

Consequences

by aerynfire

Part One -- Avada Kedavra -- There are times in a man's life where he knows without a shadow of a doubt that he has come to a critical crossroads... *HBP spoilers*

The rating is solely for Part Three. Parts One, Two, and Four are all PG. Thank you

Avada Kedavra

Chapter 1 of 4

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Authors' Note: This is a series of one-shots seeking to explain Severus Snape's motivations for the things he has done. You may also notice that it seems rather like the prequels of Star Wars. This is done on purpose. These stories continue long after the events of From Spark to Flame and its forthcoming sequel (not yet written) Dark Harvest, and were written as a response to a Fairy Tale Challenge we came across quite some time ago. We used every bit of canon material we could find and then filled up some holes...and made it a parallel to the events in the first three Star Wars movies. So sit back and enjoy and let us know what you think! We love hearing from you.

Also, you may have seen this posted as four separate stories. However, due to confusion and plus the fact we've been meaning to anyways...we've consolidated them under one banner. We apologize for any inconvenience.

Avada Kedavra

There are times in a man's life where he knows without a shadow of a doubt that he has come to a critical crossroads, each choice preceding it having led to that particular kairoic moment. Each selection made then informs the next one to come...and on and on. Every decision, whether lingered on or made in a split second, is now a point in a causal nexus, leading inevitably to the next pivotal, fate-forming moment in one's existence...a vital life point that one cannot turn away nor go forward from without incurring great personal cost.

The life of Severus Snape had been too frequently punctuated by such moments. Now, as he raced up the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, cursing under his breath as the world closed in around him until all else was excluded but the thought of the choice to come.

A choice that did not feel like one at all. The kind that made one wonder whether humanity, rather than being the creatures of chaotic free will they thought themselves to be, actually led lives of quiet predestination.

For this was a choice he had never wanted to make. One he had danced and sidestepped around for years with the grace of an expert swordsman...parrying, deflecting, sheathing the sword of his wit, and quietly pleased with his own skill, only to turn and find it looming over him all the same. Despite all his expert manoeuvrings and his chess-like precision, it had still come to this.

It had not taken more than five words from Filius Flitwick for him to realize that tonight was the night his life was going to be turned upside down...again. And he wasn't sure if he was more annoyed that Draco Malfoy had finally succeeded in getting Death Eaters into the castle or that the idiot child had caused utter chaos in the process.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he could hear the battle rage behind him...but his focus was upon the confrontation ahead.

He could hear the headmaster's soothing voice, the indecision in Draco's, and the snarls of that monster, Fenrir Greyback. Banging the door open, it only took him a heartbeat to take in the scene.

A heartbeat that slowed and seemed to go on forever.

"*We've got a problem, Snape,*" the voice of Amicus, a fellow follower of the Dark Lord, drifted into his ears, "*the boy doesn't seem to be able to...*"

But it wasn't his voice that captured his attention -- it was the beseeching eyes and voice of the elderly wizard half slumped against the brick wall of the tower across from him.

"*Severus...*" the voice whispered...begging him...pleading him.

The accompanying message in those eyes, one that any fool with the faintest hint of talent in Legilimency could read, was as clear as the crystal blue sky reflected in that gaze.

End it. I'm dying...so much pain...end it. Please. Now. Save Draco...save the others...

The people around him did not see the infinitesimal hesitation that swept through the new addition to the group as the connotations of fulfilling such a request flashed through his mind in instantaneously stark terms.

He would be branded a murderer...the executioner of the greatest wizard of the modern age. The assassin of the man who had attempted to give him a second chance.

Oh, he would gain renown amongst his fellow Death Eaters, the Dark Lord would be mightily pleased with him, and the Malfoys forever in his debt...but...Dumbledore...Albus Dumbledore, a colossus, would be dead, his blood forever staining his hands, the world forever changed...and he would lose his cover, his life here...what little veneer of respectability he had left in the Wizarding World and his freedom to walk openly within it, and the shadows he had darted in and out of for so long would swallow him completely.

But more than that...far, far more.

His gaze flattened, beetle black eyes turning as hard and as sharp as two pieces of flint.

"*Severus...*"

The old man wasn't just asking him to commit assisted suicide...he was asking him to kill his only hope...extinguish the only flicker of light in his dark existence. Blue eyes gazed unwaveringly into obsidian.

You swore, Severus...you swore an oath to me...

Snape's lips set in a grimace; his face racked with loathing. How he hated Albus Dumbledore...hated himself.

You swore, Severus...

Albus Dumbledore was rarely surprised by anything anymore. He had lived over a hundred years and at this point, had thought he had pretty much seen everything. Even now, he was embroiled in a war against one of the darkest wizards ever to rise up...but hadn't he just done something similar before not too long ago?

Grindelwald had been just as twisted and self-serving as the pretender to his crown...but he had been vanquished in the end. Though Dumbledore didn't often pay attention to the praise he got about that. Stopping him had merely been the right thing to do after all...and he was glad he could help. But, as ever, each experience informs a man...makes him older but wiser. And so, when Riddle had eventually turned, just as he suspected he might but had vainly hoped against, he hadn't been surprised at all, really. Power corrupts...and he had seen that saying hold true time and time again. And young Tom Riddle had had a taste for power from an early age that bordered on the gluttonous.

No...what did surprise him was not history repeating itself or these earth shaking inevitable events...but rather the quiet but firm knock at his door on this sunny late August day that preceded the tall, dark clad, glowering man who entered his office just afterwards. A man he hadn't truly ever expected to again walk through his door again. Not after...

He frowned a little and rolled up the scroll he had been working on, placing it in his desk, more curious than wary about what this young man could possibly want. By all reports, given his more than suspected allegiances and recent personal history, this graduate of Hogwarts should hardly be within shouting distance of his old alma mater and more particularly...of his old headmaster.

As Dumbledore took in his appearance, he found himself inwardly sighing. Though his eyes were no less as sharp and his glower no less as full, Severus Snape looked more pale now than he had when he'd been attending school here. And there was a weariness to him, as though his heart was not entirely in it anymore.

Needless to say, Albus was not surprised at that either.

The young man walked slowly into the room, shutting the door quietly behind him, and headed stiffly to the proffered chair that his old headmaster bade him into, an inscrutable look on his face and his eyes more inexpressive than Dumbledore had ever seen them.

"Severus," the old man greeted him, taking in his pristine formal and austere attire. On a boy that used to be one of the more noticeably crumpled and dishevelled in the school, *that*, he thought, was most certainly new. "How are you? You look well."

His posture erect and rigid, Snape took the seat across from his old teacher, maintaining the old man's gaze as if it were some kind of subtle test, which...knowing Albus Dumbledore as he did...was almost certainly precisely what it was. He had learned very early on in his first year here that everything about Dumbledore, especially his more innocuous questions, was far more than it seemed. Crossing his legs, he laid his hands on the arms of the oak chair he was seated in. The inclination of his head in response was so slight as to be almost non-existent.

"I am well enough, Professor," he replied, speaking again before the ancient wizard could converse or quiz further, as he knew from years of experience that Dumbledore's penchant for *apparently* inane small talk was legendary and his own personal lack tolerance for it equally so. As he had long planned in advance of this visit, the young Death Eater came directly to the point. "Well enough...and here to make you an offer. Whether you care to accept it...or even believe it, however, is something that remains to be seen."

Arching an eyebrow, the old man leaned back slowly in his chair and steepled his fingers. "I see. So this is *not* in response to our current openings for teachers?" he enquired lightly, the curiosity apparent in his gaze mingling with a flicker of amusement.

Snape inhaled softly, slowly, ignoring the question and the jocularly in favour of his own route, his gaze still as direct as his words. "I take it, Professor, that it would be foolish in the extreme to assume you know nothing of my allegiances and activities this past while?"

The older man nodded with a smile. "Yes. I am *quite* aware of where your loyalties lie, Severus. Sherbert lemon?" He gestured to the dish of garishly yellow sweets on his desk.

"Thank you, no," the young dark wizard declined brusquely. "Nor bullseyes, mints, liquorice, or toffees of any sort. I shall be blunt, Professor. I am here, by request, to apply to take up one of your teaching positions, that of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor. Given what you know, I hardly need to spell out the identity of the maker of that request."

Popping a candy into his mouth, Dumbledore appeared distracted as he sucked lazily on it, and for a moment, Snape wondered if he'd heard a word he'd said. But a heartbeat later, the old wizard opened his eyes. "A chocolate frog, perhaps? I am sure I have one around here somewhere...providing it hasn't got out of its box." He gazed down at his desk drawers with a small frown.

A strangled growl emanated from Snape's throat that seemed to approximate the word, "Professor."

A small chuckle passed from the headmaster's lips before he held up a placating hand to his former pupil and nodded more seriously. "Yes, well...you are of course free to apply for a post, Severus. Obviously, Voldemort would like you to work here so as to keep an eye on me? How very blatant of him..." He sucked on his sweet for a moment more. "And you, Severus, what would you like?"

"What I would like, Professor...is not remotely relevant to this conversation. What I am about to tell...and offer you...is," he replied shortly. "On the face of it, it is of course a blatant attempt by the Dark Lord to spy upon you. One which he knew you would never accept." His fingers thrummed once upon the arm of the chair. "Which is why he wanted me to come here with the intention of convincing you that I wished to switch sides and offer my services to you as a double agent, when, of course, I would be still reporting to him."

The old man nodded. "Of course. And what, then, is your own intention, Severus?" he asked after a moment, his blue eyes fixed on the younger man's.

"My intention, sir...is to make precisely that same proposal to you..." Snape's fingers thrummed once again, his voice low and quiet. "Only with the absolutely genuine offer of working for you and you alone."

The other man said nothing, merely placed his steepled fingers to his mouth and continued to regard him as he sucked quietly on the fizzy boiled sweet. "Why?" was all he asked after a full two minutes had passed.

The young man's face was a mask, his voice without the slightest hint of emotional inflection of any kind. "I have my own, varying reasons..." he replied. "But in essence, it is reduced to my realisation that *His* wider plans can only result in the ruination of the Wizarding World and not its salvation. The Dark Lord is, in essence, a liar. And his actions...and the actions of the Death Eaters under his command...myself included, are purely destructive."

"I see..." was the soft response. "And what brought about this change of heart?"

There was a pause as Snape drew a long breath, his answer coming on the exhale. "Ultimately...my background. I do not share his pureblood views. I am not of pure blood, as you know. And I did not join the Dark Lord to purge myself for reasons of *wizarding* purity. I do not care for the Muggle world of my father, but the future of the Wizarding World cannot be sustained by a few 'ostensibly' pureblood families. We are few enough as it is. And attacks upon ourselves..." his forehead creased minutely, "on families, mothers, and their children..." he trailed off for a moment, his voice growing even quieter, "they make less and less sense to me."

Rallying instantly from his slight introspection, he pushed his shoulder blades against the hard boards of the chair's back. "I joined with him, Professor, because I was seeking something and I thought he could help. In keeping with that, I thought too at the time that his eventual aim was ultimately altruistic. Aggressive, yes, but altruistic. Maintaining our way of life and keeping it safe from the outside world. Increasingly, all it seems to be about is the garnering of power for one side to the cost of all. We cannot secure our world by dividing it." His words were flatly matter of fact. "I was wrong in my reasoning on both counts."

"So you are doing this...for her?" the old man interjected surprisingly direct. "Because your conscience is finally listening to her words?"

Snape tensed, and a long moment passed before his level one word query. "Her?"

Dumbledore continued to watch him before finally sighing and shaking his head. "Still keeping secrets, Severus? Very well, I shall play along. Your words, my boy, notably reflect several impassioned speeches I heard over the years from a remarkable young woman and diplomat...the late Paidea Abernathy? Her pleas for peaceful resolution, cohesion, to hold true to our values...that the cost of what Voldemort offered as a 'remedy' was too high..."

He barely paused for a breath. "And she was right. Do you know I offered her membership with the Order? She refused. Refused to be part of any organisation that could lead to bloodshed...even if it was for the 'right' side. She preferred a diplomatic and judicial solution...and not...how did she put it? Ah yes... Aggressive negotiations." He sighed and shook his head. "She passed on far too soon."

Snape's knuckles turned slowly whiter as he gripped the arms of his chair harder and harder as Dumbledore spoke. On his last words, they were released, one hand resolving itself into a fist and hammering on the desk of the ancient wizard while one long finger of the other pointed itself into Dumbledore's face as the black clad wizard leaned over his desk in cold fury.

"I warn you now, Dumbledore, no matter how these negotiations go...never...ever...speak of her or try to use her memory as a pawn to sway me in our dealings again," he hissed quietly from between clenched teeth. "You think you know everything, old man. But you know nothing of the truth of what occurred between us. Nothing. And it is none of your affair. Use her name to me again...and I will strike you down the first moment I can."

His only response was the headmaster's arched eyebrow. "Indeed so? You are, of course, correct, Severus; I know virtually nothing of you both. Perhaps you would care to fill in the holes of my knowledge? I know she loved you. That you were together, though I can only suspect for how long. You both kept *that* a secret extraordinarily well, especially given the rampant speculation and probing after it became known she was with child with no apparent father. In fact, I was only privy to your name at the end of her life."

He raised his hand again as he saw Snape's boiling anger at his continuance of the topic peaking, ready to erupt again, the younger man's hand twitching unwisely towards to the pocket in his robes in which he no doubt held his wand. "But..." Dumbledore said softly and reasonably, "if...as you say... this is not about her...why should I trust you...or believe anything you tell me now?"

Snape straightened slowly, calming himself with rare effort, though his voice was tight and dangerous still. "I never said my decisions had nothing to do with my past, Headmaster. Only that *that* part of my life is none of your affair."

"Quite right...quite right..." the old man agreed before adding, "under normal circumstances. If things were different I would drop it and never question you on it again. But events occurred back then, Severus, that make that impossible...and your being here now, making this offer, makes it even more so. You expect a great deal of trust from me. And though I am a firm believer in everyone having a second chance, while you are incredibly gifted and intelligent enough to be a tremendous ally to our cause, your skills also make you a very real danger. With that being the case, I feel I should have some proof that my trust would not be misplaced. Don't you agree?"

Snape relaxed further, dropping his hands to his sides after he unfurled them slowly from their clenched positions. "You have no reason to trust me. I knew that when I came. But consider, Professor...had I wished solely to win you over above all things...to do the Dark Lord's will like his other slaves...I would fall to my knees weeping and tell you everything you wished to know about my past and how it has fuelled my change of heart...make it a sob story for the ages. Whining and snivelling, I would tell you anything you wanted to hear just to convince you of my sincerity...to fulfil his will." He leaned on the old wizard's desk again. "But I will *not*.

