be right. I hate the cold. My nails are blue ... It's cold; too cold. Dungeons! Dungeons are cold and wet and damp. What is this place? Where am I? Oh and ... UGH! Now something hot on my face; too hot ... pricking me! Prick! Prick! STOP PRICKING ME!

"STOP!" The word screeched into the sunny room as Riana tumbled off her window seat onto the floor, landing painfully on her pencil-thin arm. Wet with morning dew from the open window that she'd fallen asleep next to, she blinked slowly and then screwed her eyes shut, willing the sun to spontaneously burn out. But of course nothing happened. She didn't think it would. Hissing under her breath, Riana crawled to her bed, favoring her arm and edging slowly along the carpet-covered floorboards. She pulled up the pink bed skirt...Pink! She hated pink ... it was a horribly obvious color, but her mum liked it and that was the end of the matter...and poked her head under the bed, groping for something.

"Ah, ha!" she cried, her long fingers seizing on a piece of material, which she quickly pulled toward her, hitting her head on the bed frame as she squirmed out from under the bed. She dropped her head to the floor, rubbing the fast-forming bump, and cursed, using language that would have made her mum gasp in horror. After the throbbing had subsided, Riana sat up slowly, pulling her nightdress over her head. She leapt to her feet, then, the pain in her head forgotten, as she dashed to the full-length mirror and stood, naked but for a pair of white cotton knickers, in front of it. She counted each protruding rib until she determined that all were still visible. A small smile tugged at the corners of her proud mouth, and she darted back to her bed, picked up the piece of clothing and pulled it over her head.

Perfect, she thought. Whoever invented the color black was a genius. It goes with absolutely everything.

Despite her silent congratulations on her wardrobe, all that Riana ever wore was black and grey, so she really had no reason to think that black goes with "everything" since she had never really tested black with any other color.

Now ... where's my skirt?

Riana stood by her bed, surveying her messy room. The décor was pink. Pink curtains, pink bedspread, pink cushions, pink, pink, pink! It was like this room didn't even belong to Riana! It certainly didn't reflect her personality, though the mess was *definitely* Riana's. Dark clothing flung everywhere, hanging from her lamps, on her desk and chair, and magazine clippings of excessively thin models were among the many articles that decorated the "Think Pink" bedroom. Riana waded through the mess and prowled to her closet, opening it and pushing through the hangers with an air of impatience. She spotted her favorite skirt, the pleated, grey one, just as her mum called to her.

"Riana, darling! Breakfast's ready!"

Jumping into her skirt and pulling her fingers hastily through her straight, black, shoulder-length hair, Riana dashed toward her bedroom door, tripping on a pile of clothes and falling to the floor in the process. She cursed again, using language shocking in an eleven year old, and scrambled to her feet.

Mum's always telling me to go slower... was the first thought that crossed Riana's mind as she opened her door and turned left, heading down the stairs to the sunny, and disgustingly cheerful, kitchen. Her father looked up as she entered the room and gave her his 'million-dollar' smile; he looked like an ad for a toothpaste commercial.

"Oi, sugarplum! How's my little girl this morning?" Riana's father, John, asked her. He was a very striking man. His tanned skin, blond hair and blue eyes often caught the attention of many women in church. He was a pastor, and he led a flock of seemingly pious women, who attended church...Riana was sure...for the sole purpose of

watching the tall, handsome preacher deliver his usual dull sermon.

Make no mistake, Riana loved her father, but she wasn't altogether fond of the whole religion aspect. Indeed, she believed in a higher power, but she didn't feel that one must spend hours kneeling on the floor, begging forgiveness for a couple of white lies.

Nevertheless, Riana gave her father her biggest smile from her thin, arrogant mouth and said "Great, Daddy. Absolutely fantastic!" visualizing, as she did so, her ribs poking out that morning in the mirror.

John Carrington smiled, said "That's my girl," and returned to his kippers, fried eggs, and morning coffee. Riana quickly turned her head away from the food, biting back the sense of revulsion that she always got whenever anyone ate the sort of food that was on her father's plate.

"Sweetie, do you want some?" Her mum's soft voice asked. Riana looked up with a surprised look on her face. There Leanne stood, smiling happily, with an already-cooked egg in a frying pan in one hand, spatula in the other, waiting expectantly.

"Um... no thanks, Mum, I think I'll have some fruit, if you don't mind?" Riana quickly squashed any feelings of guilt she might have received from the hurt look on her mum's face. She walked to the refrigerator and opened the door; her eyes glazed over as she reached into the drawer labeled 'Fruit' and pulled out the first thing she touched.

*I can't help that she likes to cook things that I won't eat,*Riana rationalized to herself. *She knows that I like fruit ... and, I'm not very hungry anyway.*Still, in the back of her mind, something small and honorable was telling Riana that she was wrong and that she should take the breakfast her mother had prepared. But, honestly, she did not want to.

After slamming shut the refrigerator door, Riana walked to the table where her mum had joined her father. Looking down at her thin hands, Riana discovered that the object she held was a plum, and bit into the purple flesh. But just as she did, her mother let out a stifled gasp. Riana looked up, her hand to her mouth, the plum in it still attached firmly to her front teeth.

"Oh, no, honey," Leanne admonished primly. "Not *yet* ... No, dear, not until you've washed it; there could be nasty chemicals on that plum that could make you very sick."

Riana's mother stood gracefully and walked to the other side of the faux pine table, taking her daughter's plum out of the thin hands, ignoring the sullen fury that Riana's eyes flashed in her direction, and proceeded to the sink. Leanne turned on the faucet, icy water gushing over the plum in her hands. She stood, for several minutes shifting from one foot to the other as she washed the plum.

Riana narrowed her eyes as a flood of heat seared through her veins, causing her face to flush an ugly mottled red. She glared at her mother who suddenly, unexpectedly yelped and sprang back from the faucet squeezing the plum in a tight, convulsive grasp.

"What is it, Leanne? Pumpkin, are you okay?" John looked up from his newspaper, frowning slightly at his wife's exclamation.

Leanne wrapped her shaking hands in a checkered towel and walked to the freezer, opening it and pulling out some ice, which she preceded to place in the towel, along with Riana's plum and her hands. She chuckled nervously, pain evident in her big, dark blue eyes.

"Yes, yes, silly me, I must have turned the hot water on. Only I don't remember doing that..." she mused as an afterthought. Preoccupied, Leanne approached the table, handed Riana her mashed, dripping plum, and continued to nurse her flushed hand.

Riana looked at the mutilated plum in her hands; what little appetite she had had was long gone. Replacing it was a fear that she had unconsciously hurt her own mother. She remembered the anger she had felt as her meal was tugged unceremoniously from her hands...the boiling rage, the scalding fury, the disdain...it was all there. She had wanted that plum. Not because she was hungry but because she was sick of being treated like a baby! And then ... then, something inside her had snapped. She had been watching her mum at the sink and suddenly a sharp splinter of heat had penetrated through her brain and the water in the pipes had boiled.

Letter from a Leprechaun

Chapter 2 of 20

Riana receives a letter from Hogwarts...

Letter from a Leprechaun

Breakfast was finished in silence. John was reading the newspaper; Leanne was absently eating the fried egg that Riana had rejected, her injured hand wrapped in the checkered towel, resting in her lap. Riana was sitting, just staring at the plum ... thinking. The doorbell rang. Riana murmured, "I'll get it," and jumped up from the table, passing the rubbish bin and throwing her uneaten plum into it where it landed with a "Bang!" on the metal bottom. She slouched into the hall, ignoring the numerous baby pictures of her on the wall, and approached the mahogany door.

Grasping the cold, gold handle, Riana pulled the heavy door open and stood, face-to-face, with the daily postman. He smiled cheekily and greeted her with a "Top o' the morning." Riana simply grinned her arrogant little smile in reply.

Mr. O'Toole, a tiny, fiery-haired, green-eyed Irishman, was one of the few people that Riana liked and, although they never chatted extensively, each understood the other and kept conversation to a minimum. Usually there was a cheerful greeting, followed by a few comments about the weather, ending with a buoyant farewell, and Mr. O'Toole would continue his jaunty journey down the front walk and to the Hamilton's house next door.

However, this morning was different. Mr. O'Toole gave her his customary greeting and followed up with, "Wella, and now, who'd a-be writin' to a young chit like ya'self? Couldna be an admirer, could i'?" He chuckled, his freckled chin jiggling, at the bemused look on Riana's face and handed her an official looking envelope that was...as far as Riana could see...made of expensive-looking parchment. Mr. O'Toole grinned his wide grin, lifted his hand to his head to tip an invisible hat, gave a slight bow and bid his "lady" farewell and "g'day."

Riana smiled slightly, her gaze on the letter in her hands, stepped back slightly into the cool of her hallway and slammed the heavy door. She walked slowly back into the kitchen, turning the letter over and over as she handed the rest of the post to her mum.

John glanced up from his newspaper and, noticing the letter in Riana's hands, questioned:

"What's that, sugarplum?" His words dripped with undisguised curiosity. Leanne glanced up from the pile of mail in front of her on the table and looked at her daughter with

surprise. Not many people wrote to Riana, except at Christmas or birthdays, and those letters were always from her grandmother in Wales.

"Is it from Gran, darling?" Leanne asked casually, hoping against hope that this unconventional letter was from someone as ordinary and commonplace as her own mum. Her heart sank at the tiny, negative shake of Riana's head.

"No," and then, defensively, as Leanne reached out a hand, "but it's addressed to me..."

And the letter most certainly was for Riana; the instructions could not have been clearer, it was almost as if someone was spying on the Carrington house. The directions were incredibly precise:

Ms. R. Carrington

The Pink Upstairs Bedroom

227 Marigold Lane

St. Mary's Green

Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire

"...and it's from some school..." Riana was cut off as her mother squealed happily and spouted,

"It *must* be from that boarding school we applied to, sweetheart! Oh, open it up, darling!"

Turning to John, she remarked, "You know, Mrs. Hamilton, that lovely lady next door, referred this school to me because her own Lillian attended there a few years ago and..." Leanne's incessant babble was cut short as Riana harshly spoke up. She was holding the, now open, envelope in one hand; the other grasped a sheet of parchment.

"No, it's not from that boarding school. It's from someplace called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." Riana looked up, confusion shining in her light grey eyes. Seeing no answering expression on her parents' equally bemused countenances, she again turned her attention to the letter. "Listen, I'll read it to you:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmistress: MINERVA MCGONAGALL

(Order of the Phoenix, International Confed. of Witches, Committee for the Preservation of Freedoms for Muggleborn Witches and Wizards)

Dear Ms. Carrington,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Penelope Clearwater

Penelope Clearwater,

Deputy Headmistress

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Voice trailing off, Riana felt a surge of excitement; she quickly dug further into the envelope and pulled out a very long, second sheet of parchment. This one was a list. A very strange list with odd requirements, but it sounded quite intriguing as she quickly skimmed it with her thin, grey eyes. It read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL

of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)
2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear
3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)
4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags.

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emeric Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

1 wand

1 cauldron (pewter, standard size 2)

1 set glass or crystal phials

1 telescope

1 set brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad.

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS

ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS

Riana finished reading the letter and waited, eyes cast downward, for her parents' reply. When none came, she looked up, frustrated, and met the shocked, silent stares of her mum and dad. The broad smile, which she hadn't been aware she was wearing, slipped off her face and was replaced with a cold look of determination in her eyes and an arrogant set to her lips. Her pointed chin jerked up. "Do you disapprove of *this*, too?" she asked, using the most caustic and biting tone she could achieve as Leanne opened and shut her mouth like a goldfish.

"John," Leanne breathed, clutching her husband's left arm. "John ... I don't know what to ... John, what is this?"

With a grim look on his face, John Carrington turned to his daughter and held out his right hand. Riana hugged her letter to her chest tightly. John sighed and beckoned impatiently with his fingertips.

"Riana, let me see the letter. Please give it to me. NOW, Riana." His eyes sharpened into a flinty blue as Riana reluctantly handed over her letter and stood (like an admonished child) with her hands clasped together behind her back. However, despite her meek posture, Riana was feeling anything but humble. She felt her mind going white hot, then suddenly remembered the incident earlier in the kitchen and forced herself to remain calm.

John read the letter for a very, very long time (or else he read through the entire thing more than once), and after he was finished, looked up at Riana, his head cocked to one side...eyes bright like a bird...for about three full minutes.

Finally, when Riana could not stand the suspense any longer, she blurted out a very demanding, "So?"

"Darling, this could very well be a joke," Leanne looked at her only daughter compassionately. Then, when Riana opened her mouth as if to protest this outlook, she said, "I don't want you to get your hopes up, honey, that's all. And, you know, I think maybe it's best if you go out of the room while I talk to your father about this. All right, sweet pea?"

Riana looked frantically from her mum to her father; then her sharp chin jutted out and she gave a curt nod. She stood up from the table and left the kitchen, walking jerkily like a robot. Once outside the sunny cheerfulness of the kitchen, Riana's burning, evil feelings came back, and she had to calm herself again as she walked through the hall and sat down on the plush velvet and mahogany sofa placed in the foyer, her eyes staring straight ahead...still and grey as fogged glass.

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After a long while...it must have been thirty or forty-five minutes at least...Riana heard her mum call from the kitchen. She shook her head to clear it from a stupor and rose lightly from the sofa. Her bird-like bones creaked as she walked stiffly down the hallway and entered the kitchen. Both parents were in the same positions they had been when she'd left. Crossing to the table, Riana stood and waited for her parents' decision, which was quick to come.

Sighing, John Carrington straightened his head and looked down his nose at his daughter. "I'm a pastor," he stated, "I don't condone witchcraft. This letter," he said, tapping the artifact in question on the table, bending the corner of the parchment, "*seems* to be legitimate, it is extremely official-looking, but there is no possible way that such a place could exist."

Looking once more at Riana balefully, John picked up his newspaper, because as far as he was concerned, that was the end of the matter. Riana looked up at her father in stark amazement; she could not believe that her father, who was a relatively lenient reverend compared to other worship leaders, would dismiss this fascinating letter so quickly.

"That's it? But, Dad, you can't mean that this is the end of all discussion about my school!"

Leanne looked toward her only child with doe-like eyes, full of reproach and a strange sprinkling of sadness, "It isn't *your* school, dear, and we forbid you to learn the art of witchcraft; your father...and I quite agree with him...thinks it's best not to put yourself in tempting situations." Leanne nodded sagely as she watched Riana, whose mouth was hanging open, and then nodded again, tilting her head forward to look at the hands resting in her lap.

Riana snapped her jaw shut, sucked in her sunken cheeks, jumped up from the table (knocking over her chair in the process), and stormed out of the room.

I know I'm ungrateful, Riana fumed as she stomped up the stairs to her sickeningly cheerful bedroom, *but they don't realize how horrible it is for me here. There is nobody at school the least bit like me; there are no people who I care about there, they're all much too stupid.* She walked to her door, wrenched it open, stalked through and slammed the pink monstrosity shut with great vigor.

Flinging her lithe body onto her bed, Riana gave a low growl and grabbed her pillow stuffing her face into it, muffling her anguished, desperate sobs as she cried bitterly. She twisted the pillowcase, feeling the feathers moving around inside.

I will go to this school, if it exists, and they can't stop me. I'm nearly grown up, now, and I won't let them control me!

~~It is hard when you're eleven, not to imagine that you know everything.~~

With this momentous decision made, Riana's sudden outburst of tears abated quickly, and she sprang up from the bed and walked grimly to her bedroom door. For the second time that day, she opened it and, setting her jaw firmly, proceeded down the hall to the stairwell, pausing at the top. The dimly-lit, miniature chandelier above her head flickered in spurts of yellow light as she gathered her courage, took a deep breath, and put one foot on the top step.

Midnight Deception

Chapter 3 of 20

Riana prepares to leave her home for Hogwarts...

Midnight Deception

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, Riana took a right turn and reentered the sparkling, spotless kitchen. Her parents were sitting in the exact same spots they had been when she'd dashed out of the room only five minutes before. Leanne was staring, absorbed, into her cup of French vanilla coffee, but looked up when Riana entered the room. Riana's father was still reading his *London Daily*.

"Mum, Dad, I'm sorry for my tantrum." Riana swallowed quickly as the lie rose easily to her lips; she wasn't a bit sorry. "And I've decided to forget about that whole letter thing. It was probably a joke anyway."

Here, she giggled, a high, forced giggle that was not her own because her parents' complacency was causing the blood in her veins to boil and she knew that she would start screaming in a moment. But she bit back the temptation and continued. "But I'd also like to know if I could, you know, have my ... *the* letter, because it *is* mine and, well, I'd like to put it in my scrapbook."

Riana's mum *loved* scrapbooking and encouraged her daughter to keep one. Of course Riana hated the thing and put it off, telling her mother that she kept up with it faithfully—yet another lie, although small and insignificant. However, the mention of the scrapbook did clinch the matter, and Leanne smiled at her daughter, picked up the letter from the table and held it out to Riana, who walked up and gave her mum a tiny and unwilling hug of thanks. Leanne was big on hugging. John continued reading his newspaper.

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"Ding! DONG..." The downstairs grandfather clock chimed the hour, and a very late hour it was, indeed. Riana crept down the stairs, dressed in her thin, flannel nightgown. If anyone had been watching her, they might have thought that a skeleton-like wraith was making its way down from a moon-lit recess. As Riana stepped off the last step into the hall, her slanted grey eyes narrowed further still as she slowly looked to the left and then swung her head to the right, straight, ebony hair rippling in the moonlight, echoing the motion of her small head.

Stealthily, Riana edged to the left and entered her father's study. Pausing as she stepped through the open door, Riana took another guilty look over her shoulder and, seeing no one, proceeded to the far edge of the room. She lifted a portrait of her mum, her dad, and herself and peeked underneath.

Ha! she shouted, silently, oh, so silently. *Found you...*

There, hidden behind the harmless portrait, was her father's safe. Once, Riana had been skipping merrily down the stairs and, by pure chance—or was it fate?—had looked to the left and seen her father swinging the portrait out of the way and fitting a small, gold key into the lock that opened the concealed safe. As she had watched—so many years ago—her father had reached into the small, cement hole in the wall and stuffed in several stacks of money: it was this money that Riana was after now.

Riana swung the portrait quietly back into place and began a systematic search for the key. She opened her father's desk drawers—all of them. Nothing. She cursed quietly. Staring slit-eyed around the room, her eyes fell on a small Chinese urn placed decoratively on a small table in a corner.

Could that be...? she wondered and resolutely walked over to it. There was no stopper in the urn, and she peeked fearfully over the top to see if, by chance, there were any spiders that she would have accidentally disturbed. No such colony appeared to exist, and she reached her bony arm, arm-pit high, deep into the urn. Her fingers groped around in the dusty darkness, searching for any slight imperfection in the smooth recesses of the urn.

She was beginning to feel that this might not be her father's hiding spot after all when her pencil-thin fingers brushed over a small, cold, metallic shape. She gasped in surprise and ecstasy and then quickly froze, listening to see if anyone else in the house had heard her audible breath. There was no sound from upstairs—Riana breathed a silent sigh of relief and groped again for the key; her fingers found it, and she seized the tiny, metal object and drew it out into the cold, moonlit room.

The gold key rested on her palm, blue in the filtering moonbeams and cool, insolent. She liked keys. They did not give up their secrets easily and neither did she. A small smile tilted the corners of Riana's proud mouth up into a smirk, and she marched across the room, lifted the portrait and resolutely placed the key in the lock, where it fit perfectly.

Barely suppressing a shout of triumph, Riana turned the key and heard a satisfying click in the recesses of the grey safe. She pulled the handle and opened the safe door, her eyes dazzled at the sight of the piles of pound notes and other greater bills.

She turned around once more to make sure no one was lurking—*Lurking like a snitch*—she thought angrily, and, when she saw no one, began to grasp the piles of money and shove them into a purple cloth bag with a gold drawstring that used to hold her collection of marbles.

After stuffing in only as much money as she thought she would need to buy school supplies and a train ticket, Riana shut the safe door and quickly locked it. Swinging the family portrait back into place and straightening it, she hurried over to the urn, stuck her arm deep inside and nestled the golden key back in the bottom, among its fellow urn-mates—the dust bunnies.

Riana prowled to the door and looked back at the study to check if it was in pristine order—it was. She allowed herself a tiny smile of triumph and, walking a few paces forward, began creeping back up the stairs. She had only managed several steps when she heard the floorboards in the hall above her creak. Her slanted eyes widened in fear, and she quickly pivoted and dashed down the stairs, leaping from the last step to the floor as lightly and with as much grace as a cat.

She sprang up, then, and glanced wildly from side to side. She couldn't go in the study ... that was absolutely ridiculous. She looked to her right and heard the footsteps on the second floor walk closer to the top of the staircase. In an instant, she made her decision and darted down the hallway to the kitchen.

Riana stood in the moonlight-bathed kitchen in desperate misery—there was nowhere to hide. Her parents would surely ask what she had been doing if they found her wide awake, clutching a purple bag full of money.

That's the least that they would do, Riana thought bitterly; *I'd be grounded for a month.*

Gazing around the immaculate cleanliness of her mum's kitchen, Riana spotted a crystal drinking glass drying upside down on a fluffy, white towel by the sink. She promptly walked toward it, her gaze zeroing in on the cabinet door under the sink as she did so. She knelt down quickly; her thin body hunched over itself, and opened the

white cabinet, shoving her bag inside. Straightening up, Riana grabbed the glass and filled it with water from the tap; she put the glass to her lips just as her mother walked in, yawning sleepily.

Parseltongue

Chapter 4 of 20

Leanne remembers something terrifying about Riana...

Parseltongue

Leanne stood stock-still, her surprise at finding Riana in the kitchen evident on her piquant face. Riana was looking slightly fearful as she gulped down water in long, drawn out, thirst-quenching draughts. But—and this emotion passed unnoticed by Riana as she was absorbed in reflection of the despicable deed she had just performed—there was also a tiny glimmer of fear mirrored in Leanne's own blue eyes as she faced her daughter; the only daughter she would ever have. The daughter she had known for eleven years ...

Well, she reminded herself, almost eleven years.

Every day, Leanne was pained as she observed Riana growing away from her, away from John, away from her sweet disposition ... away from it all as she grew up.

*It was hard, she decided mentally as she gazed at her child silhouetted in the ghostly moonlight, *insanely and madly difficult, really, having a child that really wasn't your own. A child whose past was a mystery.**

*

Exactly eleven years ago in 2006 Leanne Carrington and her husband John had left Britain to minister in China. They had been trying to have a baby before they left, but with no luck. Leanne was heartbroken and John thought that a journey away from London would do them both a great deal of good. How right he was!

Upon arrival in Hong Kong, John and Leanne had begun their ministry by visiting orphanages. They both adored little children and, due to the fact that Leanne was unable to conceive, decided to assuage their pain by spreading God's word to the children. It was at "The Innocent Children Orphanage" that Leanne first set midnight-blue eyes on Riana. The precious girl was only an infant then; a sweet, cherubic angel tagged 'Miriam' with slanting grayish-blue eyes and a head-full of downy raven hair. Leanne fell in love with 'Miriam' the moment she saw her laying in her little crib in the cheerful orphanage nursery decorated by a cartoon jungle-animal motif.

It wasn't too long after that fateful day that John and Leanne were packing their trunks and moving back to Britain with their new baby safely tucked in Leanne's arms. The nine years afterward were an absolute joy for Leanne, and she knew that John felt the same way. As a matter of fact, it wasn't until Riana had started school that she'd become a less than an exemplary child.

Of course, Leanne knew that she was biased in regard to Riana ... but she really *did* believe that Riana was perfect, until ... that one day last year. That one extraordinary and memorable day.

*

It was in March ... that time of year when everything is green and new and lovely. It was three days before Riana's tenth birthday, which they celebrated on March 21, not knowing the true date of Riana's birth. Leanne had taken Riana out shopping, and they had stopped in front of a lovely boutique with colorful print sun dresses and lovely pixie shoes. Leanne loved all manner of clothing articles fluffy and cute ... She exclaimed in ecstasy as she looked in the glistening glass window of "Madame Isabelle's Clothing for the Well-Dressed Young Lady."

"Darling, let's go in. We'll get you a beautiful new dress for your birthday and shoes to match! How does that sound, precious?" Leanne turned to gaze with shining eyes on her daughter, but had found Riana looking less than enthusiastic. In fact, she looked downright miserable. She was gazing off into the distance with a frown on her beautiful, pointed little face. Leanne furrowed her own brow and leaned forward, placing both of her slender white hands on Riana's shoulders.

"Baby ... what is it? What do you see? Don't you want to go in to the shop? Or would you rather Mummy take you home? If you're tired, that's fine ... We can come back another day." Leanne hastened to reassure her child, determined that nothing would ruin their special day together.

