

From Spark to Flame

by aerynfire

Seventeen year old Severus Snape is sent to live with his uncle, an Auror, during the summer of 1977 but soon finds himself drawn into a web of political intrigue, passion, and war.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 9

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Prologue

Nine year old Severus Snape had never been what one would call an ordinary child. Sallow of complexion with lank black hair and large black eyes, he was quiet, serious, introspective, and vastly intelligent -- an intelligence which, unmatched amongst his peers, sometimes lent him a restive moodiness that quite often left him sullen.

He had only a few friends in the local primary school he attended, more often than not preferring his own company, but this lack of confederates had more to do with his intellect and carriage than his occasional dark moods and wickedly biting tongue. An extraordinarily alert student, he both baffled and delighted his teachers with a focus, vocabulary, and bearing well beyond his years -- a combination of traits which took him out of the realm of his peers and made him an outsider. They simply found it hard to relate to him...and he to them in turn.

There was also a rather unsettling trait in the young Severus that most of the children in his class experienced to some degree or other, which encouraged them to put a little distance between him and them. After all, one can never be entirely comfortable around a person who has the uncanny ability to know exactly what one is thinking about at any given moment.

Perhaps they might have been more inclined to stay close to him had they believed his claim at age seven that he could do magic. But they'd giggled and asked him pull a bunny out of Roy Morrison's woolly hat, and when he had frowned and told them he did not mean that 'silly fake magic'...but 'real magic,' Patrick Henry, a burly big-mouth who parroted his older brother slavishly, had scoffed at him, claiming there was no such thing. Severus was just about to prove him spectacularly wrong when his father's hand had closed about his collar and, with the class's laughter ringing in his ears, he'd been dragged home for a right leathering and two separate and very different style lectures from his parents on attempting to use magic in public.

He had sat, head bowed, resentful of every word, the residual throb of his father's belt across the back of his legs making it hard for him to accept what they were saying as just. He *could* do magic...it was part of who he was! Why couldn't he show people what he was good at? Especially when he *was* so good at it. His beloved mother had told him he was and that, though many other magically inclined children his age could barely control levitating a cup across a room, he knew spells.

He'd glanced up for a fraction of a moment at his railing father who was yelling furiously at him while his mother tried to calm him...a tiny surge of satisfaction ran through him as he reminded himself that he knew spells that not even *they* knew he could do. Spells he had no right to know or understand at his age. Spells that were for both convenience and...the glint of the heavy belt buckle attached to the hated belt caught his attention...for protection.

The lectures and punishments worked, for a time. But inevitably, his independent streak would shine through and he would not hesitate to use what gifts he had at hand to press home an advantage...or to teach another a lesson, taking a particularly deep satisfaction in the latter.

And so it was, one sunny June, near the grass-filled waste ground that constituted the playground for the local children of Spinner's End, that two well known bullies, who had just the day before destroyed several children's toys and one book belonging to the 'weird lad,' garnered two painful black eyes apiece. Albeit without anyone ever having touched them. As the pair of them were carted off to hospital, their eyes swollen shut and the neighbours abuzz, his mother had come to realise the time to take her son more firmly in hand had come.

Eileen Snape, nee Prince, was an excellent witch in her own right and like her son, quiet, reserved, and introspective, but she had taken the unusual step to put away magic to marry a prideful Muggle whom she loved. And though he was given to the moods that their son was also prone to, Tobias Snape could be an exceedingly personable and charming man. A good person in many ways, his downfall was his ego, taking every use of magic or suggestion of the use of it to aid them as a personal slight to his manhood. An unfortunate attitude on his part that grew worse over time as his personal fortunes decreased and his alcohol intake increased. By the time baby Severus had started juggling his toys without touching them, Tobias had come to resent the overhanging, oppressive, ever present 'out' they had for their impoverished state that was his wife's magical ability...and worse...his infant son's.

By the time his son was five, Tobias was so often in and out of work due in the fragile economy of the time that the mere mention of magic was enough to make his blood boil, every mention a reminder of his perceived inability to take care of his own family sufficiently well.

While they were poor, they were hardly starving. And if he had only taken the time to notice what he *did* have, rather than concentrating on what they didn't, he would have seen a hard working, loving, generous wife who would've contentedly traipsed across the world with him in abject poverty, and a son who was inordinately gifted in both Muggle and magical ways. Instead, though he loved his wife and child, all he saw were his own inabilities and inadequacies and so he drank and took everything out on them. His drinking reduced his ability to work effectively and his tirades made his family miserable, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of a situation -- so that with every passing year of this ever-increasing downward spiral, his ire grew more and more focused upon his son.

Knowing this, Eileen had taken a rare stand and confronted her husband, pre-empting any tirade or punishment against Severus by informing Tobias that, while of course their son had been wrong to do what he did, the boys had been bullies and it had been provoked. It had also proved that the danger of acting on impulse under provocation showed more than ever the folly of not teaching their son how to control his powers in a more constructive manner than by simply ignoring them.

Of course, it wasn't the truth. She had known from Severus's quietly smug answers about the incident that her son had been well enough in control of his powers the entire time. And it was that rather startling discovery, as well as the fact that there was no way he should have been able to cast that *particular* spell and yet had done so...never mind without a wand to focus it...that had forced her to make her stand.

Even taking in a mother's natural pride in her child, Severus was gifted and despite her promise to her husband about her own powers, Eileen would not see that gift wasted. She had finally, after much arguing, convinced his father to let the boy take a trip with her into her world. It was time, she'd told him firmly, for their son to experience the world he was obviously going to be a part of...to learn from it...so he could behave better in this world and be better prepared for the seven years he'd be in school. It would give him 'control' and perhaps it would be of benefit...and maybe brighten his mood.

So one month later, on a cloudy late July day and well out of sight of Tobias, Eileen took her son by the hand and Apparated them both to a queerly antiquated, bustling place she informed him was named Diagon Alley.

Needless to say, the boy was shocked. Shocked and...delighted. Well, as delighted as young Severus generally got, which seemed to be the equivalent of mildly intrigued.

He'd watched the people around him with keen eyes, scrutinized the odd and amazing stores they passed, and even felt a little awed by the casual use of magic around him. He also had to admit, he really liked the ornate suits and flowing robes the men wore and had decided they were much more impressive than his worn and patched jeans. For the first time in his life, there was a sense of real connection...of not feeling quite the outsider anymore. Finally, he was able to take an open pride in the fact that he, too, could do magic, without the equivalent of his father's baleful glare, wounding words, and belt hanging over him.

The final confirmation of having found a spiritual home arrived the moment his mother led him through the door into Flourish & Blotts.

He had stood there, staring as he held her hand, the tight squeeze-and-relax, squeeze-and-relax of his grip as he looked around telling a pleased Eileen just how much of an effect the place was having on her son. It had to be the most amazing shop he'd ever seen. So many books! The knowledge he could accumulate...the spells! His mother had smiled over the near-joyous wonder on her son's face and allowed him to wander off into the stacks.

He'd spent an hour merely taking in the titles, letting his small fingers run over the leather-bound volumes, actually able to feel the power that emanated from some, before summoning the courage to pull a tome from the shelf. Hidden deep within the narrow stacks, he had slipped to the ground and into a lotus position, balancing the book upon his legs as he began to read with wide, eager eyes.

Absorbed by the contents, he didn't notice that someone had approached, nor the soft voice above him that asked his leave to get by, his legs and the book upon them blocking the constricted passageway. It was only when he was physically stepped over, that his attention was drawn back to the present and he looked up with a frown at being disturbed, only to catch sight of something he'd been more drawn to than any book.

He was nine. Girls hardly registered on his horizon beyond smelling nicer, being less grubby, less inclined to either eat worms on a dare or try and push him around, and more inclined to listen when he talked. Despite his thirst for knowledge and the rather advanced view of the world it gave him, when it came to the idea of having a girlfriend...or worse...kissing one...he hadn't, up to that point, quite convinced himself that it wasn't the grossest concept since worm eating.

Looking up at her where he sat, however, the unappealing aspect of it hit the faulty concept bin in his head with a near audible thud.

She...was...beautiful. An earthbound angel, though he'd never tell her so. Small, a little skinny but not awkwardly so, graceful in fact, immaculately and richly dressed, with huge blue eyes and thick wavy chestnut brown hair, she was a few years older than him, twelve...maybe thirteen he'd guessed as she'd smiled at him while crossing over him, moving to retrieve a book from a shelf near his.

He'd watched her unwaveringly the entire time she stood there with all the direct unselfconsciousness of a boy his age and a nature such as his possessed. Watched her shift, scan a page, frown or smile slightly, exuding a serious studiousness, then turn the page, take a quiet breath, and repeat the process. By the time she closed the book and tucked it under her arm to move away through the stacks, he'd known without a shadow of a doubt...that *this* girl was the girl he would marry someday.

She was destined for *him*.

He had risen from his spot and slipped the book back into its shelf, following her and coming to stand beside her at the next shelf she stopped by, where he was favoured with another small smile as he drew a book whose title he was unaware of from the stack in front of him. They didn't speak, but his black eyes continued to follow her as she moved around the shop -- trying to find the words to converse with her while she remained fully focused on her shopping list.

When his mother called for him to go, he'd felt a pang of loss at the realisation that he did not even know the girl's name. Moving outside, he racked his brain to find an excuse...any excuse...to run back inside the store and ask her that one question...but could not find one. However, as he and his mother had stepped out onto the street, the doorbell of the bookstore jangled again and he'd glanced back to see her emerge behind them with her own somewhat regal, highly prosperous looking family.

It was then, as he loosened his mother's grip on his hand and finally got the nerve to turn and go to her, that all hell broke loose around him.

The year was 1969, a year that had seen the growing prominence in the Wizarding World of a dark wizard, his band of fanatical followers, and their equally fanatical agenda. An agenda dismissed by much of their world...so much so that they had taken to random though infrequent acts of violence to highlight their puritanical and megalomaniacal goals, while spreading fear and respect for their name, demonstrating that they were to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

Severus had never heard of Death Eaters...never even heard of dark wizards...other than in stories. And he'd certainly never heard the name Lord Voldemort and whatever his struggle for power and everlasting life entailed. He was just a nine year old boy visiting a world that would soon be his. One who could see a dark robed, masked man appear from nowhere along with a half dozen or so of his colleagues and in the course of the random mayhem that ensued, aim his wand at the little girl he knew he'd love all his days as she tried to flee with her family for cover.

Before his mother could stop him, he had broken the remains of his mother's hold on him. Screaming a spell at the nightmarish figure -- a spell he'd read in a book he knew he wasn't supposed to have read -- he pushed the girl to the ground with all his strength.

There were explosions everywhere, a fire burning nearby and people screaming all around. Yet as he landed on top of her, his eyes focused on hers -- deep blue...like the ocean...and even in their shock and fear, they held him silently for almost an eternity...capturing him in their depths and never letting go.

But the moment passed quickly, and then they were scrambling to their feet...the girl's father grabbing her arm and dragging her back into the shop...and a very angry Death Eater was holding a wand right in the boy's direction.

The masked man hadn't seen the Auror sneak up behind him...but then, neither did the boy. He did not fear death as the blast hit him...for he had seen an angel.

He'd woken up three days later on a ward on the fourth floor of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, the movement of his parents stirring him as they left his room to eat at the insistence of his father. Opening his mouth to call to them, his parched throat had fallen silent mid-croak on seeing his 'angel' sleeping in a chair by his bedside, a book in her lap.

Cataloguing his injuries, he'd noted first of all the blinding pain in his head and the absolute refusal of the rest of his body to respond to his promptings with anything more than a resolute ache. He'd supposed he'd been hit in the head by a Blasting Curse...although he ached too much to dwell on it. Instead, he'd spent the next half an hour simply watching the slumbering object of his young affections, committing every hair, every line, every inch of her to his memory...and when she'd awoken he'd finally found out her name.

Paidea.

"That means 'all things' in Greek," he'd told her croakily, for which he'd garnered an amused look from the girl.

"You're a funny little boy...how do you know so much?" she'd enquired without a hint of the arrogance or condescension that so often accompanied such words.

"Because I'm perspicacious," he'd replied as if it were the most obvious thing in all the world, his nine year old features carrying all the gravity of an Oxford Don. She'd blinked, stared at him, and then a laugh rang out around the room, the merry sound lightening his mood and helping to dull the pain in his body.

As it transpired, his perspicacity was proven when it was revealed to him that he had indeed been struck head-on by a Blasting Curse. Normally reserved for duellists who had instantaneous defensive measures to hand as well as being a safe enough distance away to help reduce the immediate impact, the curse at that range to his head almost certainly should have killed him. Even allowing for the deflection of the shot by the pre-emptive strike of the Auror upon Snape's attacker, the damage done to his head and shock to his central nervous system should have ended his young life.

Only the quick reactions of the Auror and Paidea's father, Perifanius Abernathy, who had witnessed the child save his daughter's life, had stopped that from happening. Grabbing the injured boy, he and the Auror had Apparated with him to St. Mungo's, whereupon Perifanius had brought his family's not inconsiderable wealth and influence to bear on ensuring the child's well-being, decreeing that whatever extreme measures were required to save the boy's life were to be taken, including the importation of exotic potion ingredients and personnel, and all costs would be underwritten by him.

It had been a testimony to the staff of St. Mungo's that Severus had lived, and a minor magical medical miracle that he had awoken just three days later with only massive contusions to the head and a jagged scar on his shoulder from falling unconscious onto a large shard of broken glass from the shattered window of Flourish & Blotts.

His mother had broken down in tears when she had discovered he'd awoken, his father, silent and unhappy, standing at her shoulder. Tobias had dealt with his fear for his son by subsuming it in anger, his hatred of magic fuelled even more by the entire incident. He had blamed his wife for having taken Severus to Diagon Alley. Playing unfairly on her guilt, he had proceeded to make his son's recovery room one of extreme discomfort, the air thick with the elder Snape's resentment of every Healer and magic user that arrived, including the obviously wealthy elder Abernathys, so that it hung like a dark cloud over everything.

But the silver lining had been considerable, for Paidea had stayed.

Despite her family's gratitude towards young Snape, they had felt their debt to him paid by saving his life in return through monetary efforts. But Paidea, the direct recipient of his sacrifice, had not. Cursory visits by her father and mother to visit the strange boy that had saved their daughter's life had seen their youngest daughter firmly alongside of them, the length of her visits growing ever longer while he lay unconscious. She had even managed to negotiate a set of terms with her parents that would allow her to stay those long hours in return for a house-elf remaining with her, and thus Paidea would leave for home at the same time every evening and return to the hospital with her house-elf the following morning.

Upon his recovering of consciousness, she and Severus spent the next week and three days simply talking, every moment of it, the most comfortable he had ever been with another person outside of his mother. It was strange, she was older than he, came from one of the great magical family lines, and attended the exclusive Beauxbatons school in France as a second year, and yet even at his age, he seemed to have a stronger grasp of magical theory and a far stronger interest in magic than she.

No, her magic lay in another direction altogether.

She could relax one, make that person feel vital and important, and more importantly, that she understood them. When she spoke with someone, it was like there was no one else in the world except for that person. It was a natural and exceptionally powerful gift. He found himself confiding things to her, telling her things when they were alone that he had never told anyone, including his mother.

And yet, like all good things, their time together was short-lived. Before she left, the day before he was due to be discharged, he presented her with a gift. Something his mother had presented to him when he first began to understand that he was different, telling him it was *his* now. Something that symbolised her family and the rare abilities that they and he possessed -- a locket...her only heirloom and the only truly precious thing he'd ever owned. The only thing he had that was his to give. The only thing he felt was worthy of his angel.

She'd tried to refuse it...especially on seeing his mother start at the offer. She'd pleaded that it was too precious...too valuable to give to someone he'd just met and that he had already done so much. But he would not be dissuaded...and his mother could say nothing, telling him the day she gave it to him that it was his as the heir to the Prince bloodline.

So to keep from offending him, the girl relented and promised him that she would wear it every day for him.

When they parted, he'd given her the most stoic of farewells before turning to his mother and telling her not to worry about the locket...that she would see it again within the family, for in his mind, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that one day Paidea Abernathy would once more walk into his life.

And that when she did, he would not let her go so easily.

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Protect more of your memories for less

Very Young Snape and Paidea by Perselus

(The first time Snape sees Paidea.)

Authors' Note: Welcome to our latest Snape story! This is the long mentioned beginning to the back story we mentioned when we did our series of one shots (all since combined under the title *Consequences*). Now, before anyone mentions that this all sounds an awful lot like *Star Wars*...well, you'd be right! This story was originally conceived of a plot bunny we got during a fairy tale challenge. The goal was to take a fairy tale and re-write it with *Harry Potter* characters. Well...we thought...how about *Star Wars*, specifically, the prequel movies? They are, in essence, a modern fairy tale. So we delved into the *Lexicon* and took massive notes...and are now bringing you this story of Severus Snape as canon as we can make it (another of our goals). We hope you enjoy it and look forward to your thoughts on it.