"Despite what he believes, I am not *his* slave...and neither will I be yours *should* you choose to take me on board. I have realised things...about Voldemort...and about myself, but I will be no one's pawn...not again." Resuming his seat, he crossed his legs once more. "Trust must be earned...and that can only occur over time. But rest assured, I have things to tell you that will make that easier...and I will make the first move now in providing you with a piece of information you should know urgently as a show of good faith.

"I came once before to apply for a position..." he informed him calmly, "and while waiting for you at The Hog's Head, I overheard the interview of the applicant before me. A woman. A seer. And overheard not *just* her interview..."

A light frown crossed the headmaster's face. "What did you hear?"

"I suspect..." he replied, "from my un-ceremonious entry into the room that day, you already have your suspicions. Not that your attempt to read me then provided you with anything but proof of what I wanted you to think. You and the Dark Lord have that in common at least." There was a momentary gleam of pride on that point in his dark eyes.

"In any event...you read from me that I heard nothing." He folded his arms slowly. "The truth was rather more towards the opposite end of the scale."

The old man's lips set. "How much?" he demanded to Snape's immense satisfaction. It was not often one saw Dumbledore rattled.

"Enough for it to send *Him* into a spin at the news..." His eyes dipped for a fraction of a second at the remembrance of the Dark Lord's manic reaction to the prophecy, and a rare flash of guilt at what he might have set in motion that day shot through him.

"I see," was the only response he got, though the old man continued to look more than a little annoyed. "Very well...a meeting will have to be called...and plans put into motion." His eyes turned to Snape. "Exactly what did you hear? I want it word for word."

Closing his eyes for a moment, Snape repeated verbatim the initial part of Sibyll Trelawney's divination.

To his surprise when he was done, Dumbledore sighed with almost relief.

"He did not get it all," the old man explained and rose to his feet. "Though those plans will still have to be put into gear to protect the innocents involved...a few people are going to be very put out." Crossing over to the window, he gazed out of it a minute before speaking again. "Very well, Severus...I believe I am inclined to put my trust in you. Though I would like some collateral beyond a piece of information Voldemort has known for over a year."

"What do you want to know?" the young man asked, not wholly surprised at the older wizard's requiring more. "I have names if you want them...a few places of interest..."

Shaking his head, Dumbledore pulled out his wand and moved it over a dozing portrait, tapping it several times before he pulled it open to reveal a hidden storage chamber. From within its depths, he drew out a middling sized wooden chest and carried it to a table, placing it down as the painting swung shut behind him with its occupant still fast asleep.

"I have been keeping these for over a year. I think it's time to return them to their legal owner...that is, if what I suspect is true...though no one can find a record of it anywhere. Muggle marriage, was it?" Pocketing his wand, he waved a hand over to the bemused Snape, beckoning him to investigate the box. "We were fortunate to get there first..." he advised him, "before her parents arrived to take care of her belongings."

Snape watched him in growing apprehension. "What are you talking about?" His eyes went to the box, a glimmer of fear seeming to flash there. "What has this got to do with the Dark Lord or my giving you collateral for my trustworthiness?"

Taking a small old key from his pocket, the white-bearded wizard unlocked the box, rolls of parchments and something soft that looked yellow and blue just peeking out...and the smell of a floral perfume began to waft into the room, its scent causing Snape's breath to hitch audibly. "If we cannot bring *her* into this for you to swear on...for I think you would not swear on her name lightly...will you swear on her child's instead?" His eyes returned to the younger man, his gaze deathly serious.

Snape was on his feet in a moment. "Her *child's*? What is this...some kind of *twisted test*? She had no child! You know that...the entire Wizarding world knows it!"

Dumbledore, however, didn't bat an eyelid. "It took a lot to rewrite the hospital Healers' memories to keep that piece of information hidden...but I can assure you, she did. I was there."

"You're lying!" Snape blazed as he took a step forward. "She died! And the child she carried died with her!"

"No...he did not," the old man corrected firmly but with a trace of compassion. "Paidea Abernathy...Snape...died precisely thirty seconds before her son came into the world."

Snape slammed the lid of the box shut with a force that reverberated around the room. "I told you *NOT* to *SAY HER NAME*!" he roared in a rage. "You are *lying*!"

Dumbledore merely continued as though the other man had simply whispered. "If I give you proof...will you swear...on his life?"

Staring at him, his chest heaving in wrath and an open emotional confusion that made him even angrier, Snape could feel the invisible fingers inside of him inserting and twisting themselves into wounds so deep they would never heal. His ire and uncertainty was such that he barely comprehended the question...his mind finally focusing on a solitary word. "Proof?" he breathed, looking at the box in front of him as if seeing it for the first time.

"Proof," the other man agreed. "But first...will you swear?"

"Swear?" The strength of the word and its emphasis from Dumbledore's lips aided the younger man in regaining his composure. He blinked. "*Swear*? You want me to advance an oath of loyalty to you on the life of a child I don't believe exists? On the back of proof you have not shown me? And which *may* be fabricated?" He snorted in derision. "What would *that* be worth?"

The two men regarded each other in silence, one merely waiting and the other seeking solid ground to re-establish himself.

On finding it, Snape spoke again. "I will make you a counter offer, Professor. Show me your proof and I will swear to you now if I believe it to be true...you will have your oath."

The other man smiled beneficently. "Done," he agreed with a clap of his hands, whereupon a stone bowl floated over to the other side of the table and landed softly. Moving over to it, Dumbledore drew out his wand once more and placed it to his head. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he drew out a long strand of memory, which flowed into the bowl. Beckoning over to Snape, he indicated the pensive. "Shall we?"

Snape eyed the basin suspiciously, unsettled again by the calm of the old wizard...and the manner of this proof...all too aware of the power of memories. "What is it we shall see?" he asked, staring at the silvery liquid.

"Your proof," was his only reply.

A part of him told him to turn away, to walk from the office and go back to face Voldemort and tell him that he couldn't convince the old wizard...that he had failed. To take his chances. That perhaps that risk might be the lesser personal hardship. But...his curiosity...and that part of him kept suffocated by anger, bitterness, and loathing ever since he had uttered an unforgivable spell...were crying out to him and refusing to be ignored no matter how he tried to quell them. Long pale fingers touched the stone bowl and caressed the runes. "Very well," he said quietly, his voice tinged with a calm that did not reflect what was churning inside him, and he returned his eyes to the Headmaster of Hogwarts and waited.

They both descended into the fog and grey...and when it cleared, Snape found he had to take a step back or be nearly run over by a woman carrying cloths as she hurried into another room. That it was a woman could only be discerned by her shape as her face was, rather disconcertingly, blurred. Glancing around, he could see two other people there, but their forms were blurred too, even more so, and he could barely make out that they were male...for not even their clothing was clear.

The only one who appeared normal was Dumbledore...or rather the memory of Dumbledore, who was watching something going on through a long glass window.

"Why can't I see their faces?" he asked, looking at the blurred figures with a frown.

"With your gifts of the mind, I felt it wiser to hide their identities. Their memories have long since been altered, but I didn't want you tracking them down and bedevilling them with some foolish idea that you might be able to retrieve what is long gone. Believe me, even if you could find them, there is nothing you could obtain from them. They wouldn't remember what you were talking about if you were to ask them as their memories of that night are completely different," came his answer before the current version of the headmaster held out his arm and indicated the doorway into the room his memory version of himself was gazing into. "Go ahead."

And that's when they heard the cry...a woman's. And she was in pain.

Snape jolted, the recognition instant in his eyes. "No..." he whispered, taking a step back from the open portal instead. "Damn you. Damn you. *Damn you*, what have you brought me to!"

"You wanted proof, Severus...proof I was not lying...and I'm not. Everything here is exactly how it happened...unaltered...except for the people's identities. You wanted the truth...and here it is." The elderly wizard indicated a box that appeared like a Muggle speaker. "We can hear everything that is going on in there if you wish." And a moment later, there was the sound of a woman crying.

Over it, a distorted and desperate voice was murmuring, "Hold on...you have to stay with us. The baby is nearly here...but you have to hold on."

"Blurred forms...voices only..." Snape stared at the box and then at Dumbledore, his fear transforming itself into mistrust and anger as it so often did. "What kind of *proof* is this?" he snapped. His eyes turned to the doorway and his mouth twisted into a grimace of determination as he pushed his way in.

"I'm sorry..." came the answering whisper from the very clearly-focused young woman on the birthing bed, a blurry man holding her hand as Snape moved inside. On the other end of her was the woman who had nearly run him over and, he had to assume from their outfits, two Healers. Their patient appeared to be looking elsewhere as if she were unaware of any of them, continuing to murmur distractedly, "I'm so sorry...I love you so much, Severus...please forgive me..." There came another cry of pain, followed by a Healer telling her she had to push.

Snape stopped two steps inside as a blow the force of a dragon's tail struck his chest. His eyes widened as they fell on her face, his own features losing all trace of their former suspicion and anger and instead resolving themselves at last into agonized, wondering pain.

Her name slipped from his lips, barely audible even to Dumbledore. "No," he whispered, his arms closing about himself.

"I'm so sorry..." she whispered again before turning at last to the man next to her, her eyes focusing for a time. "There is good in him...he didn't mean this...please...help him." Her voice seemed to fail her for a moment and she barely seemed to be able to get the words out. "There is good..." She reached up and yanked the chain off from around her neck, pressing it into the man's hand before she turned away, her eyes again growing distant. "I'm sorry...I love you so much...Severus...always love you..."

She cried in pain, and the man beside her turned his obfuscated head anxiously down to the Healers, when one gasped, "Oh no..."

Blood was now pouring from the woman's womb.

"Paidea..." Her name tumbled again from Snape's barely moving lips as he stared at the sight of her blood ebbing from her, taking her life, her light. "No..."

"I love you..." Her lips moved in an agonising illusion of answer and with a shuddering gasp, she closed her eyes for the last time, her head lolling to one side.

"Paidea!" cried the man, his call the merest echo of the agonised cry Snape held deep inside him.

"We have to get this baby out now!" snapped the Healer, who had pulled out his wand and was frantically chanting spells, the other Healer working just as frantically at his side, knowing one patient had just expired and desperately trying to save the second.

Black eyes turned away to the tiled floor, unable to watch as he fought for imaginary breath, while everything he had tried to suppress over the past year was ripped raw again.

"I hate you," Snape said, head bowed, arms wrapped ever tighter about himself as he stood by Dumbledore.

What seemed like an eternity later, a loud vigorous cry rang out around the room.

A small bundle was hurried over to a tub, the blood washing away in the water, leaving the child pink and clean, his dark hair barely visible under the soft cap placed upon his head while he was checked and bundled.

A minute later, the memory of Dumbledore quietly entered the room as the baby was given to the blurry and now shocked man who had been still holding the child's mother's lifeless hand.

"What do we do?" he asked, his voice distorted.

"He needs a home..." Dumbledore replied. "Away...from all this."

Snape turned his head in their direction, watching through the veil of his hair.

The rest of their conversation was muted and completely garbled in his ears before the man nodded and carrying the infant, left the room, leaving the memory of Dumbledore to take the dead woman's hand. Bowing his head, a single tear rolled down his cheek. "Rest in peace, Paidea...and I hope you are right."

Snape felt a hand take his arm, and with a yank, they were back in Dumbledore's office.

Turning away from the bowl, he walked silently to the window and wrapped his arms about himself once more, standing there without a word for a full ten minutes, only the white of his knuckles where his fingers dug into his arms betraying his struggle for control.

Finally, straightening somewhat, he loosened his hold on himself, and his arms folded over his chest once more. "Asking you where he is...*who* he is...will do no good I assume?" he enquired without looking at the old sorcerer. "Seeing as he is to be your...insurance."

"It is for both your protection that I keep that from you," the old man replied, again sitting behind his desk. "What do you honestly think someone like Voldemort will do if he finds out your son is still alive?" His eyes were piercing as he looked at the younger man through his half moon spectacles. "The boy is loved and well cared for, I can assure you. And will continue to be so, regardless of your decision. He will know nothing of magic or our world. He will live a happy and relatively normal life with a family that loves him."

"As a Muggle." The younger wizard's voice was flat as his dark eyes turned to Dumbledore.

"As you say," was the response. "Just one of billions of others. His powers bound."

"You have no right to keep him from me," Snape observed with no particular trace of emotion. "I could go to the courts and seek his return. I am not a wanted man...and everything you have done is illegal. Mindwipes. Kidnapping." Everything he said was told in a straightforward tone as he took several slow steps back to the headmaster.

"The child is just over a year...could you care for him? Do you know the slightest thing about babies? Could you keep him safe? And what would your other master do? He'd be a bargaining chip...used to ensure your loyalty, and if you were not...he would be made to suffer. Look what happened to your wife...or do you think that *He* did not get exactly what he wanted there," came the sad response.

Dumbledore sighed as he sat back in his chair. "And what do you think would happen if you went to the courts? To them, he doesn't exist, Severus. He was declared dead along with his mother...there is no record of his birth, and no one bar myself and one other knows anything about it. And then what? You attacked his mother the day she died...with an Unforgivable Curse, Severus."

"I did not mean...she would not..." the dark clad man began automatically before his eyes closed once more, and he turned his head away as the memory replayed in his mind for the millionth time. "You know this, and yet no warrant was ever issued for my arrest. No charge ever brought. You can hardly use that against me now without impeaching yourselves for a cover up in her death." He took a few steps away before glancing back. "Why did you not come after me? Put me in Azkaban...give me to the Dementors?" There was almost a longing tenor to his question.

"Because it did not contribute to her death. Gave her great pain, yes...but her death was due to childbirth related reasons. Apparently her placenta tore during labour..." the old man explained. "Remember the blood? That is what caused her death. "

Ebony eyes regarded him for a moment before a soft snort of scorn reached the elderly wizard's ears. "Did not contribute to her death? You really do know nothing of us, Dumbledore," he told him before again turning away.

The headmaster steepled his fingers again. "How so?"

Snape's back continued to face the desk. "I told you...that is none of your concern. I know the part my hand played in what occurred; let us leave it at that. The necklace she wore..." he queried, crossing over to the window. "The one she took off in the memory...where is it?"

The older man looked puzzled. "The locket? She was buried with it. It seemed to be important to her."

Snape immediately turned back to stare at him. "She took it off...pulled it bodily from herself and gave it to someone. And you're telling me that it was put *back on* her again?" he said incredulously.