Shaking her head, Riana had looked back up at her mother, but the gaze that she directed at Leanne was unlike anything that Leanne had ever seen in those eyes, and she knew those eyes very, very well. The expression in Riana's slanted grey eyes was one of smoldering fury and more than a little bewilderment. Leanne was taken aback and impulsively dropped her hands from her daughter's shoulders, gasping and backing away from those horrifying, glittery, cold eyes.

But then, Riana had smiled an odd, diminutive smirk and shook her head as if to clear the fog that had collected there in that minute's abnormality. She stepped forward, held out her delicately boned hand and whispered:

"Nothing, Mummy, I'm absolutely perfect. Well, *maybe* a little tired. But if you don't mind so much, do you think maybe we could just go home?" She then added, "But there *is* somewhere that I would like to go first. Will you take me, Mummy?"

A fresh and sincere desire radiated from Riana's rapt gaze, and Leanne couldn't say, "No," so she let Riana take her by the hand and lead her away down the sidewalk.

*

Stopping in front of a small shop, Uncle Buck's Tropical Animal Emporium, Leanne looked at her little daughter with questioning eyes. Riana simply smiled and led the way into the shop.

Inside, the atmosphere was dingy and there was a great deal of noise. Leanne shrank toward her daughter as a particularly scruffy parrot squawked in a brass cage that was in dire need of repair. There was no one behind the counter and, as far as Leanne could see, the entire shop was deserted and they were the only souls brave enough to venture into the depths of London's dirtiest pet shop.

Riana walked on, some strange force compelling her, shoving her to the back of the shop where multitudes of dingy glass aquarium tanks were lined in rows. Leanne trailed behind and glanced at a smudged sign on the wall, which read, "Snakes," in a very large and messy scrawl. Written in an equally loopy, crooked hand was a qualifier

stating that the snakes were, "Of the Tropical and Remarkable Variety: Enter and Prepare to be Fascinated." Leanne looked once more at Riana; why would her daughter want to come here? Riana normally didn't even *like* animals; she certainly had never asked for a puppy or kitten on her birthday.

These were the thoughts traipsing through Leanne's mind as Riana came to a stop in front of one of the glass aquariums. Then, to Leanne's horror and utter revulsion, her precious baby, her nine-year-old Riana opened her thin aristocratic mouth and began *hissing* at the snakes. But that wasn't the worst part, oh, no no no, not at all ... not by far; the worst part was when the snakes started hissing *back*.

A jet-black serpent coiled its body up and slithered along the glass, its evil forked tongue flicking in and out as it stared unblinkingly at Riana. Leanne watched in bewilderment as another snake, this one bright green in color, slowly uncurled itself from a dirty, artificial branch, picked up its head and began hissing, too. Snakes in all of the cages followed suit, and a chorus of sibilant sounds filled the air. Jerking out of her paralysis, Leanne dashed forward with a terrified cry and grabbed Riana's hand, pulling her away from the cages, away from the snakes, away from the terrible hissing.

Leanne dared not look back at Riana, who was putting up a strong fight, for she feared what she would see. The memory of those cold grey eyes was still fresh in her mind.

Only when the two reached the door, which in her frightened haste Leanne could not remember how to open properly, and burst out into the sunshine of one of London's rare clear days, only then did Leanne dare look at Riana. Her daughter was perfectly calm. Her face was impassive; her mouth was drawn and severe, but her eyes ... they held a sort of mockery, and Leanne understood then that her baby girl was gone forever.

Riana's Escape

Chapter 5 of 20

Riana leaves her home for Hogwarts...

Riana's Escape

Such were the painful memories that pursued one another through Leanne's drowsy mind as she stood framed in the doorway, bathed in cool blue moonlight, arrested by the unexpected sight of her wraith-like daughter.

*

Riana gulped down the cool water, counteracting the panic flowing through her veins like hot coursing blood. She glimpsed her mother out of the corner of her sloping eye and was startled back into action by her mother's blank stare. Riana slowly removed the crystal glass from her lips, sighed as if her every desire—that desire being nothing more than to fetch a cool glass of water—had been satisfied and turned to face her mother. Aware of her predicament, Riana sensed her face catch fire ... She felt guilty as a result of her midnight deception and was immensely thankful for the darkly lit room.

At the questioning look on her mother's tired sleep-puffed face, Riana decided to fabricate a fail proof excuse—one that was simple and commonplace. To do so, she needed to lie which was something that she happened to be skilled at. One doesn't talk to snakes and have a "forked" tongue for nothing.

"Mummy, what are *you* doing awake?" She yawned for effect. "I only came down for a drink of water. Are you feeling sick?"

Riana placed what she hoped was a concerned tone in her voice and, as expected, Leanne's shocked and still visage melted into a soft smile at the gentle words issuing from her darling daughter's pale throat. Taking swaying, elegant steps toward the sink, Leanne murmured, "No, sweet pea, I'm fine. I heard a noise and I came down to see what it was." Here she shook her head sleepily and sighed. "It just so happens to be you." The scared look in Leanne's eyes had long since disappeared and was replaced by an adoring gaze.

Riana almost breathed a sigh of relief but caught herself just in time for such an exclamation could betray her nighttime odyssey. Furthermore, as relieved as Riana was, she still felt that she needed to get away from her mum before she did something to reveal her secret: the drawstring cloth sack of money hidden under the sink.

"Well, I'm sleepy," another yawn, "so I'm off to bed; I love you, Mum, see you in the morning," Riana spoke smoothly, the lies rolling off her tongue. She turned to leave just as Leanne reached out her graceful arms, causing Riana to stop mid-stride, her already-frayed emotions in a tangle.

Despite her treachery, Riana wasn't an innately evil person, and she truly loved her mum and dad. She would miss them, but they were stifling her, limiting her abilities, keeping her from that which she desired most.

Nevertheless, Riana knew that it would be a long time before she saw her tiny mum again, so she swallowed her pride, her anger, her resentment, and stepped forward into the embrace of her violet-scented mother.

The two slight frames clung to one another for a few seconds and then broke apart as Riana danced lightly to the side and flashed out of the room. She leapt up the stairs, two at a time, tiptoed down the hall and, reaching for her door handle, quietly opened it and let herself into her dark room.

She flung herself onto her bed for the second time that night and frowned, all thoughts of her mother flying out of her head ... She had not been caught and that was what was most important.

Where can I get those supplies? she mused, absently grasping one wrist between her thumb and finger as she had the evening before. Satisfied that she hadn't gained an ounce, Riana rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Yes, she had money now and—she turned to look at the room that had been so chaotic earlier that day but was now organized and packed into two small suitcases and a duffle bag—she was packed and ready to leave. Now she only needed to retrieve her money—*Your* parents' *money*, the soft, honorable voice in her mind reminded her—from underneath the kitchen sink.

She quickly stood up and began to move around the room, pacing, trying to wrench those little thoughts from her mind. She would not be weak! She would not give into the pitiful silent pleadings of her mother nor her father's strict "That's my final word."

*

Her decision made, Riana readied herself to leave that very night. She could take a bus to London and from there to King's Cross railway station. While in London she could buy supplies ... She would just look around until she found the correct shops.

~~When you are eleven, the dangers of the world seem far away and one does not ever consider the possibility of injury.~~

*

Creeping to her bedroom door, Riana slowly sank to the floor and pressed her ear to the wood. She heard the creaking of stairs, the soft tread of graceful footsteps, the quiet squeaking of door hinges and then the "click" of a shutting door—her mum was going back to sleep and the coast was clear. Riana hoisted her thin body to her feet and hugged both arms tightly around herself—her hands nearly met behind her back—and she stood twisting from side to side, barely refraining from performing a little jig as her thin mouth opened in the biggest smile it could manage.

I'm leaving! Riana thought happily. *I'm actually going to Hogwarts!*

Rescued by the Knight Bus

Chapter 6 of 20

Riana finds herself lost in London until a Knight in purple armor comes to her rescue.

Rescued by the Knight Bus

The soft coo of a lonely dove echoed hauntingly through the early morning mists of London. A grey sun rose on an equally monochromatic, dewy street as Riana wearily climbed out of the bus that had taken her from Chipping Norton to London. This was the farthest she'd ever ventured from home, and she was feeling, although she hated to admit it, a little scared.

Holding her suitcases in each skeletal hand, the duffel bag slung over her sharply-pointed shoulder blade, not one person passing by would have believed that such a frail body could bear so much weight. But Riana's daring and anticipation of the new and exciting days to come buoyed her up and gave her strength. She inhaled deeply and with a cursory glance around at her surroundings, set off in the direction that the majority of pedestrians were traveling.

*

Big Ben tolled 7 o'clock as Riana, sharp shoulders slumped, suitcases dragging, stumbled through yet another side-street of London. It was already seven in the evening, and she still had seen no sign of a wizardry shop; her feet hurt and she was beginning to regret running away, mentally classifying it as a rash decision made when she was *clearly* desperate. The throng of people had long since begun to thin out, but Riana continued walking the streets, not even caring if she passed deep into dark alleyways. The dark was more comforting to her than light ... for in the light people could view her imperfections.

*

A weary two hours later when Big Ben had pealed to signify the hour of nine, Riana could take no more and traipsed to a corner on one of the dingier streets. Reaching her chosen spot, she piled her suitcases and sat down on the curb. She felt no fear, except that of the unknown, but she was very, very tired and cold. Seldom had she ever been out this late.

Riana gazed up at the shimmering moon appearing in the hazy sky; sighing, she lifted her left hand, stretched it toward the moon and covered the glowing orb with all five of her twig-like fingers. Dropping her hand to her lap, she leaned toward her luggage, her thinly-boned head beginning to droop onto one of the suitcases ... slowly, slowly...

Suddenly a "SCREECH!" and a "CLANG" ripped her out of the fields of slumber and deposited her right back on the street corner where'd she been sitting for ten minutes. Riana looked up, fiercely annoyed with whatever had unceremoniously interrupted her cat-nap. What she saw was a strange sight, indeed. An extremely tall purple bus had stopped in front of her, and an acne-scarred man in his late twenties or early thirties was hanging onto the hand-rail by the doorway and reading an announcement in his hand.

"'Ello, and welcome to the Knight Bus...Emergency Transport for the Witch or Wizard in Distress. That is ... the *Stranded* Witch or Wizard." The man spoke, his accent such a heavy cockney that Riana, who had leapt to her feet, could barely understand him. "I'm Stan Shunpike, and I'll be your CON-ductor for this 'ere evenin'. At this, he flipped the announcement closed and looked down at Riana.

"Ow... you're a little mite, aren't you? Wos your name?" With this question, Stan reached up a grimy hand and scratched his nose.

Riana tilted her head to one side and asked, "Why do you need to know?" She wasn't altogether sure that she liked this man; he was very forward and very, very dirty. Nevertheless, she was immensely happy to be contacted by the world which had sent her the Hogwarts letter.

"Well, y'see, on account o' your bein' a stranger and on account of my havin' never seen you before, I think it would be good manners to introduce y'self, in a manner o' speakin'." Stan's tone was incredulous, his face revealing that he thought this the most obvious thing in the world.

Riana sighed. "Well, all right. I'm Riana Carrington, and I'm going to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

At this, Stan let out a yelp of laughter. "Did ya hear that Ern?" he asked the ancient and bespectacled driver. "'Er says she's goin' to 'Ogwarts...in August!"

At this second speech, Stan collapsed in hyena-like laughter against the brass hand-rail of the bus and howled for five minutes straight. Riana simply stared deciding fervently that she did not like this man *at all*.

Straightening her gaunt frame primly, Riana asked, "And what's wrong with going to Hogwarts this early? I suppose *you* know..."

"I? But o' course I know. And, you, bein' new and what-not, really can't be ex-pected t' know, can ya?"

Stan had composed himself and jumped to the pavement, causing Riana to hop back; he collected her luggage, the suitcases minuscule in his large hands, and stepped ahead of her into the bus. Riana followed, her heart beating slightly faster than normal, thudding with resounding echoes in her thin chest cavity. Stan made his way past the front of the bus...which, Riana noticed, had two large and squishy armchairs, one that the driver was using and another clearly reserved for Stan...and deposited Riana's bags on a bed.

Riana followed and sat down next to her bags. *What on earth is a bed doing on a bus?* she wondered until she looked up and saw that the bus was, not only tall, but tiered

and that each level was covered in beds filled by snoring occupants in very odd clothing combinations. On the first floor alone, snoozing in separate beds was a man wearing a bright red top hat here, a very dark, fat woman wearing an ebony cloak there, and at the very back, near the twisting staircase, a bearded man reclined, sporting turquoise, high-heeled boots.

Bubbling over with questions, Riana leapt off the squishy bed and walked to the front of the bus where Stan was sitting in his armchair sipping a cup of coffee.

"Excuse me ... sir, but why can't I go to Hogwarts in August?"

Stan looked over the edge of his mug at Riana as she spoke, and then he motioned for her to sit down on the bed closest to them. The instant Riana's bony bottom touched the soft mattress, the bus gave a spontaneous lurch and was tearing down the streets of London. Riana gasped at each turn but neither Stan nor Ernie nor any of the other occupants seemed to notice anything odd. Stan continued to sip his coffee, and Riana waited impatiently for him to finish. At last, when he had drained the last drop from his mug, Stan lowered it and wiped his lips with his grubby hand.

"Well, now, y'see, the school year don' start 'till September and ya won't be able to get there without takin' the 'Ogwarts Express. And, well, unless ya have some more trunks hidden somewhere," here Stan looked back at Riana's meager pile of luggage, "then you need to take the rest of this 'ere month to stop in at Diagon Alley."

With this, Stan reclined in his armchair and looked down his abnormally long nose at Riana whose mouth hung open with the influx of this new information.

"So ... you know, then, where I can buy supplies?"

This rather commonplace question was the first thing that Riana could force out of her mouth. She saw Stan looking at her with an amazed look on his face. She ducked her head and narrowed her grey eyes. She didn't like his slightly condescending manner or the way in which he was staring at her, simply because she hadn't any *real* knowledge of the wizarding world.

"Well," he said after a moment, "sure I does ... ya goes to Diagon Alley and to get there, you'll have t' get to the Leaky Cauldron, that's a pub, see, and," he broke off at this, realization dawning in his eyes, "*you* came from a Muggle home, didn't ya?"

A What *home*? thought Riana, completely confused now.

"A m-Muggle home? What's that?"

The words were out before Riana could stop them, and Stan burst into his aggravating laughter again. She sighed and rolled her eyes, waiting for him to stop.

This man is an imbecile, she thought condescendingly as she watched Stan collapse in a fit of mirth.

"Muggles are non-magical people ... just people with no wizarding blood,*you* know. But, of course you don' 'cause ya just came from there. Anyhow, the place to go is the Leaky Cauldron, and from there to Diagon Alley. You can buy supplies there and stay at the Cauldron."

Riana said nothing; what *could* she have said? She had absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

And what is Diagon Alley? Riana contemplated moodily.

Stan was, however, oblivious as always. Taking this silence for agreement, Stan looked over his shoulder and shouted, "Oi, Ern! Take 'er to the Leaky Cauldron. Riana, 'ere 'as to get off there."

Riana barely had time to grab onto the headboard of the bed as the bus gave an almighty lurch and raced toward the Leaky Cauldron and her new, increasingly curious life.

Night's Repose at the Leaky Cauldron

Chapter 7 of 20

Riana meets Tom, the proprietor of the Leaky Cauldron and spends her first night in "wizarding territory."

Night's Repose at the Leaky Cauldron

Riana stood outside of a grimy building, watching the retreating tailgate of the purple Knight Bus for a few seconds until it emitted a loud bang (accompanied by clouds of sooty smog) and disappeared. She turned and looked up at the dark windows of the pub, crunched between a bookshop and a record store. The place appeared to be of very ill-repute. Nevertheless, Riana squared her bony shoulders and marched through the doors of the Leaky Cauldron.

*

Opening the dingy door, Riana found herself in the dim interior of a pub; there was the bar and there was the innkeeper. He was a little, old, bald man who was polishing glasses with a grimy rag. He looked up when Riana entered.

"Yes? What is it you're wanting?" he asked, his toothless mouth gaping open in what Riana supposed was a welcoming smile, but what came off more as a grimace.

She froze, then lifted her sharply pointed chin and marched toward the bar. The man chuckled, seeming faintly amused.

"I ... I'm looking for a room and ... and Diagon Alley," Riana managed to stutter for the landlord was even more bizarre-looking up close.

At her revelation, the man gave a bark of laughter and squinted down at her.

"So you're new to Hogwarts, eh? Going to be attending this year? Well, first, before I give you any information, you'd best rent out a room for the night..."

His eyes lit up greedily as Riana, aristocratic grey eyes never leaving his face for an instant, reached into her skirt-pocket and pulled out the purple cloth bag of money. Reaching into her bag, Riana extracted several notes and laid it before the man on the counter. He gave a small gasp of surprise, prompting Riana to ask him what the matter was. He looked at her, then down at the money, then up at Riana again.

"I can't accept this ... This is Muggle money. Where are your Galleons?"

Riana felt her heart jump. *He can't accept the money?* She gazed frantically at the innkeeper, her grey eyes full of desperation.

"What, what do you mean g-Galleons? What are those?"

The landlord must have heard the note of fear in her young voice, because his expression softened and he leaned forward in an attempt to be comforting. Of course, this attempt was completely lost on Riana, for the image of this ancient man, full of wrinkles and devoid of teeth coming closer only served to startle her.

"Well, you see, young missy, there is a currency that we wizards use and Muggle money is not it. You can get this changed at Gringotts," here he waved his hand vaguely in the direction of a back door on the other side of the room, "but I'm afraid I can't give you a room without your paying in Galleons."

He leaned back again as Riana furrowed her brow. "But I haven't got any wizard money, and I won't have any until I can go to Gringotts, whatever that is, and there's nowhere else for me to go tonight." Her chin jerked up sharply, and she looked down her nose at the innkeeper, who was leaning, arms crossed, on the bar. "So, you have to give me a room. Tomorrow, when I go to this Gringotts, I'll get this changed and I'll be back to repay you, I promise." Riana hesitated before adding, "Please," to the end of her plea.

The innkeeper wrinkled his furrowed forehead and stared shrewdly down at Riana; finally, he seemed to make up his mind, and he too tilted his chin up and stared down his nose at Riana. "Fine," he said, "but make sure you don't walk out on our deal." Riana nodded, but the innkeeper looked skeptical; he proffered his own, aged hand. "Shake on it?" he asked, spitting in his hand and offering it over the bar. Riana looked down at the spittle-covered hand in revulsion; then she glanced up at Tom, who was watching her closely. Steeling herself, she delicately spat in her own emaciated hand and gingerly touched it to his, dropping it quickly after one shake. She wiped her hand on her favorite (soon to be *ex-favorite*) pleated skirt as the landlord grabbed the pound notes off the counter and turned around to fetch a room key from the board behind him.

"Name's Tom, by the way," he stated as he turned to face Riana. He waited for Riana to provide her own name, and when she did not, he nodded resignedly and shuffled from behind the bar to a staircase, beckoning for Riana to follow. She did. Up the rickety wooden stairs they went; Tom in front with a candle and Riana in the back, dragging her suitcases up the stairs "bumpity-bump" with her gaunt arms.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Tom turned and whispered, "Shh..." and led the way down a dark, dusty hall.

Riana heard various mutterings, grunts and snores from the rooms they passed. She was listening intently to one voice saying something like, "Gerroff, gerroff! Nasty thing ... vile creature! Gerroff, gerroff!" and nearly ran into Tom who had stopped in front of room eight. He fitted the ornate, old-fashioned key into the rusty lock, and Riana waited with bated breath until she heard the click of the lock. Tom pushed open the door and stepped back with a slight bow from his rheumy shoulders.

Riana nodded back. She wasn't about to gush thanks to this man. He was simply doing his job. Riana walked past Tom into the room, dragging her suitcases behind her. The door clunked shut and Riana stood, bathed in the moonlight from the one window in the room, waiting for her silvery eyes to adjust to the darkness. Once they had, she saw that the room contained a bed, one dresser, a vanity with a cracked, yellowed mirror, one *much* worn Persian rug, and a wash basin.

So much for all that money, she thought wryly, viewing her meager surroundings.

Despite the drab surroundings, however, Riana felt an empowering sense of independence and breathed in deeply, promptly receiving a lung-full of dust. She began coughing and, dropping her luggage to the floor with a crunch, dashed to the bed in the hopes of stifling her coughs in the bedding. She certainly didn't want to chance waking up the other occupants of the Leaky Cauldron. The racking coughs finally subsided, and Riana breathed shallowly, her thin chest expanding with each gasp. She yawned suddenly, her jawbones popping in complaint, and realized that she was indeed, *very* tired.

She lay back on the soft, musty pillows and pulled the woolly comforter over her gaunt body. Regardless of the day's bizarre occurrences, Riana felt safe and happy, a feeling she hadn't experienced in many months. She sighed contentedly and closed her eyes. A soft hoot brought her eyes back open, and she stared out of her grey slit-shaped eyes as, in the light of the thin, sifting moonbeams, a feathered shape whooshed past the streaked window. Riana smiled to herself—she wasn't scared of birds—and closed her eyes for the last time that night, slipping instantly into a deep slumber.

A First Glimpse of Diagon Alley

Chapter 8 of 20

Riana enters Diagon Alley...

A First Glimpse of Diagon Alley

Riana woke early, before the sun had risen. She yawned and stretched, grimacing in pain as each ridged backbone cracked, creakily complaining the ill treatment she bestowed upon it. She gazed, bleary-eyed, around the room with a sort of detached interest, and then remembered that she was in room number eight, in a pub called the Leaky Cauldron. Riana leapt from her bed and darted to the cracked, yellow mirror for her customary body-examination.

She pulled off her black shirt and counted each rib. A muscle at the edge of her proud mouth twitched as her ribs stuck out even more prominently than the day before. *Just goes to show*, Riana smirked with satisfaction, *that going without meals pays off*.

After the examination was over, Riana turned away from the mirror. However, she then spun suddenly back, noticing with distaste that she was wearing the same clothing she had been sporting yesterday. With a quick derisive look toward herself in the mirror, Riana walked to one of her suitcases and in a single fluid motion, picked it up and slung it on the bed, unzipping it and flinging the top open. Rifling through the topsy-turvy contents, she spotted the hem of an embroidered black linen peasant top and pulled. Everyone here was dressed so oddly, almost with a medieval flair, and the least she could do would be to try and match that style. Riana *certainly* didn't want to stand out unnecessarily.

*

Walking down the dusty, wood-paneled hall, Riana was satisfied to hear that she was one of the only occupants awake. The rest were all still snoring, including the person who had talked during their sleep in room number three.

Riana reached the long rickety staircase and descended, one hand holding up her ankle-length, black skirt, the other clenching her list of school supplies. Her slender,

boot-clad feet reached carefully, toe-heel, toe-heel, down to the subsequent step. Upon reaching the bottom, she dropped both hands and held them, with the letter clamped securely between the two, clasped in front of her, gazing around the pub's common room.

Tom was awake and wiping down the large wooden tables with a grey rag—He didn't look at her as she skulked across the room and sat down at the bar. He continued wiping the table, over and over; Riana simply waited for him. As the minutes ticked by, and he still didn't return to the bar to wait on her, she cleared her throat primly and he glanced up, surprised.

Reluctantly, he draped the rag over his shoulder and stumped to the bar. "Yes? What is it you're wanting? I haven't got all day. Come, come, speak up."

Riana thought him very rude to speak to her this way, but didn't make any comments as he deserved none. *And*, that principled little voice whispered, *he was quite kind to you yesterday ... even though he didn't have to be.*

Shut up! Riana vehemently screamed at the little voice in her head. It did, amazingly enough. Confident in successfully squashing it, she turned her scathing, condescending attention on old Tom.

"Yes, I'd like a fruit smoothie, if you please ... and could—" She broke off as Tom turned his back and slouched out of the bar, entering a door to the left. He emerged seconds later, arms laden down with fruit and threw it all in an undignified heap in the grimy sink behind the bar. He then began to search through the hodge-podge of peeling-paint cabinets until he found the archaic and rusty blender he was searching for. Tom tugged halfheartedly at the appliance and, when it failed to give, took a deep breath, gave a bodily pull and yanked the blender out of the voracious cabinet.

"Excuse me," Riana spoke again, with a trace of annoyance in her cool voice, "can you tell me how I'm supposed to get to d-Diagon Alley after you finish that?" she questioned, indicating the fruit that Tom was now chopping speedily.

He looked up at her, continuing to chop. *If he isn't careful*, Riana half-thought in a detached manner, *he'll chop off one of his fingers.*

But Tom did *not* chop off any of his fingers, and looking Riana up and down as if sizing her up, he gave a curt nod and returned his gaze to the chopping board, his knife traveling (if it was possible) even faster through the luscious-looking fruit.

*

Some thirty minutes later, Riana sat at the bar, finishing the last of her smoothie and watching the new arrivals emerging from the sleeping quarters upstairs. It was still early in the morning yet several more people had begun, by this time, to wake up, and as each came slowly down the stairs, rubbing their sleepy eyes, all turned right and headed to a doorway underneath the steps that, Tom explained upon seeing Riana's curious gaze, led to the dining room.