We would also like to thank our betas Wendynat and Smoke. We couldn't have done this without you. -- Aeryn (of aerynfire)

Convergence

Chapter 2 of 9

Against his will, Snape leaves Spinner's End to begin his month long job shadowing of his uncle, Steven Prince, at the Ministry of Magic.

Chapter One: Convergence

"Severus!" the raven haired woman's voice called again up the narrow, thinly carpeted stairway.

Only to be greeted by silence.

"Severus! You're going to be late!"

The heavy thud of two booted feet hitting barely covered floorboards was followed by a muffled thump and the sound of a door shuddering as though something had smacked into it in passing. All of that noise preceded the sound of footsteps stomping heavily across a creaking wood floor that already magnified even the quietest footfalls.

"There's no use you taking it out on the floor!" Eileen called up at her seventeen year old son as he appeared in faded bellbottom jeans and an off-black shirt with a borrowed, large, dusty, old rucksack swung over his shoulder, scowling through the long, lank, exceedingly black hair that had fallen over his face.

"I'm not," he grouched before every stair was tested to its fullest as he pounded his way down, the rucksack thumping off the wall with every step just as it had done on the door upstairs. "And I'm not going to be late, either," he added. "I can Apparate now, remember? I have my licence."

"Yes, I know," Eileen said with a sigh, determinedly brushing his hair off his face as he ducked and weaved trying to avoid it. "If you hadn't, I'd hardly be calling you at this hour, now would I?"

"Who in the hell is making that noise!" Tobias's voice emerged from the front room before he did. The door to his father's 'secondary bedroom' swung open, and the elder Snape stared out into the dark and slightly damp hallway through drink-ravaged, black eyes.

Severus looked away from the dishevelled man immediately. He'd learned well enough by now not to look his father head-on when he was in this state. Hiding his feeling of repugnance at the realization that, once again, the man had ended up sprawled on the downstairs couch, unable even to make it up the few stairs of their small home in Spinner's End, the boy muttered a barely audible "sorry" and escaped to the kitchen.

"Good morning, love." Eileen kissed her husband's cheek as if it were perfectly normal that he should emerge as he did...which by this stage in their marriage, it was. With a half-smile and a grunt, he nodded at her, his head obviously pounding from yet another night attempting to drink his life into something positive.

"Any tea?" he muttered. "Mouth feels like sandpaper."

"You go on back inside and lie down," she told him sympathetically, as much to get him out of the way of their son as anything. "I'll bring you some right in. Breakfast?"

A pained groan and a dismissive wave of the hand at the suggestion was her response as he disappeared back inside. Turning, his wife headed quickly into the kitchen.

"Have you got everything?" she asked briskly, closing the door behind her before gazing over at her son as he dug his spoon listlessly into his cereal, hardly ever raising it to his mouth. His answer came as some kind of incomprehensible mumble.

"Severus." Eileen turned in annoyance from putting the kettle on to boil. "How many times must I remind you? You should not mumble. You should..."

"....speak clearly and pronounce my words properly. Project my voice and keep eye contact," he finished, turning around to look at her, his scowl softening as he gazed up at her in amusement. "Yes, Mother, I know."

With a smile at his verbatim recital of her speech, she took a seat beside him in the tiny kitchen and brushed a recalcitrant lock of hair back behind his ears. "You have an excellent vocabulary and a good voice...a wonderful voice in fact, deep and imposing, you should use it. People will respond to it. Respect it and you....and those eyes of yours...your father's eyes."

His scowl returned in full force, never enjoying any analogy with his father. "They're beady and dull."

"They're sharp and piercing," she corrected.

"You're my mother, you're supposed to say things like that." He drove a spoonful of Weetabix into his mouth.

"I'm your mother and I tell you the truth." She clipped his head affectionately, as she rose to her feet. "Did you wash your hair?"

"Yes."

"Truthfully?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't look much cleaner."

He paused and lowered his head. "...I did some potion mixing in the shed last night. It made it greasy again."

"Severus!" she exclaimed as her glance went to the door. "What if your father had found out?"

"In his usual state?" he snorted, his tone withering. "If he'd come in, I could've told him Doxycide was home brew and he would've drunk it."

"Severus, what have I told you about that?" she said sharply.

"Sorry," he answered, feeling nothing of the sort.

Letting it go, her eyes moved to his clothes. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"Evidently," he replied.

"Severus."

"Sorry, Mother. Yes...this is what I'm wearing."

"Haven't you something more suitable? Your suit," she suggested. "You could wear your school robes, I suppose."

"I'm not wearing my school robes on an adult venture," he told her, his words quiet but with a bolt of iron through them that told her it was futile to pursue it further. "And my suit is too small, remember? It ripped under the arms when I tried to raise my wand. Besides, he's giving me some robes." He shrugged then winced. "Though I fail to see why I should have to bother to dress up for something I don't want to do in the first place." He ripped a piece of toast in half but failed to eat any of it.

"Eat that." She pointed at the toast. "You're too light as it is and I'm not sending you off to your uncle and the Ministry starving." She poured the now boiling contents of the kettle into the earthenware teapot she had put four spoonfuls of tea leaves into, as he reluctantly obeyed. "We've talked about this. It will do you good to get out into the wider Wizarding world beyond Hogwarts. You spend entirely too much time in your room reading spell books or sneaking around collecting insects to test the potions you brew in the shed when your father's not around. You never get out and interact with anyone."

"Neither do you!"

"I am not in question here."

"Funny how the ones in charge never are," he commented, watching her. "So who should I be interacting with? *All* my friends from Hogwarts...or perhaps I should jaunt down to the youth club and play table tennis and football with the local lads?"

"Your sarcasm is not appreciated, Severus, and all you have just said only proves my point. You don't appear to make friends easily..."

"Try not at all."

"...so you need people you can interact with!" she continued. "Beyond friendship, you need to be practical. If you intend to leave here and work with magic, you'll need contacts and your Uncle Steven has them."

"Auror contacts," he replied, ripping off a piece of dry toast with his teeth. "Why should I bother shadowing him at his work when I don't want to be an Auror?"

Putting the tea strainer over his cup, she poured him some tea. "Because those contacts will help you make the connections you *do* need to get into places you do wish to go in wizarding society....and your Uncle Steven is the only direct contact we have to start you off."

"Thanks to *him*." His black eyes moved towards the kitchen door as if he could see his father two rooms beyond.

"Don't start, Severus..."

"It's he that starts it," he replied, turning to look at her. "Why do you put up with it when you could..."

"*What?*" she said sharply. "Pick up my wand and teach him a lesson?"

He turned his eyes away quickly, knowing he had earned himself a lecture.

"I've spoken to you about this! He's my husband...your father...you *never* use magic against your own! Never! Even more so when they can't fight back or defend themselves!" she told him, her tone harsh. "He has his faults." She paused and gritted her teeth as her son's derisive scoff followed her words, but she kept going. "He has his faults...but he loves us."

"He has an excellent capacity for hiding it," came the response, his spoon spearing the soggy wheaten biscuit that floated in his bowl like a gradually bloating golden whale in an ocean of milk.

"He drinks because he loves us..." she tried again.

"Ah!" The derisive scoff became a short sharp laugh. "Well then, he must love us a great deal!"

His mother ignored him, continuing doggedly, "Because he's unhappy he can't give us what he wants to."

"I don't want anything from him," he told her sullenly.

Eileen straightened as she pushed his tea towards him. "That's not true."

Her son lowered his head and continued eating his toast and drinking his tea in silence. She watched him for a moment, all too aware that all the boy had ever wanted from his Muggle father was affection and acceptance for who he was, a little pride in what he could do. But Tobias's own stubborn pride was too much the stumbling block. He had never liked magic and had wanted to be the one who supported his wife; in fact he had made it a condition of their getting married. When his business had failed, things had been hard...and when his son had started to show signs of great talent, it had only rubbed his shortcomings in.

Severus's disappointment in not getting that acceptance nor any outward semblance of the affection he craved from Tobias, coupled with his independent streak and intelligence even from a young age, had set them on a collision course.

The great shame of her life was that she had not done more with Tobias over Severus. Too often she had come home from work in Jacobson's Potters, where she worked as an artist, to hear the out-of-work Tobias raging at their young son whom he had caught flexing his magical muscles. Such occurrences had always ended the same, and each time she had watched her husband storm past her and out of the house before finding her little boy, his black eyes shining with tears and fright, cowering in a corner on the floor in one room or another.

As he grew older and found he couldn't get his father's approval no matter what he tried, Severus had settled for his attention...even if it was at the end of a belt strap.

In the two years before he had started Hogwarts, things had truly degenerated. He had changed after that incident in Diagon Alley. Whether it had been the prolonged encounter with the world of magic or his being feted as a hero in St Mungo's, Severus had become even more focused and more determined with his use of magic and in consequence, lived even closer to the edge with his father. The biting tongue he had developed at school hadn't helped much latterly.

Tobias had railed at her, too, from time to time when under the effects of a particularly bad depression and bout of drinking. And when that occurred, it set Severus off, resulting in some explosive fights between the two Snape men...until finally the inevitable had happened, and as Tobias had stripped himself of his belt and raised it to strike his son, he had found a wand in his face, his boy's dark eyes glittering dangerously.

It had only been her intervention that had stopped their child from casting a spell that surely would have resulted in him being taken away to Azkaban that night. She had never been so frightened in her life nor so aware that her son possessed a dark and violent streak.

She knew that it was, in part, due to her failure to stand up to her husband. Something she could only put down to her loving Tobias far too much. Underneath it all and in their quiet times alone, he was still the charming, good looking, sensitive dreamer he had always been -- the one with natural magic in his hands, who spoke to the artist in her with what he could create with wood and with metal. He was still the young man who had sauntered cheekily up to an odd-looking, introverted, Muggle-curious witch one day in the high street and asked her if she fancied going out with him...every Saturday night for the rest of their lives.

She had known that it was only a chat up line -- a bad one at that -- that he had probably thought she was an easy mark, being not too good-looking, and that he was at a loose end looking for someone for that night. But something had happened between them and the line had become a reality... he had kept that date with her ever since.

He was in her blood. He was her blood. She had given up everything, including her magic, to be with him. And every time she had resolved herself to do something to teach him a lesson, berate him or walk out on him, she had seen him crumple. Seen the pain in his dark eyes and the self-loathing at his failure, at what he had become, heard him beg her forgiveness...and she would give in. She hated herself for the weakness, but her heart was too tangled up with his. She would never leave him, she knew...for despite his pride and his proclamations of self sufficiency, he simply needed her too much.

She turned to pour a second mug of tea and put it on a tray for her husband, as her son finished his food and turned to open his rucksack -- the one she had made a rare foray to a neighbour to borrow, much to Severus's intense embarrassment. He could transfigure something into one, she knew...she could too, for that matter...but how would she explain it to Tobias? After pouring some milk and adding a significant number of spoonfuls of sugar into the tea, she moved to carry it to the front room, when the kitchen door opened.

"Any sign of that...ah..." Tobias started to enquire, rubbing his hand through his brown hair as he entered. "Thanks, love." Taking the mug from the tray, he drank from it, his eyes moving to his son as the boy turned himself and the contents of the now open rucksack away from his father's gaze.

"How long are you going for?"

The teen bit back a retort about why he cared. "A month."

"Trust you're going to behave yourself for your uncle," Tobias addressed him over the mug. "Live up to your name."

"Wouldn't be much point in going if I did that. I can hardly trail an Auror around and not do magic."

"You know what I mean and don't use that tone with me," Tobias replied, the edge in his voice starting to return. His wife's hand found his arm, her eyes pleading him not to cause a scene. She had spent a great deal of the last few days reminding him that Severus would probably leave home after his final year...that this would be their last summer as a family and begged with him for tolerance, if nothing else. Releasing a little of the building tension, Tobias turned his gaze back to his son and the rucksack. "See you're bringing that whackin' great journal or scrapbook or whatever it is...you ever going to show your mother and me what's in it?" He sipped on his tea again.

"It's private."

"Ah...*those* kind of pictures, eh?" Tobias snorted. "Well, if you don't have a girlfriend, I suppose you'd have to have some..."

"Shut up." Severus turned his head to glance at him, shoving the book in question down among his belongings and closing the bag brusquely. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Severus!" Eileen's voice rang out sharply in shock, as her husband's face grew thunderous.

"What did you say, boy?"

Severus stood up and swung the bag over his shoulder. "I said I'm going."

"You're not going anywhere!" Tobias growled. "Not till you've apologised for that remark!"

"No." Two sets of fiery black eyes clashed and locked together before Severus calmly turned his head away to look to his mother. "I'll see you soon, Mother. I'll give Uncle Steven your best."

"I said, you're not going anywhere." Tobias moved to stand in front of the kitchen door.

Severus took a step away from him and turned back, his wand in his hand. "I think you'll find I am, Father."

Tobias's eyes widened and narrowed rapidly at the sight of the magical instrument. "Don't you dare!" he snarled at his son.

"Severus, what are you doing?" Eileen moved towards him quickly. "You promised me! You said you wouldn't do that again!"

"What did you expect, Eileen?" Her husband raised his chin and sneered from behind her. "Not everyone is as strong as you...certainly not him. That power he has is unnatural even for your kind, you've said so yourself...and power corrupts...he can't resist using it. He's weak. He's always been weak."

Severus snorted derisively. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree then, does it, Father?" He turned his eyes to his mother again. "I'll see you in a month, Mother."

Raising his wand, he concentrated and Apparated away.

The alleyway he appeared in, midway between The Strand and Soho in London, was as typical an alleyway as you could think of. So typical, with its peeling posters, broken boxes, litter, and leaking down pipes, that it would make one mildly suspicious about its authenticity. Which wasn't surprising, seeing as the entire thing had a permanent glamour on it to hide the frequently Apparating witches and wizards from passing Muggles. It also made the alley one of the safest travelling points in London for their comings and goings.

"Mornin'," said an old witch with a sniff to the newly-arrived teenager as she wandered into the alleyway and disappeared.

Hoisting his rucksack higher over his shoulder, Snape moved out into the grimy street beyond before pausing and glancing around, mentally checking his instructions. The street had a timelessly smudged and run-down appearance to it. It gave one had the odd feeling that it could have stood, looking as it did, for anything from twenty to one hundred years with just a few small changes to the signage and graffiti on the walls to indicate the passing of the years. Even though cars and Muggles moved up and down it freely, everything about it spoke magic to him.

On spotting the grotty old telephone box with the peeling red paint he'd been told to head for, he walked quickly to it. No matter his disgruntled attitude towards traipsing around after his uncle at his mother's behest, there was still a minor thrill at the idea of being about to see, in person, the nerve centre of magic in Britain.

On stepping into the box and closing the cracked glass paned door behind him, he turned to face the phone and put down his bag. Picking up the heavy receiver, he inserted his finger in the dial and circled it around to the 6...watching intently as the dial clicked and whirred back to its starting point before doing the same again with the next number...2...4...4...2.

It rang for a moment before the answering voice surrounded him, startling him somewhat. "Good morning, Ministry of Magic. Please state your name, the nature of your business, and which Department it is in connection with."

Glancing around himself for a moment, Snape frowned and composed himself. "My name is Severus Snape. I have business with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement...with Steven Prince."

"Steven Prince?"

"Yes, he's an Auror."

A moment later, he was holding a silver badge bearing his name and the word VISITOR emblazoned underneath with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's seal beside it, and as soon as he pinned it on, the phone box dropped like a stone.

This he had been ready for, having been warned in the short missive he'd gotten by owl at Hogwarts from his uncle that that would happen. Waiting patiently, he emerged a short while later into the large foyer that was the atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

Lowering his bag again, he gazed around at the hive of activity, watching the witches and wizards attached to the Ministry or who had longstanding business there entering and exiting the building through the magnificent gleaming fireplaces to the left and right.

The people were magnificent -- their robes fine and flowing, all of them were among the most impressive people he had ever seen, and everything about them was in keeping with the splendid setting they conducted their affairs in.

His black eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he took in the huge room. The sight around him lived up to, and even surpassed his expectations. The moving images he had seen while voraciously researching the place during his first year at Hogwarts paled in comparison to what stood before him now. Then, he had only been an eleven year old desperate to understand everything about a world he could only sneak knowledge of where he could. Now he was an adult, at least in the eyes of the law, standing right in the centre of where those laws were made.

Crossing over the dark wood floor towards the Fountain of Magical Brethren, his eyes shifted from the moving symbols above him on the ceiling to the golden statues around the water centrepiece. Turning full circle as he took it all in, he remembered himself and how he would appear to others. Determined not to look naïve and out of place...even though now he was regretting his lack of suitable attire...his face took on an even more self-possessed air as he moved towards the golden gates and the manned security stand there, only to stop when he saw a familiar figure heading his way.

Steven Prince was not exactly what one would expect when picturing a member of the Prince family...nor the first person one would have immediately placed as a relative of Severus Snape. Though he possessed the long black hair of that family line and had a similar facial structure to his older sister, on him it was much more flattering. Like his nephew, he was a rather tall man and carried himself confidently. As he moved across the foyer, Severus could not help but noticed how he seemed to glide more than walk...and that several young ladies passing by took notice.