"I believe so..." Dumbledore replied, his brow furrowing a little as he glanced up. "We weren't entirely sure what to do with it...it couldn't go to the boy and no one could open it. Lovely old thing, though...had a P engraved on it. The young man she gave it to thought it would be best with her. And frankly, we had other problems besides old lockets...so it was given back," he explained.

Snape moved slowly to back over towards the desk and nodded. "And so you ignored her last request." His eyes were sharp as he regarded the old wizard. "You know she would have hated what you did, don't you? Hated the abuse of legitimate power as much as she hated those who would seize it from outside." He scoffed again and shook his head. "No one came close to her...to what she stood for...no one. Least of all me.

"Very well, Headmaster," he said quietly, staring up at the sorting hat where it sat on its shelf. "You have my oath. On...my child's life...you have my loyalty and I will be your informant until the day this is over...or one of us is dead."

The elderly man nodded solemnly. "Very well...welcome to the Order of the Phoenix, Severus." There was a slight pause. "Now...about your job application. I'm afraid the Defence Against the Dark Arts position has been filled...but how do you feel about teaching...Potions?"

"*Severus...*"

Hate filled the dark-haired man in that moment. Hate unlike any he had felt before. Hate for that Malfoy brat who he had been manipulated into saving. Hate for the Dark Lord and his twisted soul and lies. Hate for that devious, ingenious old man who was asking him to help him die, asking him to kill the one man that could give him back the one remaining piece of her. Kill his last chance at *ever* finding his son.

'I hate you, Albus Dumbledore,' he thought as his wand began to rise.

But even as the slender rod made its short journey upwards in preparing to end the life of the greatest living sorcerer, the deepest contempt and the bitterest detestation was directed not at any of these but at the one whose choices had led him to this crossroads.

For him...his weaknesses, his folly, his fear, mistrust, and misplaced faith...his contempt burned the brightest. For him, who had turned a boy with the highest hopes and expectations into a man who was not only capable of this darkest of acts but of living with them. For him, who...when the words had passed his lips...would ultimately destroy the last vestige of those hopes and expectations.

For him, and him alone, was the expression of complete and utter loathing on his face as the wand aimed unwaveringly at its target.

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Authors' Note: The quoted full lines have been taken directly from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Chapter Twenty-Seven, pages 595-596. No money is being made from this fic...and all due credit needs to go to JK Rowling for writing a marvellous series of books that continues to inspire us to play with her characters. Also, many, many thanks go to our beta, D'arcy (aka Savageland) whose tireless efforts on our behalf we are most grateful for.

The Covenant

Chapter 2 of 4

Part Two -- The Covenant -- On a moonlit mid-October night, a lone dark-clad figure seeks to fulfil the covenant he swore years before.

The Covenant

The moon was almost full.

Almost, but not quite.

There remained perhaps a day or so before the celestial orb reached its zenith and played havoc not only with the ebb and flow of the tide but with men's hearts, minds, and in some more unfortunate cases...their bodies.

For the moment though, with the sky clear and coupled with the light of a billion distant suns pinpricking the velvet black around it, the lack of the remaining sliver or so hardly seemed to make a whit's worth of difference, the resulting argent light bathing the earth beneath in a clear but subtle glow.

It was, therefore, perhaps not the best night for moving about unseen. And in tandem with the loud protesting creak of an iron gate as it was pushed open and closed again, the dark clad figure that slipped through with only the vaguest whisper of further sound might well have been spotted. Had there been anyone around to do so. But even though there was not, the lone newcomer still moved silently through the network of headstones.

Avoiding the narrow, winding, prospectively noisy cobblestone path that led between the graves, his feet barely made indents on the soft, dew heavy grass beneath them. His head was hooded, and his partially veiled features were set in the most severe and purposeful of expressions. If he was wary or uncomfortable, he did not show it, his movements silent from habit...not fear.

In fact, there was little emotion at all in those eyes. No hint as to what his thoughts or purpose in this resting place of the dead could be as he made for his objective.

The light breeze pulled at his robes, the whisper of wool on stone fleeting as it brushed past both simple gravestones and large ornate sepulchres. Finally, his footsteps slowed and came to a stop in front of a free standing long stone tomb, the high polished pale granite glowing softly in the moonlight and its metallic flecks catching the light like mithril fireflies.

Then, and only then, did the shadowed figure make a sound...the slightest of hitches in his breath. Long slender fingers emerged from the depths of the black robes, compelled with a will of their own to trace over the letters engraved on top of the tomb.

Paidea Athena Abernathy

Born: May 31, 1956

Died: May 21, 1980

Peacemaker.

Beloved of family and those she touched.

Rest in peace.

It didn't begin to do justice.

Not even close.

Young Severus Snape's lank black hair caught the breeze a little as his hands moved to the cowl on the cape over his robes, pushing it downwards. Pale features were immediately rendered fittingly spectral in the silvery glow of the night; black eyes lost deep within the shadowed wells of his sculpted face.

A face that was even thinner now, more pallid and gaunt than before.

His eyes came to rest upon the date again.

May 21, 1980

More than a year. Had it really been that long?

That long since he'd seen her face, heard her voice...felt her touch?

He supposed it must. Days had sped by since then in a maelstrom of running, hiding, anger, hatred, betrayal, hurt, and despair. Above all, despair. Minutes bleeding into hours into days, thoughts lost in a nearly never ending recycling of events -- replaying and replaying how it had all gone wrong. Spectacularly, soul destroyingly wrong.

But even then, he still had no idea of the true extent of it.

His talk with Dumbledore three weeks ago had finally made that clear.

A talk that had made him a teacher at Hogwarts. Potions. Not Defence Against the Dark Arts as he had wished. A talk during which he had taken an oath to serve his old headmaster...and had done the will of the Dark Lord into the bargain. But he had not spent those three weeks since in teaching preparations, nor in work for either wizard.

He had spent it searching. Tracking, hunting...verifying.

It hadn't been too hard to discover the names of the Healers on duty at St. Mungo's that warm May night. One of them had even given a statement to the wizard press on behalf of the hospital after their patient's death. Finding the other two hadn't been too difficult after that. Hospital records had good security, but nothing a little ingenuity, a

well prepared Unctuous Unction potion into a security guard's tea on his break, followed by the most simplistic of Memory charms couldn't bypass.

If nothing else, Hogwarts was getting a damned good Potions master.

The Hospital records had been tampered with, of course, certain *pertinent* facts never making the slightest appearance. But the names of those attending his wife had been left there, impossible to remove as no matter what had occurred within that hospital room, one public fact remained unaltered. A heavily pregnant Paidea Abernathy had died upon the delivery table...and *someone* had to have been attending her, trying to save her and the child that he and the rest of the world had thought died with her.

Two men and a woman, actually. The woman, he had guessed. Not even Dumbledore's obfuscation of the individuals in his memory quite hid that fact.

He had never been one to accept anything at face value and was less inclined to now more than ever...for the only ones he had ever truly trusted were now dead, one of them after leading his most reviled enemies right to him to capture him.

It was, he knew now, an accident...unintentional...but his inclination to trust *anyone* had taken a serious battering in that moment. And it had not been helped by the gradual realization that he had been played like Orpheus's harp by the one who had promised him his wife's life and handed him only her death.

Trust, therefore, even for the likes of Albus Dumbledore was in short supply. He would never take anything anyone told him as fact again...not without checking its veracity for himself. He could not tell who the other three figures in the Hospital that day had been...but he had discovered the Healers and that was enough. They could perhaps tell him the identities of those others who had been there. Who it was Dumbledore had spoken with about Paidea's child.

About *his* child. *His* son.

The son they had taken from him, kept from him. All he had left...all he had of her.

Dumbledore had claimed all of the memories of the truth of that event had been rewritten for those present. Outstandingly illegal and just as difficult to perform effectively without leaving...something...a thread of memory to pull...to unravel. He had gone to each in turn, questioned them thoroughly using all his magical cerebral skills...not that they remembered that either...and the outcome was that he found absolutely nothing.

Dumbledore had not lied and had performed all too well the complex magic required. There was nothing he could do to reverse it. Finally, he had had to accept that the ancient wizard was the only one who knew of the whereabouts of his son.

If there was another who knew amongst the other three present that day, he had no way of knowing who they were. The members of the Order of the Phoenix were numerous and scattered...and once the child had been taken and hidden, they too might have volunteered to have the memory taken or rewritten in their minds.

His only hope of finding his son lay in the honouring of his oath to the old man, even though the old wizard had surely not done what his dying wife wanted for her son...for her husband.

His fingers found the cold sleek surface of her grave again, feeling the warmth of his hand seep into the stone and chilling him.

A family...Paidea had wanted him to have that...and had known that family was important to him. She had known that he'd loved his mother greatly, and she had comforted him through her loss. But more than that, she had known, in spite of his outward anger and deep resentment towards him, that he had loved his Muggle father also.

Despite Tobias's increasingly drunken reaction to his wounded pride, resulting in aggressive, berating, belittling ways, the boy Snape had only ever wanted his approval...would have gone to the ends of the earth to hear a favourable word or a hint of pleasure in his father's voice directed at him. He would have given up everything, all his childish ambitions, if his family could have been whole...healthy.

His wife had wanted to give him that. *He* had wanted to ensure that. That was what his actions had all been for. And now, she was dead...and he had a son he never knew about...one whose identity or location he had no conception of.

He didn't particularly enjoy the irony.

Nor did Snape enjoy the fact that through his old headmaster's actions, Dumbledore had ignored that marital and familial commitment they had made to and for each other...and was now using it for his own ends.

Even if the elderly wizard's reasoning the day she had died had been cautiously logical and even if her husband's deeds to that point had left him a dubious father in the extreme, it was in Dumbledore's use of the reasoning that having the boy anywhere near Voldemort would have given the Dark Lord a new pawn to play his father with that Snape found utter hypocrisy.

The fact was that the prospect of being used to make the child's father a pawn had already become a reality...the very moment the Headmaster had used his knowledge of the boy to his own advantage.

Dumbledore had chosen freely to use his new Potion master's deepest desire and his last remaining hope to bind him, to ensure his unwavering loyalty more completely than Voldemort had used the Dark Mark that still adorned his arm. And though Snape now had the chance to seek to make amends for his foolish choices...he hated the old man for what he had done more than his former professor would ever know.

The old man truly had no concept of the bond that had tied Snape and his wife together, what they had given each other...what they had wanted for each other...and their child. Or maybe he knew and just didn't care because he was more focused on the bigger picture...on turning every eventuality to his advantage...on winning a war, rather than on the wishes and hopes of those individuals involved. Maybe that was why Dumbledore had even denied the gesture she had made before the lifeblood seeped from her body...feigning ignorance to her husband when he had quizzed him on it, while in reality forbidding his new teacher's son anything of who he truly was even in exile. Or perhaps he was attempting to break the familial bond in order to use the prospect of reunifying it one day as a lure the boy's father could hardly resist.

He touched her name again with one hand as his other delved into his robes to draw out his wand. It seemed so long ago now, a different world...a different him. But the memory of the creation of that deeper covenant between them, along with a great many others, had been rekindled in the aftermath of his meeting with Dumbledore.

He had repressed so much after her death -- the anger, pain, and guilt too much to bear. It had been so hard to do that at times, death would have been infinitely preferable...there had been nights when Obliviating his own mind had been just the uttering of a single word away.

But her dying words to him within Dumbledore's memory had revived his own, making them easier to bear. She did not blame him...she wanted his forgiveness...she believed in him still...she loved him.

"Always."

He could hear her voice in his head from a time before...a happier time. The bond had been unbroken in the end; despite his foolish, desperate actions...their promise to each other had not been shattered by the casting of an Unforgivable Curse. Unbroken, because she had not wished it so.

And as he raised his hand above her tomb and began to cast the spell that would help him bypass the wards upon her tomb just enough to augment a spell of far longer standing, the power generated by him through his silent spell began to thrum around him, his lips moving as the strain of pushing back the warding spells placed by her family to protect her tomb, a symbol, from desecration in this time of trouble grew. It built and built, an aura beginning to form around him...its lambent glow ever more noticeable, until with a gasp he opened his eyes, his empty hand turning palm open as he cried,

"Reveni..."

Snape emerged into the golden twilight...the walls of the whitewashed cottage almost orange in the light of the setting sun as it bathed the Southern English coast.

The world was quiet and still...barely a breath of wind moved through the few trees and plants that made up the small side garden that led to the fenced off cliff area, beyond which the world turned blue-green with nothing but water as far as the eye could see. The tiny wisp of wind that was there blew through the roses and honeysuckle that filled the air with their fragrance, while toying also with the chestnut brown locks of the solitary figure who stood in the centre of this serenity, arms folded about her as she gazed far out to sea from their honeymoon vantage point.

Clad in a long off the shoulder lavender dress embroidered with small flowers along the hem and bodice, she stood with a picnic basket on the small stone bench nearby her, the setting sun lending a kind of halo effect to the scene and her. Her young husband was loathe to interrupt and ruin the peaceful introspection and beauty of the moment, his seventeen year old mind consigning it to his memory as a visual snapshot to treasure for the lonely evenings to come.

Evenings of which would be many in the immediate future after tonight...their last night here and their last night together for some time. Destined on their return, she to London and he to Spinner's End and then Hogwarts for his final year, to months of separation and shadowy brief meetings -- their marriage meant for secrecy for some considerable time.

Until he was older, established...and she finished the work she needed to do.

He looked down at her cape in his hands and back at her...there was little doubt in his mind that he would be more than old enough to be acknowledged as both her husband and a success in his own right by the time the latter was achieved. Trying to bring peace to a world in conflict with itself, conflict that was threatening to spill over into the outside world in the peaceable non-violent manner she desired...was a task no magic could even begin to tackle.

He would have to prepare himself for a life of shadows...a half life of hidden and half truths. Still, he told himself...it was what he had accepted as the price of having her...of her being his wife. A few years...just a few...even if the war was resolved by non peaceful means, then she could set to work healing the rifts...and then, then he would be able to walk with her again just as they had this past week, albeit without all the elaborate protective wards to keep them concealed. Just a few short years hidden away and pretending...no more than that. It would be bearable as long as he had her.

Dressed in his black Muggle shirt and trousers and his soft boots making no sound on the grass, he moved behind her and, holding up the cape, slipped it around her shoulders, stepping close to her as he did and wrapping both the cloak and his arms around her, his nose and cheek brushing hers.