The people—and not all of them were human, Riana noticed. One looked suspiciously like one of the short and stumpy dwarves that graced her fantasy books in her old world—were dressed in the same sort of odd clothing Riana had noticed on the Knight Bus. Many wore hats, and most sported long, flowing robes in varying shades of the color spectrum. One, a plump witch with a very large, beaky nose and a piquant, bow-shaped mouth, was wearing robes that shimmered and changed color, varying between a tangerine orange and a very ugly, lurid yellow.

*

Riana finished the last few drops of her smoothie. Guiltily, she admitted that she'd forgotten how *good* food could taste, but quickly berated herself for that momentary pathetic lapse. Her forehead creased as she wondered how she could possibly be so weak, and then, to take her mind off her own problems, she sliced a glance toward Tom's turned back. He was doing something, she couldn't quite tell what, at the sink. Whatever it was, though, it wasn't washing dishes as the mammoth pile of dirty goblets, bowls, and plates on the counter seemed to grow rather than shrink. Sighing deeply, she arched an eyebrow and set her glass down with a resounding clunk. Tom swept it up without looking at her and began washing it out in the less-than-clean sink. Riana shrugged her tiny shoulders, sent another piercing stare toward his back and "Harrumphed!" loudly. This caught his attention and he finally turned around.

"Excuse me," she said, for the second time that morning. *Honestly, it's like talking to a brick wall*, Riana thought uncharitably, but continued with her question. "Can you show me how to get to Diagon Alley now? Please?" The afterthought slipped out of her mouth and really couldn't be categorized as an afterthought—but when had Riana ever said, "Please," without thinking about it first?

Tom smiled an old, crotchety, toothless smile and gestured with his left hand before shuffling off. Slipping off her bar stool, Riana followed in the direction that Tom was moving. He passed through a doorway and into a cloak room, then opened another door leading to a backyard full of rubbish bins, varying in stages of fullness, and walked up to a high brick wall.

He pulled a stick from his pocket—*No, not a stick*, Riana thought, *a wand*—and tapped the bricks in a pattern. *Three up*, Riana memorized, *two across*. She'd always been a keen observer. People who are outwardly silent are often more watchful than the odd individual. They listen, they watch, and they don't easily forget. Oh, and they make the best eavesdroppers.

Leaning forward, Riana watched closely, and the bricks began to *move*. She stepped closer, entranced, as the red bricks shifted aside to form a doorway through which she could see ... Diagon Alley!

Gringotts' Goblins

Chapter 9 of 20

Riana meets the goblins of Gringotts (although she doesn't know that they *are* goblins) and exchanges her Muggle money for wizard currency.

Gringotts' Goblins

Riana edged forward as Tom stepped back and shuffled past her to the grimy doorway leading back into the Leaky Cauldron. Mouth hanging open in utter disbelief, Riana nearly tripped over the slight step that leveled the ground between the backyard of the Leaky Cauldron and the cobblestones of Diagon Alley. Shutting her mouth with a snap, Riana swallowed hard, her slanting eyes as wide as they could manage. *This place is amazing...* she thought, awed. Her respect for the wizarding world grew with each step she took.

Emerging from the backyard into the alley, Riana didn't know which direction to look first. Directly to her left, she spotted a shop with a sign hanging in one of the windows over a stack of brightly-polished ... *Cauldrons!* Riana thought, immensely pleased. The sign read:

Cauldrons

All sizes

Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver

Self-Stirring

Collapsible

She took a glance at her list and read that she needed a pewter cauldron, standard size 2. With this information safely tucked away in her mind, Riana dashed lightly to the shop and was about to yank open the door when she remembered that she didn't have any wizard money. Whipping around with a slight frown on her mouth, Riana surveyed the alley and not seeing anything that looked *remotely* like a bank, stepped away from the cauldron shop and continued along her way.

Many shops, all of them incredibly appealing and some extraordinarily bizarre, caught her eye as she passed them, and she found herself ogling at them all like a child on Christmas morning. Though there were not many others awake yet, Riana, aware of how she must look, shut her mouth irritably. For once...just for once!--she wished that she didn't care about what others thought. But then she caught sight of her reflection in the window of a passing shop and she threw that thought out of her mind. However, she still stared at the wonder around her, taking in all she could with her thin grey eyes.

There on her right was Slug & Jiggers Apothecary ("We Carry Every Potion Ingredient You Could Ever Want...Guaranteed!"), a little further on was Eeylops Owl Emporium where there were ... *Ohmygod...OWLS!* Riana gaped, completely shocked.

Again to her right, was a shop called Quality Quidditch Supplies. This store Riana stopped in front of a little longer than the others, trying to puzzle out the name. She'd never heard of *Quidditch* before, although she determined that it involved broomsticks for there was a particularly shiny one with straight bristles on display in the sparkling glass window. But who ever heard of an activity (besides cleaning the house, and that's never fun) that involved *sweeping*?

She passed several more stores and began to notice that more people were appearing in Diagon Alley. There weren't many, to be sure, for it was still early ... but all of them were hurrying in and out of the shops with a marked determination.

One gentleman dressed in a long purple cloak with matching pointed hat, shambled out of a small stationary shop, passed by Riana, and mumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "Five Sickles for *ONE* quill...ridiculous! Should have tried..." and Riana could hear no more for he had gone on his way. She looked curiously toward the grouping of shops that the man had just left; one of them was a small stationary shop next to a larger place called Flourish and Blotts that looked like a bookstore. Riana had to exercise a great amount of willpower to tear herself away from that one.

She traipsed past a magical instruments outlet and continuing along her way spotted a shop called Dean's Ice Cream Parlor in Cooperation with Bertie Bott's Every Flavored Beans with a slogan proclaiming, "Now There's Every Flavor Ice Cream...A Risk With Every Lick!"

Riana vaguely wondered what a Bertie Bott's Every Flavored Bean was as she passed the ice cream parlor, her stomach betraying her as it growled fitfully at the distant memory of cold, sinfully delicious ice cream.

Directly across the wide alley-way was a store labeled Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. Riana made a note to stop there after a perfunctory glance at her list. Looking up from the list, however, she saw a gleaming white, marble building several yards away. She approached with a minute amount of trepidation. It certainly *looked* like a bank, either that or a government building. As she came tentatively closer she saw a giant bronze plaque determining that the building was indeed Gringotts Wizarding Bank.

Slowly, Riana climbed the marble steps, each slender ankle threatening to give way as her heart pounded faster. What if they couldn't take her money here either? What if, what if ... what on *Earth*? She had reached the top of the stairs and on them was a strange creature acting as doorman. She squinted closer at him? Her? It? The strange animal snapped its mouth and stood up straighter, ignoring Riana's gaping stoically. Riana's own mouth turned upwards in a slight sneer as she strode past the creature and through the impressive revolving glass doorway of the bank.

*

Once she'd stepped through the shining glass doors rimmed in gold trim, it was as if Riana had stepped into another world. Scurrying to and fro were pint-sized creatures like the ugly doorman carrying various artifacts and bags, which, Riana surmised wryly, were probably *full* of wizard currency. She moved forward nervously but the strange creatures did not pay her any attention. Using this anonymity as fuel, Riana squared her sharply-jutting shoulder blades and scurried up to a very long and tall desk behind which still more goblins were studying precious stones or counting towering stacks of coins.

She approached one of the slightly less wrinkled bankers who was sporting a pair of gold spectacles with enormously thick lenses and cleared her throat apprehensively. "Ahem! Excuse me ... I'm here to ch-change some Muggle money." Her voice petered out as the creature reached a vein-lined hand up to its spectacles and adjusted them, leaning down to see who was speaking.

"Do you have the money?" the croaky-voiced creature asked, looking down at her blearily with a rather bored expression on its face.

Would I be here if I didn't? Riana thought sulkily. However, despite her feeling of vague annoyance, Riana gave a sharp nod and reached into her skirt pocket for the bag of Muggle money. She extracted it and, standing on tiptoe, laid the purse gently on the desk, looking up with a challenging gleam in her grey eyes.

The creature returned the stare seriously over its glasses and untied the golden purse strings. One elderly hand, long, cracked, yellow fingernails clicking together, removed the money and the ... 'thing' murmured, "Wait a moment, please," and disappeared behind the granite desk.

Taking this time to gaze around the room, Riana was amazed to see that, although the bank was obviously wealthy and assuredly grand, they didn't make an effort to clean it. From the gilded chandeliers hung thick sinewy cobwebs, and everything, from the parquet floor to the curving staircase balustrades, had a slight glaze of aged dust.

"Ahem," a soft voice urged from above. Riana looked up to see that the odd creature had returned and was bearing a considerably larger purple cloth bag and a roll of thin parchment. "This," the goblin said, handing over the bag, "is your money. You have Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. Should you choose to open an account, you will receive a key and a vault. If you should so choose, please fill out this application and owl it to Gringotts. Good day."

Riana staggered slightly, falling from tiptoe, as the weight of the money caused her bony back to arch painfully. Steadying herself, Riana tucked the parchment into the waistband of her skirt, tied the purse strings around her tiny wrist and, supporting the heavy bag with one thin hand, walked across the dusty parquet to the revolving doors and emerged into the sunny, bustling world of Diagon Alley.

Black Robes and Flying Books

Chapter 10 of 20

Riana goes school-supply shopping after getting her money at Gringotts.

Black Robes and Flying Books

Holding her heavy sack, Riana stepped gingerly down the marble steps of Gringotts and sat down on the last one, laying her money in her lap and, with some difficulty, extracting her wrinkled school supplies list out of her pocket. She would deal with the vault and whatever else the thin parchment contained later. No... *What I need first*, Riana noted carefully, *are some robes*. She looked up from the parchment and gazed appraisingly around, her slanted eyes squinting against the bright sun, and spotted Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions directly to her left.

Ah! Goodie! That's where I need to go. And so deciding, Riana leapt to her feet, sore backbone cracking painfully, and sauntered lazily down the hot, dusty street and into the seamstress' shop.

*

Riana emerged gratefully into the slightly dim cool of Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and stood looking rather anxiously around. The articles in the front room consisted of a desk cluttered with feather quills, ink pots and measuring tapes as well as several racks of robes. One rack was marked 50% off and another was labeled as "Used." Riana wrinkled her nose at this label, but edged closer anyway, her eye caught by a silvery-gray velvet affair.

Suddenly, however, a door slammed somewhere in the recesses of the shop, and Riana hastily moved away from the racks as though afraid to be caught snooping. An act that was, she realized, ridiculous since this was a store.

Regardless, she backed away, mentally chastising herself for being so easily intimidated as she did so. At that moment, a plump, slightly out of breath woman garbed in mauve robes burst from a doorway and came hurrying toward her. When the woman spoke, her voice was a quick, bubbling babble that was, Riana decided, slightly annoying, but oddly comforting all the same.

"Oh, hello, dear! Are you here for your new school robes?" Without waiting for an answer, she took hold of Riana's stick-like arm and drew her back into the rear of the shop, her continuous voice keeping up a running chatter.

"Well, you're in luck. You're my first customer today, and there shouldn't be anyone else for another two hours, at least. My, you're an early riser. Like to get your shopping done early, do you? That's good, that's very responsible. I always say..."

Riana wasn't really listening to this chatterbox, and so she didn't really find out what Madame Malkin (for this *must* be her) always said. However, despite her reluctance, plus the fact that her arm was being tugged so firmly, Riana could do nothing but follow the annoyingly cozy proprietress. Her face pulled into a grimace at the wrenching in her shoulder socket, Riana soon found herself in a brightly lit back-room, sunlight streaming hot and bothersome through the tiny windows. As her hand was dropped by the witch, Riana glanced around and discovered that she was surrounded by towering mountains comprised of bolts of cloth. *Mostly black*, she couldn't help but notice with relief.

Madam Malkin ushered Riana onto a squat stool in the center of the room and remarked, "Ooh, but you're a tiny little witch, aren't you?" She hunched her broad shoulders and clicked her tongue. Her badger-like eyes shrewdly surveyed Riana as she leaned closer to get several finite measurements.

Witch? Riana confusedly thought, wondering what she'd done to deserve this insult. *Oh, wait ... it's only the Muggles who use that as an insult. She's right; I am going to be a witch.* And Riana felt a little shiver of thrilling anticipation; oh, she was so excited!

With effort, Riana tuned back in as Madam Malkin continued her diatribe. "Could do with some fattening up, you could. Oh, you poor thing, such itty-bitty measurements. Let's see, that's ten..." Madame Malkin's voice bounced around the room as she measured Riana, pausing every now and then to scratch some measurements on a scruffy, yellow, legal pad with a tattered quill.

"Hmm... and eleven and ... a half. All right, dear, you sit tight and I'll be back in a jiffy!" Madame Malkin bustled to a nearby bolt of black fabric and, taking out a wand, began to dictate measurements to it, glancing at the chart in her hand. The wand then rose from Madame Malkin's hand of its own accord and darted into the bolt of fabric and began to snip and chop, pieces of fabric falling in showers. Riana watched, entranced...

*

A mere hour and thirty minutes later, Riana, laden down with three black robes, a cloak, dragon skin gloves (which cost her a pretty Galleon, indeed) and a pointed hat, walked out of Madam Malkin's, the witch's cheery voice thanking her for her business and urging her to have a "Marvelous day!" Riana ignored her.

*

Placing her paper-wrapped bundles near her feet on the pavement outside the door, Riana referred again to her list. She still needed course books as well as a wand and other various magical instruments. But where to start?

Standing in the bright sunlight, Riana suddenly felt hot and vexed as she glared angrily up at the merrily shining sun. Her eyes stung in indignant response and she ducked her head, rubbing them vigorously. The crowds of people rushing by, for it was well past eleven now, gave her a slight headache. She hissed under her breath as a particularly fat wizard bumped into her, throwing her emaciated body into an alley wall, without so much as a "By your leave."

Turning irritably in the direction from which she had traipsed that morning from the Leaky Cauldron, Riana spotted the bookstore Flourish and Blotts and, with a wry shrug, set off towards it, battling the ever-thickening throng of people. If there were any books to be found, it was there.

*

Flourish and Blotts was an odd bookshop, to say the least. The harried bookshop owner, who was carrying a butterfly-catching net, gave Riana a curt, "Hello," before dashing off to another corner of the bookstore from whence emitted a strange jabbering noise. Riana's slanted eyes narrowed and followed the retreating back of the bookshop owner and the sound of the strange noise *until* they fell upon the towering bookshelves.

Slinking quickly to the shelves, Riana picked up the first book she saw and gasped happily. Always an avid reader, Riana was in her element as she eyed hungrily those ornate, leather-bound books that featured such titles as *Broken Balls: When Fortunes Turn Foul*. Riana's eyes lost their perpetually annoyed glint, and her thin shoulders lifted in eager anticipation. She had always wanted to learn fortune telling, but her parents, of course, would never have approved. She hastily shoved the thought of her parents out of her mind and continued browsing the dusty shelves, her slender finger tracing the titles as her thin lips formed the words silently.

The inventory was endless: *Curses and Counter-curses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue-Tying, and Much, Much More)*; *Enchanted Encounters*.

One particularly gruesome-looking tale outlined the life of a werewolf; it was sentimentally entitled, *Hairy Snout, Human Heart*. Riana tilted her head to one side and relished this last book's subject. *So they actually do exist ... That's weird, but cool.*

The next title brought another unwanted memory. *Hélas, j'ai Transfiguré mes Pieds (Alas, I have Transfigured my Feet)*. A play in French, Riana reluctantly discovered as she turned the delicate pages. Her ever-active mind jolted back to St. Mary's Primary School and to an advanced English classroom reading of *Les Misérables*, and she frowned, forehead creasing, flinty eyes darkening. She *didn't* want to think about her old life. That miserable existence was over!

Shaking her head to clear the cobwebs of memory, she continued walking slowly through the aisles, her avaricious eyes taking in as much as they could. The books went on and on: *Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms*; *Modern Magical History*; *Muggles Who Notice*.

Riana scoffed at this last. *Those Muggles must be incredibly smart, she thought scornfully. My parents didn't notice a thing.*

~~Or so she thought...~~

However, her eyes narrowing again, Riana thrust the thought of her parents out of her head, and viciously whipped her gaze toward the next row of books *The Noble Sport of Warlocks*; *Sites of Historical Sorcery*; *A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry*; and the last ... a dark and suspenseful tale called, *Why I Didn't Die When the Augurey Cried*.

She was deeply immersed in this last book when she heard the tinkling of a small bell. She glanced up, annoyed, and looked around the shop. Nothing was obviously emitting the noise, but she soon discovered the source of the disturbance. A coo coo clock that had been outfitted with a tiny wizard ringing a brass bell instead of the customary bird, had just emerged from its cave and was ringing away with all its mechanical might. Riana gasped. It had gotten so late ... why, it was almost four o'clock! And she still hadn't bought her course books.

Reluctantly laying *Why I Didn't Die When the Augurey Cried* back on the shelf, Riana set off in search of the bookshop owner. He was nowhere in sight, but, following the strange chattering sounds, she found him sitting helplessly on the ground in the jabbering corner with his net, while books with diaphanous wings soared above his head. One swooped down on Riana, cackling, and she glimpsed the title, *Illuminera Safell's Guide to Night Flying*, before ducking to avoid being rapped on the head by the book. Looking up at the soaring books from the floor with irritation, Riana narrowed her eyes and wished she had a wand so that she could curse the stupid things into oblivion. However, lacking the necessary means, she did the next best thing and reached over to tap the bookkeeper on his shoulder. He turned to her, his exhausted eyes mirroring her irritation.

Opening her mouth widely to enunciate over the jabbering of the books, Riana questioned the owner, "I need course books for first years who are attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! I have here," she handed him the crumpled piece of parchment, "the list for my books. Can you help me?"

The man looked at the required books denoted on the parchment and nodded, crawling away from the jabbering corner, staying close to the floor. Riana followed suit...apparently the books liked to stay at a certain height and in a certain area, flying 'round and 'round one another in an endless circle.

*

The bookshop owner flew back and forth between the aisles, returning every so often to Riana who simply stood with her toothpick-thin arms outstretched as the pile of books on them grew and grew. Finally, when all eight books had been acquired, Riana stiffly approached the front desk and placed the towering stack on the counter. The bookshop owner waited impatiently, glancing over his shoulder toward the corner in which soared the jabbering books, as Riana carefully extracted the amount of money the man had hurriedly named.

After receiving her six Galleons, the bookshop owner nodded smartly and bade her, "Good day," before rushing back to the jabbering books, who had taken to dive-bombing their fellow books and knocking each other out of the air, cackling even more excitedly when they succeeded in smashing one another into torn, bruised heaps on the floor.

With a last hesitant and, yes, regretful glance back toward the row where'd she left *Why I Didn't Die When the Augurey Cried*, Riana kicked open Flourish and Blotts door with her booted toe, arms full of books, and emerged into the high afternoon sun.

Professor Padma Patil

Chapter 11 of 20

Riana meets one of her future professors.

Professor Padma Patil

The late sun was boiling hot, and Riana was soon sweltering under the thin, linen peasant top she wore. Furthermore, the books in her arms were growing heavier with each tedious step down the dusty alley, and her bony back ached from the weight of the money purse.

This is stupid! Riana thought angrily, as she stalked stiffly along. *I can't possibly get all this shopping done in one day.*

As she was preparing to launch into a mental tirade against the weather, authority, and life in general ... Riana then realized that she didn't have to finish all of her shopping in one day. A smirk lit her sharp features with a rather insane glow. She was here for at least another week, and, as for authority figures, well ... there wasn't anyone to tell her where to go or when to do things. Her eyes sparked as she realized what her life was now: Complete and total independence and she loved it!

*

If Riana Carrington had been able to see herself as passing people saw her, she would have been pleased at her appearance and the vibe she exuded. What the other patrons of Diagon Alley saw was this: an excessively thin girl with raven hair and an air of dignity, but also of arrogance, strolling along with an armload of books, her money purse swinging by her side, aristocratic nose and chin jutted out in front, welcoming challenges. Her slanted grey eyes were full of a determination one seldom sees

in an eleven-year-old.

Oh, yes, she would have been satisfied. But, alas, she could not see herself, and she only *felt* the growing impatience and self-hatred she got whenever her stomach betrayed her and begged to be fed as it was doing at this very moment.

For by this time, Riana had become *very* hungry, and, instead of continuing her shopping, she marched straight back to the wall that led into the Leaky Cauldron and sat down, parcels flung beside her, supporting her tired feet, some behind her back propping her up. She reclined, with her arms folded and her eyes cold and flinty as slits of steel; she waited for someone with a wand, someone who could get her back into the pub. How she hated this vile *dependency* on others! Once she was a proper witch, once she had a wand, then she wouldn't have to admit to any weakness! Then ... she would be in control.

*

It was some time later, however, before another person showed up to tap the wall with their wand. The tall, tawny-skinned, coal black-haired witch, who did so, had her own arms heavy laden with various herbs and bizarre animal ingredients.

Riana stared up at the woman curiously, studying the parcels clasped to the chest of the dignified witch. A paragraph outlined explicitly in *Why I Didn't Die When the Augurey Cried* had mentioned the components of a potion, and Riana surmised that these purchases held lovingly in the witch's embrace were for one of those precise, intriguing concoctions.

As Riana sat, still as a stone, not moving a muscle, watching the statuesque figure before her; the woman glanced down at her and raised a kohl-smudged eyebrow. She seemed to be appraising Riana, and whatever defiance there was in Riana's eyes did not go unnoticed by her for she gave a small, secret smile, and gestured with her herb-burdened arms to the doorway, giving way to Riana and her parcels.

"Thank you ... ma'am," Riana finally decided, feeling that 'Miss' was too trivial for such a goddess-like woman. Walking ahead of the woman into the Leaky Cauldron, Riana sensed an insane urge to turn and trail after woman who had such command, such presence. Surely she was someone important, and a part of Riana seemed to instinctively realize that she would get along better in this new world of magic by knowing such people.

However, seizing control of her emotions, as she had learned to do as yet another method of control, Riana decided that it would be best to simply take her books and robes to her room, and then come downstairs for a bite. *One bite*, she promised herself. *That's all. One bite can't hurt.*

Thus, Riana reasoned with herself as she entered the Leaky Cauldron ahead of the elegant witch, crossed the expansive room, and clunked tiredly up the rickety wooden staircase back to room number eight, her emaciated frame hugging her day's purchases to her chest.

*

Once free of her baggage from her day spent shopping, Riana stood in front of the cracked mirror and sighed. *This is my last glimpse of being skinny today*, she told the gaunt reflection. *Now I'm going to have to feed you; I'm sorry.* She felt a catch in her throat as she looked at herself, seeing, not a painfully thin girl, but another being ... the polar opposite of the real Riana.

She frowned, forehead furrowed, lips pressed tightly together, blinking furiously to prevent the pathetic tears that threatened to fall. Abruptly, she pivoted, strode out of the room and turned left, tramping down the dusty, shadowed corridor and stepping gingerly down the wobbly staircase.

Riana stepped into the bar, feeling much more in control, and noticed that the beautiful woman was sitting at a table, her potion ingredients laying on the surface beside her, talking earnestly to an elderly wizard in a waistcoat with prominent eyes who was very bald and very fat. She was showing him something in a leather-bound tome, and her face was lit up with an enthusiasm mirrored in the wizard's own expression as he let out a jolly laugh, the bristles of his walrus-like mustache quivering with amusement. Riana edged closer, ignoring Tom's curious look from over the bar, trying to see what book interested them so. There they sat, heads pressed close together as they poured over the book. When Riana saw the title, she nearly laughed, which was a very unusual action for her. The beautiful woman and corpulent man's rapt attention was dedicated solely to *Magical Drafts and Potions*.

Riana felt another grin almost reach her lips, but stopped it before the smile could thaw her icy exterior. She hastened away from the couple, fearing that she would be caught spying on them.

Approaching the bar, she asked Tom (*I'm sorry. I have to*, she whispered to the distorted, confused image of herself) for a croissant and something cool to drink. Tom's weathered face creased into the familiar, slightly befuddled, toothless grin, and he ambled out the door behind the bar, emerging seconds later with, not one, but *two* croissants lathered in hot, melted butter and a bottle of something. This something was butterscotch in color and, in fact, tasted like butterscotch with a slight nip, as Riana later discovered with pleasure. She ate the food with relish and had her first sip of butterbeer, amazed and ashamed that anything could taste so wonderful. She glanced up at Tom, who was ignoring her effectively and polishing yet another round of drinking glasses.

"Tom?" She spoke the one-syllable name hesitantly, her slanted eyes wide as she endeavored to swallow a flaky bite of butter-coated croissant. He turned toward her, eyebrows raised, ancient hands poised over the rim of a glass beaker. Riana swallowed again, the lump of croissant finally sliding down her rather dry throat.