There was also a lack of arrogance about the man and as he grew closer to his quarry, a bright and warm smile lit upon his features. "Severus!" Steven came to a stop in front of him with a slight fluttering of robes. "I see you made it...excellent." He paused barely a second before shaking his head with a wry smile. "I can't believe I'm now looking my little nephew in the eyes...I swear it's only been a year and you seem to have grown a foot."

"Uncle," Severus greeted him. "Just nine inches."

A friendly hand clapped his arm and gave it a warm squeeze, as the other man's bright green eyes sparkled. "No 'just' about it. Seems you got the Prince height all right. And how's your mother?" he enquired, a worried furrow just crinkling his brow.

"She's in good health. She had some bronchial difficulties recently but recovered well. She sends her best," his nephew replied before adding, "I know she is grateful to you for doing this for me."

Steven waved his hand in dismissal of that. "No gratitude necessary," he told him with another smile. "I'm happy to...about time you got to see more of where you come from than just Hogwarts."

Snape's eyes wandered around the place briefly once more. "Yes," he agreed, admiration creeping into his voice. "I am grateful for that opportunity, too. Hogwarts and Diagon Alley aside, I've not seen much of this side of things." He glanced back at his uncle. "If you discount my stay in St. Mungo's, that is." Taking in his uncle's pristine and highly impressive robes, he looked down at his Muggle clothes. "I apologise...I didn't have anything more appropriate. I did not wish to come in school robes...and appear...well...childish."

Stepping back a minute, Steven eyed his nephew's attire and nodded. "Yes...is that what Muggles are wearing lately? Fascinating..." he mused with a shake of his head and shrugged. "No matter! And you can, of course, borrow some of my robes...until I can get you over to Madam Malkin's for some of your own. You'll need them after this next year." He shook his head again. "I can't believe you're of age...and about to enter your last year of Hogwarts! It was only yesterday that I was tucking you in and telling you stories." A nostalgic smile lit on his lips before he enquired, "Are you excited about your NEWTs? Your mother says you've been doing very well in your classes...so I shan't ask if you are worried."

Snape blinked as he struggled mentally to keep up. He had nearly forgotten about his uncle's rapid thought processes and even more rapid expression of them.

"You...really don't have to buy me robes...borrowing them is more than sufficient," he assured the elder man. "I...am looking forward to taking my exams and moving on, yes," he added with a nod.

"Wonderful! Both your mother and I did quite well on our NEWTs...if I must say so myself," Steven answered with a grin. "And nonsense on the robes. I missed Christmas this last year...and I owe you a present or two...and I won't hear an argument otherwise." And before his nephew could do just that, he clapped his hands and rubbed them. "So...let's start with a tour!"

Hiking his rucksack a little higher, Snape nodded, quietly intent on seeing everything he had read about. "Is there somewhere I can put this, Uncle?"

The elder man eyed the bag for a moment and nodded. "I don't have an office...none of us do unless we're desk bound, but I'm sure Miss Weatherby wouldn't mind keeping an eye on it for you," he said, already moving to the elevators. "She's Barty Crouch's secretary. Nice bird...wonderful knitter!"

"Knitter?" Snape repeated, having not really expected that. "*Barty Crouch*?" he breathed a second later as his eyes widened.

"Yes...bit of a stick in the mud...but excellent tactician and head," Steven told him as they stepped into the elevator, hitting the button with the number two on it. But as the doors were about to close, a voice called out, "Wait! Hold the lift!"

Steven quickly stuck his hand out, holding the doors back as a red headed man slipped in, gasping for breath. "Thanks!" the man panted. "Jolly good of you! I've got to nip upstairs...forgot my notes you see...and with the hearings today..." He grinned on seeing who it was. "Oh hullo, Steven! Fancy seeing you! They finally pulled you off field duty, then?"

Snape watched the red faced, red haired young man in his mid twenties as he took up a spot beside his uncle. Of all the people he had seen today, he looked the most...average...though his bright eager eyes spoke of a quick mind and gregarious nature. Snape was never wholly comfortable about the latter, but the former made up for it, and he decided he would at least give the man a chance before deciding he was annoying.

"Hello, Arthur," his uncle replied with a smile of his own. "Keeping you busy in the Missuse office...or are you bored yet?"

"Oh, Heavens no! It's quite fascinating really...most fascinating! I was to be out on the field today myself...but this hearing has everyone up in a tizzy, so Satersley kept me in," the red-haired man explained. "Are you going to the hearings? I hear she's going to speak today...can't wait to hear that myself. And who's this young fellow?"

"This," Steven said with a proud inflection in his tone, "is my nephew, Severus. My sister's boy. He's going to be job shadowing me for the next month." He turned to the young man. "And this, Severus, is Arthur Weasley. He works in the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts section."

"How do you do, sir?" Snape inclined his head, still taking careful note of his mother's instructions regarding his voice as he had done from the moment he'd stepped into the telephone box.

The lift door pinged quietly and slid open as Arthur went to respond. "Quite well! Quite well, Severus!" he replied genially as they all stepped from the elevator and headed to the door to the Auror Headquarters. "Well, I must be off...Satersley will have my head if I don't fetch those notes, and I'm afraid my Molly quite likes where it is."

Steven's grin was wide as the younger man dashed off down the hall and around the corner. "So! Let's get that bag dropped off then," he said with another clap and rub of his hands, leading the teen towards a large desk by the door they had just entered.

As Snape followed behind, he noted how confident his uncle always seemed. He had to admit he found Steven's speech and thought patterns somewhat disconcerting, and a part of him really would have preferred to be somewhere else practicing his potion making and spell crafting...but an equal if not greater part of him had always been taken by his uncle's apparent glide through life. The pride of a family that had disowned his own mother for marrying a Muggle, Steven lived up to his surname -- his hair, black like his own, was thick and flowing and well maintained, his clothes were pristine, his bearing proud but not arrogant, and his children when he had them would probably be ridiculously handsome...unlike their cousin.

Yes, when he married he would probably marry a pureblood heiress and make a name for himself within the Ministry. Everything about him spoke of a leader...a future Minister in the making...and seemed to come so easily to him, but not in a way one could resent. It seemed he truly was one of those men who did glide through life. A thought which brought him to focus on the way his uncle literally moved. Snape had learned to walk almost silently from a young age. It was a necessary skill when one wished to undertake banned practices in secret, and it had resulted in him having a smooth easy walk, but as he took careful note of his uncle's stride patterns, he found himself deftly slipping into them and taking up the elder's man's more flowing, commanding glide.

"Miss Weatherby!" Steven announced with a large smile as he approached the desk where a thin young woman was knitting as she answered correspondences with the help of a magical quill. "How charming it is to see you on such a bright and sunny day."

Looking up from her knitting, a pair of luminous green eyes grew wide and bright and an eager smile quickly slipped into an altogether more flirtatious one. "Steven..." she greeted him, running his name out slowly between two quite red and attractively full lips. "Where have you been keeping yourself?" One would, Snape thought to himself, have to be blind not to notice the woman was more than interested in his uncle, and he turned with some mild interest to see what the elder man's reaction would be to this clear invitation to flirt.

"Here and there," Steven replied genially. "I just got back a couple nights ago...nasty business in Wales. *His* people are getting bolder by the day," he added with some disgust.

"I heard. Bad business," she agreed with a nod, growing more serious. "There were attacks in Scotland as well last night. It does seem to be getting worse all the time. I presume you were brought in to help with security on today's events around the Wizengamot?" The gleam in her eyes grew appreciative once more. "Mr. Crouch does like to use the best..." She leaned on her desk, her eyes wandering over his slim form. "Can't fault him on that score." Snape's eyebrow twitched -- the woman was practically panting for his uncle -- and his eyes returned to his relative, waiting for some kind of reaction.

And there was absolutely none forthcoming from the Auror. In fact, he seemed rather oblivious to the woman's overtures, though Snape suspected he was more likely ignoring them. "Why thank you, Miss Weatherby!" Steven replied with a most comradelial smile. "It is nice to know that we are so well appreciated, but alas no...today I am off to help my new trainee of sorts. Now...I'd like you to meet my nephew Severus. He's going to be job shadowing me for the next month." He flashed a grin over at the teen. "Severus...this is Miss Fortuna Weatherby, the best secretary in the Ministry....and the most talented knitter in all of England."

"A...unique...claim to fame," Snape replied, stepping forward and putting his bag down, unsure what else to say to that. "A pleasure," he finally settled on saying to the attractive woman.

Fortuna Weatherby's eyes wandered over him in a similar, if quicker, manner as they had over his uncle, clearly evaluating him though her smile was friendly. "Steven exaggerates." Her eyes flitted back to the man in question. "He has no real idea of where my true talents lie," she added, extending her hand to Snape as the mischievous look returned to her eyes.

Taking it, Snape couldn't help but feel a certain amount of heat rise up at the nape of his neck at the attractive woman's flirtation...even though he was just receiving the edges of it, he could feel himself respond bodily to her. He could only assume that his uncle had decided work and pleasure did not mix.

"Miss Weatherby...would you mind horribly if Severus left his bag with you while I took him on a tour of the Ministry?" Steven's voice broke in. "We shan't be too long...not with the hearings this afternoon."

"No...not at all," Fortuna replied, releasing his hand and gesturing for Snape to put it behind her desk. "Feel free to drop by and pick it up anytime. What with the comings and goings today, I shall be working through lunch and probably late tonight." Her eyes turned back to the elder of the two before her. "You gentlemen feel free to join me

for dinner here, if you like...I would welcome the company."

Steven smiled and inclined his head in gratitude. "That's very kind of you, Miss Weatherby, but I'm afraid we've already got plans," he replied with an apologetic tone. "Perhaps some other time?"

Snape looked at him, wondering what he had in store for them, before turning his attention back to the secretary. "Thank you, Miss Weatherby."

"Not at all, Severus," she demurred. "My pleasure...and I shall take you up on that, Steven," she told his uncle. "Don't think I won't."

A slight flush finally appeared on the older man's cheeks as he coughed. "Yes...well...thank you again," he replied, a little flustered, and quickly led his nephew out the door again.

With a slight nod to the woman, Snape turned and followed his 'mentor' outside. "May I ask what our plans are?" he enquired him, closing the door. "For this evening, I mean?"

"Not sure," Steven replied, walking swiftly to the elevator. "Thought we'd eat over at the Cauldron...know some blokes that like to hang out there and get you settled in."

"So, I can assume you don't care for her?" Snape responded, falling in beside him and taking up the careful stride pattern once more. "It hardly takes a genius to notice her interest in you," he observed.

His uncle sighed as he hit the lift button. "Yes...I've noticed. And yes, the feeling isn't mutual. She's a nice girl...just not...my type," he answered with a shrug.

Snape nodded and clasped his hands behind his back as they waited, while he wondered what type of woman was his uncle's type...for he was certainly an eligible man. Steven probably had had his fair share by now, and Snape's mother had told him their parents were pressing Steven to marry and produce an heir for the family. One that wasn't the son of a non-wizard, that was. He supposed it was only a matter of time before his uncle did just that...putting aside a playboy lifestyle for family. He looked at the elder man out of the corner of his eye and drew himself up a little more, moving his shoulders a little more into line with his...feeling his somewhat slouched stance rather keenly beside his uncle.

The door opened with a ping and the elder man led the way inside.

Two hours later -- the length due to Steven stopping every five minutes to explain this or that, launch into a seemingly irrelevant tale, or simply to stop and greet random people they met along the way -- both men arrived back at the office to collect Severus's rucksack before heading out. With a quick smile at the secretary, Steven waited for Severus to collect his bag and both men moved toward the elevator once more.

"Right! Are you hungry? Tired? Horribly bored yet?" Steven asked once the doors had closed.

"No. Not at all," his nephew replied, slipping his rucksack over his shoulder.

"Really?" the old man enquired with an arched eyebrow. "Jolly good then! We'll head on over to Diagon Alley I think then...get you fitted for some robes."

"Of course." Snape nodded. "There is a good second hand store...I got my last set of robes there."

"*What?* Oh no," the other man told him with a firm look as the doors opened and they stepped into the lobby. "We're going to Madame Malkin's. Second hand robes are fine for school...but you are here to partly to see and carve a niche for yourself. And though it is sad to say it...some quarters will see second hand robes and turn up their high brow noses. No...and since it's my treat...new robes it is."

"If...it is a gift...and you are sure," Snape replied hesitantly, for even if he would never acknowledge it, something of his father's pride in regards to self sufficiency did course through his veins. "Thank you, Uncle. I...appreciate it."

Entering the Atrium, Severus was a little surprised when, instead of heading to one of the many fireplaces in the walls, his uncle turned sharply and headed to a small darkly lit area off to the side. He watched as the elder man pulled out his wand and after a quick series of taps, a door formed and opened, leading to a long candle lit hallway. "This way," he instructed before disappearing inside.

With only an arched eyebrow to indicate his surprise and the fact he was impressed, Severus quickly followed his uncle, the door closing quietly and sealing shut behind him.

The passage was made entirely of brick and stone and appeared to be quite old and, judging from the wear of the stones beneath their feet, well-used. The candles lit their way, igniting and snuffing out as soon as they were out of range of the previous and in range of the next and created long shadows behind them. Their walk only took about five minutes and they were soon exiting through another door out into an alleyway full of dustbins, broken bottles, and three Aurors, all of whom looked vaguely apprehensive as their eyes scanned the street and buildings.

Snape blinked at the sudden light, somewhat surprised to find himself on the surface. They had walked for quite a bit, but in a direct line and never veering from a level path. They had definitely been underground, he knew that, but it had taken the same amount of time to get to the Ministry in the lift as it had walking a straight horizontal line out of it.

Surmising that the magic involved must have been spatial and dimensional in nature, he found himself considerably impressed by the complexity of it. From the manner of their entry, it was also clear that it was an entrance known only to a few in the Ministry...most probably only the Aurors, he reasoned, before turning his attention to the three in front of him.

The tension was obvious. Something was about to happen. Something he assumed had to do with the mentions he had heard about the Wizengamot and some woman who was to address it amongst others at a hearing. He supposed that the Aurors present were there to guide these speakers down the secret passage when they arrived.

Steven's brow furrowed more than a little as he moved over to the nearest of the trio, his manner completely shifting to one of utter business. "Hello Erasmus," he greeted him quietly.

The blond haired man blinked a little in surprise, but the tension in his body lessened on seeing whom the speaker was. "Steven," he greeted the new arrival, his eyes flicking over to the teenager.

"My nephew," came the quick explanation. "You here for that speaker coming in? The building is buzzing like a hornets' nest."

The other man grimaced. "Oh yes...she's had several death threats over the last couple weeks...and one tried to get her this morning." He paused on seeing Steven's eyebrow arch. "Exploding package. But I'll give the lady her dues...she's not about to quit. So we were ordered up here to take her in this way. No Floo network to sabotage and they've got to be watching the booth."

Severus waited for a few minutes while his uncle spoke with the Auror Erasmus. However, once the conversation shifted to personal matters he lost interest, his attention shifting to the spread of the Aurors as they waited and wondering whether they intended to move forward when someone arrived at the alleyway, or whether someone was to Apparate straight there. He wandered up past the man and woman flanking both walls near the top of the alley, returning their nods as he went. Close to the entrance of the alley was a small flaxen-haired, sharp-faced man who seemed to be in charge of the operation. After a brief glance at the dark teen, the man returned to looking pensive.

Meandering away from the front of the alley, he wandered towards a nearby run down shop selling Muggle sewing machines, although the place looked so dingy and dreary

and the windows so unwashed, it seemed unlikely anyone worked inside of it...never mind shopped there. Putting down his rucksack, he folded his arms and leaned back against the window frame, his mind turning to a spell he wanted to try and finish. His fingers itched to take out one of the two books he had brought with him but decided, all things considered, that it was probably best his Auror uncle did not catch him with his notes on unauthorised spell crafting.

About five minutes later, a small black and white car with tinted windows that looked very much like a Muggle cab pulled up to the mouth of the alley. The Aurors on the street were instantly on guard. The door opened and a dark haired young man stepped out, his eyes seeming to go everywhere before he beckoned to someone inside. A delicate and decidedly feminine hand appeared, and whoever the passenger was stepped out of the cab covered in a long blue velvet cloak.

What happened next was a complete blur. For out of nowhere several bolts seemed to shoot out of the sky taking down two out of the three Aurors, their lifeless bodies falling to the ground.

The last Auror started firing shots but couldn't seem to find his target, and was soon felled by a curse shot from somewhere off to the side. The young woman was pulling out her wand, though seemed unsure whether to leap back in the car or run off down the alley.

Snape had hit the ground quickly, moving into the shop doorway as soon as the first shot had gone off, and from where he was, he could see what the last Auror down had frantically been trying to make out -- the precise location from where the blasts were coming from.