She made a soft sound of contentment as her head turned ever so slightly to nuzzle him. "Thank you," she whispered, her fingers brushing over his arms, before she turned her eyes back to the vista, her voice containing a hint of wonder. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

He nodded silently, settling himself against her, her body natural against him now in every way the culmination of a week's worth of the newlyweds' exploration of one another. The nervous, awkward, virginal pair replaced by the ever more comfortable lovers. "You have been standing here for quite some time. What is it you've been thinking on?"

"How I shall miss this place," she replied almost instantly, a soft sigh bubbling from her. "How happy we have been here...how I cannot wait to return." One hand drifted up his arm, her fingers wrinkling the fabric even further. "How I do not wish to leave...how I wish the world was different and we could stay, but knowing we can't. I feel like I'm about to wake from a beautiful dream to step back into the harsh light of day." Her fingers tightened a little. "And...I do not wish to wake."

His lips brushed her cheek. "Irony." His tone was philosophical. "You prepare to step into the full glare of day...and I into the shadows. Still," he said as firmly as he could manage, "it will not be for long. One day we will return here again. Make our home here if you wish."

She nodded almost minutely before turning her head to meet his gaze. "I think I would like that," she murmured, her fingers brushing over his cheek. "I hate that it must be this way...you deserve so much more than to be forced back into the dark. Your life has been so unhappy already...and here I am adding to it." The blue in her eyes darkened in sadness. "I have learned that being true to yourself is just as important as being true to a cause. Am I being selfish?"

He looked down at her, his black eyes still and soft. "We are both of us selfish in our way. I doubt you know how much in my case," he replied. "But by being true to your cause, you are true to yourself. You must do what you feel you have to. Despite me or anyone else. It is the Slytherin way," he chaffed her momentarily before his tone returned to its serious timbre. "If you did not, then you would not be you, and I would not be here with you right now."

Turning in his arms, she said not a word as her fingers moved into his hair, her lips quirked just a little at the sight of it pulled back into a relatively smooth ponytail, though many of the strands had rebelliously fallen out to cover his eyes. "Slytherin way or not...you know me too well," she agreed with a sigh, tucking one of the strands behind his ear. "And you are right...it does not need to be for long...the war could end tomorrow." She tried to make her voice sound optimistic, but both of them knew that it was not very likely...that in fact 'He Who Shall Not Be Named' only seemed to be growing in power and followers...not the opposite.

He said nothing. The war and all that surrounded it were growing more complex and intense. No one now was truly immune to its effects even though they might wish it otherwise. What they had just been through was testament to that -- the attempt to sacrifice her on the altar of expediency to hasten a war in order to end it. And, though he would never say it to her...the twisted logic involved was founded in a frightening truth...the Death Eaters were a growing force, subtly recruiting more and more witches and wizards to their side every day and striking with relative impunity as those in the Ministry debated.

There were many who feared lack of action more than war because they feared how far Voldemort's tendrils would grow and creep before action was finally taken, and that it might be too late to do so by the time the debating was done. He knew that they had a point. He knew how far the Death Eaters' influence reached...had known for many years.

Their insidious probing and enticing inside the Dumbledore-led bastion of light that was Hogwarts showed both their increasing reach and how early they started their recruitment. He recalled the quiet way he had been drawn aside his very first year by the vastly impressive seventh year, Lucius Malfoy.

Tall, blond, supremely self-possessed Malfoy, who complimented him on his startlingly advanced knowledge of spell craft and potion making...then staggered him with how much he knew about his family. Their pureblood past...ruined by intermarrying with the likes of his drunken Muggle father. He commiserated with him, welcomed him into his circle, and hinted in no uncertain terms that his skills would be welcome in certain quarters, should he wish to ally himself with them...and in return his family name might be exalted once again.

It was the first time he had been approached...but not the last.

He would be lying if he had not said he was intrigued by the possibilities it would open up to him and what advantages it could give him in his studies...but he had learned to be self sufficient even by the age of eleven, developed a strong independent streak, and didn't relish the idea of being a part of a collective hive mind of any sort...less so being anyone's lackey.

But there was no doubting the power *His* followers offered, and in the years he and his independence had struggled alone against the Marauders, the safety. It had been tempting, he could not deny that. Now, of course, it was out of the question. They were her enemies...so therefore...they were his. A welcome shade of definite black in his too often shades of grey world.

"Is everything all right?" she enquired softly, breaking into his thoughts. "You suddenly look a thousand miles away."

He nodded again. "Everything is fine. Save the thought of tomorrow morning."

She sighed and nodded. "Of course..." Her lips pursed as she gave another firmer nod. "Let us not think about that right now. I want to enjoy our last night together...the sun will again rise soon enough."

He nodded and glancing down at her hand on his arm, caught sight of something and with an expression of remembrance, turned his eyes at her. "Tell me, do you recall when we first talked? Sitting in my hospital room in St. Mungo's in the aftermath of the Death Eaters' attack on Diagon Alley?"

Her smile was soft as her fingers wrapped around an object dangling on a chain around her throat. "Oh yes," she replied, her eyes twinkling a little at the memory. "You were the oddest little boy I had ever met...but after you stopped being rather crusty...you were rather charming."

"I was in pain, surly, and impatient," he scoffed. "Yes, my usual charming self...I doubt I have come within an ass's roar of being anywhere near charming in my life...and only you could deem my behaviour so."

"It was *charming*," she insisted resolutely. "As evinced by you giving me this." Reaching behind her neck and undoing the clasp of the chain, she held it up between them. Dangling from the white gold chain was a good sized antique ebony locket beautifully decorated with delicate silver vines entwined about the letter P rendered in script at its heart. "I thought it a rather extravagant gift...but you were so insistent. I remember your frown when I tried to tell you it was too much...and you said, 'Nonsense...if I didn't want you to have it, I wouldn't be giving it to you.'" She laughed. "You had that rather *endearing* glower down to a T."

He huffed slightly and cleared his throat. "Yes...even then you took a ridiculous amount of convincing. And my glower is hardly *endearing*."

"I didn't want to offend you. You had saved my life after all...so, I took it and wore it just as I promised you every day after we parted. People assumed the initial stood for my name." Her smile became wry. "I think it got to be habit, for I was still wearing it when we met again." Her eyes twinkled at the memory of how exactly he had come back into her life. "You literally knocked me off my feet," she teased. "It was most *romantic*."

He arched an eyebrow slowly at her continued gentle jibing. "You hardly thought so at the time...and I'm beginning to wonder why I bothered right at this moment," he groused, though his eyes flashed with his own dark humour as she started to laugh at his much put upon tolerance.

His fingers reached out to touch the one family heirloom he had...the one item of value the Prince family had left. The one his mother had been quietly shocked to see him give away to a little girl whose acquaintance he had only recently made, and understandably she had not gained much satisfaction from her nine year old son's dogged explanation that it was 'Quite all right, Mum. The locket has not left our family...I intend to marry her.'

A quiet and decidedly enigmatic "Good" slipped from his lips in a murmur as he continued to regard the locket, and his wife's expression was quizzical when he looked back at her. He did not enlighten her. "Shall we depart for the strand so you can display what it is you have prepared for this beach supper you wish to treat me to?"

Fixing the heirloom around her neck once more, she nodded. "Of course! Though...it's mostly a cold collation," she warned him. "I still do not fully trust my newfound cooking skills," she added, picking up the picnic basket and blanket.

"You will improve in time and with practice." His eyes glinted in the dying twilight as he held out his hand to her. "As you have in...other areas...this past week."

Her eyes widened as her hand slipped into his, her fingers instantly entwining with his own. "Severus!" she gasped, her cheeks pinking, though her lips struggled not to pull into a wide smile.

"You do not feel you've improved?" he mused, returning her earlier teasing. "Very well..." He turned his eyes towards the small narrow gateway that led to the steps at the bottom of which lay their personal and private strand. "I stand corrected."

Both her eyebrows rose as she continued to stare at him. "Severus Snape! I should most certainly think that I have improved! Especially since I knew absolutely nothing about...*those*...areas when we started!" she exclaimed before her eyes narrowed. "And you have proven...acceptable...yourself this week," she added with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes, your acceptance of me has been quite frequent, enthusiastic, and even insisted upon, I've noticed," he replied immediately, leading her to the gate.

She sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. "I should know better by now than to engage you in verbal wordplay...have I mentioned you should try going into politics?"

The gate creaked a little as he opened it. "Several times. And as I suggested to you before, with certain key exceptions, there is a certain natural limit a man has in dealing with and dwelling amongst snakes...even for a Slytherin."

Her laughter filled the air as they moved down towards the sand.

Finding a sheltered spot, Snape laid out the blanket, while his wife busied herself with the large picnic basket which not only held their meal and dessert...but also several bottles of elf wine, glasses, plates, utensils, and a couple of extra blankets.

Sitting back, he watched her as the sun continued to descend rapidly. After he drew out his wand, a silent Accio gathered together dried grass from the cliff side and driftwood from around the beach into a neat symmetrical airy pile. On his command, they burst into a crackling campfire, illuminating the gloom around them. A moment later, they were joined by a Lumos spell he had adapted, and a dozen small lights winked into existence in a broad circle around them...throwing a satisfactory glow over the area around them.

Setting out the cheese, fruit, and sandwiches, she handed him the bottle of wine. "Would you care to do the honours?" she enquired, casting her eyes at the romantic lighting and smiling in appreciation.

A small parade of stones drifted up to ring themselves neatly about the fire, the final practical and aesthetic flourish to his creation, as he put away his wand and took the bottle from her.

Taking some pleasure in inserting the corkscrew into the easy give of the cork, he drove it in before pulling it out slowly, the muted pop as it slipped out quite noticeable. "You know, being as we are in Muggle territory..." He returned the bottle to her before turning to raise the blanket behind him and scoop the sand up, forming it to create an angled backrest. "You could be arrested for giving spirits to a minor. Or is it, in fact, your plan to get me drunk? In order to have your diplomatic way with me?" Turning around, he settled back against his creation with a small smirk on his lips.

Her brow furrowed a little. "A minor? But you are seventeen...you are an adult," she replied before snorting lightly. "And I am the one with the lower tolerance for alcohol as you well remember."

Reaching out after a moment, he touched her face, one finger tracing the line of her jaw slowly. "That would only make you more irresponsible to the Muggle authorities," he noted. "I may be an adult in Wizarding terms...but I am a year under age to Muggles..." His lip curled as he inched a little closer to her. "At least for drinking."

She blinked, more than a little surprised. "Muggles wait till eighteen? Does that mean...our marriage isn't legal?" She swallowed, appearing more anxious by the moment.

He paused in his slow encroachment upon her, his hand falling away slowly, as what he had hoped was his rather seductive line fell somewhat flat on his Muggle ignorant wife. She championed them, advocated good relations and more openness with them...but like many idealists, she really didn't have the first basic clue what she was talking about in practical terms.

"No." He shook his head, resuming his former position as a strand of his hair slipped loose again. "Our marriage *is* legal, Paidea, don't worry. Eighteen is for drinking and voting. Sixteen is the age of consent for matrimony. That's what I meant by other...never mind..." He exhaled, shaking his head tolerantly and following the golden rule that

if you have to explain it, it really isn't worth it, he turned his face up to look up at the moon as it grew ever brighter in the sky.

She breathed a sigh of relief but upon seeing the expression on his face, winced a little. "Oh! Oh dear...I'm sorry...you were...oh no," she groaned. "It seems I need to further my education of Muggles..." Her eyes shifted back over to him slyly. "That is if I can find a good...teacher."

Catching her look from the corner of his eye, he ignored her and slid further down his back rest, slipping his hands behind his head. "I'm sure you'll find someone in the Ministry...maybe in the misuse of Muggle artefacts section...or the Obliviators..."

Arching an eyebrow, she put the cork back in the bottle, propping it carefully against the basket before moving over to him and leaning over him, her chestnut hair falling over their faces like a curtain. "I suppose I could," she murmured. "There is that new man in the Misuse office...red hair and freckles, who is rather sweet and vigorous. Though I was hoping for a tutor a little closer to home."

"I have a poor temperament," he warned her as her heat and scent surrounded him intoxicatingly. "I'd make a terrible teacher."

One corner of her lips tugged up as her eyes twinkled down at him. "You did very well with our cooking lessons," she reminded him, bending just enough to brush her lips over his.

"There was a reward system in place," he reminded her, his voice deep and low. "Added incentives."

"I see...and what...incentives...do you require, my husband," she answered softly, nipping his bottom lip.

He eyed her silently, the amused, expectant, and vaguely wolfish expression on his face really all the answer that was required.

The other corner of her lips joined its counterpart. "I *am* glad I decided on a cold supper..." she breathed before capturing his lips properly.

Propped up on the enlarged bank of sand with its covering blanket, another one draped over them, Snape sat with one arm encircling his denuded wife. Her head cradled against his neck and shoulder, they both sipped on the wine, their legs entwined and their clothes in one pile, their used dishes in another, as they relaxed, sated in the aftermath of indulging two kinds of hunger.

His hand around her playing idly with the bottom-most tendrils of her long free hair, he gazed up at the stars, the sea folding quietly onto the shore in the darkness as the moon reflected on its relatively placid surface midway between land and horizon. Glancing down as his wife's free hand traced little lines on his chest, he put down his wine glass and captured her hand gently, raising it up in the firelight so that the band of gold she wore there glinted in the flames.

Her eyes followed his to the ring, the symbol of their promise of love, fidelity...and marriage, a melancholy expression setting on her face at the realization she would have to remove it in the morning. "I wish...I did not have to put this away too," she murmured softly.

"Where had you decided on keeping it?" he asked vaguely, continuing to watch it as it shone.

She sighed softly and shook her head. "I'm not sure...I can't wear it, even on a chain around my neck it would be noticeable. But I do not wish to simply leave it at home in my jewellery box either."

"You cannot take it with you...not in any conventional fashion." He turned his head to gaze down at her.

She nodded, looking up to meet his eyes and frowning slightly as she recognised the tell tale signs on her husband's expression that indicated he was already several steps ahead of her regarding where this conversation was heading. "I am open to suggestions," she replied curiously.

Reaching out slowly, he traced the line of her collar bone with his index finger before finding and slipping his finger under the locket and raising it.

"*Reveni Princepi*," he murmured, before the locket around her neck winked out of existence to curl neatly up, chain and all, in the palm of his hand.

She blinked in surprise, her fingers automatically moving to the now missing pendant around her neck. "You had a spell on it?" she enquired, her light frown remaining.

"No," he answered, looking down at it. "Not me. And not just one. Several spells...put there by some ancestor of my mother several hundred years ago, when the Prince family was still one of the notable houses. This is all that's left of that time...a good reminder of how such things fall asunder."