"Tom, who is that woman? The one talking to the fat man," she gestured, "over there." Riana raised her thin black eyebrows and fixed Tom with a penetrating grey stare. He looked over at the dark woman and the portly man and then back at Riana.

"That," he said, "is Professor Padma Patil, your Potions mistress at Hogwarts. And that man," he nodded in the couple's direction, "is Horace Slughorn, former Potions master at Hogwarts. Those two come here often to discuss potion-making and what-not." Here, Tom cut off his short speech and turned away, apparently deciding that this was all that Riana needed to know.

Riana continued staring at Tom's hunched back for a few moments, amazed yet again that he would dare to be so blunt and short with her. Her lip curled proudly, and she determined that she didn't care, and then turned her cold, grey gaze back to the laughing couple. Somehow the news that the woman was a professor did not surprise her, and she was rather proud of the fact that she had noticed the woman's command and assurance with such a short glimpse of her earlier. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry seemed even more exciting, and September the first had never seemed further away.

She turned back to the bar and sipped the rest of her butterbeer, sharp elbow propped on the counter, holding the bottle, feeling the warmth of butterscotch seeping into her belly. The balmy beverage was soothing her, calming her, rocking her to sleep.

No! she thought, suddenly sitting upright. *I decide when I want to go to bed. And it certainly isn't here!* But, despite her mental rebellion, Riana yawned widely and felt her bottle clunk to the bar loudly. *And ... I think, another yawn, that now is the time ... to go to ... sleep.*

Raising one skeletal hand to her eyes, Riana rubbed the lids covering the silver irises and, reaching into her purple drawstring purse, removed a few bronze Knuts and laid them on the bar.

She slid off the stool and slithered back to the stairs, nearly tripping on the uneven floorboards as she did so. The nourishing food felt heavy in her small stomach, and she found it very difficult to climb the stairs and continue down the dim hallway to her room.

However, though she was nearly dead with fatigue, Riana *did* reach the door, and without even stopping to brush her teeth or comb her hair, much less remove her skirt, peasant shirt, and boots, she fell onto the soft, musty bed and passed into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Sycamore and Heartstring of Dragon

Chapter 12 of 20

Riana buys her wand.

Sycamore and Heartstring of Dragon

The following morning, Riana woke up and knew exactly where she was. She felt her mind and body acclimatizing itself to the dusty hospitality of the Leaky Cauldron, and, though her belly felt uncomfortably heavy on this dewy morning of August the twenty-eighth, she was enjoying her stay there. At least, that's what she thought at first. Then again, she hadn't tried to truly rouse herself either.

Rolling out of bed, Riana leaned over and stretched her thin arms toward her toes. Her muscles felt taut and sore from the walking she'd done in Diagon Alley the previous day. She was mentally chastising herself for neglecting to stretch...which she'd read was a preventative for sore muscles...when the first pangs of pain began. Initially, Riana thought that perhaps she needed to pee, but the pain intensified quickly, spreading through her stomach, burning to the ends of her cold, blue fingertips. She felt as if hundreds of tiny daggers were stabbing into her abdomen as she dashed quickly to the antique washbasin, her hands grasped together over her stomach. Leaning over the cracked bowl in agony, Riana vomited every bit of croissant from the previous evening's dinner. So long had her body been without nutrient, it was rejecting the unknown food with the feverish fervor of an attacked immune system. Every shred of decomposing bread, every globule of butter was emptied into the basin as Riana's thin body racked with horrifying spasms.

Finally, minutes later, when no more food was left in her tiny stomach, Riana straightened slowly, wiping her mouth with the back of her thin hand as her throat burned. Sighing, she closed her eyes and slouched so that her back arched, causing her newly emptied stomach to pooch out.

Her forehead creased in pain as she swallowed. A shuddering sigh raced through her body as she steadied herself against the dresser upon which the bowl lay. It was at moments like these that Riana hated herself the most. The loss of control, the feeling that she couldn't stop ... Yes, she hated herself at these moments.

And then, as if remembering a schedule long followed, Riana's steely eyes snapped open. She slinked over to the mirror, whipping the soiled peasant shirt over her head and mussing her straight, raven black hair. At the exact moment her gaze fell upon the reflection in the mirror, she gasped in shock and agony...her ribs were only *slightly* protruding. She felt the tears pool in her grey eyes and sprang lightly to the bed, flinging herself onto it and sobbing bitterly. This unhappy display continued for several minutes, while Riana wretchedly decided that she would *never* eat again ... even if it killed her!

As the grey rain shower gradually abated in Riana's own eyes, a thunderclap boomed deafeningly from outside, and the heavens opened up, their enormous eyes weeping in sympathy with Riana's miserable plight. Riana sat up slowly, hugging her thin arms around her emaciated body. She closed her swollen eyes, but still the thick, salty tears spilled out from under the eyelids. Riana sat there, listening to the patter of raindrops hitting the roof only a few meters above her head. The tears fell less and less frequently as she mentally composed herself, drawing deep, calming breaths.

At last, Riana's tears stopped and she opened her eyes, which shone with a red-veined, watery glimmer that could only be attributed to one cause. She edged to the corner of her mattress and, still hugging her arms tightly to her chilled body, slid off and tiptoed to her open suitcase. Releasing her hold, Riana plunged both hands deep into the slippery pile of clothing, and sought around for attire absently, her mind traveling back to the unsatisfactory image of herself in the mirror that morning.

Feeling her eyes start to mist over again, Riana shook her head violently, her straight hair swinging around her ears, trying to clear the image. By angrily turning her attention to the case-full of clothing, she succeeded.

After choosing her ensemble, Riana stood, the articles of clothing in her hands, and proceeded to dress herself, carefully paying attention to the detail of the silvery-grey faux velvet top and black corduroy cargo trousers. This infinitesimal inspection of her otherwise ordinary clothing was the *only* way she could keep the image of her inadequate body at bay. Only when she had placed the Converse sneakers on her bony feet and folded her weathered piece of parchment dictating school supplies into a pocket-size square did Riana feel controlled enough to descend to the first floor and pay another visit to Diagon Alley.

She avoided looking at herself in the dated mirror as she rushed headlong from the room. Riana felt sure that one glance would send her straight into another river of weak tears, and so she continued her plunging stride through the hallway shadowed in rivulets by the rain-spattered windows lighting it.

Because of her self-hatred and anger toward her supposed "weakness," Riana did not notice the bright yellow eyes of the tawny tomcat that stared with a slightly amused and curious expression from the now open doorway of room number three.

*

Lightning splintered from the roiling sky as Riana waited in the rainy backyard of the Leaky Cauldron, drizzle pelting onto her shiny black head, and running in glistening trails down her chattering, slender body. Her rapt gaze was fixed on the brick wall in front of her, her ears deaf to the slamming of a door behind her. She felt, rather than saw, the aged presence of the shabby innkeeper, Tom, and turned to watch him shambling out of the Leaky Cauldron clutching an enormous, tattered, magenta umbrella at which she stared enviously.

As Tom approached her, she heard him muttering something about the "Blasted weather" as he extracted his plain, thick wand with difficulty from his apron pocket, trying to keep the umbrella in place over his own bald head.

Three up, two across, Riana recalled as Tom tapped his wand against the bricks. Oh, yes, she remembered ... she would never forget. The proud Riana never forgot anything once she had determined to remember it; the entrance into the magical world of Diagon Alley was not ever going to be forgotten. She would remember this rainy backyard as the entrance to her birthplace of independence. The portal opened, causing Riana to gasp again with astonishment...she would never fail to be amazed by magic!

Without so much as a glance in Tom's direction, she lifted her proud chin and prepared to step over the threshold and enter Diagon Alley, when she felt a slight tap on her shoulder. She pivoted in annoyance, and saw a soaking wet Tom holding the umbrella out to her, a slightly begrudging expression on his wrinkled countenance. Riana sucked in her cheeks and pushed out her lips, tilting her small head upward and staring down her nose at the offering with a fair amount of disdain. She'd never carry anything that was magenta and old and tattered and ... *borrowed*.

However, when a particularly vindictive rain cloud opened a pouring drain of pelting raindrops directly on her head, Riana darted forward and pulled the umbrella out of Tom's outstretched hand, opening it over her head and turning her back on the old man. As usual, the small, respectable voice struggled to make itself be heard in her brain, *Thank him, thank him, thank him...* but she smashed her unwelcome conscience by darting quickly through the doorway into a soggy Diagon Alley.

*
Riana was pleased to note that not many people had decided to brave the weather...which wasn't affecting her in the least...and that those who did were all wearing dark colors and turning their secretive faces away from their fellow patrons, rushing to collect whatever purchases they needed, then darting, specter-like, away into one of the dark alleys squeezed between shops.

Holding the umbrella firmly in one hand, Riana walked along the muddy lane and, ducking under the overhang of the cauldron shop, pulled her supplies page out of her pocket, running her eyes up and down the list.

First, she decided, *I will get ... my wand.* Her grey eyes lit up in anticipation and more than a little satisfaction as she remembered that she would not have to rely on the rather odious Tom anymore to open the passageway to Diagon Alley. With this thought to cheer her, Riana grinned wryly and set off in the general direction of Gringotts, hoping to spot a wand shop on her way.

*
The rain was now falling faster in drenching sheets that raced with the wind, each element trying to outstrip the other, as Riana sloshed, slanted eyes squinting, knee-deep in mud past Gringotts. She paused slightly past the grand threshold of Gringotts and stood, looking around for a wand shop. *My toes are wet*, she thought numbly. *There's mud down my socks... And why isn't there a wand shop around here?* Riana gazed desperately into the distance, searching for the wand shop she just knew had to be there. But apparently, she was wrong. Seeing no wand shop in sight, she sighed in reluctant acceptance, her thin shoulders sagging under the weight of doubt. A hard look crossed her sharp features and, narrowing her eyes, Riana again bent her head against the gale and surged forward, frail body desperately trying to overcome the great forces of nature that fought to drive her back.

*
Ugh! Finally. Riana sighed, wavering tiredly in the flowing street and staring up at Ollivander's, a dingy and narrow shop with a motto stating that Ollivander's was a "Maker of Fine Wands since 382 BC," a fact that Riana sincerely doubted. She had passed several shops on her sojourn and found herself standing at the far end of Diagon Alley. Riana knew that she had reached the end of the magical shopping district for she noticed another wall, clearly marking the end of the Alley, a few shops past the left side of Ollivander's.

Breathing deeply and consequently receiving a nose full of precipitation, Riana snorted derisively, spraying invisible raindrops into the saturated air, and marched through the shabby, smudged door of the shop.

Once inside, she shook her umbrella carefully, propped it beside the door and gazed with interest at the dimly lit interior of the wand shop. Piled in towering stacks, crammed on every chair and table, were long, slender boxes. *Boxes of wands*, Riana thought excitedly. She was slinking closer to a heap stacked atop a chair to her left, when a rattling noise caused her to whip around, eyes wide. There she found herself gazing directly into a pair of very large silvery eyes that mimicked the watery world outside. She drew back involuntarily, something about those eyes glowing like twin moons disconcerted her; when the man spoke, however, she lost her fear and drew closer, interested.

"Good morning. I don't know you, but that chin is familiar ... and your eyes ... Ah, yes, those grey eyes. I know them well. Come for a wand, have you? Well..." The man's voice was soft and silky. Riana felt hypnotized and leaned dreamily in ... hoping against hope that he would explain not only what was so distinctive about her eyes, but *why* he knew them so well. Instead, however, the old man spun around and hobbled back into the depths of his store, leaving a very confused...and admittedly disappointed...Riana standing conspicuously in the middle of the cluttered room.

She peered nervously after Mr. Ollivander and was steeling herself to follow him into the maze of wands when he suddenly appeared from an aisle to her left, pulling a measuring tape with silver markings out of his deep pocket.

"Hold out your wand arm, Miss...?" Here he faltered, his soft voice trailing off as he turned his glowing gaze on Riana. She lifted her chin and announced "Carrington," defiantly. Mr. Ollivander's thick eyebrows shot up; his expression looked puzzled, but he nodded and asked her to hold out her wand arm.

A frown creasing her brow, Riana looked down at her hands and then held out her left, which she favored in composition class and therefore decided that it would do very well as a wand arm.

Mr. Ollivander's withered yet graceful hands measured Riana's arm and other extremities as he murmured, "Miss Carrington, every Ollivander wand contains a core drawn from a potent magical source." He paused, placing the measuring tape in his pocket and folding his hands placidly together in front of him.

Riana leaned closer, her slanted eyes glaring out from the depths of her gaunt face.

Mr. Ollivander looked back at her calmly and, standing solidly on two feet, gazed at Riana with his enormous eyes. "We traditionally use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons."

Heartstrings? Riana thought confusedly. *What are those?*

Mr. Ollivander, however, continued, clearly oblivious to Riana's confusion.

"Although there are other makers who use different ingredients, we have always found those three to be sufficient. I say *we* have found, but it's the wand that does the finding, doesn't it?" He nodded sagely at this and turned abruptly to his left, retreating into the bowels of the wand shop.

Riana stared after him curiously. *The wand does the finding?* This revelation did not help to assuage her fears. What if no wand chose her? What if no wands fit her personality, characteristics, whatever it was a wand searches for in a person? What if...?

But her fearful musings were cut short as Mr. Ollivander reappeared, clasping a stack of thin boxes in his arms. He dumped them onto a nearby table and opened the first, sliding the top off of the thin box and handing Riana the wand inside.

"Hawthorn and phoenix feather. Eleven and a half inches, delicately springy, responds well to the proper touch. Now, Miss Carrington, give it a swish."

Riana looked at him blankly.

"Give it a wave. There's a good girl."

Riana obliged, her eyebrows lifting, mouth twisting to the side. *Here goes nothing.* She swished the wand skeptically and waited for a few moments. But, she was right. Nothing happened.

Mr. Ollivander snatched the wand out of her hands, and replaced it in the box, tossing the offending article carelessly to one side. He rummaged in the stack on the table and pulled out another box.

"Sycamore and dragon heartstring. Nine and a half inches, stiff. Wave it about, Miss Carrington." She did so. A burst of green, snake-like sparkles curled out the end of the wand, and Mr. Ollivander nodded, eyes wide, pleased and knowing.

Riana gazed at the wand in her hand. She felt the power of magic the wand contained and reveled in the feeling of control that each nine and a half inches gave her. She

grinned suddenly and then looked up at Mr. Ollivander, who was watching her with an unidentifiable expression in his huge eyes that, as he felt her gaze upon him, was quickly replaced by a guarded stare.

Riana jerked her chin up and asked the price. Mr. Ollivander looked slightly affronted and murmured that it was seven Galleons. Digging deep into her purse, Riana extracted the proper sum and slipped the slender wand box into her purple cloth bag.

Walking to the front of the shop, followed closely by a bowing Mr. Ollivander, Riana allowed herself one small smile, a genuine, true smile, as she picked up her damp umbrella and stepped into the rain. She opened the magenta monstrosity, for which she was immensely grateful though she didn't like to admit it ... even to herself, and set out along the muddy Alley.

The purple bag bounced against her pencil-thin thigh, and she felt the magical power of the wand emanating from the bag and entering her body like a warming sip of butterbeer. She sighed, letting the glow of magic flow through her until a sudden thought imposed itself upon her silent revelry.

She stopped, rain showering down on her umbrella, her mouth shaping a silent "O" as she recalled the expression in Mr. Ollivander's eyes as he gave her the wand. She desperately fished through her memories until she had pulled up a clear picture of his ancient face. She concentrated deeper into the memory and, eyes narrowed in concentration, poked and prodded it until she had conjured up an exact representation of Mr. Ollivander's shining, twin eyes. The gaze hung, suspended, in her mind. What was that expression? She knew she'd seen it, but where ... And suddenly she gasped, for now she knew. It was fear.

Meeting Fabian

Chapter 13 of 20

Riana makes a friend and buys a pet.

Meeting Fabian

As Riana waded back in the general direction of Gringotts, she felt herself becoming faintly resentful toward Mr. Ollivander. Why should he fear for *her*? Or did he *fear* her? Was that it?

That can't be it, Riana thought angrily. *He's worried about me, or pitying me or something. He knows I'm from a Muggle family, and that's why he was looking at me like that ... with ... with those horrid eyes!* She finished her internal rant peevishly.

Deciding that it was easier to distance herself emotionally from others, Riana chose to feel nothing but animosity toward Mr. Ollivander, and thus prevented him from entering her thoughts for at least the remainder of *that* afternoon.

Extracting her crinkled, and now damp, supplies list from her pocket with difficulty, Riana's grey eyes raked the parchment, her quick mind deciding where she would venture next. She looked to her left and saw a group of wet, patchy people entering a second-hand robes shop. Her nose wrinkled in distaste, and she was immensely thankful for the wealth of money that her parents kept hidden away behind the picture. She stared at the soaked, though happy, group for a few moments until they had all disappeared into the shop. Swallowing hard, emotions that she could not identify flowed through her body. The rainy world looked even wetter as her slanted eyes misted over. She blinked furiously and quickly set off again, body stiff as a board, while trying to stall these unknown feelings.

The rain had begun to slow to a slight drizzle, and Riana found herself in front of the Magical Menagerie. She knew that she had to bring an animal to Hogwarts, and that it had to be a toad, a cat, or an owl.

Riana had never liked animals. Dogs were horrid, anxious things and birds were noisy. *Cats are quiet; they're fine. I suppose if I have to get an animal it might as well be a cat.*

Deciding thus, she furrowed her brow in distaste and made her way through the thick, roiling mud to the animal shop, still thinking about animals.

Snakes are the best, though. Why can't I bring a snake? Her petulant face crumpled as she neared the door of the shop; it smelled horrendous ... even out here!

I certainly don't want an owl, nasty little creatures ... they molt, they smell Riana continued naming the negative attributes of the unfortunate animals blandly and meticulously as she opened the thin, wood-paneled door while a cheerful gold bell tinkled overhead. *And, of course, a frog is out of the question. Fat, ugly monsters.* Her eyes were desperate as she glanced around the chaotic store. *Why, oh why, can't we bring snakes?*

Riana shook out her umbrella and propped it beside the door as she had done in Ollivander's. Looking around at the cages covering the walls, Riana found she was very glad that she had already decided against an owl, although she really didn't have any reason *before* coming into the animal shop to harbor prejudice against those majestic, though messy, flying fowl. Each of the birdcages were crammed full of hooting owls, beating their wings and scattering birdseed, jumbled together with rat skeletons, all over the floor. Riana sniffed, turned up her nose and turned to gaze in fascination at a murky fishbowl housing a glistening water snake when a reedy witch wearing thick black spectacles sidled up and tapped her on the shoulder.

The woman smiled perfunctorily and said, "Welcome to Magical Menagerie. Are you attending Hogwarts this year?" At Riana's confirmatory nod, the witch allowed herself another quick grin as she beckoned Riana to follow her throughout the shop. "Good, good. Now what sort of animal did you want? If I'm not mistaken, you have the choice of an owl, a toad, or a cat, correct?"

Riana took a breath and raised an eyebrow rather huffily; this woman wasn't letting her get a word in edgewise.

"Yes, but I don't want an owl. Rather messy, don't you think?" Here she gestured disdainfully toward the wall-length of birdcages and did not notice the affronted look on the witch's sharp face. "And since they won't let us have a snake, which is what I wanted in the first place, I'll take a cat, I think." She nodded affirmatively and bounced up on her toes, thin hands clasped together in front of her, holding her money bag.

The witch also nodded and waved her hand toward the other side of the shop. "Help yourself," she said bluntly, "they're all over there." So saying, the witch walked stiffly away and retreated to her back room, where, Riana assumed, she kept feeding and (hopefully) cleaning supplies.

Riana walked to the other side of the shop, careful not to trip over any birdcages. She stepped gingerly over the droppings and rat skeletons on the floor, and was so busy watching her feet that she nearly stumbled over a large, square, wire cage filled with rambunctious, mewling kittens. Her usually cold heart got the better of her: A sigh

escaped her lips, and she crouched down, hunching her slight body over itself as she reached her finger through the bars and stroked the fuzzy back of one of the sleeping kittens. She found herself cooing softly to the sleeping kitten, "Aw, you're just a sweet little darling. Oh yes you are, oh yes you are."

The kitten opened its pink mouth in a yawn, and Riana discovered that she was smiling. She quickly pulled her hand out of the cage and stood up, ashamed to have let this relatively newfound fondness for cats rule her emotions.

Glancing up at the shelves in front of her, she saw that on each, more wire cages containing full grown tabbies, Persians, and tomcats were crammed together. The cats, for the most part, were asleep, and Riana didn't notice any particular one that she wanted to own until her slanted grey eyes came to rest upon a dusty, cage-less space on the pine shelf. There, snoozing peacefully, his yellow eyes half-open slits, was a tawny tomcat with slightly matted fur, long tufted ears with brown fur sticking out of them in all directions, and chocolaty brown paws.

"Oh," Riana breathed, delicately inching closer to the cat. She reached forward, her petite, trembling hand outstretched, and let the now awake tomcat sniff it before she touched her long fingers to his scruffy head.

The tomcat opened his yellow eyes still wider and arched his back, standing up on the shelf. Riana reached her bony hands up and grasped the cat around his middle, she heaved, her back cracking with the extra weight as she hoisted him into her arms. Her heart beat wildly as she grasped the cat to her chest, and she sank to her knees, clutching the animal. *This is the one*, she thought, *you are the one*.

Almost smiling, Riana began to stroke the tomcat, the droppings on the floor forgotten as she petted the matted, tawny fur.

Suddenly, however, the tomcat leapt from her arms and walked a few paces away in the direction of the screeching cages of owls. Shaking himself from scruffy head to long tail and spraying tiny water droplets over nearby caged occupants, the tawny cat turned to face Riana. She stared at him, her thin grey eyes questioning. Both of her hands lay limp in her lap and, so great was her interest in the cat's odd behavior, she didn't notice the tawny hairs that covered her black corduroy trousers.

The cat's mouth turned up in a smile. *Cats can't smile*, Riana's rational brain yelled.

Then why do snakes talk? the little voice whispered in Riana's mind.

This time, she didn't bother to hush it. Yes, she thought absently, squinting closely at the muscular cat. *Why do snakes talk?*

Meanwhile, however, the tomcat yawned, his pointed fangs were brilliantly white and gleaming fiercely. Riana blinked once, only once, and there, in the place where the tomcat had formerly been, stood a petite, tanned boy, his dark hair mussed and matted. The boy grinned, self-satisfied, at her. His teeth were slightly pointed, just like the cat's own fangs, and he winked insolently. The moment he winked, Riana saw his eyes ... they were bright yellow and the pupils were vertical black slits.

She stared up from her seat on the dirty floor, mouth hanging open in abject astonishment.

The boy rolled his yellow eyes, sighed, and walked toward Riana. He stuck out a callused hand, slightly shiny with a rainy sheen on it, and nodded. "Hi. My name's Fabian, it's nice to meet ya. Ya'd be the girl from room number eight? I'm right, ain't I? Ya have a nice touch," he added, looking slightly impious as he winked again with that bizarre yellow eye. When Riana didn't shake his hand, he glanced down at it confusedly as if to check that there was nothing vile on it. There wasn't and he lazily cocked a rather cheeky eyebrow, and offered it to Riana once more.

She somehow found her voice and squeaked, "Charmed. Yes, I'm Riana, room eight, and..." she meant to say *who* are you, but what came out was, "*what* are you?"

Alvean and the Werecat

Chapter 14 of 20

Riana learns something about her new friend.

Alvean and the Werecat

Fabian chuckled unconcernedly and sat silently down beside Riana, thrusting his unshaken hand deep into his pocket and pulling out something that *looked* like licorice. He poked one licorice stick into his mouth, pointed teeth gleaming. Riana leaned closer, staring at his fangs ... fascinated.

Pretending not to notice her gaze, Fabian offered Riana a piece of licorice. She drew back quickly, shaking her head vehemently. "I ... I can't; wh-what is that?"

Fabian's feline mouth turned up at the corners, but he also looked slightly confused. "It's all right," he said, his voice a low, pleasant-sounding growl, "it's good. Licorice Wand, ya know."

Looking down in shame, Riana spoke again, "I can't eat it. I don't *want* to eat it," she corrected. She spoke in a quiet yet rough undertone as she lifted her chin, daring Fabian to question her.

Fabian, however, merely looked at her, curiosity shining from his yellow eyes. He cocked a shaggy, tawny eyebrow and twisted his mouth to the side, the Licorice Wand shifting with the movement of his red mouth. Under his inquisitive, bizarre stare, Riana lost her momentary bravery and cast a sullen look toward the dirty floor. She immediately wished she hadn't. Seeing where her thin hand lay on the wood floor, she gasped in disgust and hurriedly moved it away from a rat skeleton-ridden owl pellet.