Across the way in an upstairs window, he could see a shadowed figure lit up in a flash of split second magical fire. Magical fire that was somehow being suppressed so the Aurors on the ground could not quite track it. It was minute but the glint was enough to attract his attention.

His eyes moved to the target. The car she had come in was the only thing saving her from joining her protectors...but it was now under fire as the attackers tried to flush her out. His hand moved to his jacket...paused...and then moved again, drawing out his wand. This was none of his affair...but he could hear his uncle shouting at the woman to run to them...and knew damn well if she moved from behind that car, she would get no further than two steps before she was cut down by the perfectly placed and almost completely hidden assassin. But if she stayed much longer where she was...that car would combust, taking her along with it.

The driver in the car, sensing something horrible was about to happen made a break for it, shoved open the door and dove to the ground before rolling and making a dart for cover further down the street. But he was not quick enough...and his legs were taken out from under him, leaving them blackened and charred, while the man writhed and screamed in agony on the ground.

The attack upon the car was resumed, and a moment later, as Severus turned his eyes upon the window above the old cobbler's shop and crouched his body low to the ground, he made a break for it. At the same moment that he raised his wand hand and swept his other arm out in an arc, his brow furrowed in absolute concentration as he dived and caught his target in the hook of his arm, taking her to the ground with him.

Behind him, an explosion reverberated around them and down the surrounding streets.

Debris from both the car and the building shot in all directions as bits of twisted metal, brick, and mortar scattered. The window and the wall around it disappeared in a fireball of the impacting car, bathing everything in the room beyond in flaming fuel and bringing the roof down on top of it.

Black and noxious smoke billowed up, and an unnatural silence descended, broken only by the sound of burning materials and the groans of the wounded survivors.

His body covering that of the diplomatic personage below him, Snape raised his head and winced at the burning sensation on the side of his neck. Turning his head towards the smoking charred remains of the building, his eyes widened a little at the destruction he had caused by the simple combining of a levitation and projection spell on a combustible object. There was no sign of movement...perhaps the assassin had Apparated away before the car had struck, but he had his doubts. The attacker probably hadn't seen the object coming until the last second and if the Aurors had had any sense they would've set up an exclusion zone to stop people Apparating in and therefore out...while this crisis was going on.

Seeing nothing, he released his hold on his wand since his other hand was under his rescued target, and his fingers gingerly touched his neck, coming away bloody. Reaching back tentatively once more, he could feel the deep slash on the side of his neck and the blood leaking from it badly. Glancing quickly down, he saw the piece of metallic shrapnel that had caused it and picked it up with a glower...another inch or two and it might have actually severed something serious. With a slight grunt, he tossed it away, more annoyed than anything, for though the wound was deep it was, for the moment, doing nothing more than stinging rather badly.

Turning his attention to the person he was lying over, he enquired as solicitously as he could, "Are you all right?"

A pair of deep blue eyes stared up at him in shock, and though the woman had obviously grown older since the last he had seen her, it was without a doubt...his angel.

Authors' Note: Thank you once again to our beta readers Smoke and Wendynat for their efforts on our behalf. They are greatly appreciated.

Fortune Favours the Foolish

Chapter 3 of 9

After saving Paidea's life yet again, Snape ventures to impress the young diplomat, who, though appreciative, can only see the boy she once knew.

Chapter Two: Fortune Favours the Foolish

Paidea Abernathy was not a foolish woman. Nor was she one given to flights of fancy or stubbornness...well, not massively overt stubbornness at any rate. For it must be said that when she put her mind to something she believed in, she saw it through to the end, no matter what. She was what others not on the downside of her determination would describe as 'a woman of deep convictions.' And indeed, she had pledged her life to public service and helping others...to the cost of nearly all else.

Magically speaking, it wasn't a huge sacrifice. Truth be told, she wasn't a fantastically good witch...to put it mildly. She had gone to Beauxbatons, or rather been sent there by her wealthy, ultra refined, and rather snobbish parents to expand her cultural as well as educational horizons. While there, she had been a studious and diligent pupil, very well liked by both teachers and peers, and had shown a great aptitude for glamours and inanimate transfigurations.

However, she did manage to set two records while there as a student, and though they were much remarked upon were not something she liked to discuss much -- one being for melting the most cauldrons in Potions in the long and illustrious history of the scholarly establishment, and the other for blowing out the most windows. Her yearly school fees were always augmented by a hefty bill for damages, much to her father's chagrin.

It would have been even more annoying had it not been for an event that had occurred while she was still a young child. Her father had been entertaining a mix of high-powered business wizards and Ministry types at a party, when his eight year old daughter had snuck out of bed while her mother wasn't watching and squirmed her way under her father's arm. Snuggling up to him, she listened as he spoke about the unprecedented recent tensions in Eastern Europe between Muggles and Wizards and how they were exacerbated by the Muggle Communist regimes that predominated in the area.

Her father had started to respond to a comment, only for the entire assembly to be astonished when she quoted from a recent article in verbatim about the need for a calm, level-headed resolution by the eminent German Minister for Magic, Schroeder Graf. The little girl had even added, as she played with her father's shiny dress robes' buttons, a few sound if simplistic pronouncements on the need for everyone, Muggle and Wizard, to 'get along.'

From that point on, her father, a man of singular ambition though frustrated in achieving a political career of his own, began to suspect that his aims might be realised by another member of his family. On copiously querying his daughter afterwards, he had discovered that their family had indeed spawned something of a prodigy. While she, unlike her older sister, had hardly so much as moved a teaspoon magically, it became clearer and clearer that she showed an immense aptitude for taking in and analysing vast amounts of personal, sociological, historical, and political information in a manner far beyond her years.

Her powers of observation, which had always been advanced even as a very young child, became increasingly keen. Anything that had to do with people and their situations seemed to fascinate her. Whether it be at the individual or group level, the behaviours of people and society enraptured her. Her growing understanding of people's desires and motivations augmented her calm, naturally insightful nature and that, combined with her empathic and sympathetic skills, allowed her to see both sides of most arguments.

Her father had begun to groom her carefully, feeding her more and more information on the workings of the Wizarding World, the tensions and factions within it, as well as trouble spots and their histories. He would sit with her perched on his knee alone in his study in the evenings, talking about historical events and asking her why she felt they had happened and what might have been done to avoid them. He had had far less interesting and insightful conversations with people many times her age. By the time he began to get glowing reports back from Beauxbatons about his daughter's calming influence, leadership, and natural peacemaking abilities amongst her classmates, he knew he was on the right track with her.

As did she.

After doing only marginally well on her OWL exams and at the same time having a long essay on the benefits of a more open dialogue with Muggle leaders published in the editorials page of *The Daily Prophet*, she and her family had decided that sixteen was more than old enough to begin her long planned for career in the political circle. Dressing in a style considerably older and more ostentatious even than those around her, partially from her family's influence and her love of clothes and partially to distract from her very young age, she had embarked upon her career.

Needless to say, clothes and hairstyle or not, many of the well established and much older veterans of the governing world did not take her at all seriously or react well to this young idealist encroaching on their territory. But she had taken it all in her stride. Paidea, with her ear for listening, had a talent for getting people to open up to her...to share with her what they really feared, wanted, and needed. She had utilised this to her own advantage. Taking her talent for negotiating between two disputing parties to a win-win outcome, she had negotiated her own fit place amongst their number.

Under the wing of one of her father's diplomat friends, Hezekiah Butler, she had been taken on board as a junior negotiator in a fierce border skirmish between the giants and centaurs in Austria. The negotiating party had tried hard, but it had become apparent that the only thing the centaurs and giants disliked worse than each other...was wizards.

Expected only to be there to learn, Paidea had a chance conversation with a young centaur, the son of the leader of the tribe, bringing her a great deal of insight into the situation -- insight her superiors were not getting in the stalemated talks. Along with further knowledge into the workings of a giant's mind harvested from long talks with Madame Maxine, one of her teachers at Beauxbatons, she began to communicate with both sides during the breaks in the talks.

This quiet girl with her extreme self possession and no airs and magical graces, a witch of wealthy family and good name, who brought them food and drink, mingled with them and spoke with great authority and knowledge on matters of interest to them, gradually began to win both sides over. And it was to everyone's great surprise when one afternoon, both opposing leaders requested her presence at the top table for the talks. The rest became history, and the peace deal brokered three days later had not been breached since.

It was a great gift to be sure, and after a short while many began to favourably respond to and even request her by name. Slowly but surely, her talents had earned her the ears of many in the top levels and the influence to bring several issues near and dear to her heart to the table. But her main concern above all was peace. Peace achieved in a non-violent manner. In her mind, she felt that anything could be achieved if people just learned to communicate with each other...to understand each other...and basically avoid blowing each other to bits. For in the end, violence only bred more violence.

And so, at a time when the entire Wizarding world was witnessing the emergence of one of the darkest wizards ever known and with the threat of internecine war starting to loom, Paidea put aside everything, including any semblance of a personal life and any vague dreams and desires she might have had, and dedicated herself to trying to bring her people together...to be a voice of reason in an increasingly insane world.

Over the intervening years, she used every ounce of persistence, persuasion, and talent she had for speech writing and making to try and counteract the growing tensions and violence. Too often, however, it felt as if she was Sisyphus trying to roll that boulder eternally up the hill -- for every one step she took forward, there was always something to pull her two steps back.

The struggle had taken its toll upon her. Failures started to pile up, many of which she took to heart, and over the past month with so called Death Eater attacks on the increase and hard-liners in the Ministry determined to match blow for blow, she had come to wonder if all the sacrifices she had made had been worth it.

But there was still the hearing.

The all important hearing that she had fought tooth and nail for, utilizing every opportunity to have it brought in front of the Wizengamot. A hearing on the future empowerment of Aurors.

Normally, she would not have dared to interfere with the Department of Defence's proceedings and judgements, but in this case she had felt it was of vital importance. For Bartemius Crouch had requested that his Aurors be allowed to employ ever more aggressive tactics in their own and the people's defence.

As a rule such decisions were made exclusively within the inner workings of the Ministry itself, on consultation between the Minister and the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Paidea raised enough concern with her colleagues, the press, and the public as to the ramifications of this decision that she was granted a hearing on the matter before the highest court of wizarding law in Britain. Now the decision would rest in the hands of the Wizengamot.

Crouch could still get his way on increased Auror activity and force should the decision be an adverse one, but that was not what concerned her -- for the violence was building every day, and she wasn't a naïve woman about the necessity to protect the public. No...it was the *level* of force he was requiring. *That* was what she truly wished to be placed at the heart of this hearing.

For Crouch had requested that the ban on the Unforgivable Curses be put aside for Aurors in order to combat the Death Eaters' use of them. Untie the Aurors' hands, he had said, allow them to protect themselves and society better. That was when she had spoken up, when she had interfered and voiced what a danger this would be, not only to the Aurors themselves and to anyone potentially caught in the crossfire, but the moral fabric of their society as a whole.

How can one be fighting for society when they were killing each other with a simple spell...especially when such a spell is fuelled by sheer hate? Never mind the moral implications of taking over a person's will with an Imperius curse...or causing nothing but pain with a Cruciatus! *What* could possibly be the gain of any of these? There would be nothing but an escalation of violence and a diminishing of respect for life. The government would, she argued, become as bad as those they were fighting to stop.

It had taken her six months...six long months of petitioning and adding it the ends of virtually all her speeches, much like Cato the Elder did before the Roman senate when he urged them to lay the salt to the earth of Carthage so that it would never rise again. Finally, the Minister of Magic, taking cognisance of the rising concern, suggested precisely what Paidea had been hoping for -- that the decision be taken to the court and for them to decide what was best.

Crouch had been incandescent, confronting the young diplomat and accusing her of procrastination and naiveté and putting his Aurors' lives at risk. She had faced him down then, and taken his berating calmly, but knew if the court decided in favour of Crouch's decision, she would have to back down.

And so the researching and compiling of her case had begun in earnest. Soon the hearing itself had become an issue almost as divisive as that which was starting to tear their society apart. Many joined her in her cause and offered support, but just as many had been opposed and angered that a pacifist diplomat was interfering in something that was, to their minds, not her concern.

Of course in the meantime, she continued to speak out vociferously against Lord Voldemort and his followers' actions, condemning both them and the 'pureblood' reasoning behind them and insisting that disputes over the future of the Wizarding world would and could only be resolved by compromise and talks. And when asked about any actions taken by the Aurors to protect the people during this time, she gave them her explicit support and approval.

She was so vocal in her condemnation of Death Eaters that it hadn't surprised her when she, coming from a pureblood family as she did, was declared a 'Blood Traitor' and the death threats began.

The first actual attempt on her life had shocked and saddened her, but it did not for one moment make her rethink her decision or plan of action, nor doubt its worth. Instead, it had brought out a stubbornness, or rather, a determination that had rarely been seen in her. She had raised her chin, squared her shoulders, and soldiered on, increasing her public appearances and interviews instead of decreasing them, and speaking out even more against violence from both sides. If she was going to be killed for her beliefs, she would go out fighting and on her own terms.

Her father had, of course, been furious. He who had been her mentor and advised her all of her political career had suddenly been overruled when he 'requested' she put aside this crusade and find an easier banner to bear...another way to carve herself a niche. To find that his protégé was no longer listening had been a shock.

The young, pliable woman he had groomed was gone, and in her place was a much more seasoned and experienced politician with her own thoughts and ideas. His creation had taken on a life of her own. He had always encouraged her to be her own person, to stand out from the crowd, but to find he was now one of that crowd had been a blow. And so he could only stand and watch with concern, his own ambitions for her churning, as his youngest daughter was threatened over and over with attacks on her life.

The first had been the tampered Howler letter, but that had only singed her clothes and burned her hand...nothing that couldn't be fixed with a salve and a quick visit to a Healer. But over the next two months, the attempts had become more and more inventive -- tampered gifts, cursed items, poison in her wine...and someone even found a way to let loose some rather nasty magical and potentially fatal insects into her suite.

All of these had obviously been thwarted, first by private and hired bodyguards and security and then, ironically, by the Aurors now assigned to her on orders from the Minister for Magic herself. It was to the point that now Paidea could not leave her home without an escort, and all her mail had to be scanned and checked before it was given to her...even her office at the Ministry was now routinely scanned for any potential hazards.

Paidea was beginning to feel like a goldfish in a very small bowl. But for her work...for the people's needs she would acquiesce and put up with it. The work...her duty...was what mattered. If some personal inconvenience was to be had...so be it.

There had been very clear indications that there would be an attack on her life upon her arrival at the Ministry. The Aurors who had arrived to escort her had given her strict instructions that brooked no argument on what she was to do...even asking her if she knew any defensive or offensive spells or hexes. But still, she had not been too concerned.

She had dressed and calmly prepared herself for her day of testifying and arguments with the Wizengamot, doing everything her protectors had asked, including the extremely tiresome and ridiculously circuitous route...though she had to admit to a small thrill at the novelty of riding in her first Muggle taxi. Everything had seemed to go so smoothly, and she had begun to hope that the opposition had simply given up.

But it was not to be. When Tangerston and Ellwes were shot down before her as they had emerged from the taxi, their glassy vacant eyes staring up to the sky, she had felt her first true deep surge of terror. She had been prepared...or thought she had been...for such an eventuality, but not for the reality of it. People were dying before her...for her! And she was next, trapped like a rat.

She watched with mounting horror as the Muggle taxi driver was shot while trying to escape to safety, his legs nothing more than charred stumps when the would-be assassin was done with him. And though she was firing back blindly, trying to remember long disused spells from her Beauxbatons days or the private self-defence classes she'd taken at her father's insistence, she was not gaining any ground. In fact, she realised as she watched the magic dismantling the cab that was her only shelter, she was losing it!

Paidea was not a woman who felt fear easily; instead she often channelled such emotions into motivation and renewed drive to continue on. But trapped as she was with people dying and injured all around her, she'd never been more terrified in her life. Just when she had little recourse left to her but to give in to the forlorn hope of breaking cover and making a run for the alleyway, something warm and solid collided with her as she emerged, covering her body like a blanket a moment before a massive explosion reverberated and rocked the world around them.

When the ringing in her ears died down and the debris that had smashed into the ground around them had settled, her wits began to return, and she found, to her shock, her cut and bleeding saviour freely staring at her in apparent recognition. It felt as though time had frozen, there was only her, this young man with the darkest eyes she'd ever seen, and the sound of their pounding hearts and rapid breaths.

And yet despite all this, there was something...familiar...about him at the same time. A feeling that only grew when he spoke to her.

"Are you all right?"

Her brow creased slightly as she checked herself, still trying to remember where she knew him from. "I'm fine, thank you," she replied rather breathily before her eyes moved to his neck. "But you are not."

Drawing himself up to his knees, Snape could feel the blood from his wound flow freely down his neck and under his shirt collar, soaking him quickly. Pressing one hand against collar and wound to stem the tide, he clambered to his feet and offered her his other hand to help her up, noting that his blood had splattered her clothes. Clothes that, from the cut and style of them, were probably worth more than his entire wardrobe. He could see her trying to remember, and that even given her shaken state she knew that she had met him.