"It's enchanted with some of the strongest magic," he told her. "Always to return to a member of the Prince family when summoned. No doubt that's why we never lost it along with everything else. It was...I believe, designed and created by Aramis Prince for his daughter, Arabella. Supposedly she was a great beauty, and he was afraid she would elope with someone unworthy of her...so when giving this to her for her seventeenth birthday, he placed enchantments on it...some of which he informed her of...like the retrieval spell...and some of which he didn't...like the tracking spell."

"Tracking spell?" his wife repeated, her brow furrowing more. "You mean...I've had a tracking spell on me for eight years?"

"I never used it," he replied mildly. "One has to invoke it...and then follow it. I never did." His eyes returned to her, his voice smooth and velvety. "I never felt I had to...that I would meet you again one way or another when the time came."

The slight tension in her shoulders eased immediately and she nodded. "All right...so..." She inhaled suddenly, her eyes widening with understanding. "You are suggesting we put my ring...in the locket."

He arched an eyebrow. "Have you tried to open it?"

Her cheeks flushed a little. "Yes...a long time ago after you first gave it to me. I was curious about what might be in it...but it wouldn't open," she explained. "I thought its mechanism might be broken...but not even an opening spell worked."

He nodded as he explained, "It can only be opened by a Prince...no magic except in tandem with that will work." His gaze turned back to the prize in his hand. "*Aperi*." There was a click and the seamless locket suddenly separated and unfolded itself, revealing an intricate gold filigree interior.

"If you place your ring within it...no one will be able to look inside to discover what it is you hold there. It can lie around your neck for all to see...and with none the wiser. A hidden testament to our vows...to our family."

Her eyes moved from the locket to the wedding band on her finger, her thumb and forefinger twisting it a little from side to side, and then, with a deep breath, she slid it from her finger and placed it inside the heirloom. "Close to my heart," she whispered. "*Always*."

A ghost of a smile rested on his lips. "Now..." he told her, "seal it once more."

Swallowing slowly, she placed her fingers over his and moved to close the locket, and was surprised to see the two halves close over but not seal.

"No..." he said softly, gazing at her, "with the words *Claude Arcanum*...invoke the Princes' spell." He touched her cheek. "As my wife. As a Prince. As my family."

Turning her face, she kissed his fingers and nodded. Pushing the locket closed again, she said softly but with a firm tone, "*Claude Arcanum*."

The locket sealed...no sign of a break in the metal anywhere. "Now..." he whispered, kissing her forehead, "call it back to you."

Her eyes shone and her smile was gentle as she held out her hand. "*Reveni Princepi*," she called quietly, recalling the spell he had uttered a few minutes before. The locket winked out of sight as it had before...and a fraction of a moment later, a light weight appeared around her neck again as it hung in its proper place once more.

She blinked again in surprise, but her smile only seemed to grow as she curled her fingers around it, the familiar, slightly heavier weight reassuring.

Looking at it and then at her, he nodded solemnly. "Now at least when we're apart there will be something of us with you." He kissed her lips softly. "Like a child curled up in its mother's womb...waiting to emerge."

When he pulled back, she was watching him closely with an odd look in her eyes. "You have that look again," he noted.

She continued to watch him some more and after a minute, she hedged, "Do you think about that...I mean...have you? Children, I mean..."

He was silent for a moment, his gaze calculating. "Yes. Family is important."

She nodded silently and turned to refill her glass.

"Family...when done right...gives you strength. A base...a home. I want that. For me...for us." His eyes watched her hawkishly, as his voice grew quiet. "It does not have to be now or anytime soon. I will not pressure you," he promised. "I know there are things you want to do...things you feel are more important now."

She held the bottle up silently askance as she shook her head. "No...it's not that. I just...I've just never thought about it. In fact, I hadn't even thought of getting married until two weeks ago. I suppose, I am simply getting used to one life change still," she answered. "It is not that I don't want to have children...but...if we think about this practically, we can't even be seen married yet...let alone have a child. Never mind there is a war going on...you are still in school...and I'm hardly home." She sighed. "What kind of a life could we give a baby?"

"A better one than we've had," he replied, looking away from her out to the rolling sea. "Parents who are proud of them for who and what they are. Parents who encourage...parents who won't steamroll them into a role they want him to play and taking their lives away in the process." He nodded to himself as his hand turned to the sand, a finger idly scratching symbols in the grains. "As I said, it does not have to be now. But if you do not wish it...so be it," he stated softly as he drew a line through his etchings.

She bit her lip idly, her brow furrowing as she watched and listened to him. "You really want this...don't you," she said softly, and almost in spite of herself, her hand drifted to her blanket-covered belly as her mind mulled an idea that before that day had seemed foreign.

His shadowed eyes remained on his scratched through writings. "Family is the bond that never breaks...for good or ill. It may stretch, even tear...but never completely breaks. It has more magic than any spell with words ever created. It moulds lives, minds, hearts. Magic users understand the power of the marriage vows better than Muggles...the joining of two into one. That's why my mother cleaved to my father so. The covenant is of blood...not just hearts. That's why the locket accepts you as a Prince. We are family...we are blood...and that is the oldest of magic. Children ensure and reaffirm the bond...carry it into the future as testament."

"I agree," she replied. "My father has said something similar my whole life...though from the parent's perspective...not the one of someone who wishes to be." She put down her glass on top of the closed basket and hooked a finger under his chin to turn his face back to hers. "I never said I did not want children...just that I was not used to thinking about even having any of my own." Her eyes were soft and loving as they met his. "I love you...and I am proud to be your wife...and I will be proud to be the mother of your children."

His body relaxed minutely, and he nodded slowly before kissing her forehead and drawing her to him to hold her tightly. "And I to be the father of yours...they will be our strength...grow to know us, carry something of us forward with them into the future...our future."

Her voice was soft and warm as she repeated with an ever growing smile, "Our future."

"...*Princepi*!"

The short but powerful spell of recall rang out around the silent cemetery. A cemetery that would be silent for only a moment more...his expertise enough to push through the wards on the tomb but not enough to also take care of all the alerts that had been put upon it. The caretakers of the wizarding necropolis would be alerted and on their way even as the pulsing aura around him died.

In the not too distant gloom, he could hear the sound of creaking sarcophagi...the custodians of the burial ground emerging from their sleep to come for the desecrator. Showing no particular sign of haste, he opened his hand, noting with grim satisfaction the glint of silver that caught the moon's beams.

She had taken this from herself on her death bed...their child's birthing bed, her intent clear in an instant to him as he had watched. It was meant for him...for the boy...so he would have something of her; her ring still inside signifying their bond, her commitment, her tie to him, and to their *new* family. But they had returned it to her body instead of giving it to him, not letting the child have even that to wonder on before they whisked him away.

Turning away from her tomb, he drew the cowl around him as the unearthly squealing of undead voices drew closer, and he moved quickly away into the darkness towards the trees beyond the gravestones, his hand closing tighter still about the precious locket and its contents.

Even in death she had not left him alone. She had given him a family just as she had promised. He had failed her in all things to this point...but he would find their son one day, and when he did, the boy would have this.

No matter what he thought of his father...or his actions...he would have something of their family, know something of his mother and the bond his parents had shared. In this at least...he vowed as he Apparated away, he would ensure her wishes would be met.

We would just like to thank our beta, D'arcy (savageland) for all her help in this and our other works. We appreciate her efforts immensely.

Peace

Chapter 3 of 4

Part Three -- Peace -- All Severus Snape wanted was some peace. *HBP spoilers*

Peace

It had taken everything he had not to slam the door after the Black sisters had left. His simmering anger about what they had convinced him to do...what he had allowed them to convince him to do, was palpable...not the least because he suspected there was a degree of sentiment involved in his decision. And sentiment, as he knew to his cost, could, in the game he was playing, get him killed...or worse.

Peering through the curtains and ensuring that the sisters had indeed gone, he swept the fabric closed with such force that it tore off the rings. His calm demeanour completely evaporating, he turned with a snarl and bellowed, "Pettigrew! Get down here and clear up this mess!"

There was no small amount of satisfaction to be had in the way that the odious little rodent appeared almost instantly, even if the smaller man's expression was almost mutinous. Not that he cared a jot what the former Marauder thought, his mind already returned to mulling over this newest twist in his convoluted existence.

He disliked being pressured, and both sisters had exerted their own form of it upon him, providing him with little enough room for manoeuvre; Bellatrix's presence had seen to that. The malevolent, twisted bitch and her obsessive suspicion on behalf of Voldemort had tried to provoke him, to push him into some kind of amateur slip up on the back of Narcissa's emotionality.

An Unbreakable Vow. It boggled the mind that he had taken it upon himself. That his life was now instantaneously forfeit should he fail to maintain it. But in the cauldron of snap decision making that the meeting had turned into, it was, he decided, the best choice available to him.

In taking it on, he had flummoxed LeStrange, the look of shock on her face when he had bound himself via Draco to Voldemort's will almost worth the risk alone. In that single move, he would endear himself to the Dark Lord, who would hear about this soon enough, still further. And that would bring him a greater level of trust as well as a greater insight into his plans...advancing his position amongst the Death Eaters. It would also bring a flood of new information to feed to Dumbledore, and earn him more in return from the ancient wizard.

Then there were the Malfoys. They were in his debt now. The idea that Lucius Malfoy would owe him, Severus Snape, the integrity and well being of his wealthy, ancient pureblood family filled him with such a glow of malevolent satisfaction that he even allowed Pettigrew to get away with crawling around the ground after the brass rings within range of his boot without applying it swiftly to his arse.

Lucius would despise every minute of living under the yoke of that debt, and Narcissa would not allow him to wriggle out from under it. Her words had been genuine. Her son and husband were everything to her.

He could appreciate that kind of devotion to family.

Getting Draco out from under the thumb of the Dark Lord had been another part of it. The boy had potential...and that would be wasted in the life-threatening task that the Dark Lord demanded of him. He had no doubt that Draco would fail. He was intelligent enough, had a certain level of deviousness that saw him thrive in Slytherin, but he did not have what was required for this...his mother knew it...and so did he.

Voldemort was wrong. Saving the boy was the right thing to do. Dumbledore would certainly agree. After all, Dumbledore had spoken to him often on the inevitability of the Dark Lord using children against their families...their fathers...should they fall into his sway. He frowned and again tried to push away the nagging feeling that sentiment had clouded his decision.

Weakness. He had to avoid it. But it was hard...increasingly so the deeper he sank into this web. He turned away as Pettigrew rose and moved to clean up the debris left by 'their' visitors. The truth was that staying five steps ahead of the Dark Lord, Dumbledore, and that idiot Potter boy was beginning to wear on him. And with weariness came a clouding of the mind and a turn to emotion to resolve one's decisions for oneself. He could not afford the disasters that he knew lay in that direction, but it was not as though he could suddenly call 'time' and take a brief holiday to settle his mind and ensure his strategising. There was indeed no rest for the wicked.

The clink of the goblets barely registered in his consciousness as his dark eyes drifted over to one of the bookcases that lined the far wall, a deep pang of longing washing through him...his fingers itching to open...

No.

He turned away quickly, perhaps too quickly, because he was brought crashing back to reality by the squinty gaze of that overgrown rodent watching him. He glared back, his eyes boring into the other man until, cowed, Peter turned away.

"You move like that ever thickening girth around your middle is made of lead. I told you to clean this up. Now be quick about it and get out of my sight," he snapped, crossing over and slumping in his chair.

"Somebody forgot his happy potion today...what a shock..." Pettigrew muttered under his breath, picking up the tray with his good hand, the goblets rattling as he attempted to balance them before reaching for the bottle.

"Leave it," came the instant command.

The silver hand retracted back slowly as the little man shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure...whatever. Going to get yourself pissed then...again?"

Snape moved smoothly to Peter's side and picked up the bottle in question before his other hand left the pocket of his robe and smartly struck the odious pest hard across the face, sending him reeling backwards while leaving the tray floating serenely in the air, the Leviosa spell silently cast upon it.

Regarding the bottle's label calmly, he did not so much as cast a glance at Peter as he tumbled back over a chair to the ground. "Speak to me like that again, you vermin, and it'll be the last flapping your tongue ever does..." his black eyes finally turned on him, "...inside your head."

The tray floated across to Pettigrew, awaiting his taking hold of it again.

Rubbing his jaw, the fat man pulled himself to his feet, his eyes narrowing in loathing. "I shouldn't do that again if I were you! I shall tell *Him*! I am his loyal servant...I gave my hand so he could be reborn to us," he spluttered.

"You are free to report this to *Him* and the other Death Eaters, Wormtail," Snape replied indifferently. "Oh...and if you ever think I'm letting a bottle of this vintage fall into your mangy hands..." He paused. "Apologies...*hand*...I suggest you think again. Nothing of mine accompanies you into that rat hole you've made your room into."

Snatching the tray from its hovering position, Pettigrew glowered at him. "Fine...well, I'll just scurry off, shall I? And leave you to your nightly appointment of getting sloshed and passing out in your clothes!" he spat, and stormed across the room, goblets tinkling with each footfall.

Snape sighed and, withdrawing his wand from his robe, set fire to the bottom of his undesirable houseguest's left trouser leg, taking care to place the tray back in levitation mode first. "Your inability to heed warnings," he said on hearing the rat squeak in alarm, "is second only to your inability to form coherent thoughts of your own, Pettigrew. So I shall make allowances and give you this one as well."

Stamping his foot wildly, the other man waved at the flames with his hands before grabbing a pillow off a nearby chair and batting them out with that. "Are you *insane*! Have you lost what is *left* of your mind?" the man gasped, staring at the other dark clad one in shock before pressing his lips closed to prevent any other words from coming out, though his face clearly told what he thought of his housemate.

"I wonder that every day," Snape replied, again slumping into the armchair, "when I see your face and try to understand how I acquiesced so easily to the Dark Lord's request that you be billeted here. You're more trouble than you're worth. The Dark Lord or not, I'd hand you over to Remus Lupin in the morning without a second thought if I thought it would bring me some peace." He held his hand up when he saw Pettigrew's eyes widen with fear at his former compatriot's name and his rotund body swelled as he geared up to retort. "But it will take more than that...a great deal more than that...so you can rest easy...for now."

Peter, however, simply glared back as Snape arched an eyebrow at him. "The tray, Pettigrew? You have goblets to wash."

Spinning on his heel, the Animagus grabbed the still hovering tray and stalked out of the room.