If Fabian noticed, he didn't mention it; he was too busy staring at the tips of his fingers, picking lazily under the nails with claw-like precision while the Licorice Wand dangled from his mouth. "Suit ya self," he said, ceasing his nail-cleaning, shrugging carelessly, and returning the proffered Licorice Wand to his pocket. He sighed deeply and sucked on his Licorice Wand for a minute and then turned his yellow cat's eyes on Riana.

"So ya want to know *what* I am?"

At the sound of his proud and amused voice, Riana's gaze snapped up to Fabian's face. "I ... I meant *who* you are," Riana stuttered, then added quietly, "and what, of course." She finished her excuses lamely, looking up at Fabian from under a fringe of dark eyelashes.

At her hesitant confession, Fabian laughed out loud and leaned languidly backwards onto a nearby cage, which promptly slid out from behind him, its furry occupant hissing angrily. Fabian's eyes flew open in surprise, and sitting bolt upright, he cast a derisive glance back toward the cat who stared at him in silent fury. Shrugging again, Fabian

turned back to Riana, licked his licorice-smearing lips, shifted the Wand to the opposite corner of his mouth, and leaned forward confidentially.

"Well, I'm a werecat...born not made. And I've been followin' ya all day. I'm down the hall from ya at the Leaky Cauldron, room number three." He grinned insolently and cocked his head to one side, his bizarre stare measuring Riana up and down as if waiting for her reply.

Riana gasped, "Oh! You're the one who was talking in his sleep." She narrowed her eyes and stared at him, daring him to contradict her.

Instead, he smiled. "Yeah, I do that from time to time. Drives me mum insane. I'll disappear in the middle of the night...cats don't sleep at night, even werocats...and she'll come upstairs to me room, checkin' on me ... as usual, and I'm not there!" At this, Fabian chuckled merrily, his mouth open, pointed teeth clearly visible. "But they can't do anythin' about it ... and dad, he doesn't really care, as long as I don't terrorize Muggles and *get caught*. Though I got to admit, it's rather fun scarin' those idiots ... especially the kiddies."

Fabian had a melodious Irish accent that sounded very pleasant to Riana's ears, and she smirked slightly as Fabian reached up a coarse hand and comfortably scratched behind his ear. Riana was beginning to like him, oddly enough. He made her feel happy ... accepted. Yet he also had a vindictive edge to him that she couldn't quite puzzle out. In a word, he was intriguing.

Fabian didn't seem to (or chose not to) notice her contemplation. "So ... Riana, what's your tale? All I know is that ya cry, sometimes, in the mornin's, and that ya wear black and grey ... never anythin' else."

Riana tilted her chin up and stared down its pointy length at Fabian, searching his tanned face as if to test its truthful interest. When he simply looked at her, Licorice Wand stuck comically in his mouth, she pulled in her bottom lip, grinned a little and began to tell her history.

Riana told Fabian everything, starting with the fact that she didn't know who her real parents were. She then related her adventure of the past week, starting two days ago when she'd received her acceptance letter to her present stay at the Leaky Cauldron.

When she related her midnight escape, he sucked in his breath, nearly choking on his Licorice Wand, and coughed, finally managing a weak, "Wicked," his merry eyes shining appreciatively.

Riana blushed slightly at his obvious admiration and found herself smiling and laughing, truly enjoying being alive for the first time since ... since when? She could not remember another moment in her life when this had happened.

"Then ya don't really know who your parents are? Do ya think ya are wizard-born?" Fabian asked, with a hint of suspicion no doubt stemming from his penchant for teasing Muggles. His words slurred together as the Licorice Wand shrunk quickly in his mouth.

Riana shook her head. "I don't for sure if I'm wizard-born. As for my parents ... I met somebody today who, I think, knew who they are ... or were. But he didn't tell me anything," she finished sullenly.

Fabian gazed at her with concern in his crazy eyes. "I'll tell ya what," he said. "Why don't we stick together for the rest of the day and I'll show ya Diagon Alley. Sound like a plan?" He stuck out his callused hand for the second time since he'd met Riana.

Pursing her thin lips, Riana lowered her eyelids over her slanted eyes, hardly daring to believe that she might have a friend. Opening the silvery grey orbs, she saw Fabian still looking at her speculatively.

Nodding slightly, Riana replied, "It's a plan," and reached out her own tiny hand to shake hands with the werecat. His palm felt smooth and rough, all at the same time, and smiling hugely ... pointed teeth and all, Fabian effortlessly leapt to his feet, hoisting Riana's slight body along with him.

"All right!" He exclaimed loudly, with barely contained excitement, "Now that we're here, I suppose we might as well get our animals. Rain's stopped outside." He indicated the cloudy day, dropping Riana's bony fingers, and turning around, looking at the owls, speaking over his shoulder, "I want an owl. I mean, there's your own personal mail-carrier right there and they're intelligent, too. Plus, they scare Muggles to death if ya send messages durin' the day," he added with an amused grin. "Oh, that, and it wouldn't feel quite right buyin' a member of me own family," he continued, glancing toward the cages of cats.

Riana stared at Fabian's back. *Mail-carrier?* she thought confusedly.

"But ya, I suppose, want a cat," he turned back, flashing a smile in Riana's direction, "and since ya can't have me, I suggest you try one of the kittens ... they'll be easier to train. We grown cats have *bad* habits." He chuckled, stressing the word 'bad' and, baring his fangs, mimicked a crouching cat. Riana shrank back involuntarily at Fabian's fierce mien. He chuckled at her discomfort, but it was a companionable snicker, not a cruel one.

Riana narrowed her eyes and stuck out her tongue, turning her back on him and walking quickly to the wire cage filled with kittens. Despite her saucy manner, however, Riana was thrilled to have met Fabian, and her face was wreathed in a smile, stretching it into tight smile lines.

The little, sleeping kitten was the one she eventually chose, and she cuddled the tiny creature to her emaciated frame as it slept on. "I ..." she hesitated momentarily then plunged ahead, murmuring softly in the kitten's ear. "I love you, you darling thing. You're so sweet, so warm ... what do you want to be called?" She glanced toward Fabian who was browsing through the cages filled with owls and then returned her gaze to the fluffy, grey-haired Persian in her arms. Recalling a name she'd wandered across in *Why I Didn't Die When the Augurey Cried*, she rubbed a stick-thin finger on the kitten's velvety nose and whispered, "I'll call you Alvean."

*

A few minutes later, the two stood at the front desk, waiting for the witch who was fetching feed from the storeroom in the back. Fabian had ended up with a nip on the finger from a particularly vindictive barn owl that he'd tried to tease with a half-eaten rat. It was this owl that he chose, laughing merrily at Riana's raised eyebrow. "It's more of a challenge this way," he explained. "Now I have to get the big idiot to like me."

The two were amiably chatting now as they paid the skinny witch for their pets, a few days' supply of dead rats, and a cloth sack full of kitten food, and ambled out of the menagerie. Fabian told Riana about one of his escapades during which he'd appeared on the windowsill of a young Muggle boy during the night and transformed quickly into human form, then back to werecat, scaring the toddler half to death.

"I don't really hurt them," Fabian admitted, hauling his giant, domed birdcage quite easily for such a small boy and grinning as the bird beat its angry wings against the bars of the cage, finally settling down on its perch and glowering angrily with round, yellow eyes. "But I do like to have some fun. Fabian raised the cage to eye-level, speaking to the owl as it clicked its sharp beak and stuffed its fluffy head under its large, brown wing. "Well, Bevil," he said, "now ya have to work with me ... despite this wicked nip here." He showed the owl his bleeding finger. The owl glared fiercely at him and snapped, causing Fabian to jump back. However, he continued to swing the cage breezily as he and Riana emerged from the shop into the muddy alley lane.

Riana couldn't figure out why she liked Fabian so much. No, scratch that, she couldn't figure out why she liked him at *all*. He was the oddest combination of humor and vindictive obsession that she'd ever met. Mind you, she really hadn't had the pleasure of meeting anyone with whom she really got along. Fabian seemed to traverse all those obstacles.

"Fabian, I ... I don't have all my school things yet, and..." Here, Riana shifted her kitten to one hand and slid the other deep into her trouser's pocket, groping for her school supplies list. "So do you think we should go get those now? Or wait until tomorrow ... you *will* still be here tomorrow?" She asked anxiously. She really did enjoy being around Fabian. He was such a happy, self-satisfied person that it made her happy to be alive, as well.

Fabian glanced at Riana, his laughing eyes taking in her worried expression. He nudged her bony shoulder with his arm and replied, "Of course I'll be here. We're stayin' 'til it's time to go to Hogwarts, and ya can meet me parents when we get back to the Leaky Cauldron. So ya don't need to look so worried. Or..." He glanced at her roguishly before continuing, "...is it because you'll be missing me cuddly self?" He shot a grin at Riana as her mouth and eyes snapped open in shock. Then, as she realized what he'd said and sprang toward him, Fabian whooped loudly, sidestepping a cuff from Riana's petite, ineffective fist and dashed off down the muddy Alley, kicking mud in every direction. Riana jerked up her pointed chin and followed, scampering after her new friend.

What is a Pureblood?

Chapter 15 of 20

Riana is introduced to Fabian's mother and yet another fascinating aspect of wizard society.

What is a Pureblood?

The following days were the happiest that Riana had experienced up until this point in her life. During the daytime, she and Fabian wandered all around Diagon Alley, visiting various shops and retrieving the rest of their school supplies.

*

The afternoon that they got their animals, Riana and Fabian had decided to return to the Leaky Cauldron and save the rest of their shopping for the days left 'til September the first. There was plenty of time, and Riana was completely content to spend the rest of summer vacation in Diagon Alley with Fabian..

What it is, Riana had thought, trailing along the alley, *I'm sure I don't know*. But everything was so extraordinary and unexpected, she was quite happy to take him at his word. Arriving back at the gateway to the Leaky Cauldron, Riana had reached into her purple purse and was in the process of drawing forth her new wand, when Fabian placed a restraining hand on her arm. She glanced up defensively into his smirking face.

His eyes twinkled. "I wouldn't do that, if I were ya," he muttered, sitting down on a nearby curb and pulling Riana down beside him. "Ya aren't a fully qualified witch yet, so it won't work for ya." He indicated the wall. "Besides, I've already tried." Chuckling, he pulled out his own wand, an eight inch, whippy wand. "Juniper," he told Riana, "with me own fur in it."

He then laughed loudly at Riana's shocked expression and swished his wand lazily. "This wand's been commissioned since I was born; the wood is me Celtic tree, and when I was born, when they discovered I was a werecat, "...another chuckle..."they yanked out, well, 'kay, they cut a lock of me hair and sent it to ol' Ollivander." Fabian smiled, looking at his wand fondly. "Sometimes I love bein' a pureblood."

Confused, Riana opened her mouth to ask what a 'pureblood' was, but Fabian cut her off as he continued his leisurely chatter.

"Anyway, regardless, we can't open the wall 'til..." He was cut off as the red brick wall suddenly formed its doorway, and a pale, willowy witch with tousled brown hair came storming out of it ... murder written plainly on her face.

She swept up to Fabian, who jumped cheekily to his feet. "Mum! How good of ya to open the wall for us. This is Riana, met her today, definitely a future Slytherin." He grinned back at Riana, who tilted her head to the side and glared at him. *A future* "What"?

"Anyway, we'll just be goin'," he said, stalling for time as he signaled behind his back for Riana to sneak through the doorway. Riana ignored his unspoken pleas and simply rose to her feet, backbone cracking wearily. She stared at Fabian, standing impudently, feet spread wide, in front of his mother. She felt curious to know what kind of woman his mother was...she soon found out.

"Where *were* ya?" The witch howled, her Irish brogue thickening in her fury. "Ya father and I woke up this mornin' and ya weren't there ... again! I have told ya time and again, that ya are not allowed to leave your room, the house, *anywhere* without our permission! Ya are only eleven, son. *What* did ya think you were doin'? *Explain* ya self!" Fabian's mother stood, her slipper-clad foot tapping the wet, cobblestone pavement irritably. The fearsome scowl on her face made her petite frame terribly frightening, and her green eyes glittered venomously as her son stepped back and placed a friendly, muscular arm around Riana's thin, bony shoulders.

"Mum," he spoke with careful deliberation, "as I said before *this* is Riana, and she's a few rooms down the hall from us. I wanted to get some shoppin' done before ya and dad woke up." Fabian lied with born skill, covering for Riana's sobbing that morning smoothly. He indicated the large, brown, barn owl in the birdcage and informed his mother, "That's Bevil. Bought him this mornin'. Nasty little devil, aren't ya?" This last he directed to the huffy owl.

His mother's eyes narrowed as she glared at the owl and her rebellious son, but suddenly, as if seeing Riana for the first time, Fabian's mother's glittering green eyes swept over her, and obviously meeting with her approval, she approached Riana gracefully, offering her smooth, manicured hand. "I'm so pleased to meet ya, Riana. I don't know if my son has told ya"...this was said with a furious glare in Fabian's direction ... he pretended not to notice..."but our name is Urquhart."

Riana looked toward Fabian, who was now watching his mother and Riana with an impish grin on his tanned face. He bowed with an exceedingly fancy flourish as Riana turned back to Fabian's mother.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Urquhart." Her thin lips stumbled over forming the strange surname.

"Please. I'm Favel." Fabian's mother's lilting accent was distracted as she released Riana's bone-thin hand. Riana nodded ever so slightly as Favel turned away from her and swirled toward Fabian in a blur of emerald green cloak.

Seizing her son's chin, she tilted up his laughing face, narrowing her glittering green eyes. "Don't ya *ever* scare us like that again!" she hissed. Thus saying, she cast a final glare back at Fabian and flounced through the doorway back into the Leaky Cauldron.

Riana glanced, wide-eyed, at Fabian and let out a long, relieved, pent-up sigh; she was a little frightened of Favel and this she wasn't ashamed to admit...the tiny witch was forbidding. However, one look at Fabian, who was bent double, laughing raucously, assuaged her fears, and she smiled too.

"Ha, ha, ha! *That* ... was so..." more laughter, "funny!" Fabian whooped with hilarity and bowed again. "Our name is *Urquhart*..." he drawled, drawing out the surname pretentiously. "Honestly, ya'd think they ruled the world with the way they go on and on about bein' purebloods. Mind, if I weren't a pureblood, I'd have somethin' to say about it. I like bein' one, but they," he gestured toward the Leaky Cauldron into which his mother had disappeared, "flaunt it like it's the most important thin' in the world." He yawned lazily. "It ain't."

Riana stopped laughing. This expression was one of the many that she did not know; it had popped up before in conversation with Fabian, and Riana seized her chance to discover what it was. "What's a pureblood, Fabian?"

He stopped laughing at once and turned his yellow eyes on her seriously. "Ya don't know?"

Riana shook her head.

"Well," Fabian began, but then he stopped as the wall leading back to the Leaky Cauldron began to close. "Quick!" he shouted, leaping to his feet. "Back through the doorway. We'll talk about it inside," he called over his shoulder as he grabbed the birdcage and ran through the fast-closing wall.

*

The young witch and wizard walked quietly back into the dimly lit Leaky Cauldron, avoiding the pointed, emerald glare from Favel Urquhart who sat sipping a beverage at the bar, and shuffled up the rickety staircase, Bevil's cage bumping along each step accompanied by an indignant squawk from its occupant at each bang. Reaching the top, Fabian scurried down the dusty hallway with Riana close on his heels, her hands supporting the sleeping form of Alvean.

Fabian opened the door to room number three and disappeared inside. Riana was left standing nervously at the door and heard him shouting, "Shut it, ya dumb bird!" in a rather threatening yet jovial voice as several heavy objects crashed to the floor to the cacophony of irate owl hoots and screeches. He emerged from the room seconds later, holding a battered box in his hands.

"What's that?" Riana asked, indicating the box, but Fabian waved her question airily aside, questioning her instead.

"Let's go put Alvean in your room, 'kay?" Riana assented and they walked five doors down as she transferred Alvean to one hand and fished the room key out of her pocket with the other. She unlocked the door and pulled it open as she and Fabian entered the room. He smiled in indulgent humor at the heaps of clothing that lay covering the bed and tumbling messily out of the suitcases.

Alvean was still sleeping soundly, and Riana handed her reluctantly to Fabian, whose yellow eyes glinted mischievously, as she dumped the contents of one suitcase onto her bed and crammed an old bath robe in the bottom of the now-empty suitcase. She held out her skeletal hands for Alvean and gently placed the sleeping kitten in the suitcase with the lid propped open. Looking down at the small animal, Riana felt an odd emotion shining out of her slanted, grey eyes, and she quickly looked away from Alvean in order to stem the unknown feelings. She then walked to the bed, motioning to Fabian, who was standing balanced on one foot, gazing around her room, his mysterious box clutched under his arm.

"So," Riana began, plopping down on the bed, "what's a pureblood?" Fabian followed suit, jumping cat-like onto Riana's pillow before answering.

"A pureblood is a witch or wizard whose ancestors have always been magical. That's like me family, the *Urquharts*. And that's like the Zabinis and the Malfoys and a few others. Of course, there aren't *that* many, because we would've all died out a long," he yawned in the middle of his sentence, pointed fangs gleaming, "time ago ... if nobody had married Muggles." He pulled a face. "I couldn't stand bein' related to a Muggle, they're inferior," he grinned wickedly, "and so much fun to scare. But, really, about the pureblood obsession, it's a stupid thing to be proud of. I don't pay much attention to it, anyway." He looked at Riana, his weird eyes sparkling in the gloom of the musty room.

If you don't pay attention to it, why mention it? Riana looked warily at Fabian. Yes, she liked him. But what was he hiding? There had to be so much more to this boy who was so merry and yet so deceitful. She resigned herself to discovering Fabian's nature. Why was he like this?

Riana shifted her eyes to the floor where Alvean's suitcase lay. The kitten was still sleeping peacefully and Riana felt a touch of fear. *What if Alvean never wakes up?* Realizing, however, that this was entirely ridiculous and, too, that Fabian was waiting for her to comment, she opened her mouth slightly and questioned Fabian further. "Who are the Zabinis and the Malfoys?"

Fabian looked at her, surprised, as if this was the question he least expected her to ask. "They're just some friends of my father...just people. Purebloods, of course. You'll meet them soon enough. They're all right, I guess. Scorpius's not bad, and Hyacinth is a brat, but they're okay." He gave a throaty chuckle. "Just wait three more days and ya can form ya own opinions."

Riana sat, knees propped up under her chin, her mind working rapidly. How much about this world of wizardry did she not understand? How would she know how to conduct herself at Hogwarts? And what if they expected magic on her first day? Her anxious musings were cut short, however, by the sound of Fabian's questioning voice. She looked at him, silver eyes narrowed to slits. "What?"

"I said, how 'bout a game of wizard chess?" With this, he whipped the top of the box he'd brought from his room and scattered chess pieces across the bed. He grinned and removed the chess board from the wooden box. "Well, what about it?"

Riana leaned closer, spellbound. One of the pawns gave an almighty scream as it was rapped smartly on the head by the enemy queen's scepter. Her eyes glistened eagerly. "Absolutely."

Glass and Crystal

Chapter 16 of 20

Fabian and Riana continue shopping and meet an old woman who seems to know something about Riana ... something she will not share.

Glass and Crystal

The following day dawned cool and bright. For the first time in her life, the sun did not affect Riana adversely, and she stretched with pleasure, remembering the previous day and her adventures with Fabian. However, old habits die hard, and Riana suddenly sprang up from the soft, antique cushions of her bed and, nearly tripping over Alvean's suitcase, waking the mewling occupant as she did so, walked to the cracked mirror. She pivoted to the left and studied her protruding ribs. She pivoted to the right and hunched her shoulders, causing her vertebrae to stand out in a spiny ridge over her emaciated back. She pivoted to the front and poked at the sharply jutting hipbones. Each bone stood out to such an extent that Riana felt uncomfortably like a foreign presence ... a wooden soldier in her *own* body...but she was pleased.

The evening before, Fabian had taught Riana the fairly simple game of wizard chess. "It's just like *real* chess!" Riana had exclaimed and at Fabian's questioning look. "Uh...

Muggle chess. Only, now the pieces move..." Fabian had laughed loudly at this after giving her a strange, yellow-eyed stare.

After several raucous and entertaining games of wizard chess, Fabian had then invited her downstairs for dinner with his mum and dad. Riana had declined, feeling that she must not eat anything due to her lapse in self-control the day before. She went to bed feeling dizzy and light-headed but oddly self-satisfied.

Still, this morning was a new day, and Riana looked forward to another jaunt with Fabian. She cast a final glance at her looking-glass reflection and tripped lightly to the remaining suitcase, still crammed full of monochromatic clothing.

"I'll feed you in a minute," she assured Alvean as the kitten set up a fearful din, mewling and scratching at the sides of her suitcase home. Slipping a black dress over her head and grabbing a grey cardigan, Riana knelt on the floor and rummaged underneath the sagging mattress for Alvean's kitten food. She pulled out the cloth bag and picked a spider web off of it, a disgusted expression over her pointed features.

Kneeling beside the suitcase, she lifted little, grey Alvean out and placed the kitten in her lap. Alvean pranced around impatiently as Riana unscrewed the bottle cap of Aunt Arabella's Kitten Mush and poured some of the brown mixture gingerly onto her hand. Alvean mewed angrily at the delay as Riana looked with disgust at the mushy mass in her hand. Sighing in resignation, Riana shrugged and lowered her hand to the tiny animal.

In her haste to discover what the source of the pungent smell was, Alvean proceeded to trip over herself and landed nose-down in the mess. A shadow of a grin played across Riana's thin mouth as she set Alvean on her feet, placed her hand in front of the kitten's pink mouth, and held the small head directly in front of the kitten food. Alvean gratefully lapped the mushy food out of Riana's emaciated hand as Riana softly stroked the fluffy grey back. The kitten arched its back against her hand, tail stiff and straight, balancing as the kitten's four little legs trembled in young weakness.

A loud and drawn-out "Meow" sounded from outside Riana's door, and she leapt to her feet, Alvean mewling indignantly as she was swept through the air supported by one frail hand. Riana walked to the door, stumbling over yesterday's discarded outfit, and opened the wooden panel to find a tawny tomcat staring up at her with a wide, toothy grin. Riana rolled her eyes. "Fabian, *quit* doing that. Honestly. You'll scare Alvean." She stroked the kitten as she spoke and lowered her high-pitched voice, cold grey eyes softening as she gazed at the tiny creature mewling plaintively in her thin arms.

With a loud purr, the tomcat shook his head, and in his place stood Fabian, the tanned Irish boy that Riana had met the day before.

"I just wanted to see whether or not ya recognized me. Ya were reelin' last night before ya went to bed. It's breakfast time." He walked into Riana's room, scooping Alvean out of Riana's arms and placing the kitten back in her suitcase where she put up a frightful display of kitten savagery, rolling around, grabbing the old bathrobe in her front paws and kicking at it frantically with the grey pads of her back paws.

Fabian grinned down at the irate kitten indulgently, no doubt remembering his own similar infantile fits of anger.

Alvean continued for several minutes before settling moodily down and comically stretching out her rough, pink tongue in an effort to clean her food-covered nose.

Riana simply stood, watching Fabian and the kitten, her cheeks sucked in, lips pushed petulantly out. Fabian glanced up, fixing Riana with his piercing yellow stare as she then began objecting to breakfast loudly.

"No, missy, you're eatin' breakfast this mornin', because I don't aim to have my mate pass out in the streets while we're shoppin'. I'm only a cat." He winked cheekily. "A little chit like Alvean, I can carry. But a big girl like ya ... I'd have trouble with."

At the look of horror on Riana's face, Fabian darted toward her and grabbed her shoulders. "Look at me, Riana. I was kiddin' ... you're so thin already, I..." Here he faltered. "Please, just come eat." His usually laughing eyes were serious.

Riana jerked up her proud chin, ashamed to let Fabian see her one true weakness, and agreed to come to breakfast. "Only a small fruit smoothie, all right? Nothing else..." She fixed him with a hawk-like stare. Fabian just nodded with self-satisfied pleasure, obviously delighted.

"I just need to find some shoes," Riana muttered, looking at the mess on her floor. She spotted the toe of one grey pump poking out from under the vanity table and darted toward it as Fabian approached Alvean's suitcase.

"No, that's not all ya need to do," he said, bushy eyebrows raised amusedly. "This little one needs to take care of business, if ya know what I mean."

Riana glanced back over her skeletal shoulder as she knelt, bony bottom sticking up in the air, elbows and forearms pressed to the floor, her long, thin fingers reaching under the dusty, spider web-ridden vanity, trying to snag the pumps.

"Oh, right..."

She sighed and was drawing her stick-like arms out from under the cabinet as Fabian shook his head, laughing at Riana's compromising position. He rolled his yellow eyes and sighed loudly. "Don't bother, I'll do it ... she's not that much of a problem, are ya? Little rascal." He addressed this last endearment to Alvean as he scooped her up, supporting her delicate body in his strong, tawny arms, and dashed from the room.