He had seen her many times since they had parted eight years ago -- at first in his juvenile imagination and then in a variety of wizarding publications that he obtained access to once he started at Hogwarts. To begin with, it was mostly only in the society pages -- details and pictures of her wealthy family departing hither and yon to fantastic places for their holidays, arriving at prestigious evenings, or participating in charity and sporting events.

And then, one day, as he passed through the Great Hall moving past the Ravenclaw table, he saw a group of students huddled around the latest issue of *The Daily Prophet* headlined with AMAZING ABERNATHY AGREEMENT. The name had caught his attention immediately and a moment later, he looked down to see not her father's face as expected, but her demurely smiling one. In the photo there she stood with the leaders of the centaur and giant tribes flanking her as they looked around at the press while some rather bemused looking older wizards hovered on the fringes.

He had broken school rules that night when he had snuck into Hogsmeade to get himself a copy of the paper. In the silence of his dorm room, he'd devoured every word

and then carefully added the articles and most especially the pictures to his private journal. The journal that he jealously guarded from every prying eye and which currently lay on the ground in his bag. She always looked elegant, composed, and beautiful. Even when her gowns seemed to him to be incredibly over-elaborate, she was never less than stunning in every appearance. But none of his multitude of pictures, whether public appearances or specially taken portraits of her from the myriad profiles done upon her, compared to real life.

With the cowl of her velvet cloak fallen back, the deep chestnut hair he remembered was swept up and back into a long braid which was curled and pinned at the back of her head before falling down over her shoulder. Her aristocratic face, slender with high cheek bones, was understandably ashen, and her ivory skin, even under the refined amount of make up she wore, had paled noticeably on witnessing the death and destruction around her. It had the cumulative effect of making her wide blue eyes and full red lips stand out all the more, catching his attention as he looked down upon her.

And look down at her he did. For it was a considerable height difference. Even when they had been nine and thirteen respectively, she had never really towered over him. But whereas he had stretched a great deal in eight years, she hadn't grown much at all since their last meeting. She was perhaps five feet two inches, and even allowing for the heels she was wearing, her dark, bloodied saviour was a good foot taller than her.

The elaborately worked, sophisticated dress of deep rich blues, now visible to him under her cloak, had not been tainted by his blood, but it showed the effects of the attack all the same. The bodice of her gown rose and fell quickly with her rapid breaths, her small, curved figure still shaking a little from fright. The shouts of other Aurors broke the eerie and momentary silence around them. Taken out of herself and showing the depth of her control, she inhaled quietly and began to compose herself.

On seeing her do so, he let go of her immaculately manicured hand, her fingers slipping from his just as the remaining Aurors, his uncle included, arrived in a rush of robes. Stepping away from her, he shook his head in response to her observation of his wound. "It's nothing."

The wiry black haired head of Dawlish flashed past them, as he made for the smoking remains of the building across the street and barked cautionary instructions to Katrina Campbell to keep low, while she moved to check on the bodies of their two comrades and the badly wounded Muggle.

"Miss Abernathy!" Erasmus Gilreany called as he rushed up, placing himself in front of her, his wand raised and eyes scanning the area swiftly. "Come with us!"

Ignoring the young blond man, Paidea merely pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and moved after her rescuer. "Nonsense," she argued with Snape, still peering at him closely and ignoring the Auror's words. "You saved my life...and now you need some medical attention," she insisted, moving to place the linen on his neck. "Now press this to the wound firmly...it will help stop the blood loss." As he did so, she glanced up at his face again and took a step back. Who was he? There was something...something familiar about all this...her fingers touched the silver locket around her neck, a nervous gesture...but one that finally jogged an old memory.

"Severus?" she breathed, her eyes widening in shock at the very tall, dark-haired teenager.

"Miss Abernathy," he greeted her soberly, quietly pleased at her recognition of him. "I'd ask you how you've been...but...under the circumstances..." He glanced around at the fire and death around them.

Her eyes swept over him again before turning once more to witness the carnage, and though her expression remained forcibly composed, it was evident from the look in her eyes that what had happened had deeply affected her. "Quite..." she said softly in reply before turning to the new arrivals. "Gentlemen...someone should contact St. Mungo's immediately...and...these fine people's families."

Erasmus's voice radiated urgency. "All of that is in hand, but our first duty is to get you into safety, ma'am. There's no guarantee this was an isolated individual. I must insist you come in."

"Erasmus is quite right," came the deeper toned voice of Snape's uncle. "We need to get you inside at once." His eyes fixed on the teen's wound. "Both of you."

She glanced over at the Muggle driver, her brow furrowed as though she was about to argue. But she knew she could do nothing for him. "Very well," she acquiesced.

Erasmus moved his arm back around her protectively and glanced back at Severus. "You do need to get that attended to, it's bleeding badly. And exceptionally well done, Mr. Prince," he said, leading his charge away.

"Snape," the young man replied, his eyes fixed on the diplomat as she departed.

Steven lagged behind, his attention focused on his wounded nephew. "Come on, Severus," he instructed him with a small smile of reassurance. "We have some Healers inside."

"My belongings." Taking a step towards his bag in the shop doorway, Snape stopped, the world doing a slight jig before his eyes.

His uncle's hand grasped his arm with an iron grip, immediately steadying the lad. "The bag is not important," he told him firmly, but on seeing his nephew's expression sighed and levitated the bag over, slinging it over his shoulder. "Come on...in we go."

Following his uncle's guiding hand, Snape took one last glance over the street that had so suddenly become a war zone. He watched as Dawlish attempted to bring a pall of smoke under control so that the scene could be better investigated, and as Campbell gently dealt with the body of the thankfully unconscious Muggle driver. As he turned away, more Aurors accompanied by what looked like Obliviators suddenly poured out from the alleyway and other points along the street, the sweep and clean up about to begin in earnest as the sound of Muggle sirens was heard in the distance.

The Healers were also on alert, and as they moved down the tunnel to join the others, one of them stopped the moment she caught sight of the blood stained handkerchief clutched to the young man's neck. "Deep," she commented after a quick examination. "You were lucky; it just nicked the artery."

The tall leonine figure that Snape recognised instantly from newspaper reports as the Auror Rufus Scrimgeour strode down the corridor towards them and came to a halt on spying Steven. "What in blazes happened, Prince? All I got was some garbled half message. All sorts of rumours are doing the rounds!"

"They tried to assassinate Counsellor Abernathy," his uncle replied perfunctorily, watching as the healer attended to Snape and wondering what his sister would say to her son's involvement in all this. "Erasmus has taken her inside."

"They? How many of them?" Scrimgeour frowned. "What's the damage? Have they been taken down...captured?"

"There was one as far as we can tell. Half the building opposite is now rubble...and my nephew here likely blew him to small pieces, so yes, he's been taken care of. But Dawlish is checking to make sure." Steven turned his head to his superior, his expression sombre. "Ellwes and Tangerston are dead...and a Muggle cab driver is severely injured."

There was a momentary silence, during which Scrimgeour's features moved from shaken to angry. "I told them...I told them involving Muggles could do no good! Damnation!" he fumed before turning his attention back to Steven again. "Blown up, you say? And half the building opposite?" His gaze shifted to the teenager. "How did you manage that?"

Snape's black eyes turned to him. "I used a particularly large petrol bomb."

Not understanding, Scrimgeour looked to Steven. "The Muggle car," the dark-haired Auror explained.

The elder man's eyes widened. "I see! Efficient use of materials to hand..." Scrimgeour gave Snape a quick once over. "Are you one of our trainees?"

"No," came the decidedly short answer.

Pleased to see the last bandage applied and the young woman moving away up the tunnel, Steven sighed at the teenager's attitude and gave him a look before addressing his superior. "Severus here is my nephew, Rufus...he's job shadowing me for the next month while on break from school."

"Bloody dangerous time to be shadowing an Auror," Scrimgeour commented before evaluating the young man again. "Still, can't say it didn't turn out well. Have you considered joining our ranks, Severus? We could use initiative like that in these times."

"Don't have the grades," the young man answered, glancing at his uncle. "I should change my clothes."

Steven arched an eyebrow at his nephew at the blatant lie but nodded all the same. "Indeed," he agreed. "If you will excuse us, Rufus? I'll make sure to be at the debriefing," he told him, pre-empting the older man's instruction to do just that.

"Very well...." Scrimgeour nodded to them both. "You should take things easy, young man," he addressed Snape. "I've had enough blood loss to know what it can do to your head. I'd be obliged if you stay around with your uncle, though. We'd like to pick your brain on what you saw. And well done; the Ministry and the Counsellor are in your debt." With another quick nod to them both, the older man set off down the corridor.

Moving with his uncle back into the main arteries of the Ministry, the two men found the place in uproar. Looking around him, Snape turned to his relative. "What happens now?"

"Now, we go to the offices and get you cleaned up...and then we make ourselves available for that inevitable debriefing that will be taking place for the rest of the afternoon," Steven informed him with a regretful sigh, keenly taking in everything around them as they walked to the elevators. "Excellent job, by the way. Rufus was right, that was some wonderfully original and quick thinking. You saved lives."

"What about the Couns...hearing?" his nephew asked, catching himself mid sentence.

"Very likely the hearing will be postponed. Though from what I have heard about Counsellor Abernathy, she will most assuredly not be pleased about *that* one bit," was the reply as Steven squeezed them through a crowd and hit the lift button. "That woman could have lost both her legs and an arm and she'd still be dragging herself into that room." His tone was actually quite admiring. "She is all about duty...notorious for it...she simply doesn't know how to give up."

"Yes..." Snape stepped into the lift as it opened. "I know."

"Indeed," Steven replied, not sounding the least bit surprised. "I did rather gather that."

"What floor?" Severus asked, looking at the myriad buttons.

"Right now? The Second and Auror Headquarters. Why?" the elder man enquired, a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth at his nephew's attempt at deflection. "Somewhere else in the building you wish to be?"

Snape's eyes found him. "No. I merely find that lifts tend to go faster when you press a button...the *correct* one is generally best."

Steven chuckled slightly at the teen's sarcasm and nodded. "I stand corrected. Two it is. Though...I *suppose*...we could see where the Counsellor is. I suspect on Level Ten," he suggested lightly, glancing out of the corner of his eye at his nephew.

"If you want." Snape shrugged, keeping any vestige of enthusiasm from both his face and the fingers currently itching to press the Tenth Floor button.

"I don't know..." His uncle's air was carefully oblivious. "Maybe we should just skip it. Though...she probably would enjoy seeing a friendly face after such an ordeal...and I do need to speak with Erasmus...but if you rather just go change..." he waffled back and forth.

Knowing precisely what his uncle was doing, Snape sighed. "Isn't that where the Wizengamot is? On the Tenth Floor?"

"Yes...that's where the hearing was to be held...before the Wizengamot." Steven was finding he had to pull on his reserves not to smile at his nephew's behaviour. "And she probably marched right in there to argue her case, attack or no." He rubbed his lower lip with the side of his finger slowly. "Quite a sight to see, really...the Wizengamot."

"Yes. I'd like to see it..." His nephew agreed with a nod. "The Wizengamot."

Without waiting further, the teen stuck out his hand and slowly but deliberately pressed the number ten, while the finger on Steven's lip became a hand to cover the wide smile that had taken over the older man's face.

"Order! Order!" called the enhanced voice of Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, who was trying in earnest to bring order to the emotionally charged room. "Now, Cadmus, what was this about an attack?"

"My apologies," the middle-aged man replied. Taking a deep breath, he nodded to his aide, who had hurriedly whispered the news to him, to resume his seat. "Wiggins here has just informed me that there has been an attack just outside the Ministry."

The uproar began again.

"Order!" the elderly wizard barked again, immediately silencing the deafening speculation. "Is it...was the Dark Mark seen?"

"No," came the reply. "Though the assailant appears to be deceased...so it is possible he did not get around to conjuring it." The tall, distinguished man took a deep breath. "It seems as though it was an attempt to assassinate Counsellor Abernathy..."

"An unsuccessful one, I might add," interjected a diamond hard female voice behind him.

"Counsellor!" Dumbledore called to her in a relieved greeting as the pale young woman strode into the room with a determined pace, her aide moving behind her.

"Chief Warlock," she returned with a nod, not stopping until she had moved around the interrogation chair to take her place with a small group of waiting individuals at the side. "It is with no little shock and sadness that I must inform the council that during the ambush by an unnamed attacker, two Aurors, Jeanne Ellwes and Robert Tangerston, who had been sent to protect me, did just that and were killed for their efforts. I must also report that our Muggle driver...an innocent...was severely injured.

"This senseless act of violence," she continued as those around her proceeded to murmur in shock and anger, "only proves to me that what we are here to discuss and hopefully prevent today is more necessary than ever."

"How can you say that?" A wizard rose from the benches above. "The bastards just tried to kill you...they *did* kill two of us! We need those increased powers now more than ever!" Several voices rose in agreement around the room.

"No!" she insisted, just as Dumbledore went to call order again. "The increasing violence is only breeding more of the same. The truths and laws we cling to, never mind our moral principles, are now at stake! I tell you now..." She turned slowly to address them all. "We stand now at a crossroads, and one wrong step will only send us stumbling down a path I know none of us wishes to go."

More muttering wafted around the room, agreement blending with disagreement.

Holding her hand up to silence them, she continued, "Do not mistake my vehemence for foolishness or blind faith in human nature. I agree...the violence *must* end! The Death Eaters and 'He Who Must Not Be Named' must be stopped!" She paused, her loud words echoing and sinking into the ears of those around her. "But at what cost?" she asked them pointedly. "What is the point of fighting to preserve our way of life...our freedoms...if we *become* that which we fear and struggle against?"

"Those who do not agree with those freedoms seek to stop us...not by talks and a meeting of the minds, but with threats, violence, and death." She shook her head slowly, her eyes taking in each member of the fifty person assembly above her. "I am not afraid to die...but I will not cower from them and their tactics. Nor will I agree that we need to sink to such tactics to defeat them! Yes, ours is a better way!" she declared to them, still holding each person's gaze in turn.

"*But*...unless we prove that...unless our actions back up our words, those words and much vaunted ways are as useless as expired fairy dust. Someone must speak out...to show them that such methods will never intimidate us...scare us into following them down that dark path. For the minute we do that, we lose a hold on the value of life, and the minute we do *that*, they *have* won!" she told them. "We must fight them...we must show them that we are *not* afraid, but we must show them that we will continue to hold to who and what we are and what we believe in!"

Caught up in the hubbub of the announcement of the attack, no one within the Wizengamot had noticed the Auror and the heavily bandaged young man arrive in time to hear the impromptu speech. As they took their seats, the two of them looked around the faces of those within the great chamber, which remained hushed in the aftermath of her words.

"A poignant opening statement, Counsellor," the Chief Warlock replied after a moment's silence before turning to the middle-aged woman beside him with a serious expression. "However, Minister, even though it seems all the parties are for the most part prepared, after what has just happened and out of due respect for those killed, I would humbly suggest..."

"Indeed," Millicent Bagnold agreed, picking up his meaning immediately. "Though it pains me to postpone these proceedings, this current attack cannot and should not be ignored. Therefore, I am calling a recess to this hearing. After I have had a chance to meet with the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, who I assume judging from his absence amongst us is already engaged upon the matter, we shall reconvene when it is agreed that it is safe to do so."

Paidea's brow furrowed, and she appeared as though she might argue the point, but after glancing at several of the others in her party, she nodded up at the Minister for Magic in agreement as did Cadmus Hornsby, Deputy for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"Since all are in agreement...we stand adjourned." Dumbledore ended the session, rose to his feet, and moved off down the rows, the Minister alongside of him, towards a side door. The rest of the elders of the Wizengamot followed after him, their purple robes flowing behind them.

Even though Snape's eyes took in the great room about him, the greater part of his attention remained focused on the woman in the middle of it. As the elders left, he leaned towards his uncle. "What does that mean? 'When we *all* agree?' Will the debate be shelved indefinitely?"

"I don't know," the older man replied, impressed that his nephew had caught the subtle political cadences inherent in the simple statement. "The Minister finds herself divided on the subject. It's something of a hot potato -- one way or another the outcome will leave her with a lot of aggrieved supporters. I have a feeling she wouldn't mind seeing it put aside for a while." Steven rose to his feet, his brow furrowing just a little. Then without another word, he moved with swift steps down between the rows of seats, his eyes fixed on the small group still talking quietly below.

Suddenly acutely aware of his blood soaked shirt clinging to his shoulders and upper right chest, Snape nonetheless followed his uncle. Despite his rather woozy state, he reminded himself to be calm and take the elder man's lead. Following at his uncle's pace, he clasped his hands behind his back. He'd made a good impression, and now was the time to enforce it. He was no nine year old boy anymore.

Arthur Weasley glanced up from where he was talking softly with an older woman who had a broad, square jaw, very short salt and pepper hair, and thick eyebrows. Following his gaze, she looked up as well, holding her monocle to her eye to take in the two men. "Ah, Steven," she greeted him. "Good work today."