However, before he could leave, Snape noted a garishly coloured and glossy addition to the pile of parchments he had been reading through the night before. Reaching down, he pulled out the interloper and turned it right way up to examine the cover, addressing the traitorous Marauder as he headed through the open doorway, "When you're done, go to your room and stay there. I'm sick of your wandering. Can't you find a way to amuse yourself? Perhaps that shiny new hand of yours can be of some personal use."

Rolling up the copy of Pettigrew's *Playwizard*, he fired it at the scuttling man's head with smirk, the magical impetus giving it greater force as it thwacked satisfactorily against the back of his target.

And yet, to Snape's great disgust, both at the lack of reaction and the thought of what the moron might actually use it for, the little weasel merely adjusted his tray, nabbed the magazine off the floor, and stormed out of the room.

The smirk on his face dissolved as soon as the other man was gone. Beetle black eyes narrowed as the small fillip of the rather easy victory slipped away almost as rapidly as it had come, leaving him numb, empty, and tired again. He had meant what he had said. Peace...it was all he wished for. Be it in one form or another. Not that he ever found it...it seemed as elusive now as ever.

Knowing that in his current state of preoccupation and exhaustion that he would get no more reading done that night, he rose to his feet. A silent command later and the house on Spinner's End was bathed in darkness. Ascending the steps that led to the bedrooms, he barely noticed the light still shining under his door, his mind on the longed for...the impossible.

He closed his eyes and, massaging the bridge of his nose, took a deep, weary breath.

Peace...if only for a night.

"You're back!" came the joyful cry when he stepped into the room, barely having time to close the door behind him before a pair of slender arms wrapped around his neck and a set of soft lips found his.

Slipping his arms around her, he drew her in close to him, relaxing in her embrace and relishing every moment, until she pulled away with a happy sigh.

"Where have you been?" she enquired, her voice soft and mixed with a touch of relief. "It feels as though you have been away for years."

His gaze visibly softened as he drew her to him once more. "I had some tiresome business to attend to, but I am now entirely at your disposal," he replied, his voice velvet smooth and soothing.

Her fingers curled around the folds in his robes, her head resting on his chest. "At my disposal?" she purred, the teasing hint in her voice unmistakable.

He found his lips quirking upwards despite himself, her chestnut hair soft under his caress. "Of course...what does my lady wish of me?"

Her blue eyes met his, the desire in them setting his own to smouldering as he perused their azure depths. Those eyes that had captured him when he had first met her at the tender age of nine and never let him go. With one look she had made him hers...though it had taken a lot of persuading from him after an eight year absence to convince her that that fateful moment had bound her to him in return. She had been stubbornly hard to persuade, and he had had a lot to contend against -- his younger age, though really, as he had reminded her, it was only four years; her grace and beauty versus his acerbity and black looks; their disparate social positions...the total public unacceptability of any relationship, especially with her very public diplomatic job in the Ministry and he still with a year's left of schooling at Hogwarts. But one could not say that Severus Snape did not have patience...or perseverance...especially when it came to something he wanted. And he had wanted her.

Lowering his mouth to hers, he captured her lips, drawing on them softly at first before his resolve shattered and he took hers with an eagerness and desperation he had not felt since he was seventeen and first in her arms.

His ardour only increased as she melted into him, her body moulding to his perfectly. Lifting her easily, he carried her to the bed, his lips never leaving hers, drawing strength from her as he always had throughout their long illicit relationship, while her fingers methodically opened the buttons of his robes, the tips of them brushing over his fallow skin as she worked.

Her hair fanned out beneath her as her head came to rest on the pillow, and once more he found himself gazing on her beauty like a man thirsting. Her arms reached out for him, but there was one thing he needed to do first.

Taking one outstretched hand, he turned it and placed a slow kiss upon its palm and wrist before leaving her and striding over to the door. Pulling out his wand, he shot a hex through the antiquated keyhole and was gratified to hear a high-pitched squeal answer him.

Crossing back to her side, he shrugged at her arched brow and puzzled gaze. "He's taken to listening at keyholes," he told her, finishing her earlier work and stepping out of his robes.

"I see..." she replied, that amused timbre back in her voice, as she took his hand and drew him to her.

His fingers made short work of the tiny opalescent buttons of her nightgown, reverently pushing the edges aside, while his eyes feasted on her. Every detail had been thoroughly committed to memory long ago, but her skin was as soft as it had been seventeen years before, her touch as tender, and he found had to forcibly control himself...to refrain from merely claiming her there and then.

He was older now...and not the clumsy boy he had been on the night of their secret wedding.

And so, he took his time. His lips brushed over her skin, and relished her scent, each touch, each taste, the feel of her arching and spasming under his mouth, the sigh and moan of his name from her lips as he divested them both of their clothing.

She was his bliss...his calm centre in the storm the raged outside...his peace.

And he craved her.

As she lay there, he moved beside her, draping his right leg over both of hers, his hardened cock pressing comfortably against her hip as his hand caressed her throat. Bending his head, he kissed her, his tongue flicking out to tease her lips apart.

The jolt that shot through him went straight down to his toes, as did the thrill when she responded, her mouth opening and accepting him with a groan, while her fingers slipped into his hair.

His kiss was slow, wet, and deep, and he lost all sense of time with her as their tongues entwined in a slow erotic dance of their own. One that lasted for as long as it took

him for his hand to wander from her throat to touch and explore every part of her he could easily reach before returning to the firm full swell of her breasts. He squeezed and fondled her gently, letting the tips of his fingers circle and brush the hardened nipples, as he drew his mouth from hers for air, inhaling deeply, and murmuring, "Do you miss me when you're not with me? Where you are?" His head bowed, his tongue sweeping over an areole before he enclosed it in his mouth with an aroused grunt, continuing to lave over the nipple within.

"Always!" she gasped above him, and he relished the delicious shivers travelling down his spine brought by her fingers tugging on his hair as she held him to her, her body arching to his mouth.

Here, too, he took his time, his mouth moving easily from one breast to the other, kissing, licking, suckling...letting his teeth graze over her damp sensitive flesh. Every tremor and ripple that passed through her from his ministrations sent an echo through him, making his erection throb against her, making him rub against her slowly as he slid further down her, his tongue rimming and then impaling her navel and causing her to arch from the bed once more. His fingers, circling her far hip, slipped to her abdomen and, as he trailed hot open mouthed kisses across the flat plain of her belly, they slipped into the dark full thatch of hair between her legs and played with the curls there, the need to go further, to touch more intimately subsumed by the desire to prolong the moment.

Her cries, gasps, and moans echoed in his ears...and he thrilled in them, his own resolve only shaking when they turned to whimpers and pleas...her calls for more of him...for him to give himself to her...for him to end their mutual torment. His head rose, his dark eyes taking in the familiar sight that still continued to amaze him a little more each time, and the roar in his ears increasing at what lay before him -- her closed eyes, her parted and full lips, her head lolling in abandon...her expression one of pure bliss.

Faced with all that, he was sorely tempted to acquiesce to those pleas, but these moments with her were all too rare. This was all he had of her, and he wanted her with him too much...wanted to feel all of her, and feel all that she did to him just from her responses far too much to let it slip by hurriedly in a tangle of limbs and heated thrusts, no how matter how much he wanted to experience that as well. No...patience...and perseverance. "Soon enough," he promised, rumbling soothingly into her. "Soon."

Withdrawing his leg from over both of hers, he inserted it, instead, between them, parting her slowly, and shifted himself upwards and over her onto all fours between her legs, his fingers running over the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, parting her still further.

Bending his head, he placed soft kisses where his fingers had been working, letting his tongue snake over the quivering skin, tasting the increased salt as she began to bead with sweat from the pent up need he was causing to build within her. He growled softly at her scent...the scent he could still smell when he was alone at night, and moving his head, he put his large hooked nose to good use and nuzzled into the roaring heat and dampness of her sex, before pressing his mouth to her, making love to her with his lips, tongue, and the gentle graze and pull of his teeth over the hard throb of her nub.

And she cried out for him...over and over...her voice rising in pitch and volume as it shook and trembled in unison with her body. It was music to his ears. But it was nothing to the utter satisfaction he felt when she let go. Her slender form bent back nearly in half, her fingers fisting the blanket beneath them as she jerked and spasmed above him, her ecstatic calls of his name echoing off the walls.

And *that* brought a dark smile to his lips.

She had called for him...always for him. *He* was what *she* wanted. All she had ever wanted. Just him...with his beetle black eyes, greasy hair, hooked oversized nose, sallow skin, and crooked teeth.

She had chosen *him*.

And in her choosing, he had made her his. In these moments, forever his and his alone...and the reinforcement of that fact in these briefest of reunions sent a feral surge of possession through him that made him even more relentless, ruthless in seeking her and by extension, his pleasure. Riding her release with her, he ensured it was prolonged and even multiplied, his mouth never leaving her, and his hands never ending their caress until shaking and gasping, she had fallen limply back to the bed. Then, and only then, did he plant his hands on either side of her and rise up her slowly, letting his body slide up hers sinuously and joining her in her shivers of aftershocks when his chest brushed hers, his nipples rubbing hers.

His hair spilling down over his shoulders and the sides of his face, he took in her flushed skin with a wolfish gleam of lust and satisfaction, though his kiss when he claimed her mouth was of a softer, sweeter nature -- slow and deep like before.

She sighed into him; a sigh he had come to learn so long ago as one of contentment, the accompanying hitch in her breath, though, was most certainly one of anticipation...and the way her fingers again delved into his hair was most certainly an unspoken invitation for more.

It was only at that moment that he let his attention return to the hard insistent pulsing between his legs. Despite his control and his patience, it could not wait any more...it demanded gratification, satisfaction...her. Breaking the kiss, he gazed down at her, his dark eyes blazing, and his lip curled at the knowledge of what was to come as he raised, set himself, and with a short surge of his hips, entered her quickly, a snarl escaping his throat at the scorching heat that surrounded him.

Her soft, desire-filled blue eyes locked onto his, her heart shining in them, as they began to move together, their bodies joined and flowing in a rhythm as old as time. And again, he brought his lips to hers, determined that no part of them would be separated.

Her hands slipping over him and their breath mingling within their mouths, she caressed and played him as expertly as he thrust into her, knowing all the favoured places, how to move, where to touch, what to whisper. Moving with whatever tempo was required, they built and slowed, and built again, taking each other to increasing heights, until his breath became hard, grunting pants, his hips moving ever more vigorously into her, and she writhed beneath him, her moans and whimpers rising to cries...their voices filling the room. Finally unable to hold back, the pressure inside too intense, too hot, he rose up above her, arms straightening as he stared down at her tossing beneath him, and thrust roughly into her, driving in deep and hard, taking all of her as he rushed inevitably towards his ached-for release.

"Paidea!" he bellowed into the night, his call answered by a cry of his own name from her as she followed him over the edge. His hips continuing to jerk helplessly into her tightened muscles, his climax so forceful it felt as though his brain had been plastered to the back of his skull.

His arms were shaking with strain as he fought for air and to keep from collapsing on top of her; his eyes closed behind the veil of his limp greasy hair as he sought to still his racing heart. Lowering himself to his elbows, he inhaled slowly, mastering his breathing rapidly, and became gradually aware that soft hands were stroking his back, sending hot and cold shivers up his spine and bringing a rare ghost of a smile to his lips.

"I love you," her voice whispered in the darkness, and with a long contented exhale, he opened his eyes to gaze into the blue ones beneath him.

Her emotions were there, clear to see and so easy to read...not from his use of Legilimency...for he had never needed that with her, but because she never hid what she was feeling or thinking from him. She was as honest and true as they came...and though he'd often called her naïve, he loved her for it all the same.

His slow nod was her only answer...a part of him wishing to respond to her as he used to -- freely and honestly. But that had been in a time before events and choices had hardened him to the point where verbal expressions of the softer emotions seemed to die in his throat.

Tracing the smooth curve of her neck with a long finger, he pressed his lips to her brow before finally sliding off her and gathering her close, his nose buried in her hair.

Drowsy, his eyes drifted closed, and he was soothed to slumber by the gentle sound of her breathing and stroking of her fingers over his arms.

And for the first time in longer than he could recollect, he felt calm...at ease...at peace.

The room was dark when he awoke, and the knowledge was instantaneous.

He hardly needed to fumble in the inky blackness to touch the empty pillow beside him to know that he was alone. The absence of the soft warmth he had felt just a heartbeat ago became a gaping void, threatening to consume him from the inside out.

Pushing aside the blanket, not at all surprised to find himself still fully dressed, he rose to his feet. Stalking across the room, he threw the door open with a loud bang, part of him wishing that Pettigrew was still hanging around so he could displace a modicum of the pain he was feeling now onto that fat, unctuous little rat.

The tread of his footfalls echoed down the stairs. His eyes took in the room as easily as a cat's in the night. But on finding nothing amiss, he snarled in a kind of disappointment before gliding across the room, his feet compelling him...guiding him almost of their own accord to that section of bookshelf-covered wall that seemed to call to him like a siren's song.

His hand traced over the wood in a lover's caress, though his face was as inscrutable as it always had been. The only sign of any effect on him was the hitch in his breath as he waved his wand over an old, battered copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and muttered a name long lost to the world. There was an audible click and a creak as the bookcase swung open, revealing a hidden staircase curving down.

He took the stairs two at a time, waving his hand behind him, not even slowing as the door swung shut behind with a low thud.

"*Lumos!*" he snapped, reaching the bottom, and found himself blinded for a full minute as the torches flared brightly on his command, bathing the room in orange and yellow flickering lights.

His dark gaze, when once again adjusted, swept over the scene before him.

It was not a large room -- no bigger than a good sized walk-in closet, only made of brick, but it contained a rather comfortable if ratty looking chair, a desk covered in parchments and news clippings...a small blue and yellow blanket lay on the floor, likely where it had fallen after a previous visit of his, and presiding over it all was a painting -- a portrait done in the Muggle non-animated style of a beautiful, chestnut haired woman, her bright blue eyes shining in happiness, a soft smile on her lips.

Lips that his fingers reached out to trace with reverence.

Not a word passed from him...for there were none that could convey the loss and emptiness that shone in his eyes.

He lowered himself slowly into the chair, his eyes never leaving her face and his fingers resting on the scattered papers on his desk -- letters that spoke of the undying love of a young woman and her husband, words of longing...and promises, many never able to be kept. Beside them, newsprint and moving photographs told of diplomatic triumphs, social appearances...and a funeral held for a prominent woman whose life, and the life of the child she had carried within her, had ended all too soon; eulogies and testaments to a woman who had dedicated her life to public service and helping others, and rumours...rumours that had dogged her in life and persisted on with the suddenness of her death...that perhaps 'He Who Shall Not Be Named' was somehow involved...and speculations and questions on just who was her unborn child's father.