Riana called after him, "Don't you *dare* change into a cat around her! And what about Bevil?" But he was already flying down the rickety staircase, taunting laughter drifting up to dusty room number eight, where Riana crouched, exasperated.

*

Riana had placed her pumps on her feet and was standing in front of the mirror, facing toward the open doorway, one hand pressed to the small of her back, the other to her abdomen, measuring the side view of her body when Fabian came bursting through the door, holding a now slumbering Alvean in his hands.

His heavily-bandaged hands, Riana noticed, narrowing her eyes and leaning closer, her own bony hands dropping to her sides, forgotten.

Fabian placed Alvean softly in the suitcase and looked up at Riana impertinently.

"What happened to Bevil? Did you feed him already?" Riana asked, as Fabian strode toward her, hands thrust in the pockets of his blue jeans.

He laughed loudly, but his eyes held a touch of disgust as he said, "No. I tried to, but, ah... it didn't go so well."

Riana lifted her chin and squinted her eyes, "Oh... he nipped you again, did he?"

She grinned wryly, and Fabian joined in her mirth as he drew his bandaged hands out of his pockets. "Did my battle scars give ya that idea?" he asked as Riana collapsed, helplessly howling with laughter.

After several minutes of red-cheeked, raucous laughter, Riana and Fabian finally quieted down enough to at least *stand* properly. In silent agreement, they decided to set out for Diagon Alley. Both Riana and Fabian kept their mouths pressed together, though their eyes twinkled in merriment, for a single chuckle would instigate another fit of hilarity. So doing, the young witch and wizard linked arms and walked out of the room, fitting easily through the doorway. Riana sighed happily as she walked down the dust-glazed hallway, and then her eyes fluttered wide.

"Oh! I forgot to lock my room!" she exclaimed. Riana dropped Fabian's muscled arm, dashed back to her room, retrieved her purse, which coincidentally, she'd also forgotten, and stopped to drop a quick kiss on the sleeping Alvean's furry head. She dashed out the door and slid to a stop on the dusty floor, pumps screeching noisily. Pivoting in place, she reached a thin hand out to lock her door. Breathing deeply, her thin ribs expanded creakily and she glanced up to see Fabian grinning at her mad

rush with amusement evident in his feline face. She stuck out her tongue at him and approached him unconcernedly, her eyebrows raised challengingly. Fabian gave a mock bow, extended his arm to Riana who grasped it just as haughtily, and they traipsed down the stairs, arms linked comfortably.

*

After Riana's fruit smoothie and Fabian's five sausage links, two fried eggs, and a pint of orange juice had disappeared into two hungry mouths and the respective Knuts had been paid to Tom, the two children walked to the Leaky Cauldron's backyard and stood in front of the wall, waiting, as Tom hobbled forth from the Leaky Cauldron and tapped his wand, three up, two across.

The red brick doorway ground open and Riana sprang forward, only to have her thin arm wrenched painfully in her shoulder socket as Fabian caught hold of her hand. As if to prove a point, he looked at Tom and spoke loudly, "Thank ya, Tom." The old man looked surprised but nodded his head anyway. Fabian grinned smugly then turned to look at Riana, admonition written plainly on his face.

She looked down at Fabian and demanded indignantly, "What?" Fabian gave a pronounced nod in Tom's direction. Riana's face crinkled into disgust as she shook her head. Fabian's eyebrows shot up.

Now, if Tom noticed this odd exchange, he did not say a word. He simply stood there, arms swinging slightly as he gazed, cloudy-eyed around the backyard.

Fabian mouthed, "Yes," at Riana who looked down at him angrily. Seeing, however, that they were going nowhere until she did as he asked, she lifted her pointy nose, stared down its full length at the impish Fabian, and turned to Tom.

"Yes," she simpered, letting her false thanks leak through her insincere words, "thank you." Fabian nudged her hard in the ribs. "Ouch! Thank you, *Tom*," she finished, glaring at Fabian's conceitedly pleased countenance.

Tom inclined his rheumy, aged head and ambled back into the Leaky Cauldron.

Glowing at Fabian, Riana jerked her arm free and stepped over the threshold of Diagon Alley, keeping a few paces ahead of Fabian.

"Oh, come on, Riana. Ya know that was rude of ya back there. It was nice of him to do that for us." Fabian caught up to Riana easily and darted from one side of her to the other as she swung her pale, pointed face side to side, avoiding his gaze.

Rounding on him furiously, Riana placed her hands on her bony hips. "I was rude! Who was the one poking me in the ribs? Besides, aren't you supposed to hate him? He's obviously *not* a pureblood. And I think you were just trying to, I don't know, make me do something I didn't want to. And that makes me mad!" She glared at her companion with all the fury she could muster in her slanted, silvery eyes.

Fabian simply stared back at her and inclined his head. "I like to play with the old gent from time to time. No, he's not a pureblood, I like to tease you, oh, and yes, ya were rude."

Riana huffed and rolled her eyes, turning and walking into the nearby cauldron shop. She didn't need her list to tell her that she needed to visit *that* particular shop.

*

The cauldron shop was nondescript. It was filled with stacks of cauldrons that looked, Riana thought, like Muggle flower pots. The proprietor, a small man with a little, round belly shaped just like the curved base of a cauldron, greeted them and assured them that if they needed any help, he was their man.

"Actually, yes, we need, um," Riana looked down to check the list that she'd just pulled from her pocket, "two pewter cauldrons. Standard size two?"

The man nodded, put a finger to his nose and disappeared into the maze of cauldrons.

Riana was busy ignoring Fabian, still angry by his rebuke. Uncharacteristic and unpredictable as always, he danced merrily around stacks of cauldrons and popped out of such odd places, pulling the most peculiar faces, that Riana had to laugh. She did, however, succeed in popping him soundly on the arm for criticizing her earlier, but she eventually forgave him.

The short, round man materialized on Riana's left, toting two pewter cauldrons. "Standard size two," he clarified. "And you're both attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year?"

At this, Fabian stopped dancing around, his face frozen in a horrible grimace, one foot raised off the floor, and he and Riana nodded simultaneously.

The man looked from one to the other. "Well then, you'll need scales for weighing potion ingredients. Professor Patil's class, you know, as well as telescopes for Astronomy." He touched his finger to his nose again and faded into the grey background of the cauldron shop, leaving the two cauldrons at Riana's feet.

"You know, if he keeps touching his finger to his nose like that, he's going to end up with a greasy mass instead of a nose on his face," Riana hissed this comment in Fabian's direction, and they both sniggered.

Soon, the man reappeared and handed over the brass scales and retractable telescopes. Fabian and Riana both paid the proprietor as he beamed rosily on the pair and helped them carry their purchases to the door. Fabian thanked him. Riana did not. This earned her another punch, which she ignored.

Riana checked her list and informed Fabian that the last thing they needed was a set of glass or crystal phials each.

"That sounds absolutely spectacular," Fabian quipped, "*completely rivetin!*" He shut his eyes and reached his callused hand out in front of him, walking blind, shouting, "Take me to the phials, Riana! Show me the way!"

Rolling her eyes, Riana stepped toward him, the heavy cauldron banging painfully against her knobby knees, dress flowing in the cool wind of the bright morning. She grabbed his hand and pulled it down as he began laughing.

At that moment, a serious looking, blond haired wizard with a receding hairline passed by them, his black robes flapping in the breeze as he cast a cursory look in their direction with cool grey eyes.

Neither Riana nor Fabian noticed the man. To their young and happy faces, he was just another passer-by.

*

Though Fabian had asked Riana to lead *him* to the phials, he was the one who knew where they were located and led Riana across the street, a few buildings down, to Slug and Jigger's Apothecary. Riana opened the green-tinted glass door and gasped in disgust. Her pointed nose wrinkled in distaste as the odor of a thousand different herbs and other various magical ingredients assailed her aristocratic nostrils. Fabian, as always, was perfectly composed, though his nose twitched disdainfully at the smell of rotten cabbage and putrid eggs.

An old witch with stringy, tangled, mossy hair and a large hairy mole on the side of her nose crept up to Riana and, grasping her arm in a claw-like hand, spun the thin child to face her.

Biting back a gasp, Riana raised her chin and pulled her arm free of the witch's gnarly clutch. Turning and glimpsing the revolting cause of her pain, Riana's face pulled itself into appalled lines. She purposely made a bigger matter of the unwanted grasp than she normally would. "Ow... That hurt!"

The witch ignored her drawn out protest. "Those eyes look familiar, little one," she croaked, "Parents been in here lately, have they?"

Riana heard a sharp intake of breath, and realized it was her own. *Will this woman tell me who my parents are?*

"I don't know who my parents are," Riana admitted reluctantly. "Can you tell me?" she asked hopefully, desperately seeking to rectify her earlier response. She was trying unsuccessfully and unaccustomedly to be polite to this rather disgusting old woman.

It was a futile attempt

For, sensing her true purpose, the witch cackled and hobbled away, picking up a handful of wriggling worms from a nearby basin on her way to a remote corner of the shop.

Riana stared angrily after her, eyes narrowed and searching, as her lip curled up in a sneer.

Fabian crept to her right side and placed a comforting arm around Riana's gaunt shoulders. Shaking his head, he pulled her off to another aisle where they found crystal and glass phials. Because of her recent influx in financial funds, *Your parents' money*, the voice reminded her, Riana bought a set of crystal phials while Fabian stuck with glass, evading her query as to why he didn't just buy the crystal. He was a pureblood, and by the looks of his own leather money bag, he *certainly* had enough money.

After selecting their items, they approached the witch who was crooning softly to the undulating worms in her knobby claw. The two cleared their throats faintly, and the witch spun around, giant nose wrinkled, eyes beady and staring.

"Well? What do you want?" she demanded briefly, before promptly turning her back on the young witch and wizard.

Fabian and Riana shared a glance.

"She's acting rather uncharitable," Riana whispered defensively, "especially since we've just brought her business."

Fabian's lips thinned into a grim line and he tried his skillful hand at the matter.

"Ma'am," he purred, "we've decided to purchase these phials." The insincere words flowed silkily from his mouth in a musical Irish brogue, and producing the desired effect, the witch turned around, smiling.

Riana shrank back involuntarily.

The witch's smile, though she might have been trying to look friendly, was rather a gruesome affair. The poor woman only possessed one tooth, and that one was oversize, yellow, and cracked. However, she beckoned Fabian forward, and he seized Riana's set of crystal phials as well as his own glass ones and walked to the front desk, on which was scattered an assortment of fuzzy green moss and frog spawn.

The witch, shuffling behind the front desk, turned to a table placed conveniently behind her and began humming tunelessly as she scooped various ingredients into little bags and then tossed this hodgepodge into a larger cloth sack.

Riana looked at Fabian questioningly, but he only shrugged and returned his gaze to the decrepit witch. After a minute or so, the witch turned back to the two children and stared beadily down at them.

"Basic potion ingredients," she informed them, "for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." She didn't wait for their answer, yea or nay, as she rattled off a price. Fabian smiled wryly as he paid up and Riana followed suit, earning her the piercing glare of the witch. Riana ignored the woman, but was interested nonetheless as she and Fabian grabbed their purchases and smashed them into their newly bought, size two cauldrons.

That witch recognized my eyes, Riana mused, as she and Fabian, their pewter cauldrons loaded down with potion ingredients, bumped their way out the door and into the blustery alley outside. *She knows who my parents are ... or she had a suspicion, at least* Making a mental note of this, Riana vowed that she would return to question the intimidating, repulsive witch again ... just as soon as she could. But she would have to be alone. Fabian couldn't know. How soon could that happen? She didn't know, but she had to try.

*

Reaching the street, Riana took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the sweet, clear air of Diagon Alley, increasingly thrilled to be out of the Apothecary's shop.

Fabian was doing the same, and as he took a giant gasp, expanding his small, tanned chest, he cast an insolent glance at Riana. "God, that was borin'! I think it's about time to have some *real* fun. Let's head back to the pub. Ten to one says I take your queen in five minutes."

With an arch look, Riana set her cauldron on the pavement, extended her hand and took Fabian's. "And I, Mr. Big Shot, say that you won't win one game this evening."

A Vision Through the Dirty Window

Chapter 17 of 20

Riana has a dream that seems all too real.

A Vision through the Dirty Window

Riana tossed and turned in her tangled sheets, using her pent-up energy *to will* sleep to come as her slanted eyes gazed tiredly at the full moon outside. Yes, her day had been long, full, and thoroughly enjoyable, and she *should* have welcomed the setting of the sun with open arms, yet ... she could not. Despite the rather uncomfortable sensation that every bone in her body was cracking in agony when she moved, and despite the fact that every strained and tight muscle in her small body groaned with fatigue ... she could not sleep. The dirty streaks on the window in her room at the Leaky Cauldron slightly dimmed the glow from the giant, white moon, but not enough for

slumber to approach.

Throwing back the confining blankets, Riana sat up in the sagging bed, knees pulled to her bony chest, her ultra-lean frame highlighted by the pale shafts of light drifting through the room. Swinging her toothpick-thin legs over the corner of the mattress, Riana scooted closer to the rim, finally edging off and standing, toes curled in cold agony, on the chilly, wooden floorboards.

She cast one glance at Alvean, the corners of her proud mouth twitching at the sight of the sleeping form, and then scurried to the mirror. Pulling off the nightgown (for the first time that week, she had finally been awake enough to get undressed before bed), Riana shrewdly examined her skeletal body in the moonlight. The dappled effect the moon gave to her body turned Riana into a phantom ... a thin, shrinking wraith. Nevertheless, though she did not see this true reflection, Riana's eyes lit up as she poked at individual bones with a pencil-like finger. Pleased, she turned from the mirror, replacing the thin nightgown, and approached the window, standing high on tiptoe to peer over the edge.

Gazing down at the foggy street below, Riana's eyes confronted an eerie, foreign landscape. Wreaths of smoky mist curled around lampposts and obscured the pavement as Riana gazed down on the spooky scene. Suddenly, with a bone shaking lurch, Riana felt herself falling into the spooky, shadowy world outside the streaked window.

But she didn't fall.

Instead, she found herself looking through the same grimy window...only she wasn't in room number eight anymore. Gazing back over her lightly-clothed shoulder, Riana's squinted eyes met nothing but inky blackness. Shivering slightly at the nothingness, she turned her gaze again through the grubby window.

Leanne sat on a mused bed, surrounded by pink. Pink walls, pink furniture, pink upholstery, pink everything.

Riana's slanted grey eyes widened in surprise. *What is Mum doing here?* She leaned closer, peering at her mum's hazy face.

Silent tears sent silvery trails in rivulets down Leanne's pale, newly sunken, cheeks. Her enormous eyes were closed; the face that Riana remembered so very well wore an expression of abject misery. Leanne's forehead was twisted in recent age wrinkles and the droop of her mouth was tragic, contorted, and grief-stricken. She sat still as a statue, but for the quiet sobs that racked her petite frame. She was completely unaware that she was being watched.

Riana felt a sudden alien longing to approach the woman who had been her mother, her comforter, for eleven, lengthy years. She wanted to place her thin arms around the weeping woman and soothe her. Though the feeling was new and odd, Riana knew that she *must* ... or she would never forgive herself, for she knew, instinctively, that *she* was the cause of her mother's grief. Resolutely squaring her thin, shadowy shoulders, Riana placed a small, emaciated foot in front of her...

And, as though the fates conspired against her, she felt a wave of shock flowing through her gaunt body as her foot struck something hard...something *invisible*. The tremor raced from her long toes, through the out-standing bones of her feet, into the two protracted bones that formed her ankle, passing the protruding, knobby knees, the pencil-thin thighs, the jutting hipbones, individual ribs and, finally, reverberating loudly in her chest.

No, Riana thought, her stunned brain barely comprehending this distinct emotion through the sharp pain, *in my heart*. This bizarre realization shocked Riana even more than the magical barrier had as she realized that she could not comfort her mum. Even more that she longed to.

Leanne continued to sob pitifully, the silver tears spilling in silently thundering waterfalls from under her eyelids. She clutched a dark blue picture frame containing a photograph in her hands. Suddenly, though, her long, white hands (hands that Riana had always envied, for they were naturally slender) moved slightly, and the portrait was revealed to be a little girl. A thin, little girl with straight black hair, slanted grey eyes and a small, aristocratic smirk on her sharply pointed features.

The little girl's photograph, however, was not the only item clutched in Leanne's white-knuckled grasp. No, indeed; upon further examination, Riana could clearly discern the edge of a book covered in Chinese silk, peeking out from under the photograph. Straining her slender eyes, Riana actively willed her dream-mother to adjust the items lying in her lap.

As if hearing a voice, long hoped-for, long-missed, Leanne's head jerked up, the flow of thick, pearly tears abating fractionally as she cocked her head one side, chestnut hair falling over her eyes. She waited...

Riana pushed still harder with her long, thin hands and her aggravated, pulsating brain at both the invisible physical and mental barriers existing between her world and that of her mother's.

A strange look passed over Leanne's face and her large eyes snapped open in surprise. At that very moment, the two separate worlds collided as a pair of misty, midnight blue eyes gazed, shocked, into a pair of slanted, steely grey ones. The objects clenched in the white hands fell to the floor, and the edges of the book smashed into the glass of the photograph, shattering it with an earsplitting crack. But this neither Leanne nor Riana noticed as, following the descent of the silken book and photograph, each gaze was wrenched painfully away from the other.

Emitting a cry of pain, Riana reached a thin hand up to her silvery eyes and pressed her palms to them, rubbing vigorously. The fall of the book had caused her gaze to be torn away from her mother's and was shockingly agonizing. As she rubbed at her closed eyes, Riana felt, rather than heard, another voice tugging at her subconscious, pulling her back into the musty bedroom at the Leaky Cauldron. Part of her mind whispered dazedly, *The Leaky Cauldron? What's that?* as she quickly and sharply opened her eyes. She ignored the throbbing pain and returned her piercing gaze to the dream room where Leanne was sitting, stock-still and staring, on the ghastly pink bed.

Carefully ignoring the prone figure frozen on the bed, Riana's evading gaze hurriedly glanced at the floor where the broken glass from the photograph mixed with the fibers of pink carpet, creating a sparkling mélange of color as it was touched by the pinpricks of moonlight from the room's open windows.

The book lay to one side as Riana strained to make out the words embroidered in glittering gold silk thread on the cover. Her head began to ache terribly as another voice called, urging her, pulling her, from the other world. Using one last newfound bit of strength, Riana poured a colossal effort into determining the impossibly ornate thread writing on the book.

Just as she was nearing the realization, however, she was yanked bodily away by another invisible force and distributed gracelessly back onto the dusty, hard, wooden floorboards of room number eight in the pub known as the Leaky Cauldron.

*

A pair of feline, yellow eyes stared down at her worriedly. The tanned, and now Riana could see, slightly freckled, nose hovered a mere three inches away from her own. Seeing her grey eyes open, the face heaved a giant, explosive sigh of relief and sweet, warm breath caressed Riana's thin face. Riana wondered abstractedly if she knew this androgynous person. The neutral face's mouth opened and a low, growling voice questioned, "Riana?"

Fight Between Friends

Chapter 18 of 20

Fabian confronts Riana about her eating disorder and the two friends fight. Also, Fabian and Riana send off Riana's acceptance letter to Hogwarts.

Fight Between Friends

A pair of feline, yellow eyes stared down at her worriedly. The tanned, and now Riana could see, slightly freckled, nose hovered a mere three inches away from her own. Seeing her grey eyes open, the face heaved a giant, explosive sigh of relief and sweet, warm breath caressed Riana's thin face. Riana wondered abstractedly if she knew this androgynous person. The neutral face's mouth opened and a low, growling voice questioned, "Riana?"

Riana grimaced in pain. Her vertebral column was digging mercilessly into the floor. She blinked rapidly, adjusting to the blinding pinpricks of sunlight streaming through the filthy window. Groaning, Riana tried to raise her head but fell back weakly as her muscles rebelled. Slumping back, Riana prepared herself for the inevitable thump to her already aching head, but a strong hand had already reached forward to prop her up.

Not caring at all to whom she owed this rescue, Riana's thin fingers groped her head tentatively, working their way to the back where she pushed the lank strands of sweaty, black hair out of her way and pressed gingerly. "Ouch," she hissed, the muscles of her lean face contracting as her hand contacted a large bump on the back of her head.

"Ya continue to surprise me, Riana. Here I am, comin' to wake ya up for breakfast..." Riana felt her eyes narrow at the word 'breakfast' but the voice continued, unaffected by her sharp intake of breath "...and here ya are lyin' on the floor. What are ya goin' to do without me?" The lilting voice sounded slightly amused as Riana finally opened her eyes to view the speaker.

"Mornin', Riana," Fabian murmured, his jovial tone masking the worry shining in his eyes.

Riana felt his arms tilt her up from the floor and ... *Wait from the floor?* Why was she lying on the cold, hard floor? "Fabian, what," she swallowed the taste of morning breath and tilted her chin down, raising only her eyes to his curious gaze, "what happened?"

Fabian's mien lost its amusement and he hugged the small body to his barrel chest. "I don't know, Riana," he said reluctantly as he heaved her to her feet, supporting her swaying frame. "I knocked at your door...we needed to send your acceptance letter to Hogwarts today...but you didn't answer so I let myself in. That's all I know." He pressed her small body to his tightly, and Riana didn't wriggle out of the embrace as she was prone to do in all other cases. It felt good to have another human care about her so much ... another human that wasn't inferior in knowledge. She screwed her eyes shut in an effort to stem the flow of thick, salty tears. But still, a few of the sparkling, rogue tears escaped and ran down her cheeks, dripping off her chin and landing on Fabian's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I can't remember what happened either, but..." Riana's voice trailed off as the memory of a dark room, crying woman, Chinese silk book, gold silk thread, and a broken picture flooded back, assailing her brain with bits and pieces of information. Riana gave a sharp cry and wrenched away from Fabian jerkily. "Fabian, I... I think I..." she gulped as Fabian looked at her, confused. *What did I do? How was that possible? It was a dream, wasn't it? But how did I end up here on the floor, in front of the windows? I remember windows from my dream. I remember... Mother.*

Riana felt numb with shock and began to tremble violently. Her head ached worse than before and she tasted blood in her mouth. Realizing suddenly that she'd bitten her tongue, Riana darted to the cracked, porcelain washbowl and grabbed the pitcher of water. She gulped a mouthful and swished the water around for a moment before spitting into the basin. Sucking her cheeks in, Riana shivered at the taste of blood in her mouth. She hated the taste of blood. Never was there a more disgusting flavor than the tangy, iron flavor of one's own blood.

"Riana?" Fabian's voice sounded through her haze of pain, and Riana turned toward him, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand as she massaged her raw gums with her tongue. Frowning, Riana stared at her friend, wondering what he had to say.

"I bit my tongue," she mumbled, "but my gums hurt, too. It's nothing." However, Fabian continued to stare at the washbasin, his expression showing that there was perhaps a bit more to his questioning tone than Riana realized. Following his gaze, Riana turned and peered in the basin. Gasping in shock, Riana started back from the basin and clutched her hands to her mouth convulsively. There, lying in the bloody water, was a single tooth.

"My ... my t-tooth," Riana whispered, her heart pounding as she realized that the missing tooth was not a "baby" tooth. It was far too big, and as she crammed her thin fingers into her mouth to feel the hole left by the tooth, she remembered that she had lost that exact tooth last year. "Oh, no! What happened," she shrieked, grabbing Fabian's arm in a claw-like clutch, "to my tooth? What happened to me? Why did it fall out? Tell me!"

"I don't know, Riana! Let me go!" Fabian bristled visibly, his dark hair standing on end as Riana began hyperventilating, holding onto Fabian's arm. "Okay, ya want to know what's wrong with ya? Ya are unhealthy! That's what's wrong with ya! Ya don't bloody eat!" Fabian eyes shot off yellow sparks as he, too, seized Riana, his clawed fingers digging into her translucent skin.

Gasping, Riana released her grip on Fabian and felt her eyes fill with tears as she realized what Fabian had said. Immediately, Fabian's expression changed and became penitent as Riana sank to the floor in front, clutching her thin arms around her chest.

"Riana, I...I didn't mean it. Ya couldn't have known this would happen. Please, ya have to believe me. I didn't mean it." Crouching beside her, Fabian reached forward to wrap his arms around the trembling girl, but Riana shrank back. His eyes tortured, Fabian continued, "Look. I don't know why ya were on the floor; I don't know why ya lost ya tooth; I don't know why ya are sick ... but ya are. Please understand, though, that I would never have said anythin' to hurt ya if I didn't think ya needed to hear it."