The dark-haired man gave her a respectful nod. "Madam Bones," he returned. "And I'm afraid I did very little. The praise goes to my nephew." He glanced behind him and beckoned the teenager over.

"I say!" Arthur breathed, his expression one of pleased respect as he smiled at the teen. "Good show, Severus!"

"Nephew, eh?" A small, short wizened man with a veritable mane of silver hair and close clipped 'ronnie' of a moustache exclaimed in a rather high pitched voice. "Really?" The two beady little blue eyes of Hezekiah Butler ran over the dishevelled newcomer, gleaming with interest and intelligence and leaving Snape with the impression that he was being looked through and thoroughly weighed up.

Steven made to answer, but was beckoned to by a tall dark-haired man with a tweed pointed hat. "A moment?" his cultured voice enquired.

"Of course, Mr. Satersley," the Auror replied and followed him to the far side of the room.

"Nephew, indeed?" Amelia Bones said in a no nonsense tone as she peered at the teen through her monocle. "How old are you, boy?" she enquired briskly. "And have you considered a career here at the Ministry?"

For his part, Snape returned Amelia's level gaze, not overly keen on being addressed as 'boy' in such company. "I'm seventeen and of age, Madam Bones," he answered, using her name, having recognised her from her picture. "And I'm considering a great many careers...but have decided on none as yet."

"Hmmm..." She tapped her monocle against her hand for a moment before slipping it back into a pocket inside her outer robes. "Yes...it is good to keep one's options open. Though you should make a choice soon -- spots among the Aurors fill up quickly -- but with the war..." Her voice drifted off as she sighed. "Well, you should give it some careful thought...make the choice that's right for you."

"Severus..." came a soft and very familiar voice behind him.

The instinct to turn immediately was strong, but Snape kept his gaze ahead of him for a moment more before turning casually to face her. "Counsellor Abernathy," he greeted her with an incline of his head.

She stood there, flanked by another woman with curly red hair and a tall skinny blond man with green eyes and glasses, a notepad and quill seemingly glued to his hands. Her eyes were warm as she gazed at him. "I wanted to thank you again for what you did for me. It seems I owe you my life twice over now."

Snape's lips curled minutely. "I was merely fortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the right time...twice. And as for today, it was nothing anyone else here would not have done, I'm sure. I am, however, sorry to have ruined your cloak."

"Counsellor?" The tall young man by her side spoke up before she had a chance to respond. Snape's eyes moved to him immediately. Apart from their respective lean aspects, they seemed polar opposites. Where Severus was sallow skinned and had long stringy black hair, this other man was blond, tan, had neat features and hair, and appeared to be about the same age as his employer. He was also immaculately dressed in an expensive tailor made set of robes that doubled as a suit, the silver grey material forming an ankle length frock coat which buttoned to his waist with silver buttons that were each imprinted with a crest. His suit trousers were crisp, their crease almost razor sharp, and his shoes shined with a high polish. He was dapper and immaculate, and there was no denying that he was eyeing the rather rumbled and grimy Snape with some slight disdain.

The dislike was mutual and instant, enjoined and recognised by both men before green eyes parted from black to return to his employer. "Counsellor, we need to formulate an immediate submission to ensure that the hearing is not bound over for the duration. We need to see to the media as they are clamouring for an interview...so a press release must be organised. Your parents have both sent owls. Your father is on his way to a Portkey point as we speak. Your mother and sister wish to speak to you by

Floo as soon as possible."

She sighed and shook her head. "Very well, Hawk," she agreed. "But a press release only...and I will draft a submission as soon as we are done here." Shifting her attention back to the dark-haired young man before her, she gave him a lopsided smile, though her words were directed to her assistant. "Send a brief note to my father, informing him that I will meet with him in an hour...and let my mother and sister know that I shall call them when I return home, but all is well." And without missing a beat, she continued, "And please do not worry about my cloak, Severus...it is easily repaired. People are less so. How is your wound?"

"The Healers attended to it. It stings a little but I shall live," he replied. "My apologies for my appearance..." His eyes glanced to her assistant for a fraction of a second, his words pointed. "I have not had the chance to change since the *attack*."

She touched his arm and shook her head. "I am most relieved that you are well," she assured him. "And no more apologies."

Looking down at her hand, he nodded and turned his gaze back at her. "I..." he began and paused, his mind trying to formulate the right words.

Giving his arm a squeeze, she released it. "We must catch up soon...it has been too long." Her eyes were warm and friendly as she gazed into his. "But you are very much the same...just as I remembered you."

His intent had been to ask if she might have time to visit privately...but he was now grateful his momentary uncertainty had prevented him from voicing that hope in front of so many others as her final words struck him. His eyes flickered, and he cleared his throat lightly, attempting to keep his equanimity as his delusions of adult suavity and assurance were well and truly punctured. The same. Just as she remembered. He could see the truth of that in her eyes. While the fully grown woman of his dreams stood before him, that odd little nine year old boy still stood before her.

"I am...somewhat grown as you can see, Counsellor," he reminded her quietly.

She chuckled and shook her head. "Oh, Severus, to me you will always be that precipitous little boy...and my dear friend," she told him warmly before turning to the red-haired witch beside her. "Daphne, we shall talk on the way to my office?"

"Certainly..." came the rich voiced reply of the reserved Daphne Willowby, an operative of unknown rank from the Department of Mysteries. "And my congratulations too, young sir," she added throatily as Snape, his head dipped to hide his humiliation, stepped aside to let them pass.

He watched the three of them go, the smirk on the face of her assistant obvious at her words. Saving the Levicorpus inflicted on him by Black and his fellow prats, it was the most embarrassing moment of his life. To have saved her life...to have been so highly praised...and then be told in front of all and sundry you were in essence still a little boy -- he would've been angry if it wasn't so disheartening. All his ideas, all those veiled dreams regarding her, and his place alongside of her smashed into a castle wall with a resounding thud.

"Is everything all right?" came the voice of his uncle as he and Satersley returned.

Snape looked at his relative, turned on his heel, and strode up the stairs and through the door they had come by. The Auror left in his wake gazed after the teen in confusion, before excusing himself and following him out.

"Severus!" he called, his long strides bringing him to his nephew's side quickly. "What in heaven's name is the matter?"

"Nothing," Snape snapped, walking back towards the lifts as the omni-present feeling of light-headedness increased. "I merely wish to rest, change...and leave."

An iron grip closed over the teenager's arm. "Severus..." The easy, affable voice was now one of commanding presence. "First of all, look at me when I'm talking to you. Second, you can't leave as we have to be in the Minister for Magic's office in ten minutes. And third...nothing my arse."

Snape stopped and looked him in the eyes as per his request. "You saw what happened out there as well as I. *You* talk to the Minister. I have blown up half a city street, lost several pints of blood, and am sick of being patted on the head like a good little boy. I would like to lie down and rest, if it's not too much trouble, Uncle?" The cool tone in his voice was completely at variance with the angry blaze in his eyes.

"No...it's not all right," came the quick reply. "Welcome to the life of an Auror. We're lucky these days to get time to sleep. And it is because of what you did that you have been requested to come to this meeting. You have a report to give, Severus. And like it or not...you have to obey the summons and do it."

He folded his arms across his chest, his green eyes upon his nephew. "That's what being an adult is...not getting to do what we always like to do or want to. It's about fulfilling your duty."

"Then do your duty, Uncle...I'm not an adult, remember? I'm just the boy. You go play the big man. I need to lie down." Severus turned away and hit the lift button.

"Severus Snape!" came the answering bark. "That attitude may work with your teachers and your mother and father...but it *will not* here and most certainly *not* with me. And you agreed to this arrangement for this summer. You are now in the real world. So cut the melodramatics." The doors pinged open. "The Minister for Magic has requested your presence in a meeting that will attempt to figure out who is trying to kill the Counsellor...your friend. And maybe what you have to say will save her life." His shoulders sagged and with a sigh, he stepped into the elevator. "I'm not entirely sure how or why, but it's obvious you know and care about her...and if you are of a mind to help her, you need to make a decision to stop acting like a child."

"My decisions are my own to make," Snape snapped, stepping after him a moment before his legs gave out and he sank to his knees.

Catching him quickly, Steven slipped an arm around him and pulled him back to his feet. "Damn it, Severus," he breathed. "Why didn't you mention you were feeling light-headed?"

Snape pulled himself away from the older man and steadied himself against the wall. "Let me see..." he rasped acerbically at him. "I mentioned the blood loss as did the Healer *and* your superior. I believe I even asked if I might rest...but duty rules, doesn't it, Uncle? Very well..." He turned from him and hit a button on the panel before his rather guilty looking relative could respond. "I'll be the man and play it by your rules. Let us go and do our duty."

Authors' Note: Many thanks to Smoke and Savageland for their time and marvelous beta editing of this chapter.

The Best Laid Plans...

The Ministry debates what should be the next course of action in regards to the recent attack, and Snape is given the opportunity of a lifetime.

Chapter Three: The Best Laid Plans...

"There have been more calls from *The Quibbler* and *The Daily Prophet*," Hawk said on entering Paidea's office, the tall young man all business while he frowned at his clipboard of notes. "The WVN would like you to appear on *Witch Affairs* at primetime tonight, but failing an interview, they'd like a statement touching on the attack. The expected thing -- who you believe is behind it, what it means for you personally, and how you see this affecting your campaign...the usual thing," he reeled off, waving his hand. "Sooner we get that out the better; get them off your back for the moment."

Seating himself in front of her desk, he glanced across at the blood stained cloak resting on the bureau nearby, eyeing it with distaste. "When we have that done, I'll send it out by owl...and then Scourgify that blood out of your cloak," he pronounced, lowering his head and making yet another note.

Paidea, deep in contemplation and standing by the fireplace with her arms folded, turned as he mentioned the cloak. Crossing the room to finger the rich material, she regarded it thoughtfully. "Forget about the cloak, Hawk, it's not important. In fact, I'd rather the stain remained. It's a clear reminder to me of everything I've worked for...and the cost in innocent blood should we not find a way out of this mess our society has got itself into."

Her hand moved unconsciously back to the locket at her throat, a pensive look on her face. A few moments of silence passed before she turned to her assistant and gave him a small smile. "Eight years." A hint of wonder tinged her voice. "I haven't seen him in eight years and he pops out of the blue to save my life...again! Severus," she said fondly, her thoughts obviously nostalgic. "I should invite him for dinner...catch up. It has been too long."

Hawk watched her, his brow creasing at her affectionate attitude to the teen. "Perhaps, *if* you have time," he reminded her, causing her to re-emerge from her childhood memories into reality.

"Of course." She nodded, crossing back to her seat. "The statement. Give me half an hour, Hawk, and then arrange for it to be sent out -- but not to that girl Rita at *The Daily Prophet*. She...well, I don't trust her or her motives." Pulling open a drawer, she retrieved a scroll to begin composing.

"There is one more thing, I'm afraid," her aide informed her quietly, his manner indicating he knew she wouldn't be pleased. "The Minister would like you to join the emergency committee after the debriefing on today's events. There is almost no doubt that they will be insisting on vastly increased security for you after this."

"And quite right too," a deep and commanding voice commented from the doorway before Paidea could react.

Perifanius Abernathy was nothing so much as imposing -- a tall, muscular man with steel grey hair, eyes that were the mirror of his daughter's, elegantly dressed in robes that accentuated both his tanned complexion and trim figure. He carried himself with the air of one who would excel in every field that he ventured into, which...for the most part...was true. But it was concern, not confidence that emanated from him now.

Reining in a sigh, Paidea looked up from her writing to give her father a smile of greeting, though her words were to her aide. "Hawk, please inform the Minister that I will be glad to meet with her when she is finished," she said, rising to her feet and crossing over to Perifanius. "Hello, Father. You're early...please sit down. Would you care for a cup of tea?" she enquired, kissing his cheek.

"That'll be quite enough of that," he told her sternly, laying a hand on Hawk's shoulder as the young man made his way past both father and daughter. "You will not attempt to make light of this to me, Paidea. There will be time enough for tea and the like when you and I are safely at home." Perifanius turned his gaze to her assistant. "Inform the Minister that Counsellor Abernathy will indeed be disposed to talk with her...but in the safe environs of our family residence. Miss Abernathy will be travelling there directly, and I will follow on with the Minister once this debriefing is over."

Hawk hesitated, glancing from the man who had hired him to the woman he worked for.

"No." Her word was firm, simple, and to the point. "I'm sorry, Father, but I will not be returning home. I have a job to do and I intend to do it. Please follow my instructions, Hawk," she told him, her tone brooking no argument. Resuming her seat, she picked up her quill and commenced writing once more. "My work is important, Father," she continued, "as you well know. And I will not falter simply because there are some who do not agree with me."

"Do not *agree* with you?" he scoffed, deliberately standing in Hawk's way. "Paidea, they are trying to kill you! The Death Eaters have made you their target. They *have* killed two people and may have killed a Muggle to boot! No." He shook his head. "This has gone far enough, young lady. Your mother and your sister were frantic with worry to me over the Floo. They are just as adamant that you come home to the safety of our residence. They want you there, as do I. You have made your point and stood your ground, but you can do no good if you are dead! It is time to pull your horns in and find a different path. Discretion is the better part of valour."

She rose up slowly, her face stony though her eyes were blazing. "You are my father and I love you, and I am, of course, sorry to worry you and my mother and sister, but do *not* think you can address me as though I were still a child at your knee! I have a job...no, a responsibility to the people to finish what I have started. And you would have me give up now? After people have given their lives so that I may proceed in what is right? Would you have their deaths become meaningless? I *will not*. I will not retire from my duty nor will I bow down to hate and terror. I am sorry that this grieves you, but my mind is made up." And with that she turned, sat back down, and took up her writing once more. "Hawk...that message will not deliver itself."

Her aide regarded the august impediment between him and the door -- a presence that still wasn't moving.

"Paidea...be reasonable!" Perifanius retorted, somewhat taken aback. "You are more than just a diplomat now. You are a mouthpiece for people who feel as you do. They need you to stay alive. You cannot keep putting yourself out there like this; sooner or later they will succeed! You cannot count on luck, or however it was you managed to get out of this attack!"

"And if I were to back down, what would that be saying about me or my cause, Father? I believe in this." Her eyes met his, though she did not move from her chair. "If I were to simply walk away, what would that say about my convictions or my ideals? I started this with full awareness of what it may mean to me and my life...and I *will* see it through to its conclusion, good or no.

"People are listening and looking to me to set an example. If we want a unified, peaceful world, there must be those willing to put themselves and their lives out there to show it can be so. I will not cave to cowards, Death Eaters, nor 'He Who...'" She paused. "Voldemort himself!"

The silence was almost deafening, the three of them barely able to believe she'd just spoken the dark wizard's name. Paidea swallowed slowly, shocked at her own audacity, part of her waiting for the Dark Lord himself to come bursting through the door. Straightening her shoulders, however, she continued coolly, "I *will not* give up. I will not surrender what is important and vital to us as a people. I will not shirk from my duty to them."

"No..." Perifanius snapped, "nor from reckless self-endangerment either, it seems. The very fact that you have chosen to speak *His* name just to make some kind of a point proves it to me! Paidea, you are being a fool! And you are going to get yourself killed!" He glared at Hawk as if he were somehow complicit in his daughter's foolhardy rebellion. "Very well!" He stepped aside, clearing the way for the younger man to leave. "Have it your way. Die for your ideals." Opening the door, he pointed for Hawk to leave, which the younger man did with great alacrity.

Slamming the door behind him, her father stalked to her desk and leaned on it. "I hope that it's a comfort to you when you go to sleep at night, thinking on the worry you're causing your family." He spun away from her, folding his arms. "This was not what I intended for you, Paidea...not at all!" A moment later, his broad shoulders sloped, his

head dipping as the worry and fear that had been gnawing at him since the threats and attacks had begun got the better of him.

On seeing his reaction, his daughter's planned retort died in her throat. Putting her quill down once more, Paidea rose to her feet. Crossing over to him, she placed a hand softly on his arm. "Father...it does hurt that I worry you all so. But your intentions or no, I am a grown woman walking a path that is now of my own choosing. And sometimes one must do what is right instead of what is easy. I love you all very much...but I must do this...even though I do sleep less than I should each night."

It took him a moment to raise his head and look at her, his eyes meeting hers, weighing and evaluating. "It appears there is a great deal too much of you in me, Paidea Abernathy. Then I went and compounded the error by training you to stand on your two feet far too well." He shook his head slowly in resignation. "So be it. But I won't stop fighting for your safety," he warned her. "I am going to this meeting and will have words with Millicent and Bartemius to that end."

Turning to her, he laid his hands upon her shoulders. "You lack the Abernathy height, but you carry yourself well, and despite my wish that you leave and come home, I am and will always be proud of you." Wrapping his arms around her, he drew her to him and held her. "You will always be my little girl, you know. No matter how far you climb, no matter what you achieve, and no matter how much you rail against it. And I am more grateful than you will ever know that you somehow escaped this alive and well."