The pages crumpled in his clawed hands as he inhaled, fighting to bring himself back...to find some peace in her eyes...to continue and persevere in this cat and mouse game that had become his life.

No...not life. He had no life...he was merely surviving, whether it was under the Dark Lord's rules or Albus Dumbledore's...it was only, in the end, an existence.

Retrieving the crumpled blanket from the floor, he carefully folded it, that lovingly embroidered testament to a life long lost to him, and placed in a desk drawer, locking it with a tap of his wand, and seated himself once more to gaze upon her portrait.

He could still hear her words in his ears, feel her lips on his...and craved the serenity she had always instilled in him. And he knew he would do anything to hold her...truly hold her...once more, for the dreams when they came were never enough.

She was never really there; he'd always known that...knew it each and every time. She was gone. Lost...both to him and to the world. Her light just another extinguished in the last war.

Another victim.

And he had killed her.

Authors' Note: Thank you all for reading and to our beta, D'arcy, whose efforts on our behalf and tireless attention to detail amazes us a bit more each day.

The Inevitable

Chapter 4 of 4

Part Four -- The Inevitable -- A lone wizard watches an ordinary Muggle home, pondering the inevitable path that led him to this point.

The Inevitable

The streets of Banbury were quiet this time of night. Children long ago called in for dinner were now busy watching television, talking on the phone, playing some sort of game, or in all too rare cases, reading a particularly interesting tale.

The lamplights here on the short dead-end road that was Falcon Close were dim. Whatever illumination they attempted to cast upon the undistinguished street had been long since defeated by the thick and seemingly never-ending fog that persisted now over Britain. A fog that had Muggle fingers pointing at each other in blame, yet they were completely unaware of the true cause of this perplexing meteorological state.

On this humid July night, the strange miasma only helped to make the still air even more sticky and close, and a bead of sweat trickled from temple to chin of the lone man watching a semi-detached house from the mists.

He resembled nothing so much as a tramp, his ragged and patched robes hanging from his thin form, and his greying light-brown hair insisting, much to his silent chagrin, on flopping, sweat dampened, into his face.

Pushing the soaked strands back again with a sigh, he returned to his contemplation of the very ordinary red brick house. A house that was dear to him. A home of sorts,

though he had never lived there. Even now in the fog that dulled its brightly lit façade, he could feel the warmth that radiated from within its four walls. And yet, despite that, he was only here because he must...because of duty...albeit one partly born of love.

A figure moved past the window inside the house the kitchen, he surmised to himself. It was an ordinary home with an ordinary family going about their evening, and from happy experience, he knew exactly what this normal Muggle family would be doing right about now -- Mother doing the washing up and likely starting a load of laundry; Father, newly returned from work and having been more than of a hindrance than a help to his wife in doing the dishes, settling down now with a beer to watch the International football match on TV; and the boy...a small smile lit on the man's lips...their son...would very likely be calling his long-time girlfriend, chatting with her for the next hour, while his father...whenever his attention wavered from the match...would shout up the stairs reminding him about the bill.

The watcher's brow furrowed again. If the boy was home, that is.

His brow furrowed further still as yet again, he went through the speech that he had been rehearsing constantly within his head for the past forty-eight hours. A speech that had effectively distracted him from everything else...much to the grumbling displeasure of his new girlfriend.

Midway through his silent recitation, he balked. It really was not the least bit fair, his mind exclaimed furiously. The boy was happy and safe here! And now, he...his 'uncle' no less...was to rip that all away from him. Force him headfirst into a life he may have been born into but knew absolutely nothing of, due to being snatched away from it as an infant. A life he didn't need...but now must live. A life that would turn the boy's existence on its head, tear away everything he had always thought he had known for a certainty...plunging him into confusion, insecurity, pain...and danger.

All due to the death of one man.

The man's eyes filled with sorrow as he remembered the funeral of the week before, when the Wizarding World had laid to rest one of its legends Albus Dumbledore. A figurative giant of a man, who had helped lead his people to victory and kept them on the path of light on more than one occasion...dead. Felled by one of those he had tried to help.

Or at least, that is what everyone was saying...what young Harry was insisting upon.

Even given his faith in the son of his long dead and much loved friends, he was having trouble accepting what Harry was telling him at face value. Nothing about the events that had led him to stand upon this spot on this murky night had ever proven straightforward or obvious. There was always...*always*...something more going on. And he was not inclined to believe otherwise now.

Everything...all his instincts, preternatural or otherwise, were telling him that something had gone on in that tower which the young Potter had not been able to comprehend...something no one else was privy to.

He watched the figure at the window move casually back across it once more. Knowing what he knew...he found it very hard to believe that Severus Snape, for all his flaws and faults, could or would simply betray the old wizard...not after all this time...not with what was at stake.

There simply *had* to be another explanation.

There had to be...not least for the boy he had come to see.

Sighing, he leaned back against the tree that was helping to shelter his presence. It was all a right cock-up, really. A situation that had been doomed from the start.

He had promised Dumbledore to keep the boy safe and hidden. Felt, considering the role he played in bringing about her tragic loss, that he owed it to the boy's true mother.

He still remembered her hand clutching his, her eyes focused on some far away place as she begged the man she loved to forgive her. Remembered the sight of her blood pouring from her...her whispering her love to her husband...her last breath. He remembered his own feelings of utter frustration and despair...of senseless loss.

Life had seemed to slow then, seconds creeping past him like treacle, only to shoot forward like a Nimbus Special a few seconds later as he was handed a baby...her baby...the tiny being staring up into his eyes. He'd known then that his life would never be the same that he and this child were bound in some way.

His suspicions had been confirmed when his former headmaster returned, leaving James and Sirius in the other room, and spoken to him. Suggested that the boy be taken somewhere safe...somewhere he'd be loved. And he'd done just that, despite certain qualms about what the child's mother would have wanted for her son...for her husband. He'd done everything asked of him, because circumstances dictated that it must be that way for the good of the child...and from that day, he'd been the only one to know exactly where that child was.

And ultimately, he had revelled in the heavy responsibility. Every year, sometimes twice a year, he would come and stay for a while. Thrilling in watching the boy grow, learning of his accomplishments, helping to guide him to understand his failures...becoming a cherished and favoured uncle. By now, the boy could not have been closer to his heart if he had been his very own.

And now...

He sighed again before tensing at the change of scent in the air.

"You shouldn't be here, Tonks," he scolded the newcomer softly. "Why did you follow me?"

"Why? I was worried, that's why," came the equally hushed, feminine reply, a hand touching his arm. "You've been keeping right quiet of late...I know that part of it is down to...to Dumbledore...but...it's been more than that. It's like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. Now, I know you're not the most happy go lucky bloke...but..."

His hand reached up and patted hers. "I'm fine...there's just been a lot to think about."

"Remus..." she hedged, "what's going on? Why are you here? And why did you Apparate to five blinking places first? I mean I was hard pushed to follow you...there's secret and then there's overkill, luv."

His body tensed under her touch. "It's nothing that you need be concerned with, Tonks...you shouldn't be here."

Her hand only seemed to grip his arm tighter as she moved to face him. "Remus...I love you. We're in a relationship...and while the whole thing might be spanking new to you, you should know that, generally speaking, in these kinds of set ups, what concerns you flipping well concerns me, d'you know what I mean? Now why won't you let me help you?"

"Because, you can't...this was started long ago...and...I made a promise. Now the headmaster is gone, it is up to me to see this through. I know you want to help...but..." He trailed off with a sigh and shook his head, his eyes turning back to the house. "I have to turn a young man's life upside down tonight..." he admitted finally. "He's been under a binding spell his whole life...knows nothing of magic or our world...and now he's about to get tossed into it whether he likes it or not."

"A *binding* spell?" the young woman repeated. "But...why? And who?" Her breath caught a little in the night air at the thought of what might be behind the deployment of such a powerful spell of last resort. "Dumbledore...he must have...which is why you are...oh well, that's just brilliant, that is! So the spell wore off on his death, then...but I haven't heard of anyone misusing magic here..."

"The rate you all have been kept busy with the attacks...I'd be very surprised if you had," Lupin broke in. "Anything he's done has probably slipped under the radar, as the Muggles say. It's likely not been much if anything anyway...he's a pretty controlled, sensible kid."

"You still haven't explained why, Remus," Tonks reminded him, her tone coaxing.

"No...I haven't," came the firm reply.

His girlfriend nodded. "And you're not going to..." she filled in. "All right, you don't have to hit me with a sledge hammer...more than once...I get the not so subtle hint."

He lowered his eyes to her and gave her a small, kind smile. "I'm sorry...I'll tell you soon...or rather he will, if he wishes to. I know you want to help, to be there for me, and I appreciate it but...I have to do this...alone."

She regarded him carefully for a moment before a resigned sigh escaped her lips. "All right...but come home soon, eh luv? I'll be waiting up," she relented, kissing his cheek.

He found himself chuckling despite himself and nodded. "Yes, Mum," he teased, giving her hand a quick squeeze. "I promise...and best have two cups waiting." His eyes flicked over to the house.

"Righto..." she murmured, slipping back into the shadows.

"Oh, Tonks...don't forget to..." he started.

"I know," came the disembodied but amused answer. "Hide my trail...yeah, luv, I know." And with a soft pop, he knew she'd gone.

The easy natural smile she engendered was still on his lips as he returned his attention to the house...only for it to slip off his face once more as the weight she had so aptly described resettled on his shoulders.

He hadn't asked for this. He'd only been doing his job when he'd knocked on a very different woman's door, looking for an old classmate of his...an old enemy...of a sort. There had been an incident at the Boar's Head, and though he hadn't been told what, he'd been asked personally by the Order, seeing he had shown some rather useful and inherent tracking talents, to go and find out where the young man involved was now so that he could be questioned on it further. Lupin had tried all the usual haunts, even done a quick look through Knockturn Alley and had come up empty handed. It was though Severus Snape had simply vanished.

The urgency had increased massively when other incidents seemed to involve the former Slytherin student...far more serious incidents. He had grown anxious, lives were now on the line...and yet Snape was remarkably adept at keeping any trail to himself firmly buried. And Lupin had been almost at a loss at where to turn next.

The only avenue left to him had been one that was, not to put too fine a point on it, ridiculous. The person involved was so above suspicion that to even consider an involvement with nefarious activity was beyond laughable. And yet with little option, his mind had tracked back to a time, long before he had been commissioned to this job, maybe just over a year and a half after he had left Hogwarts, walking out of the Leaky Cauldron to catch sight of two shadowed people, a man and woman, talking hurriedly in a side alley.

Though he could not hear what was being said, from her body language it was clear that the woman had been worried. The young man had his hands on her arms, rubbing them reassuringly, and everything about him telling her gently that all would be well.

From a better vantage point as he walked down the street, he'd recognized the woman instantly...but it had taken a second longer to realize who the young man with her was, and he'd barely refrained from freezing on the spot and gawping.

After seven years at school with the dark haired, mordant man, despite everything that Lily Evans had ever said to him or his pals about him, Remus had never ever thought he would see the day *Snivillus* Snape would be at all kind in tone or that those black eyes could show the slightest hint of warmth...and both were suddenly there in abundance.

He had hurried on quickly, fairly sure he hadn't been seen but more than a little curious about what they could possibly have been talking about. He had learned later that Snape had been responsible for saving her life at one point. Knowing her reputation, it wasn't unusual to assume she had kept in touch with him out of gratitude. Life had gone on from there, other things becoming far, far more of a concern. In the course of things, he'd eventually met her once or twice via his ongoing dealings with Dumbledore, discussing the political situation and even a few personal issues. He'd found her astute and charming. And if she was somewhat overly optimistic about the inherent rationalism of people, her kindness, wit, and intelligence easily showcased her mediatory and empathic abilities that made her such a good facilitator. Snape, needless to say, had played no part in these meetings in thought or actuality.

That moment had been all he had left to go on. So, after finding out where the well-known diplomat lived, he had gone to her home next, praying that the clue of one stray conversation would lead him to his quarry.

The elevator moved slowly upward, its brass fittings shining in polished oak as the floor indicator continued its climb, until with a pleasant ping, the doors opened and Remus Lupin stepped out onto a luxurious, carpeted hallway, his shabby persona completely at odd with his surroundings. Marvelling at the mixture of modern and Victorian elegance skilfully intertwined in the decor, he moved to the hand carved doubled doors and rang the bell of the penthouse flat.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a uncharacteristically well dressed, smiling house-elf, her large brown eyes taking in his worn robes, though her pleasant expression didn't change at all. "Greetings!" she chirruped with a little curtsy. "How may Elly serve?"

"Hello." Remus smiled down at the little being. "I realise this is somewhat unorthodox and that she is probably exceptionally busy, but I was wondering if perhaps Miss Abernathy was at home? And if so, might I be able to have a word or two?"

"The Mistress is indeed home, my good sir!" the young elf replied cheerfully, holding the door open so that he could enter. "And who may Elly say is calling?"

As he ran his hand through his hair, partially to tidy it and partially from unease at what he was doing, Remus's eyes darted quickly around the room area visible to him taking in its sumptuous and bright surroundings...hardly the place you'd expect to find...

"Lupin," he answered her, stepping in. "My name is Remus Lupin."

"Very good, Mr. Lupin, sir," she said, leading him into the large, comfortable sitting room and indicated a rather plush couch for him to sit and wait. "Elly will go and fetch the Mistress." And with another little curtsy, she hurried from the room in a whisper of cottons and lace.

Looking around him and then down at the rich satin brocade of the couch, he brushed off his dusty clothes and sat down somewhat gingerly. The room was full of antiques and art...it spoke of someone from a refined, elegant, and wealthy background. He imagined most of what he was looking at was at least several centuries old...with the smattering of newer art, speaking of a more progressive personal view.

The view of London from the window nearby was spectacular, and the light struck the room at a perfect angle to show off the contents, the Venetian and Waterford glassware, catching it with an almost prismatic effect and causing the room to sparkle with reflected light. Glancing down, he absently brushed at his robes again, wondering if he was, all puns aside, truly barking up the wrong tree.

If ever there was a less likely place for the unobtrusive, dark, dirt poor Snape to be seen...this was it. And a less likely person for him to be on sociable terms with, Paidea Abernathy was it...and yet there was a connection, he knew that much.