Riana gazed up at Fabian through long black lashes as he spoke. "I'm," she whispered, her voice breathy but defensive, "not sick. I lost my tooth because I fell last night. It just scared me." With great effort, Riana took hold of the cabinet upon which the basin sat and pulled her body off the floor. Gazing at Fabian, Riana lifted her proud chin and stared down her nose at the tanned, tawny boy crouching animal-like on the floor. "It was a dream," she lied. "I sleepwalk. You don't need to worry." Lying came naturally to her and she wasn't afraid to use it to her advantage. The fact that Fabian had attacked her verbally, however, shook Riana more than she liked to admit, and she was afraid of losing the only person she knew in this alien world. Of course, Fabian didn't look quite convinced as she would have liked, but Riana wasn't about to risk angering him again. She knew, instinctively, that he had almost turned into a cat when she had grabbed his arm.

"All right, then," Fabian finally said, jerking his chin into a nod. "We're leavin'; get dressed." Stalking out of her room, Fabian didn't glance back, and his posture was stiffer than Riana had ever seen.

Sniffing, Riana looked down at her hand, admiring the protruding bones, which were now her only comfort. And then, as she had done so many times before, she wrapped her fingers around her wrist and watched in relief as they met, overlapping a full inch-and-a-half.

Fabian still hadn't spoken more than two or three words to her, and Riana missed his friendly banter so much, she had even tried to initiate the conversation once or twice with little success. Fabian simply wouldn't speak to her and kept his weird gaze fixed straight ahead as they traipsed down the sunny alley. Folding her arms over her chest, Riana bowed her head and scurried after Fabian as he strode down the alley, his expression hard.

"Fabian, stop." The words surprised Riana even as she spoke them. Obviously they shocked Fabian, too, for he spun around and glared at her angrily.

"What?" he spat, pointed teeth gleaming dangerously.

"Why aren't you talking to me? What did I do wrong? You know what? I'm sorry. There, I've apologized. Are you happy?" Riana's grey eyes hardened into steel as she glared at the werecat standing in front of her.

Fabian's own eyes narrowed in return, the vertical pupils appearing as slits in the sunlight. "Well, all right, then." He spun around and marched in the other direction, his body still taut as a spring.

Unbelievable, Riana thought as she stared after her friend. "What?" She felt herself hiss as her body propelled itself forward. "I told you I was sorry; what is wrong with you? Why won't you forgive me? What do I have to say?"

Fabian turned over his shoulder and glared at her angrily. "I am the only friend ya have in the whole world, and ya can't even tell me what's really goin' on with ya? What is wrong with ya that ya can't just tell me?"

Even as Riana felt her eyes spark, even as she felt her lips straighten into a thin line, even as her chin jerked imperiously up, Riana saw, felt, knew the hurt in Fabian's eyes was real. It was the dream; he wanted to know about the dream. The dream was important to him and..."It wasn't a dream. It was real. I didn't tell you because ... I was afraid. It scared me, Fabian; I don't know what it was. I saw my mum. She was crying, Fabian." Riana's eyes lost their anger and were replaced with a cloudy sadness that only Fabian saw.

Standing there in the middle of the alley, crowds of people pouring past her, Fabian had never seen anyone look so alone. With her small hands clasped in front of her, the breeze whipping her dark hair across her forlorn face, Riana looked like a poster child for poverty-stricken children. Though she tried to hide the hurt in her eyes by adopting a defensive pose, Fabian could see that she was deeply shaken by her 'dream,' and he felt his anger melt away. Striding toward her, Fabian grabbed her hands and gazed earnestly into her face. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know it's not your fault and ya can't help what happened ... whatever that was. Ya are my friend, Riana. Ya scared me this mornin' and I was just reactin' to that. Forgive me?"

Riana realized that she'd been holding her breath and let out a small sob. Smiling slightly, she tilted her small head to the side, her almond-shaped eyes blinking furiously as she gazed at Fabian through the strands of raven hair. "Of course I forgive you. You're my friend." The words were shocking, yes, for Riana, but they were indeed true.

Grinning in return, Fabian stepped back and bowed, gesturing in mock grace toward a shop to their right. "That," he said, "is the Diagon Alley Owl Post. I already sent me letter; well, me parents did, actually. Me mum is a bit over-anxious about stuff like that. It's about time ya letter got there too. We're not late, but we're not early either... Comin'?" So saying, Fabian sprang toward Riana and seized her hand in his shiny palm and pulled her through the jostling crowds toward the glassy building.

Once inside, Riana gazed around in amazement as Fabian swaggered to a desk located in the center of the room behind which a pretty young lady sat, filing her three-inch long, bright pink, jeweled fingernails. As Fabian dealt with the receptionist, Riana inched toward the corner of the lobby...at least, she *thought* it was a lobby...and pressed her face to the glass walls. The shop was amazing.

The receptionist's desk was placed in the center of the room and was surrounded by bins filled with parchment, envelopes, quills, and ink bottles in varying shades of color. There were glittering ink bottles, jewel-toned ink bottles, matte bottles, black ink bottles, Ever-Changing ink bottles, and many, many more. The lady also had two trays sitting conspicuously on her desk labeled *cleverly* "Outgoing" and "Incoming." Fabian was gesturing animatedly to the lady who was pointing out various prices and listings on a page of parchment taped to her desk.

However, the receptionist's desk was not what had captured Riana's attention, though she could have happily spent many days staring at the myriad bottles of ink. No, the rest of the post office was what truly amazed Riana. The receptionist's office was round and the walls were glass ... pure, sparkling, shining glass. But beyond those glass walls, stacked farther and higher than she could see, were shelves divided into boxes, and in each little compartment, some eating, some sleeping, stood an owl outfitted with a small pouch on its right leg and tagged on the left with a purple, cloth band.

Though the floor was covered with droppings, Riana couldn't have cared less. The sheer magnitude of the outer room was staggering, though no more so than the number of owls that lived there. Gazing up toward the ceiling, Riana realized that the roof was also glass and that the outer room had none. A door led from the lobby to the outer room and was marked, "Employees only beyond this point. Owls subject to partiality and will attack if threatened *in their homes*. Not responsible for bodily harm."

Raising her eyebrows, Riana turned from the door and looked back at the owls. There were so many varieties, each uniquely different from the others. As several owls stared at her with wide, unblinking eyes, Riana wrinkled her nose in distaste and, turning back, walked toward Fabian and the woman.

"Miss," the receptionist murmured in a ladylike, quiet voice, "to whom do I address this? In what color would you like it written, and what grade parchment do you want?"

Grade parchment? What was that? Riana stared at the woman, confused. "Grade parchment?" she asked.

"Yes. We have Lacewing Fly thin; Schoolwork regular; Dumbledore's Choice, which is a medium thickness; Mattress heav..."

She was cut off as Riana, annoyed by the proceedings, blurted, "Regular thickness. Do *you* actually go out there and attach the letter to the owl? Kinda nasty, isn't it?"

The woman's face took on a glint of distaste as she gazed at the rude, demanding girl standing in front of her. Fabian deliberately treaded on Riana's foot, and as she stifled a shriek of surprise, he turned back to the receptionist.

"Could we have regular thickness, matte black ink, and a big eagle owl, please?" Fabian asked, innocently ignoring Riana as she glared at him.

The receptionist nodded and picked up a quill lying beside her on her desk. Turning around in her swiveling desk chair, she seized a bottle of black ink from the bin labeled 'Matte' and a sheet of parchment and placed both on her desk. She dipped the be-feathered instrument into the pot and began writing furiously on the sheet of parchment, while simultaneously pushing a button and speaking into a small speaker box on her desk. "Madley, I need a size five eagle owl, please. Mm-hmm, yes. Hogwarts, that's right. Thank you."

Turning back to the glass windows, Riana forgot her bad mood for the moment and watched eagerly to see what the procedure was for selecting an owl. A few minutes later, a door that Riana hadn't noticed before opened, and a witch with a grey-streaked, brown plait and a young face walked out, her arms covered by leather gauntlets. She was wearing a hat with a wide brim and her short-sleeved robes were creased, brown leather and covered in plastic. She grabbed a whistle that was hanging around her neck and placed it in her mouth. The witch blew one, shrill note and extended her arm. Quick as a flash, a huge eagle owl swooped down and landed with an arm-shaking *swoosh* on Madley's (for Riana assumed this was she) leather-clad arm. Her face creasing into a smile, Madley petted the head of the owl and offered it a dead

mouse that she'd drawn from a leather pouch attached to her trim waist.

Riana watched, entranced at these proceedings, until a rustle caused her to whip around. Fabian was watching her, pleased at her expression, and the witch behind the counter was sweeping her rose-colored robes out of the way as she sealed the letter and sashayed gracefully to a glass door melded into the glass walls of the lobby. Madley had approached the door as well, and as the receptionist opened the door, the owl trainer grasped the parchment, rolled it expertly into a scroll-shape and, in less than ten seconds, had attached it to the leg of the eagle owl. With one last caress, Madley extended her arm above her head, and the owl took off with a sweep of its four-foot wings.

Turning toward the two children, Madley smiled at them through the glass, the wrinkles on her face contrasting sharply with the condition of her skin. She was obviously a young woman, but she looked tired, old and was severely scratched. *However, she does*, Riana thought, *look happy*.

With a pang of guilt, Riana thought suddenly of Alvean, her kitten, who was not getting the attention she deserved. Why, just that morning, because of her row with Fabian, Riana had pushed some food down the mewling Alvean's throat and stalked out of the room, deliberately leaving poor Alvean to do what she could with her full bladder. In an effort to push Alvean out of her thoughts until she could get back to the inn and care for her, Riana watched as Madley turned from them and gazed skyward, following the progress of her beloved owl.

Needless to say, the love in Madley's expression did not help Riana feel any better, and she turned to Fabian. "Fabian, I didn't take Alvean out to use the bathroom. Can we go back, now?"

His yellow eyes widening in surprise, Fabian leaped toward Riana and pulled her out the door, nodding, 'Thank you,' to the receptionist who was again filing her nails. "Why didn't ya tell me? Poor, little mite. I know what that's like. Try sittin' for hours, watchin' a stupid bird while ya need to go to the bathroom, and then ya can give me a good excuse for forgettin'."

As Riana began to protest, Fabian hushed her. "Kiddin' again, Riana. I know why ya weren't carin' for her this mornin'."

Looking down in penitence, Riana nodded, her grey eyes sad and searching, as she turned back once toward the Owl Post and gazed at the building. *What a great thing it must be*, she thought, *to know something so well. Madley knows her owls ... I don't have anything like that.*

No, the ever-present voice whispered, *you have Alvean. Of course, you left her to fend for herself this morning. What good are you, anyway? Are you really worth anything? You nearly lost your only friend today. Your only friend. Do you really think you will fit in at Hogwarts if you've never fit in anywhere else?*

Eyes narrowing in anger, Riana ignored the accusing voice and strode hurriedly down the alley, accompanied by a sympathetic Fabian. *I am worth something*, she thought, *and I will fit in. Everything will be better at Hogwarts. They'll see; they'll all see! It ... It will, won't it?*

Unrest

Chapter 19 of 20

Nineteen years after Voldemort's defeat, a young girl named Riana is living an innocuous life with her adoptive Muggle parents *until* she receives her acceptance letter from Hogwarts.

Escaping the clutches of her loving but stifling parents, Riana travels to London and from there to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There, Riana is viewed as mysterious, cunning, sly, and—though her parentage is unknown—is chosen for Slytherin House.

The two halves of her life clash, as her anorexia battles with the disdain of fellow Slytherin students for Muggle-born witches and wizards. Follow Riana on her journey through the world of wizardry and her search to find a true home, the identity of her real parents, as well as her inner conflict with anorexia.

Author's Notes

First item of my importante business: the continuance of my thanks to my lovely, wonderful, fantastic, awesome beta... *drum roll* Evie! I couldn't do this without you, chica. And, while I'm at it, thanks to Jan, my moderator, and to Theresa of TPP, and to all the other administrators of both TPP and MNFF. Love!

Second, to all my wonderful readers: I'm so sorry that it has taken me so long to post an update to "Serpent." I've been so busy and I had a monumental writer's block that is now gone, gone, gone! =)

Before you read, I'd like to make a few notes about the new-and-improved "Serpent." I have gone through the entire story and edited each chapter in order to include/exclude information that has now become available due to the release of *Deathly Hallows*. Perhaps the most notable of these edits is the complete removal of the chapter "Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes," a much-too-long discourse on something that is no longer possible. So, you will not find that in the mix. I have also made slight changes to the storyline, but these will not become evident at all because they are for future chapters.

I just wanted to say Thank You to everyone who's been so supportive of this story and I hope to bring you more Riana in the future.

~Julia~

P.S. In the next chapter, Riana finally gets to Hogwarts. Hooray!

Unrest

As it turned out, however, Riana didn't get a chance to visit the hag in the apothecary again before leaving for Hogwarts. She and Fabian *did* go by Slug and Jigger's on their way to do a little last-minute sightseeing in Diagon Alley, but the shop was closed. Riana felt a small twinge of disappointment as she passed the hooded windows of the grimy shop, but she disguised her feelings from Fabian. There were some things that he could know (and did know) about her and others that he just wouldn't understand. Her obsession with trying to find out who her parents were was one of them.

But after spending the afternoon with Fabian in Diagon Alley, Riana had mostly forgotten about the ancient witch. She was having too much fun! For instance, on the day

before they were to leave from school, Fabian decided he'd introduce Riana to the wonders of wizarding sweets.

"Hey, Riana, I know ya don't really *like* ice cream, but ya have to try Dean's Ice Cream Parlor," Fabian said with a twinkle in his weird yellow eyes.

Riana narrowed her own thin eyes, but she had been eying the ice cream parlor for days. It was so colorful and she *really* wanted to know what an Every Flavor Bean was. "What's so great about it, Fabian? I mean, no, I don't like ice cream"...she nearly bit her tongue remembering the taste of the double chocolate fudge ice cream she'd had on her birthday last year..."but maybe I'll try just one scoop."

Fabian grinned, a mischievous glint in his eye. "I, uh, think ya'd better try it for ya self"...and at the suspicion in Riana's eye, he hastened to add..."before I spoil the ... *surprise*."

That was all it took and the two children were dashing off arm-in-arm to the Ice Cream Parlor. The moment Riana stepped inside the small, one-roomed building, she was in heaven, literally. The interior of the shop was designed to look like one was among the clouds, except that the clouds were pink and green, purple and orange, blue and red, all the colors of the rainbow. The walls were enchanted to look as though there weren't any walls, just acres of never ending, fantastic clouds. And the best part was that when you walked into a wall, you kept on going and going and going, just walking in the midst of cool, misty clouds. But no matter how far you walked, when you wanted to come back, it took little to no time at all.

The shop was scattered with plush white easy chairs that looked like fat marshmallows and that, miraculously, showed no sign of staining or use. There were no tables set up, but as Riana watched, a young couple with ice cream sundaes walked over to two marshmallow chairs, sat down and a round grey marble tray whizzed from a hole high in the wall behind the ice cream counter through the air to hover before them, effectively creating a table in midair.

"Oh, my..." Riana breathed in wonderment. She turned to look at Fabian, grey eyes wide, and found that he was just as saucer-eyed. "Have you ever seen ... something so...?"

"No," he replied, his rough brogue awed. "The last time I was here, the whole place was under construction and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas were here castin' enchantments. They had one, two, three flavors at most, but it was enough." Fabian grinned in admiration. "Looks fantastic, don't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah..."

Riana and Fabian moved toward the glass counter behind which sat a tall girl with mocha skin reading the cover of a magazine. She had long hands covered in henna tattoos and long, straight coal black hair which was strung with ... radishes? Riana and Fabian turned to each other, raised their eyebrows and shrugged.

Whatever, Riana thought as she nudged Fabian forward, a tiny smirk on her face. *I'm through trying to figure these people out* But no matter what she did to prepare herself, Riana would find the world of magic infinitely more exciting, more confusing, more amazing than she had ever imagined. But let's leave her with her convictions for the moment; God knows, she has little enough to ground her.

"Excuse me, Miss, can ya help us?"

The girl tilted her head to the side and peered out from around her magazine, which, incidentally, she was reading upside down. "Help? I suppose so. Have you ever met a Potbellied Puffer Fish? I'm told they float ... on the air, but swim in the water, too. Oh, and they don't have those spiny things that normal puffer fish have. Have you seen somebody about your eyes? Is that totally natural or do you have Felinus Cataractus? Is it contagious?" The girl put down her magazine and leaned forward eagerly, her large, pale blue eyes widening.

"Er... No, I haven't. Yes, it's natural, and no, I don't and it's not. Do ya have a menu or somethin'?" Fabian, despite his usual self assurance, seemed to be more than a little disconcerted by the odd girl's questions. As for Riana, she had retreated completely behind Fabian and was looking over his shoulder in stark amazement.

"Pity. I like your eyes. It would be cool if I could catch them too," the girl said, sighing deeply. "Oh, well." With that, she proceeded to pick up her magazine and, opening it, settled in for a good, long read.

Fabian and Riana were flabbergasted and simply stared at each other. The girl had completely forgotten about them, and the couple across the shop...the only other people in the room...were snogging each other silly, their sundaes forgotten on the beneficent hovering tray.

"This is ridiculous, Fabian. She's totally mad. Come on, let's go," Riana whispered in disgust. She had had enough of this crazy girl with radishes threaded into her hair; she had had enough of this wacky shop.

"Aw, come on, Riana," Fabian whispered back, his eyes still on the girl behind the counter. "Just give me a minute more, yeah?"

"Okay, but if you can get her attention again, *Felinus*, I'll give you a Knut," Riana replied skeptically.

Fabian chuckled. "It's a deal then; I'll be expectin' it, lass." With that, he shook himself and, with a wink at Riana, morphed into a cat. With a meow, he leapt onto the counter and, raising one powerful, tufted paw, batted the girl's magazine (which was, as far as Riana could see, called *The Quibbler*) away. Grinning his maniacal cat grin, he sat back and, with another shake of his ragged coat, morphed back into a human, his nose centimeters away from the girl's. The strange girl sat quite still, her flaring nostrils the only indication that she was actually breathing.

"All right now, Miss. I've no idea why it's so damn hard for ya to give us the menu, but I'm askin' sweet right now. Two menus, please, if ya will be so very kind." Fabian grinned broadly, his fanged teeth sharp in his mouth.

The girl, whose name according to the swirling color tag on her chest was Evertrue, smiled and reached behind her to grab two menus. "So, a werecat, then?" she asked, the tone of her voice quite normal.

"Right as ever, me darlin'," Fabian purred, a roguish look spreading over his face. He hopped off the counter and handed a pleased Riana her menu.

"Cool." With that, Evertrue slipped off her stool and picked up the magazine off the floor, but she never got back up to the stool. Instead, she got sidetracked by some *wonderful* article in *The Quibbler* and froze in a crouched position, her head bent over the magazine, radishes swinging forward, her lips moving silently as she read.

*

A few minutes later, Riana (minus one Knut) and Fabian sat in two of the marshmallow chairs, which were, undeniably, the most comfortable chairs Riana had ever sat in. Grinning at each other over their own floating marble tray, Riana and Fabian picked up their silver spoons and dug into their bowls of ice cream. Riana had decided to try the warm yellow Bertie Bott's ice cream, hoping that it was butterscotch or something similar. She had pressed Fabian for an explanation when she found that the menu listed the colors of the ice creams and not the flavors.

"But what are they?" she had demanded as Fabian buried his nose into his menu, sniggering.

Finally, when she could elicit no response, Riana simply chose a color that *might* taste good. She still remembered the wonderful warmth of the butterbeer, and if this was half as good, she'd be surprised. Delighted, of course, but she really didn't expect to find anything as good as butterbeer. Too bad that it would make her fat, she had thought, sighing. Meanwhile, Fabian had finally decided on a ruby red ice cream.

"Maybe it'll be raw meat-flavored, eh?" he had said, grinning as his tongue darted out to lick his lips. Riana had nearly gagged until she realized he was joking. At least, she

hoped he was joking. With Fabian, she never knew.

In a few moments, Evertrue had brought out their ice cream and melted away with a distracted, "Enjoy," leaving Fabian and Riana to their heaping (so much for "one scoop") bowls of ice cream.

With a pang, Riana plunged her spoon into the goldenrod-colored ice cream. She'd eat a little, just a little. It couldn't hurt that much, could it? With trembling fingertips, Riana raised the silver spoon to her mouth and...

"Bloody hell! Ugh, what is this?" In disgust, Riana spat the mouthful of ice cream back into her bowl, but not before Fabian had swiped his spoon into the golden mound of cream. His eyes dancing, face wiped of expression, Fabian placed the spoonful of ice cream in his mouth and swished it around with his tongue.

His face underwent the most awesome variety of expressions Riana had ever seen. First it was speculative, then beatific, then exquisitely happy, then utterly confused as he opened his eyes to find Riana staring at him in amazement. "Chicken fat," he said.

Riana's mouth hung open and her flinty grey eyes widened to the size of chicken eggs. "I'm gonna be sick," she hissed, ducking her head as a familiar roiling feeling began to bubble up in her stomach, her throat. With a quiet groan, her hands clasped her stomach and clutched convulsively.

"Ah, no, no, don't do that," Fabian said quickly. He set the spoon down and reached forward, palms smooth and sure, to hold Riana's head still. "Look at me, lass," he said, forcing her head up. "Ya better not be doin' that in here. It'll make ya embarrassed. Breathe now, Riana. In, out, in, out..."

Riana breathed as Fabian told her to, her grey eyes locked onto his bright yellow ones. "I n-ever, ever, ever want to try th-at again. I mean, g-od!" she shuddered, her breath going in and out in hyperventilating gasps.

Fabian, whose gaze was trailing back to the bowl of yellow ice cream nodded absently and he licked his lips again. "Okay, but... do ya mind if I have it?"

"No, no, and no and *no*. Eat it. Eat it all, but, ugh! How can you?" Her breathing finally getting back to normal, Riana jerked her head back, leaving Fabian's taloned hands in midair.

"I'm a cat, I guess." Fabian's grin was back and laughter bubbled up in his eyes. "Would ya care to try mine, then?" Mischievously, he pushed his melting bowl of ruby red ice cream toward Riana, who closed her eyes and swallowed.

I have to, she thought, or I'll hate myself even more. I'm not a coward. I will never, ever be a coward. Steeling herself, she opened her eyes, picked up her spoon, carefully wiped it on her napkin to remove any residue of "golden yellow/chicken fat" and smiled icily back, her lips a thin line. "Sure, why not?"

*

On the morning of September first, Riana woke with the sun. Streaming rays filtered through the streaked window in her now familiar room, suspending dust particles in the hazy air. With a yawn, Riana raised herself on sharply-pointed elbows and stared blearily around the room, frowning slightly as she heard a soft purring noise.

Yawning again, Riana felt something beside her move, something radiating heat, something pressed against her thin side, nestled between the cavities formed by her ribs. Riana's first instinct was one of surprise and then of astonishment. Someone was touching her. Someone was close to her. But, as she started and sat up abruptly in the ancient, creaking bed, the small form twitched, emitted a minuscule mew and snuggled closer into the warmth of Riana's slight body. Riana's thin proud mouth tilted up in a smile as she reached a hesitant hand down to Alvean and softly petted the kitten's grey head.

The kitten's only response was to snuggle closer to her young mistress and give a tiny rumbling burp. A feeling of vague happiness and lazy luxury settled over Riana as the kitten's body heat traveled up her cold fingers, igniting a warmth in them that was completely foreign but certainly not unwelcome.

Sighing deeply, Riana relaxed back onto the pillows and shut her eyes against the sun. It wouldn't hurt to take a cat nap, would it? Ha! Cat nap, that was funny... Maybe Fabian would think so, too. Maybe she should tell him...

"Riana!"

Her eyes flew open just as the door to her room shot inward. Alvean sprang up with a yowl and dug her claws into Riana's stomach before flying under the covers. Riana, in turn, shot out of bed with a cry of pain and, as the blood rushed to her head, feet, everything, sat down on the floor with a bone-crunching plop.

"Up, up, up! We're leavin' today, Riana. The train leaves in ... a very short time. Up, up!" Fabian sprang to Riana's side and, hooking his clawed hands under her armpits, pulled her up like a puppet master and his marionette. "Pack, and then we leave. I'll help."

Riana, her mind sleep-bleared, simply looked at Fabian and, shaking him off, staggered over to her bed, where she sat down and pulled the cowering Alvean out from under the itchy wool blanket and plunked her into her bony lap.

Fabian, however, didn't seem to care, for he darted around the room, throwing black and grey clothing and white knickers into her two suitcases. He flung himself to his stomach and grappled about underneath the armoire for Riana's shoes, which he then crammed into the duffel bag. Finally, when her clothing and shoes had been packed...inexpertly and messily, but even so...he turned to the mounds of school supplies and books that had been purchased in Diagon Alley. He stared down at the huge pile for a moment and then whipped around to face Riana who simply watched him detachedly.

"I'm goin' to me room, which as ya recall is five doors down the hall, and I'm goin' to fetch somethin' for ya, and when I get back, Riana, I expect to see ya dressed in ya school robes, otherwise, ya will be dressin' on the train. Speed it up!"