She held him in return, allowing herself a moment to be that little girl again and take comfort and safety from her father's arms. "I'm sure you'll meet my rescuer again at the meeting. Knowing Millicent, she'll want an in depth and in person report with everyone around so she won't have to repeat herself too much," she told him with a chuckle, glancing at the clock on the wall. "And speaking of which...you're late."

Looking up, he nodded as he released her. "Yes...I had best go. What's this rescuer's name, by the way?"

Paidea smiled, her fingers reaching up to play with her locket. "Severus," she pronounced, eager to see his surprised reaction.

"I'm sorry....who?" Her father's brow creased a little.

She sighed, barely refraining from rolling her eyes. "*Severus Snape*, Father? The young man...well, he was only a boy then, who saved me during the attack eight years ago in Diagon Alley? The one whose treatment you paid for?"

"*What?*" he said, clearly startled. "What was *he* doing here? And more to the point, what was the boy doing with you?"

She arched an eyebrow at him. "I don't know why he's here, Father. But I'm very glad he was." Her smile reformed on her lips as a finger traced over the engraved P on her locket. "He's a little taller than you now, you know."

Perifanius took in the small smile on her lips and the way she was fingering that locket she always wore...the one it suddenly occurred to him had been given to her by the boy. "Just how tall?" he asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Hmm?" She looked over at him and on seeing his expression, snorted lightly with laughter at where his mind had wandered to. "Oh Father...he's still a boy! He must be...what...seventeen? He has probably not even started his last year in school. I hardly have time for a social life with a man of my own age, so cradle robbing is entirely too much effort." She waved him away with another chuckle.

Her father joined her after a moment. "Well...I shall be happy to reward him. As I recall coming from that destitute Muggle background he did, he'll probably be exceptionally grateful for it. Give him a leg up, heh?" he pronounced with more than a certain amount of pomposity as he opened the door. "I shall see you later. We shall have dinner together, yes?"

"That would be wonderful. I'm sure Elly will delight in the chance to make your favourite dishes again." Giving him another smile before her father left, she moved back to her desk, pushing thoughts of heroic teenagers with fathomless dark eyes, over-protective fathers, and life-ending explosions from her mind so as to concentrate on her statement.

"Thank you for the very concise report, Mr. Snape," said Millicent Bagnold from her seat at the head of the long oak committee table. The appreciative smile on her lips showed how refreshing she found it for someone so young to give such an articulate and succinct recounting, not to mention what the teenager had managed to do. Turning her attentions to the Auror sitting across from the black haired, freshly cleaned teen, she arched an eyebrow. "And what did you find of our assassin when you searched the site, Dawlish?"

"A man in black robes...though there wasn't much left of him," the young man replied. "Immediate identification will be near impossible, but he did have the Dark Mark. We found it tattooed on his arm plain as day." He cleared his throat slightly. "When we found his arm, that is."

The sound of several sharp inhales resounded in the quiet of the room -- some of them coming from the assistants of those present who were seated along the sides of the council chamber as they took notes.

"It's hardly that surprising, is it?" Snape said, speaking again rather unexpectedly. When all heads turned back to him, he regarded them steadily. "Given the death threats the Counsellor has been receiving, who else would you expect to find there?"

"Precisely so, young man." Perifanius Abernathy swept into the room with his assistant, a young woman with pince nez perched precariously on her nose trailing behind him. "And given the escalation of said death threats into out and out assassination attempts, I would like to know what this assembly is intending to do to protect the life of my daughter!" he demanded, sitting down and looking directly at the Minister.

"That is one of the matters that we will be discussing momentarily, I assure you, Perifanius," the leader of Britain's Wizarding world replied, her keen eyes meeting his without flinching and her voice cool and calm. "We are not taking this incident at all lightly." She turned her gaze to the man on her left hand side. "Mr. Crouch, what else have your Aurors found?"

The middle-aged man's face was like a thundercloud. "There were the remains of a Reflectus," he said of the banned two way communication and espionage device based on Floo magic that allowed the speakers to interact or see what was going on elsewhere. "Which means someone else was watching the street from a distance, most probably giving the orders. It is ruined beyond any chance of repair and there's no way we can ascertain either where the signal was coming from or what that last message would be. I would imagine, however, that it was the signal to open fire..." Simmering with barely controlled fury at the loss of his two Aurors, Crouch slowly sat forward.

"Both of our people were, *naturally*, hit by the Killing Curse." His eyes turned to Perifanius slowly as if in accusation. "The Muggle had his legs burned to cinders, no doubt in the hope of a slow, agonising death. As our people were not allowed to respond *in kind*," he emphasised, "there was no way for them to take him out."

"As I heard it," Perifanius responded coolly, though clearly irked at Crouch's reasoning, "it was not so much a matter of them being under armed, but rather that they simply couldn't see the attacker in question. And yet this boy could..." He glanced at Snape then back at Crouch, pausing before speaking again. "With all due respect to Mr. Crouch, might I suggest that perhaps the fault lay in their training and ability rather than the spells they have been given?"

Crouch's eye twitched. "*What?*" he growled as the tension in the room suddenly ratcheted up dangerously. "How dare you, *sir*," he snarled. "Two of my best people are dead in the line of their duty protecting *your* daughter and you dare suggest to me the fault lay with them and their..."

"It wasn't training and it wasn't a case of the wrong spells, he was using a muffling spell," Snape reminded everyone present, speaking out calmly once more and keeping his gaze on his headmaster, who nodded approvingly. "He had covered the flash of the magic leaving the wand, but forgot to take into account the mirror in the room and the resulting Speculum Effect."

"Speculum Effect?" repeated Hezekiah Butler, his bright eyes gleaming at the boy. "I see your understanding of magic is as good as your ability to use it, young Mr. Snape. The reflective and modulating effect of mirrors upon magic is advanced final year theory -- you've been doing some significant reading, I see."

"Enough that I understand what went wrong," Snape inclined his head a little.

"Understanding or not," said Satersley as he gazed at his colleagues, the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department present due to the use of a taxi cab as a bomb, "we were damn lucky the mirror was there to allow him to be seen."

Snape frowned a little at that and looked at his uncle, but on seeing Steven nod in agreement, said nothing.

Perifanius, however, had plenty to say. "Minister, there is time to sift through the who and what of what occurred. While I have great respect for those who died defending my daughter, I do *not* appreciate this being turned into an opportunity for Bartemius Crouch to advance his agenda on the subject of Aurors and the use of the Unforgivable Curses!" He inhaled slowly, keeping his composure. "The dead are dead and we must honour and grieve for them. But my daughter, the subject of this attack, still lives, and I demand that her safety be put to the top of *our* agenda now."

"Might I suggest..." Dumbledore, seated on the right-hand side of the Minister, interjected, his voice soft but full of authority, "that for the moment, we put aside any personal agendas and focus on the issues at hand. Mr. Crouch will have his opportunity to present his case soon enough as, thankfully...will Counsellor Abernathy. And though I agree with Perifanius that we must deal with the personal security of the Counsellor as our prime issue, we must get to the bottom of this attack, or more precisely how it came about. That tunnel entrance to the Ministry is known only to Aurors...and a few others who are high enough to have clearance to access it."

There was silence for a moment. A silence that was full of a thought many people were having but few wanted to speak of, especially given the preponderance of Aurors and representatives of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement seated around the table. In the end, however, it was an Auror who finally voiced the thought.

"We must consider that perhaps we have a leak," Steven said, hesitant at first, knowing he was venturing into unpopular territory. "Only we knew where the Counsellor was going to be, when, and how she was getting there." His eyes met the Minister's. "We have a mole in the Department, ma'am."

"Mr. Prince," the deep, resonant voice of legendary Auror, Cadmus Hornsby, Hero of the Grindelwald War and Order of Merlin First Class, addressed his former student at the Auror training academy, "do you know what it is that you are suggesting?"

Snape turned his eyes to the monster of a man seated further down the table from him. At six feet five inches and powerfully built, despite his advancing age and white hair, Cadmus was still a handsome and trim man in the full flush of health. The kind of man who had always attracted attention even at an early age, he now inspired a kind of awe and deference in all other Aurors. His feats of magic, daring, and ingenuity were legendary, and during the war with Grindelwald, he had been second only to Dumbledore in the acclaim given to him. He was an Auror through and through, and even Snape, who was not given to hero worshipping the Aurors like his fellow Hogwarts students, admitted to a filip at sitting across from so imposing a figure.

Cadmus laid one brawny arm upon the table, the golden bracer emblazoned with an eagle upon it catching the light in the room. "You know the training that Aurors go through. The testing, both mental and physical. Only the best of the best are allowed to pass into our ranks. And those that lead us in the Department are either Aurors themselves or above suspicion in every way possible, thanks to the testing they face on a constant basis. Are you seriously suggesting that a Death Eater has permeated our ranks?"

Steven gazed back at his mentor, a little uncomfortable at coming into conflict with Cadmus and his green eyes showing that he was more than aware of what he was saying...and that he didn't like it. Yet he remained resolute all the same. "I think we are all loathe to think it could happen, but it is possible that someone -- perhaps not an Auror, perhaps someone simply working in the office -- is at the very least passing information on. Sympathisers do as much damage as actual converts to 'You Know Who's' cause."

"There is also the Imperius Curse to consider..." Millicent Bagnold added.

"Aurors are well trained in its resistance. And all those on active duty go through periodic re-evaluation, so it would show!" Hornsby insisted, a large finger tapping the table for emphasis.

Satersley sighed from where he sat next to Perifanius. "That does reduce the chances it's an Auror," he agreed, "but it does not mean they are immune. Nor does it reduce the chance that it's a member of the Departmental staff."

"I know my people," Barty Crouch snapped. "I trust them all."

"And we are all glad to hear it," said Dumbledore. "But perhaps, given the circumstances, we should take a leaf from the Aurors' books and begin to check *all* Ministry members for evidence of the Imperius curse. Beginning with the Aurors and Magical Law Enforcement staff..." He smiled placatingly. "Merely as a show of intent course -- no admission of guilt."

"I'm not convinced that this had to have come from inside the Ministry," Cadmus shook his head. "Not convinced at all." Gesturing behind him to where the various assistants sat, the Auror beckoned forth a tall, very handsome man with neatly coiffed brown shoulder length hair. "Do you have those papers, Nicholas?" he asked him.

"Yes sir," Nicholas Fleetwood answered in a quiet mellifluous voice as he moved forward, his chocolate brown eyes looking respectfully around the table. Opening a folder, he pulled out a sheaf of cuttings.

Taking them with his thanks, Cadmus turned back to the assembly and one by one tossed the headlines about the day's hearing upon the table.

"Is it really that hard to see how this might have happened?" he asked them, pointing to the plethora of headlines and editorials from the past few days on the upcoming hearing on extending the Aurors' powers. "The media are being given far too much access to what is going on within the Ministry!"

"There are only a few entrances in and out of the Ministry -- the Floo network obviously, which I would urge you to check in case it has been tampered with. The second entrance is, of course, the phone box on the street," he pointed out. "Our assassin was placed in a house just up the way from that phone box. None of the buildings directly by the phone box are empty, but the house in which the assassin took up his position was."

"Have you ladies and gentlemen considered that he was but one Death Eater located around the place assigned to cover *that* phone box on the chance Perifanius's daughter would use it? Even given that you have to walk down an alley from the street to get to the tunnel entrance, in my view it was an absolutely disastrous decision to bring that girl in through a secret entrance that bloody close to the phone entrance!" he railed.

"The phone entrance was almost *certainly* going to be watched..." He tapped the newspapers forcefully. "Especially when virtually the entire wizarding world knew when and where this hearing was going to take place! If you want to know of a dangerous leak, then look no further. It is this administration's insistence on being open to the point of foolhardiness with the press and the public."

He looked towards Millicent. "Madam Minister...we are on the verge of a civil war. We must impose secrecy upon all Ministry dealings from this point forward. Minimal information. For the safety of our people we must restrict information. The public must be kept from knowing details of what is going on at high levels. Information is a weapon. A strong weapon...it controls belief..." He closed his fist tightly. "For the safety of our people we must control that information. Of all kinds."

"You are dangerously close to asking that we keep our people in the dark, Cadmus," she said, her voice sad but calm. "And that is something I will not do. There is already enough fear and misinformation spread about; I won't add to the confusion further by shutting down those lines of communication. But I do agree that we must be more vigilant and confidential about top level meetings and events. This hearing, when it reconvenes, will be somewhere else, and it will be need-to-know only. And considering those who wish to speak are all Ministry officials, that shouldn't be a problem."

She inhaled slowly. "We also do have quite the situation with Counsellor Abernathy. It is clear that these assassins, Death Eaters or no, are not going to stop until they have achieved their goal. Therefore...I suggest...we make the Counsellor's whereabouts need-to-know as well."

"You wish to put her into hiding," Hezekiah interjected. "She will *not* like that one bit...especially now."

"She will have to do as she is ordered," the Minister replied firmly. "Paidea can be intensely stubborn...but she will do her duty. Especially if the Ministry orders her to."

"I would be reluctant to bet my life on that supposition," the low voice of the teen still at the table cut through the momentary silence as he sat, head bowed and arms folded.

There was silence for a moment before Perifanius spoke up, a slight edge to his voice. "Would you indeed, Master Snape?"

The young man raised his head. "I mean no disrespect to your daughter, sir. But she is notoriously stubborn just as the Minister says...her track record speaks for itself," he answered, drawing on his years of reading about her. "In fact, she has been so from an early age...as you will recall, defying her parents was not beyond her even then."

Unfortunately, given what had just occurred in his daughter's office, now was not the time for Perifanius to be reminded, no matter how subtly, of his daughter's tendency towards defiance of her parents, and he reacted sharply. "She was foolish then...and she is being foolish now. If the Minister orders her, she *will* go. Especially if this council is unanimous on it. Childish behaviour is just that, Mr. Snape, and something we all have to grow out of it...something that will no doubt occur to you too in time."

Snape's eyes went flat and cold almost immediately, but before he could retort, Perifanius turned back to the woman at the head of the table. "I would have her returned to her family's custody, Minister," he formally requested. "Our residential compound is easily defensible and very secure. With extra Aurors, we could make it virtually impregnable."

"I would venture to disagree, Minister," Dumbledore said after a moment's silence. "That will be the first place that an assassin will look for her." He stroked his long grey beard slowly, his eyes far away. "No...I would suggest somewhere as far removed from London and from our world as we can. Somewhere where no one will think to find her."

"Dumbledore's right," Cadmus agreed, joined in his assessment by Steven, Dawlish, and even Crouch.

Millicent gave a brisk nod as well. "I concur. The fewer of us who know her location the better. She'll need a guard, of course...two if we can spare it. Both to keep her safe from any attacks...and..." A small knowing smile lit upon her lips. "To keep her from her own pigheadedness."

"Two guards? That's insanity! Did you people not see what happened today?" Perifanius exclaimed, aghast, before rising to his feet. "Are you *trying* to get my daughter killed?"

Daphne Willowby nodded slowly and looked to her friend's father. "I feel they may be right. Too many people knowing makes her not only a sitting duck but also increases the chance of a leak. The fewer the better is the best policy...but I would recommend a Portkey or two be placed there for evacuation as well as an alarm."

Steven inclined his head in agreement. "In fact, Minister, Chief Warlock, it would probably be for the best that neither of you know as well. Perhaps one, but not both."

"Sit down, Perifanius," Cadmus addressed the still standing anxious father. "Deep down, you know it makes sense. If we hide her away and control the information on her whereabouts..." his eyes glanced pointedly back to Millicent, "in line with my suggestions, then we reduce the chances of a repeat of today's disastrous events. Secrecy is the key to keeping her safe." Perifanius, outvoted on all sides, sank back down into his seat as Crouch's deputy continued, "My suggestion would be that the Chief Warlock be allowed to choose his people and her location. No one can doubt Albus's loyalty..." He smiled at his old ally. "Or his somewhat eccentric deviousness."

Millicent gave a quick nod of agreement. "I concur. Albus?"

The old wizard's head bobbed slowly, his normally sparkling blue eyes deep in thought. "Two should be unobtrusive enough. Bartemius, who would you suggest?"

Crouch steepled his fingers, his expression pensive. "Whichever pair you choose, I would say they have to be loyal without question. Considering secrecy is key, an amount of cunning is most definitely required, as is the ability to think and act fast...talented and with highly honed skills obviously...and finally..." He scowled somewhat, glancing towards the elder Abernathy. "Considering the subject they'll be looking after, people who are capable of being firm in the face of exceptional obtuseness!" He turned back to Dumbledore. "I can compile a list of suitable names for you, if you like."

"Thank you, Bartemius, that would be most kind." The elderly wizard's eyes took in those gathered around as the Minister spoke up.

"Very well, then it's decided. I will speak to Counsellor Abernathy after we adjourn and let her know what decisions we have reached. Then she and her two escorts will depart immediately to wherever they deem it safe to keep her until such time as we have uncovered the events leading up to this attack, or that circumstances show that it is safe for her to return.