The soft sound of hurrying footsteps reverberated down an adjoining corridor until a woman clad in a soft velvet high-waisted robe emerged, her chestnut hair gathered back into a long braid down her back, her face alight with relief and joy...until a heartbeat later, not seeing the face she clearly expected in her sitting room, she completely

restructured her expression into one of friendly but guarded greeting.

"Mr. Lupin? I...wasn't expecting you," she admitted, holding out her hand. "But how good of you to call."

Rising up quickly, Remus did a fair job at hiding his curiosity at both the manner of her entrance...and her appearance itself. Her rapid approach and evident surprise on seeing him there clearly seemed to indicate that she had not waited for little Elly to tell her who her caller was and that she was most certainly waiting for someone else...quite anxiously too. In addition, the attire she was wearing was unusually cut, jutting forward in a layered effect over her stomach, giving it a voluminous look.

Taking her hand, he gave a slightly awkward courtly bow. "Miss Abernathy, my apologies for arriving unannounced like this. I just dropped by as part of some work I am doing for...the Ministry...and was hoping to ask you a few casual questions. But if I am disturbing you...or...if you are expecting someone else, I could go," he hedged, watching her carefully.

Her face seemed to shift even further into that enigmatic, well-honed diplomatic mode as she shook her head and indicated for him to resume his seat while she sat rather awkwardly down on the other end. "No...I am not expecting anyone. I was merely taking a short nap...but had to rise soon anyway." Her expression turned curious. "I was unaware that you are now working for the Ministry...have you just started?"

"I...have been requisitioned, you might say, to use some particular skills of mine," he lied with a smile as he sat back a little, having no intention of telling her he was there on behalf of the Order, despite her once being approached by Dumbledore to join them. "Freelance work, I suppose you could call it."

Her gaze grew more acute before she nodded her head slowly. "Yes...I can see why they would begin hiring freelance workers. The war is taking many of our Aurors away from their usual duties and into battles." She sighed and shook her head again, her gaze moving to the far window. "It's a never ending spiral really." She stayed that way for a moment before pulling her attention back to him. "So...what can I help you with this afternoon?"

"I'm making enquiries into the whereabouts of a certain individual the Ministry is interested in speaking with. I was hoping with your extensive connections you might be able to help me locate them, or at least point me in the right direction," he replied, rubbing idly at small scar below his ear.

She appeared a little surprised. "I am not sure if I can help...but I will try," she answered, shifting in her place to get a bit more comfortable.

Watching her and waiting for her to settle, Lupin raised his chin a little, sniffing, his brow creasing ever so slightly. "Thank you, I do appreciate your time, believe me," he returned before adding politely, "And if you don't mind my saying so, Miss Abernathy, that's quite a fragrant scent you are wearing." He leaned forward a little. "I should explain perhaps, that the reason I believe you can help me is that I myself witnessed you in conversation with the individual in question."

"Oh?" she enquired, her expression one of interest, before she chuckled. "I wouldn't be at all surprised. I do speak to a *lot* of people, Mr. Lupin; hazards of the profession, I'm afraid. And please...call me Paidea. Would you care for a drink?"

"Thank you, no...Paidea..." He inclined his head gratefully. "I shall not be taking up much of your time. You are busy, I know." He sat back again. "What with the almost constant calls upon your time and the public appearances you make so frequently, it is a wonder you have any time to yourself for a personal life at all."

Her eyes narrowed, albeit so slightly he would have had to have been aware of her personal foibles...or been an astute observer of human nature...to notice. "Indeed...though lately due to my health, I have been stepping back a bit. The Healers tell me I should take a holiday." She laughed again softly. "I shall soon, I think. And my calendar is rather clear today, so please do not worry." She folded her hands calmly on her lap. "Now, who is this person you need to find?"

Remus hesitated, knowing he was on thin ice. She had a lot of clout. If he was wrong...and she sought to complain...he could get both himself and the Order in a lot of trouble. But his senses were telling him something...and his instincts were joining in cheerfully. And, desperate times led to...

"A person you know well, I believe...quite well, in fact," he said calmly, folding his own hands in his lap, "an old school mate of mine, Severus Snape."

There was little sign of reaction, merely a slow inhalation at the mention of the young man's name, though her face remained placid. "Severus Snape? Yes...I know him. We're friends...have been so for many years. Though I haven't seen him recently." A hint of concern flashed in her eyes. "Why...is he in trouble?"

He watched her carefully, not least because his arse was quite firmly on the line. "That remains to be seen, Paidea...but my inclination would be, yes...yes he is. Primarily as he is strongly suspected as being involved in a recent spate of Death Eater attacks. One quite brutal one in particular...quite strongly involved, in fact." On seeing her eyes widen somewhat, he paused again, this time for dramatic effect, deciding the moment had come to take a leap, and his tone when speaking next was almost conspiratorial. "You really should be more careful in your choice of...friends...Paidea, and your choice of rendezvous for your assignments."

She looked deeply shocked at that last comment, her hands fluttering in her lap before she quickly, if clumsily, rose to her feet. "I...I don't know what you mean. What assignments? We've been friends for three years, yes, but I have a good many such friends. But I do know this, Mr. Lupin...he is good person." She moved over to the window and gazed out across the skyline. "He wouldn't be involved in any such activities...especially with any such attacks," she insisted.

"I rather think he would...sadly." Remus watched her closely, such vehemence over a *casual* friend's morality in one normally so composed telling him a great deal. Taking a soft breath, he played his next over-exaggerated card. "Just as I think you and he are somewhat more than friends...that is, if the body language and looks you exchanged the day I saw you together near The Leaky Cauldron are any indication...which I do believe they are."

She spun around to face him, a scornful expression on her face. "The Leaky Cauldron?" she scoffed lightly. "That was quite some time ago, Mr. Lupin! And as for...body language and the like? I don't know what you're talking about. He was merely discussing a problem I was having with me. Taking the time to kindly encourage me."

It was rather a convincing display, and Lupin might even have begun to worry about having made a serious miscalculation except for the slightly unusual edge in her voice and the fact that Severus Snape had never been witnessed *kindly encouraging* anyone in his life...that he knew of. For Snape to do so indicated strange and unusual circumstances indeed. And so, his face took on an expression of resolute disbelief.

And it bore dividends.

Paidea Abernathy was renowned as being so single minded in her pursuit of peace both at inter and intra Wizarding levels that she had no private life to speak of...certainly not one that involved romance. Because she had begun her career so young and was certainly most attractive, in order to be taken seriously she had made it clear time and time again in interview after interview that she had no time for love. That she would consider it only after she had done what she needed to do.

The statement and her slavish adherence to it had shown her not merely to be some wealthy, flighty heiress playing at diplomacy and politics but a serious, idealistic young woman with a sensible head on her shoulders. And it had garnered her, in time, respect from other wizards and witches...and indeed a broad spectrum of other magical folk...that she required in order to do her work. In addition, her well-practiced, strict emotional control coupled with the lack of distraction gave her focus as a negotiator and mediator and a clarity of thought when speaking before the likes of the Wizengamot or International Confederation of Wizards.

But under Remus's intensely sceptical gaze, the subject not diplomacy, not politics, but personal involvement...specifically with one man...her complete lack of experience in dealing with emotional issues coupled with the now obviously agitated state she had been in before he arrived began to show through.

That celebrated focus proved singularly lacking as she turned and moved swiftly across the room and then back to the window, her calm façade starting to crack. "He wouldn't attack anyone...he wouldn't. He saved my life...helped protect me," she muttered distractedly before turning her attention back to him with a demanding, "What makes you think he is involved...and what attacks?"

His eyes drifted again to the flow of her dress around her stomach and back to her. "Discussing a problem with you, you say? Well, it may well be that you may have to help him with a far greater one, Paidea." His tone was soft and genuine, as he sensed the very real growing confusion in the young woman's reaction...confusion and

something more...something free-lancers like him were rather good at discerning...fear.

"You see..." he stood up slowly, "Severus was seen by a late arriving group of Aurors...one of whom, a fellow school mate of ours, recognised him as he fled under fire with a number of his fellow Death Eaters from the scene of an attack upon a Muggle residence on the outskirts of Cardiff. An attack on the home of a young witch of pureblood lines, her Muggle husband, and....their twins." He gazed at her grimly. "All of whom were killed."

Her hand flew to her mouth, her expression one of utter horror. As if physically struck by the news, or perhaps merely trying to distance herself from it, she stumbled back a few steps until her back met solid brick and plaster. She grasped the wall as though it was a lifeline, shaking her head in anguish. "No...no he wouldn't...he couldn't..." As she tried to pull herself together, one hand came to rest on her belly, revealing the solidity beneath the expertly designed fabric -- a rounded solidity he had certainly suspected was there.

"Your friend must have been mistaken," she asserted. "Severus would never have done something so horrible..." She moved silently over to the window, mostly to escape the young man's penetrating gaze as tears welled in her eyes. "I truly haven't seen him, Mr. Lupin...not for some time. But I know he couldn't have done what you say."

"I'm sorry..." He stood up slowly, his sympathy genuine now as everything became increasingly apparent. "But his presence was confirmed. And that presence has led to other worries...about information he might be in possession of...dangerous information...that could be passed on to 'You Know Who.' We have to find him." His voice was still calm and insistent, but internally, he found he was having almost as much trouble processing this as she was in her way. His risk had borne fruit...a long shot...a vague suspicion that had proven more accurate than he could have dreamed.

Her reaction to the news was clear...her shock far more than that of any mere acquaintance or casual friend, as either her insistence or their outward connections would imply. She was close to Snape...much closer than anyone could have suspected. Much closer than Lupin would have ever dreamed possible. Morose, dark, perpetually angry Snape...and this vibrant, attractive, idealistic young woman? Even now it seemed impossible...but the anguish in her face, the tears in her eyes...and the hand on her pregnant belly said otherwise.

He stepped forward, his voice urgent, pressing this unexpected advantage. "Paidea, listen to me...if you care about him as I suspect you do, you must help me find him. For his sake...and for others like that young family in Cardiff. I saw the look in his eyes when he was with you. I've never seen that in him before. Perhaps if we find him, stop him, we can talk sense into him...*you* can help him change his path. He was only *seen* at the location...there may yet be a way out of this for him if we can halt this now."

She continued to stare out the window, though her reflection showed her turmoil and despair. Her hand continued to move over her belly, her other hand curling and hiding her mouth, but he could see her lips were moving as though she was still trying to convince herself that what he was saying was not true.

Finally after several minutes of this internal stand off, she turned back to him, though her eyes refused to meet his. "I don't know where he is...I don't know how to find him..." Her hand slipped to the large ebony and silver locket around her neck, playing with it idly. "I wish I could help you...but I can't." Her last words were almost a whisper.

He straightened slowly, looking her directly in the eyes. "Can't or won't?" he asked quietly, his gaze drifted down to her abdomen and back to her meaningfully. "Both, I'd imagine...but that shouldn't really surprise me, should it? He *is* the father of your unborn child, after all."

Her hand dropped from her belly instantly, her face struggling to regain its usual composure under this emotional onslaught both from him and her pregnancy-fuelled, wildly fluctuating emotions. "I don't know what you mean," she lied softly and badly, turning away. "I can't help you, Mr. Lupin."

He stood watching her for a moment, no doubt any longer in his mind about the paternity of the child she had been adeptly hiding to this point. But it wasn't just a matter of paternity, was it? This was no brief dalliance resulting in a child.

Snape and Paidea's connection went back years. The dark, glowering wizard had not simply used her and abandoned her. There was no acrimony here. Far from it. There was a history between them, a line running from that first explosive and well documented introduction through Lupin's own witnessing of them at the Leaky Cauldron to...he glanced at her swollen belly...what he assumed was around about a nearly full term month pregnancy. This was a relationship. She was protecting him, fearful for him. Remus needed no preternatural senses to feel the fear as it wafted off of her, and it all left him in with next to no doubt about the truth -- she loved Snape, and whatever he himself thought of the man...she saw someone else again.

Someone kind and incapable of these acts...he recalled again the look in Snape's eyes the day he had seen them together, his soft reassurances. Someone different from the boy he had known in school...someone whose recent actions may have had more behind them than he had ever suspected. Considering he and his friends had tormented Snape for so much of the time in school, was it any wonder perhaps that they had never seen that side of him? Never thought him capable of it? A real pang of guilt struck him quite forcibly for the first time. Taking a step towards her, he laid an understanding hand on her shoulder, a small sad smile on his face. "No..." he replied, "I don't suppose you can."

She didn't look at or answer him, her eyes riveted to the landscape before them as her body tensed and straightened under his fingers.

Breaking the touch, he turned silently and walked towards the entrance, feeling her pain...and his own confusion...but with his mind already working towards the next step and with a far more pragmatic view of things than his empathy for her dictated. He still had a job to do...lives to help save.

She was calling to her lover...whether she knew it or not...he could instinctively feel it. She was bewildered, disorientated...frightened...for Severus, what this all meant for them...for their child. Her next step was virtually preordained...coded into her...she would go to him...seek him out. Find him. There was no overcoming nature. He knew that all too well.

Opening the door to depart, he knew that when she did, he would be right behind her.

She had died later that night...just before the sun rose. The guilt still continued to nag at him for that and for the part he'd played. For using her that way. And as he'd carried the swaddled child he'd been entrusted with away to hide him from his father, and more pertinently his father's master, he'd sworn to her memory then and there to care for the boy.

He knew deep down she would have wanted the boy with his father...but that was impossible after what had happened...after what Snape had done, what he had become...who he was with. And so in his true father's absence, he'd sworn to her that he would protect the baby with his life, that the child would have a good and happy home, and he'd be there to watch him. That memory still crystal vivid, he inhaled the damp night air deeply once more and set his shoulders.

He still had a job to do.

Moving from the tree, he made his way across the narrow street, not stopping till he reached the porch glass door. The warm light shone cheerily through the curtained windows on either side of the portico, and the illuminated doorbell added to the welcoming touch on such a gloomy, muggy night.

The chime sing-songed into the home after he pressed the button, and a moment later, a round-faced woman opened the inner wooden door with an expression of puzzlement that rapidly turned into a pleased smile of welcome.

"Remus!" she breathed. "We weren't expecting you till Christmas! How good to see you," she exclaimed as she unlocked and opened the outer door. "Come in. Come in!"

As he brushed his hair back from where it had again flopped onto his face, his grave blue eyes met the happy woman's, her own sobering instantly.

"Remus? What's wrong?" Her tone was anxious as he closed the door behind him. "What's happened?"

Her guest simply glanced around the hallway and towards the stairs, knowing in his heart it was always going to have come down to this...that this day had been inevitable.

"Rose...is Aiden home?"

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