With that, Fabian zipped out the door, leaving Riana and Alvean to one another. Riana sighed and brought Alvean's fluffy grey body up to eye level, whereupon the kitten batted playfully at her mistress's sharply pointed nose. *I don't want to stand out any more than I have to, I guess, and if I show up in Muggle clothes, everybody's going to know that I'm not from a wizarding family, so...* "I guess I've got to get dressed."

In three minutes flat, Riana had pulled on a fresh pair of knickers...which, amazingly, was at the top of the pile of clothing Fabian had chunked into one of the suitcases...and a black and grey track suit over which she pulled one of her black school robes. As Riana tugged and pulled at her clothing, trying to cover her ugly body, she heard a thumping noise from the hall. Leaving her reflection (staring at her instead of she at it) in the mirror, Riana turned to see Fabian dragging a leather and oak trunk into the room. He grinned at her and pulled the trunk to the pile of supplies lying in the middle of the floor.

"What do ya think, eh?" he asked, his face merry.

Riana stared, her face expressionless. So, charity was it? God, she should have known better. So, Fabian was sorry for her, too? "Why are you giving me that? Take it back; I don't want it," she hissed, her grey eyes storming up behind their narrowed lids.

Fabian looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Are you mad?" he exclaimed, the smile dropping from his lips.

"No, I'm not. *You're* mad if you think that I'm a bloody charity case! Take it back, take it back!" Riana screamed, her voice escalating in pitch as she clutched her arms around her thin body, wrist bones grating against ribs.

Fabian looked at her for a moment, then, with a supremely deep breath, knelt down and, picking up a pile of schoolbooks, placed them in the trunk. In a haze of fury, Riana rushed forward and, reaching deep inside the trunk, yanked out her books.

"I'm *not* a charity case and I won't take it!" Once she had taken out the books, she spun to face Fabian, her flinty eyes spitting fire. Fabian breathed deeply, his lips moving as he counted to ten. He got to eight, then, with a hiss, his arm shot out, claws retracted and he grabbed Riana's skeletal arm. With his other tanned arm, he slammed shut the lid of the trunk and thrust a shocked Riana down onto the lid.

"Now, listen to me, Riana. This," he indicated the trunk, "is a gift from me to ya. It's not charity...I know ya better than ya think. I'd never, do ya hear me, *never*, give ya somethin' if I felt sorry for ya. I'm not a kind person, and I've never given anyone anythin' before, so ya better shut up before I lose me temper and punch ya. And this time, ya will lose more than one tooth, do ya hear?"

Riana's mouth hung open as she stared at Fabian. His voice had been even, almost monotone, but there was a great deal of threat beneath the facade of calm. The two stood there, staring at each other for five minutes until...

"I'm sorry," Riana whispered in a small voice. "I thought that you felt sorry for me."

"And I would have had a bonnie reason to do so," Fabian curtly replied.

Riana stiffened, her pride touched, but then Fabian stepped forward, looking first at his hands, opening and closing them, retracting his claws and extending them, and then he looked into her eyes. "But I don't, and I never will, lass, unless ya give me reason to do so." Riana stared at him, her eyes wide. "Oh, and we're goin' to be late for the Express if we don't hurry along."

"Oh! You're right, you're right!" Stooping, Riana scooped an armload of her Diagon Alley purchases into her stick-thin arms and threw them into the trunk, where they fell with a resounding thump, clang, clatter, and tinkle of shifting possessions. Fabian winced as each armload of miscellany fell into the trunk. Finally, when all but little Alvean had been packed, Riana slammed the lid of her trunk shut and stood.

"Done," she announced proudly and flipped her raven black hair over her sharp shoulders.

"Aye and ready to go; lead on, lass," Fabian said, a smile in his voice as he grabbed the duffel bag and piled the suitcases on top of the trunk. Riana made kissing noises to call Alvean to her and, once the suspicious kitten had crept from her warm refuge under the covers, scooped the little grey cat up and held her tight. Then, together, Riana and Fabian walked out the door of Riana's shabby room, leaving the suitcases to the Urquhart's manservant, Henry, a creature that Fabian called a house elf who was standing bowed in the hall.

Slight of Hand

Chapter 20 of 20

Nineteen years after Voldemort's defeat, a young girl named Riana is living an innocuous life with her adoptive Muggle parents *until* she receives her acceptance letter from Hogwarts.

Escaping the clutches of her loving but stifling parents, Riana travels to London and from there to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There, Riana is viewed as mysterious, cunning, sly, and—though her parentage is unknown—is chosen for Slytherin House.

The two halves of her life clash, as her anorexia battles with the disdain of fellow Slytherin students for Muggle-born witches and wizards. Follow Riana on her journey through the world of wizardry and her search to find a true home, the identity of her real parents, as well as her inner conflict with anorexia.

Slight of Hand

By the time they got to King's Cross railway station, Riana and Fabian were on the best of terms again, talking and laughing as though they had never had a fight. Yet each of them knew what the other was capable of, and they watched each other a little more carefully than they had before. But only on a purely subconscious level because, you see, children are so forgiving (or forgetful) that the bitterest feuds go unremembered, unremarkable, in the light of friendship. And so it was with Riana and Fabian as they, arm-in-arm, surged into the train station in a sea of commuters.

"Hurry, children," Favel said curtly as she clicked speedily along in her emerald green stilettos. "We're a little late, so I don't want ya to wander off. There'll be plenty of that for later when ya are at Hogwarts." Riana looked up at Fabian's mother and nodded in comprehension, although Favel was busily fighting her way through the crowd and didn't notice Riana's confirmatory nod at all.

Riana loved to watch Favel, even if Fabian's volatile mum did scare her at times...well,*most* of the time, actually. Favel was everything that Leanne was not. Leanne was quiet and withdrawn; Favel spoke her opinion and brazened her way through life. Leanne wore quiet pastels; Favel was exquisitely fashionable, dressed in a knee-length, fitted, black pencil skirt and emerald green poet's blouse. Her lips were painted bright red, and her eyelids were feathered in smoke. She really was a beautiful woman, and Riana in her childish way knew that when she grew up, she wanted to look exactly like Fabian's mum. It was a pity, really, that she couldn't. For Favel was thin, and Riana was not. But even this grim realization could not dampen Riana's spirits on this thrilling day. They were *here*. They were getting on a train in less than five minutes and leaving London, leaving the last remnants of her old life behind.

Mr. Urquhart had been unable to come with the family because as the magical community of Great Britain's ambassador to France's magical community, he was constantly in and out of the country, and just this morning, he had been called to an urgent meeting in Paris. *Too bad, too*, thought Riana vaguely as Fabian pulled her through the crowd, *I wish he was here*.

Mr. Urquhart...unlike his beautiful wife, Favel...did not tell Riana to call him 'Andometus,' which was infinitely preferable to Riana. For one thing, 'Andometus' was an awfully hard name to pronounce. For another, this virtual "not knowing" allowed Riana the privacy she so desperately desired.

Theirs was a very impartial, distant relationship. Mr. Urquhart never referred to Riana by her first name; instead, whenever Riana would take her meals with the Urquhart family (and it wasn't often, for she usually found an excuse to avoid meals), Mr. Urquhart would address her as 'Ms. Carrington'. For instance, the night before, at their last meal together, Mr. Urquhart had picked up his glass of wine, drained it, then looked directly at Riana and asked,

"Ms. Carrington. What are your plans upon leaving Hogwarts?"

And Riana, to her chagrin, could only reply, "I don't know."

As previously evidenced, Riana thought of herself as a mini-adult, and this question (to which she did not know the answer) disconcerted her. Angrily, she had clenched her folded, yellow hands tightly in her lap so that the knucklebones stood out. *I sound like an idiot* she had thought as furious tears flooded her narrow eyes. Fabian had noticed her perturbation and banged her foot gently under the table, his yellow eyes concerned. But Mr. Urquhart merely "harrumphed!" loudly behind his grey beard and returned to his steak au poivre. His manner, cool and removed, thus endeared him to the "adult" in Riana, although her child's subconscious cringed at the emotionless dismissal of her reply, and indeed, her very existence as a person.

But consciously, Riana liked Fabian's father and missed the quiet confidence of him as she was pressed upon by all kinds of people in the train station. Luckily, they hadn't had to lug their own trunks and cases since Henry was taking care of the luggage. *How does he, though?* Riana wondered, for Henry the house-elf was awfully small. But Fabian didn't seem to notice or care, so Riana put all thoughts of the unfortunate Henry from her mind.

Within three minutes, Favel, Fabian, and Riana had fought their way through the herd of people...casually dressed tourists and business people, both...and stood in front of the wall between platforms nine and ten. Riana instinctively pulled Fabian to one side. "Which one are we on?" she asked.

Fabian chuckled and pointed straight in front of them at the wall. "This one," he replied, the lilt in his voice dancing perilously close to a pronounced brogue as his excitement grew.

"That one?" Riana looked in confusion up at Favel, who nodded absently and drew a heavy, monogrammed pocket watch from her ... Now, *where'd* she pull that watch from? Riana blinked once and the watch was gone, but Favel merely raised a plucked eyebrow and reached out a manicured hand to each child.

"Let's go, children. I have things I'll be needin' to do when ya are through, aye?" And with that, Favel walked forward, Fabian and Riana trotting on either side in order to keep up with Favel's small but efficient strides. As they neared the wall, Favel squared her shoulders and quickened her pace.

Wait, thought Riana, panicking slightly as she felt herself being propelled forward by Favel's brisk, clicking steps, *this isn't right. We're going to crash!*

The threesome was nearing the wall; closer and closer. One meter, half of a meter, and faster and faster. They were now jogging, all three, and bumping into people left and right who either snapped, "Hey!" in annoyance, or simply ducked their heads and pushed doggedly back.

Clickity-click! cracked Favel's heels on the concrete below, sounding for all the world like machine gun fire as she broke into a half-run. Fabian and Riana copied her motions, their school robes swishing around their ankles, and Alvean dug her tiny claws into Riana's arm as she found herself being jounced up and down, up and down. And faster and faster! Riana shut her eyes in terror and shock as the brick barrier between the ninth and tenth platforms loomed closer. Less than half of a meter! One-quarter of a meter! Linked arms pressed together, Riana felt Fabian's arm muscles bunch in excitement or fear, or both as they...sprinting now...hit the wall. Except ... they *didn't* hit the wall. Riana's eyes were tight shut, she could feel the muscles in her face straining as she pressed her eyelids together, but she never felt herself hit anything solid. When would they hit? Now? *Now?*

But no... it was like running through a vat of congealed pudding; no feeling, no sound, nothing, for at least thirty seconds. And Riana began to feel constricted, claustrophobic; she opened her mouth, but no sound came out; she grasped for Fabian...he was still there. And just when she thought she would suffocate, a blast of hot, diesel air hit her *smack!* in the face, and Riana screeched to a stop, clinging desperately onto Favel, who was teetering on her green stilettos.

"And here we are," she heard Favel trill in a breathy Scottish brogue. "Platform nine-and-three-quarters."

Riana timidly opened her slanted eyes and felt her jaw drop in amazement, for there before her, shining in gleaming black, huffing and puffing like a randy bull in spring, was a train. And not just any train; no, it was like one of the old-fashioned locomotives that she'd seen in her Usborne picture books. And, all around her were people: dozens of people, young people, old people. Oh, there were people in the King's Cross they'd just left, but they were *normal*. Here, everybody was dressed in robes of black, fuchsia, olive, navy-blue, goldenrod, and pointed hats, stovepipes, berets, and lugging trunks and animals.

Young children were chasing after each other, laughing happily. Many of the little girls had long hair, unbound, and it was flying after them in tangles and whorls as they whipped after their brothers, their sisters, their friends. Some children were dressed in black school robes like Riana's and Fabian's, others wore Muggle clothing. One girl...she must have been only three-years-old...was dressed in a sparkly princess costume. She was a beautiful little girl, with golden curls and huge blue eyes with which she stared at Riana, fingers in her mouth. Riana felt her own eyes widen in response and she almost...*almost*...smiled back, but caught herself before she did.

Older students walked arm-in-arm toward the train, gossiping happily, their multi-hued heads together. Riana saw the girl...*Evertrue, right?*...from Dean's Ice Cream Parlor stepping onto the train with a magazine tucked under her arm. She was followed by a spindly, black-haired boy, about one year older than Riana, wearing glasses. Children hung out the windows of the train, yelling their "Hullo's" to each other, or reaching for *almost*-forgotten objects from anxious parents. The place was a zoo, and Riana found herself grinning like a fool. Aware of how she must look, she snapped her mouth shut, lips thinning into a stenciled line, but continued to stare around, her grey eyes sparkling in joy instead of sparking in fury or annoyance.

"All right, then," Favel said, regaining her composure as she balanced herself on her heels. "Time to move, children." And, before Riana (who was eagerly drinking in the sights and sounds of platform nine-and-three-quarters) could say "house-elf," they were moving again through the crowd, heading for the train.

As they reached a passenger car, a deafening crack resounded through the station and Henry appeared, bowing low before Favel. "Mistress," he whispered as Favel's sculpted brows lowered dangerously; she was an awfully hard woman to please. "Henry has put Master Fabian's and Miss Riana's possessions in compartment twelve of car two," he elaborated, gesturing toward the car behind him. "Henry hopes he has not been too bold to do so without express permission of Mistress."

"No, Henry," Favel replied icily, "ya have done well. That'll be all, then. Go on back t' the Leaky Cauldron now and pack me things. Then take them home. I'm leavin' as soon as possible."

Henry bowed and, with another crack...which no one around seemed to find amiss, although one bushy-haired witch standing next to a gangly, redheaded man glared scathingly at Riana and the Urquharts...vanished. Favel then turned to Riana and Fabian. Kneeling, she placed her hands on Fabian's solid shoulders and stared at him with her glittering green eyes for a full minute. Then, with something that sounded a little like a sob, she pulled him to her chest. (Riana then had the pleasure of watching Fabian turn from a tanned golden to a splotchy red in embarrassment.) Finally, Favel let go of Fabian, looked him dead in the eye once more and said, "Ya behave ya self, now, lad. Ya will *not* be gettin' expelled and blottin' up the family name, aye?"

Fabian grinned cheekily, the flush fading from his cheeks. "Aye, Mum; that'll be the truth." Favel narrowed her eyes at Fabian's flippant tone, but turned instead to Riana and held out her arms. Riana simply stood and stared at her until Fabian, sensing awkwardness, prodded her forward with a paw to the lower back. Riana felt herself stiffen as Favel's arms went around her, but she relaxed a little as water lily perfume, not violets, filled her nostrils. With a brief squeeze, Favel let her go and looked down. "Take care of him, lassie, aye?" And with that, Favel smiled, spun in her emerald green stilettos, and clicked off.

Fabian and Riana slowly turned to face each other, faces split into wide grins, and with whoops of excitement, dashed toward the door of the car. Of course, they both got there at the same time, and with much shoving and pushing, managed to squeeze in at the same time too, Riana bumping her bony elbows heartily on the brass and wood doors. Seizing Riana's hand, Fabian took off down the hallway, snaking around couples and groups with the natural ease of an animal. "Nine," he intoned, glancing up at the numbers over each cabin, "ten, eleven, twe...Ha! Here we go. Twelve."

Sliding the glass door open, Fabian let himself and Riana in, shutting out the exuberant noise of the other Hogwarts children behind them. Riana was beside herself with excitement; she had been glancing over her shoulder at the surge of students rushing by in the hall and failed to notice that anyone else was in the cabin with them until Fabian drew her around him by the hand.

There, staring hostilely up at her, was the prettiest...and tallest; her long legs were folded akimbo underneath her body...girl that Riana had ever seen. She looked like she was carved of marble. Huge, almond-shaped brown eyes rested arrogantly over a ski-slope nose and high, prominent cheekbones in a cafe au lait face. Brown hair brushed with strands of gold was swept high into a messy, but elegant bun, through which silver and green chopsticks were thrust. A full, pouty mouth was the beautiful Hyacinth's, for so she must be, crowning feature. That mouth, innocent now, and puckered in a petulant frown, would one day be sensual.

Next to her on the couch was a blond-haired boy with a pale, pointed face. His cheekbones, too, soared high, nearly up to his temples where blue veins pulsed through his unnaturally pale, translucent skin as he stared, grey eyes wide at Riana and Fabian. A pile of books was heaped in his lap, and delicate, pale, well-kept hands were placed lightly on top of it. As if sensing Riana's discomfort in the present situation, the boy smiled at her, a smile which instantly lightened the seriousness of his sharp face.

Riana tried to smile back, but her slanted gaze instead flicked back and forth between the two children in front of her. Not *exactly* the warmest welcome. And weren't she and Fabian supposed to have this cabin to themselves? Oh! House-elves were useless!

"Who are you?" the girl asked softly, though through the softness was a barb of suspicion and instant dislike. Riana merely stared, grey eyes wide as possible. Fabian, his natural ebullience emerging, answered for her.

"Hiya, Scorpius, Hyacinth. This is Riana; she's a Slytherin born, so there'll be none of ya normal complainin', eh, Hyacinth?" Hyacinth shrugged and gave Riana a saccharine smile before pulling out a green brocade journal. With a little, affected sigh, she proceeded to ignore Riana and began writing in it with an ostrich-plumed quill, her nose primly lifted in the air.

Scorpius shyly smiled again, said, "Hi, Riana," and then quickly looked down at his books, opening one of them.

Pleased at his success in introducing Riana to his pureblood friends, Fabian flung himself onto the seat beside Hyacinth, leaned to one side, and dug deep into his pocket. As he rooted around, Riana stood there, clutching the sleeping Alvean to her chest, awkwardly watching the three young friends. She already felt like an outsider, and they weren't even at school, yet! Fabian, finally extracting the something from his pocket (it turned out to be Licorice Wands) raised his eyebrows at her, his yellow eyes gleaming. "Aren't ya gonna sit?" he asked.

"Yeah, Riana," Hyacinth spoke again, her soft voice ultra-sweet. "Sit down. We don't bite." She giggled, but her giggle wasn't kind. Instead, Riana felt the mocking underneath the niceties and remained standing. It wasn't until Scorpius, who had, by this time, placed a pair of spectacles on his upturned nose, grinned up at her and gestured to the spot on the wooden bench beside him that Riana finally took a seat.

"My last name's Malfoy," he said. "My dad works for the Ministry. Who's your dad?"

Riana gulped and looked over at Fabian for help, but he was whispering in Hyacinth's ear. She was laughing delightedly at whatever he was saying. Riana felt a surge of annoyance toward both Fabian and Hyacinth; Fabian, for his desertion, Hyacinth for her, for her... *Oh! I don't know! She's just ... weird!* "Um... I, I don't really *know* my real dad. You know what I mean?"

Scorpius looked confused. A shock of blond hair had fallen across his forehead, though most of it was slicked back with pomade, and his glasses had slid farther down his nose. "No, not really. Your *real* dad, huh? But whatever. It's all okay, I guess. Who's your mum?"

Hyacinth was eying her now, too, and Riana was beginning to get nervous. She wiped sweating palms on her robe and opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Then, with the candor of a politician, Fabian intervened again. "What is this, mates? She's not a murder"...he rolled the *r*'s in 'murder'..."suspect, so stop quizzin' her. And ya, Scorpius, stop havin' a bloody go at her parentage. Who cares? Oi! I've got an idea; who's in for some Explodin' Snap?"

With a sigh of relief, Riana raised her thin arm in acquiescence as Hyacinth, her cool mask broken, squealed, "Oh, me! Me! I do!" Scorpius shoved his books off his lap and took his glasses off his nose.

"Me, too," he said, pushing the lock of blond hair off his forehead.

With a grin, Fabian said, "Well... on t'other hand, I'm none s' sure I have the game with me. Have ya got it, lass?" This last, he directed at Riana. With an incredulous look at Fabian, she shook her head emphatically. "Haven't ya, then?" he asked mischievously. He then turned to Scorpius and Hyacinth. "Who believes that Riana has a deck of Explodin' Snap?"

Without fail, Scorpius and Hyacinth blurted out, "I do!" simultaneously, looked at each other, and burst into peals of laughter.

"Traitors," Riana snapped playfully, surprising herself with the ease at which she spoke to them. They merely grinned back; Hyacinth's a little strained, Scorpius's genuine. Fabian chuckled softly, fangs glinting in the light of the carriage, stood, and walked over to Riana as the Hogwarts Express gave a screaming whistle and trembled a little under their feet. With a bow and flourish, Fabian effortlessly pulled a bemused Riana to her feet, turned her around to face Hyacinth and Scorpius, reached up to her ear, and pulled a card deck out of thin air.

Mouth hanging open, Riana turned to stare at him. "You never told me you knew magic!"

"Slight of hand, me darlin'," Fabian said with a grin as Scorpius and Hyacinth clapped appreciatively, "slight of hand."

*

For the next three hours, Riana and the others played "Explodin' Snap," and time seemed to pass quickly. The others were her equals in intellect and...she hoped...breeding, and it was the first time that she had ever felt comfortable with people her own age. True, Hyacinth's hostility was a little trying at times, but she soon learned to ignore that. Hyacinth was a brat, just like Fabian had said, but she was a beautiful brat, so her behavior was easier to overlook. And, yes, when the others ordered snacks and candy off the food cart that a plump witch wheeled down the aisle, Riana told herself, *No!*, and abstained, although her stomach growled loudly at the mountains of delicious desserts and delicacies heaped around the carriage.

Riana was absolute rot at Exploding Snap; so was Scorpius, but Fabian and Hyacinth were at each other's throats the entire time. "We've played before," Hyacinth explained as her tower grew miraculously fast, her fingers flying to build it higher and higher. Fabian was hot in pursuit, but at that moment, the train hit a switch on the tracks, bumped, and Fabian's card castle snapped loudly and came crashing down, followed seconds later by Hyacinth's. "I win!" she crowed triumphantly and held out her hand.

Begrudgingly, Fabian handed over a Chocolate Frog, which was the currency of their game. Unfortunately, though, they were running out of Chocolate Frogs and, while there were plenty of wrappers, it's not fun to win trash, no matter *what* game you're playing.

"Are we there yet?" Riana asked, yawning as she reclined back, only to sit up quickly as one of Scorpius's textbooks jabbed wickedly into her back.

"I hope so," Scorpius replied, rubbing his nose with a soot-blackened hand...he really was terrible at Exploding Snap. He left a smudge on the bridge of his nose, and Hyacinth stuck her finger in her mouth, leaned over, and rubbed off the spot. "Thanks," he muttered before leaning back next to Riana.

Fabian had, by this time, fallen asleep ... or something. He lay on his back, eyes open but glazed over, and his breaths were deep and even. Besides, he wasn't moving or talking or doing anything of the things he normally was. It was difficult to keep Fabian still ... except for now.

With a deep sigh, Riana wriggled uncomfortably on the hard bench, rolled Alvean (who was lazy and getting tubby) into a ball, and turned to look out the window. Evening was falling fast, and orange light soaked the green countryside as the train whizzed along. Every so often, the Express would emit a loud whistle, and black smoke would

billow past the window, but mostly it was just trees and fields, rocks and valleys that whipped by in the steadily-darkening gloom. A v-shaped flock of birds sailed serenely by among the sun-soaked clouds, heading south. At least, Riana *assumed* that they were flying south. It was a little early for winter migration, but maybe the birds wanted a change.

The steady rocking of the train began to lull Riana into sleep, just like a mother and her baby in a bassinet. Somewhere, distantly, a fly buzzed, but Riana simply ignored it, her eyelids drooping. Oh, it would be so easy just to fall asleep. This ride was taking much too long anyway. Besides, once she woke up, she'd be at Hogwarts, right? *Right...*

"Look!" It was Hyacinth, her soft voice escalating into a shrill shriek of exhilaration. With a start, Riana sat up straight, knocking head with Scorpius as he did the same. Rubbing their heads and grinning at each other ruefully, Riana and Scorpius turned to look out the window.

"Oh, my god," Riana breathed softly, her breath fogging up the glass window. There, meters and meters away, but visible through the trees, was a brightly-lit, behemoth castle, its myriad windows ablaze with golden light. It was pitch-black outside now, and the castle, growing larger as they snaked toward it, was absolutely breathtaking. Its battlements and turrets were starkly outlined against the velvety black of the sky and gleamed pale in the moonlight.

Taking short, hyperventilating breaths, Riana gazed at the castle as though she could drink in the magical nourishment that she felt pulsating from the castle through her eyes. Suddenly, she felt a rough hand on her arm. She started, startled out of her silent reverie, and looked up to see who had touched her. Her eyes met Fabian's queer yellow ones, and the expression in his mirrored that in hers. "Can you believe..."

"No," he replied, for once serious as he, too, turned to stare out the window, eyes wide. "It's..."

"Incredible," supplied Hyacinth, who was clutching Fabian's muscular arm on the other side of the bench.

"No," whispered Riana, her heart breaking and healing at the same time as the lonely beauty of the castle seeped into her rail-thin body, "it's Hogwarts."