"The Chief Warlock will appoint who shall go with her and act as Secret Keeper to their location." She paused, her displeasure at sending one of her top diplomats away just when she might be needed showing clear in her expression. "I hope for this to be only a temporary measure, ladies and gentlemen. I want any existing breach culled and the culprits found....yesterday. Is that clear?"

Cadmus's voice was low and serious as he answered her, "It's clear, Millicent. But I remind you, no breach within the Ministry has yet been ascertained. That is, beyond the seemingly never ending need for Ministry staff to gossip to the press. Which, quite frankly, those of us *not* concerned with re-election or political careers all know is maintained only to try and keep the public onside while the Death Eaters move about them actively recruiting.

"Something the Aurors...every one of them..." he nodded towards Steven, "are unhappy with. Start with controlling your information, Madam Minister -- that will get you results. Then, and only then, start a campaign of misinformation within certain sections of the Ministry. *If* you find that information leaking out...then you will know there is a breach. But I warn you, ladies and gentleman, don't start a Death Eater hunt through the ranks of the Aurors. The results will not do them or the Ministry any good at all."

Around the table, Bartemius, Dawlish, and even Steven appeared to be in agreement with the elder man's sentiments, along with one or two others. It was clear the subject was once again going to be divisive.

"It seems..." Millicent said with a resigned air, "that this meeting shall run for a while yet. Very well. Bartemius, would you take Albus to your office and give him your list of preferred names, then return to us. Albus, use his office to peruse your choices and when you have arrived at a conclusion, let Bartemius's secretary know and she will send us a message. I shall then inform the counsellor of our decision, and your choices may implement whatever plan you have come up with."

"Of course, Minister." Dumbledore rose from his seat, along with Crouch.

Millicent turned her head to Steven and his nephew. "Mr. Prince, Mr. Snape...thank you for your report. We are grateful for your attendance here. Now please...take young Severus here for a rest and a good meal; he has more than earned it. Wouldn't you say, Albus?"

"Most certainly." Dumbledore regarded Snape with a smile. "Holidays it may be, but you have done the school proud, Severus. I do believe Slytherin may start the year with some significant house points in the bank."

As uncle and nephew rose, Snape inclined his head. "Thank you, Headmaster."

"Not at all, Severus...thank you. An excellent job, young man, eh Perifanius?" the elderly wizard called back as he moved towards the door.

Perifanius, unhappy at the way things were running, was somewhat shocked out of his own thoughts. "What? Oh...oh yes..." he said reluctantly, Snape's remarks not endearing the teen to him and removing the inclination to do more for him. "He did his duty as an Auror would. Well done. You have our thanks once again. I'm sure the notoriety will be of great advantage to you in whatever future career you choose," he said dismissively before returning to his thoughts, making it clear to everyone that that notoriety and his family's thanks were enough reward for anyone in his estimation.

Patting Snape on the shoulder, Dumbledore smiled at him as the four men exited before further comment could be made. Once outside the door, Steven gave his superiors a respectful incline of his head. "With your permission, sirs, I'm going to take my nephew over to The Leaky Cauldron for something to eat. He's lost a bit of blood today and needs the bolster."

The elderly wizard gave them both a beaming smile as the stuffy, overly neat man next to him nodded. "Very good, Prince." And with a quick turn of his heel, Crouch moved off swiftly down the hallway, Dumbledore next to him and from the sound of it, trying to engage him in discussion about the merits of sherbet lemons as medicinal agents.

With an amused shake of his head, Steven turned to his nephew. "Let's get some food in you," he said with a small smile as they began their walk to the elevators.

"Are we going back to your home afterwards?" Snape enquired, touching his bandaged neck lightly.

The Auror nodded, rubbing his upper lip with his knuckle absently and his gaze still fixed in deep thought. "Yes...you should get some rest once we've gotten some food into you. I think some of Tom's beef stew is in order." Shaking his head, he gave his nephew a wide smile as he hit the elevator button. "Your mum would be jolly pleased with you, Severus. You handled yourself like a natural in there...which is less than I can say for Perifanius Abernathy." He gave a light snort as they walked into the awaiting lift. "But never mind him. Our role in this matter is over...now on to the spoils. Stew and pints for all!" he declared with a clap and rub of his hands as the lift doors shut.

Snape entered the by now familiar surrounds of The Leaky Cauldron and headed inexorably towards the removed booth in the darkened corner he always claimed whenever it was free. Sliding himself in, he ignored Steven's look at the secluded position he had taken up and picked up the menu.

He supposed his uncle would assume he was being reclusive again, and to a point that was part of it -- his own company was something he was most comfortable with, after all. But it was more than that. This spot was the best one to observe all the comings and goings of this hub of Diagon Alley. To observe and not be seen to be doing so.

It was almost entertaining to watch the unexpected liaisons, arguments, and trysts that went on here. And from time to time, one could pick up some useful information about what others were up to.

Perusing the menu, he decided upon the vegetable broth. Like the meat variety his uncle was intent upon, it was more stew than broth, but it was the best and lightest thing on the pub's menu. And even with the restorative he had taken after cleaning his clothes, he felt it best to go light on his stomach.

His uncle, it seemed, appeared to eat with as great an enthusiasm as he took most aspects of his life, and happily ate, drank, and chatted away with his nephew over the next forty-five minutes. Mostly it was about what it was like to be trained by Cadmus Hornsby, what an incredible Auror he was, his idealism, and how he sometimes let his paternal feelings towards the Aurors and the population they were trying to protect overwhelm him. It was only when Steven began tucking into his bread pudding that they were interrupted by a large tawny owl landing right on the edge of their table, a rolled up and sealed parchment in its beak.

Steven's eyebrow rose in surprise as he took the letter and tossed the owl a treat. "You expecting a letter, Severus?" he enquired. On the teen's shake of his head, the older man unrolled the scroll and quickly scanned it. "It seems we are not free to go just yet," he said, his voice soft but again possessing that business like air that indicated duty called. "The Chief Warlock would like to see us in fifteen minutes." And with that he went back to his pudding.

"Does it indicate what it is about?" Severus queried, a slight scowl forming on his face. "Does Dumbledore stipulate both of us? More to the point, is there any way I can avoid it?"

Steven's eyebrow arched at his nephew. "Yes, it says both of us...and no, you can't avoid it. In fact, I'd lose the notion of avoidance, Severus. The life of an Auror pretty much is the opposite of avoidance...more like being knee deep in it on a regular basis."

Snape put his spoon down with a clink and sat back checking his bag. "Spoken precisely like a man who hasn't had to sit in front of Albus Dumbledore for twelve hours a week lately," he answered. "And must *everything* come back to honour and duty with you Aurors?"

"I wasn't talking about avoiding 'duty,' merely having to listen to a conversation littered with references to bullseyes, sherbet lemons, acid drops, and strawberry liquorice. Not to mention the *amazing* story of how he suddenly discovered he was wearing three pairs of socks at the same time. *That* and I only wanted to rest." He stood up, hefting his bag up. "Blood restoratives work even more slowly than bone ones, Uncle," he told him as he moved off, dropping his share of the bill on the table before his relative could stop him.

Arriving back at the Ministry five minutes later, the two men crossed swiftly through the atrium to the elevators. As they walked, Steven took in the more subdued atmosphere of those in the Ministry since the incident that morning. In his own way, the idea of a leak in the Department bothered him as deeply as it had his old mentor...though for the sake of his nephew, currently glowering at having to return to the Ministry once again, he tried not to show it.

He was not blind to the young man's focus on the beautiful diplomat, and he supposed if he was inclined toward people with breasts he would be as well. He had also not failed to notice the silver and ebony pendant around the Counsellor's neck -- a locket, to be exact, and one he knew quite well. Its placement around her neck and his sister's recounting of how it had been given away by her son certainly seemed to explain how his nephew and the diplomat knew each other. So this was the girl Severus had saved...and now he had done it again. Casting a glance over to the teen by his side, he wondered why he found that vaguely troubling.

Severus was far too young for her, of course, but the boy was obviously affected by her. It was not surprising giving their past connection, but he worried the boy might get hurt if his crush continued unabated. However, perhaps through her, his nephew would take an interest in...or simply be inspired...to participate in something greater than his own studies. Frankly, the boy didn't seem to be inclined towards much of anything outside himself. And that too was worrying.

The lift swiftly took them to their destination on the second floor, and a brisk walk down the corridor and through the offices found them once more before Miss Weatherby, her red glossy lips smiling widely at the pair.

"I see you got the owl. He's waiting for you both inside." She rose to her feet and crossed over to the large oaken door, her gentle rap immediately answered with a jovial "Come!"

Steven watched with some vague fascination as his nephew effortlessly let his sour expression slip into a more composed one, hiding his emotions easily. In that moment it was more obvious than ever why the Prince line, almost exclusively Ravenclaw throughout its long history, had another rare entrant into Slytherin.

Entering the office of Bartemius Crouch, Snape found Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, bouncing gently up and down on the large swivelling seat and swinging it back and forth in between bounces as he revelled appreciatively in this new style of chair.

Taking a long deep breath, the teen cast a rather long suffering look at his uncle before he moved in to take one of the two seats arranged in front of the desk.

Steven appeared more than a bit amused at the sight as he visibly struggled not to laugh at the elderly but highly respected wizard. Taking the seat next to his nephew, he leaned forward ready to speak, but instead found a paper packet hovering in his face.

"Toffee?" enquired the old man with the most innocent of expressions.

Picking one out of the bag with thanks, Steven went to begin again, only for the bag to zip its way over to take up a similar position in front of his nephew.

"Swedish Fish?"

Even Snape, long used to his Headmaster's eccentricities, blinked at that, his long nose twitching in anticipation of the smell of brine emanating from the brown bag. "Pardon me, Headmaster?"

"Yes!" Dumbledore enthused. "Tasty little things recommended to me by the headmistress of the Salem Witches Institute in our last correspondence. Red jelly type sweets shaped like fish...oh...jelly fish!" he chortled to himself, suddenly realising the play on words before shaking his head with a smile. "Although I'm not entirely sure why they are Swedish," he pondered looking into the bag. "I believe the Swedes are inordinately fond of herring. Red herrings, do you think? I remember once when I was in Sweden, I saw a herring that was..."

"Headmaster?" his student's voice quietly interrupted him. "I have no wish to cut your story short," he lied, "but my head still aches a little from this morning's events, and I would...if at all possible...like to lie down at some stage."

"Ah..." The elderly wizard cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. I digress. Of course you are wondering why I have called you both here." He popped a jelly fish into his mouth and chewed upon it slowly with a smile of satisfaction -- though whether from the sweet or from what he was about to say next, it was hard to say. "What were your plans for the next little while, Mr. Prince?" he enquired.

Any smile on the Auror's face immediately cleared, his mind already moving five steps ahead at that simple line. "Apart from Severus job shadowing me for the next month...I had no plans." His green eyes flicked to his nephew. "But perhaps that question is now irrelevant?"

"No...it is entirely relevant, I assure you," Dumbledore replied, leaning back in his chair. "You are an intelligent man, Mr. Prince, your reputation precedes you...so I shall not assume that you do not know why you are here. I have chosen you as one of the guardians of Miss Abernathy. This of course means that there must be a change of plans regarding your young charge here."

Snape turned from his scrutiny of his uncle and the stab of jealousy he felt at the realisation that his relative was about to go into seclusion with Paidea Abernathy. "You wish to send me home, sir," he cut in, getting swiftly to the point.

Dumbledore merely smiled and glanced back at Steven. "How do you feel your sister would take to losing contact with both her brother and son for a period of time?"

The Auror's lips pursed as he considered that. "It would depend. If I were to let her know that Severus was with me under my protection, then I think she would be all right with it," he decided. "But of course, it depends if Severus wishes to go. This is not what he agreed to when his mother suggested this 'apprenticeship' of sorts." He turned to the teen. "You would not be allowed to contact anyone...not even your mother, and I know she has not been well as of late. Is that something you feel you can live with? No friends...no family. Well...except for me."

The teenager looked from one man to the other in surprise. "You wish me to help protect the Counsellor?" he asked in astonishment, both at the proposal and at the fact that neither of them seemed to think it odd to ask an untried seventeen year old who was not even an Auror trainee to take up this task.

The headmaster smiled. "Who better, young Severus? After all...there is certainly no one with the Department who has such a successful track record in preserving this young lady's life!" He tapped a small scroll by his side. "Twice now, I believe. I see no particular reason to substitute you when you are doing so well!" he added with a chuckle.

"You have all the requisite skills that Barty Crouch stipulated; saving that you are not an Auror, you have the added advantage of a longstanding acquaintance with Miss Abernathy. Plus..." he eyed Snape with amusement, "a relatively healthy disrespect for figures in authority. Paidea Abernathy, like her father...perhaps more so...can cut quite the imposing figure. You, as I know of old, Severus, are not one easily cowed...and in fact can be quite daunting yourself when you put your mind to it. So yes, my intention is to use you, providing your mother agrees and you wish to be used, that is."

Snape restrained himself forcibly from nodding too quickly at the thought of being not only in close proximity to Paidea but in such an intimate and legitimate capacity. "I have no objections to the task, sir." He turned his head to his uncle. "When will you speak with Mother..." he frowned in remembrance, "...and Father?"

"I'll speak with them directly," his relative agreed, his gaze penetrating, knowing full well his nephew was more than simply pleased, even if he didn't show it.

Snape nodded again and turned back to his headmaster. "Where are we to guard her, sir?"

Dumbledore folded his arms. "Well, the exact location I shall hold off from deciding on and discussing with you until after your parents have given permission and we have ascertained you *will* be joining us on this little venture. But..." he added, "I have been dwelling on a few safe holds where we could securely place her. All of them have copious amounts of protective spells and are conveniently enough located in the vicinity of wizarding communities to allow you easy access to supplies...something the Counsellor will no doubt be insisting on."

A sly look slipped over his face. "However, I do have one other idea I rather like bouncing about in my head like an over-excited house-elf. One that young Snape here would be ideally suited to help implement." His gaze turned to Steven. "How would you fancy living the life of a Muggle for a while, Mr. Prince?"

The dark haired man appeared momentarily taken aback, though his mind was quick to kick back into gear and on doing so, began to sift through the benefit of such an environment. It would not only be completely removed from any potential troublesome hot spots, but there would be a next to nil chance of anyone recognising her and reporting back should they go out in public. Plus...who would think to look for the wealthy pureblood witch in amidst Muggles?

"An excellent suggestion, sir," he agreed barely a breath later. "I think I shall be able to adapt. I've spent enough time at my sister's house to learn a little, though I'm sure Severus will be able to instruct us both." He flashed his nephew a quick smile.

Snape nodded in acknowledgement at his uncle's words. Amidst his silent euphoria, he was pleased that he would be able to speak authoritatively on at least one subject in the presence of the quick-witted aptitude and suavity of his uncle and the poise and intelligence of the Counsellor.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore enthused. "Then we are agreed. Once you have received his parents' permission, Mr. Prince, return to me here and we shall, all three of us, plot the perfect spot for this hideaway. Then I shall inform the Council...who will have the joyous task of breaking the news to our lovely...but dogmatic...Miss Abernathy."

Authors' Note: We would just like to take this opportunity to give many thanks to the amazing D'arcy for her betaing efforts. She totally rocks our socks.

Dressing the Part

As Paidea packs in preparation to leave, Snape finally convinces her that he is no longer the child she once knew.

Chapter Four: Dressing the Part

Snape glanced down at his boots as the lift started to rise, the plush carpeting on the floor and the carved wood panelling alone making him feel out of place. Raising one foot under his new robe, he rubbed it slowly down the back of his jeans, ultra conscious of his appearance.

The Ministry Atrium was well appointed, but one expected that. It was a government building and the hub of Britain's Wizarding community. But Ereterium Towers, home to London's Magical Elite, was something else again. The lobby downstairs was ridiculously ostentatious to his mind, with its marble floors and walls, huge Persian carpets now removed of their flying charms that lined the sweeping double stairs to the in-house restaurant, as well as a leisure centre and indoor Quidditch practice arena.

In the centre of the lobby, a large diamond phoenix, the symbol of the Towers, soared from a model of the building and was surrounded on each side by solid gold statues by the renowned Leprechaun artist Seamus O'Sean. Statues that were worth a king's ransom, but which would cleverly turn to dross the minute they were taken from their rightful owners.

All along the walls, portraits of the families in residence eyed all those not of their ilk with suspicion as they dared to set foot in the Towers. These portraits, along with the porter dressed in liveried robes, had eyed Snape's not inexpensive but not yet properly tailored robes that his uncle had hastily bought him as if they were sackcloth. Everything about the place spoke of wealth, breeding, power, and culture...except him. Merlin alone knew what awaited him *inside* the home of one of Wizardry's most rich and famous.

The doors slid open with not so much a ping as a sigh, and Snape stepped out into a hallway that was about as wide as his family's front room and most certainly better decorated. Just one of the vintage items dotted around the place was probably worth roughly all of the belongings in the Snape household...and it didn't even belong to one of the residents, just the building in general.

"You, Prince's protégé?" came the gruff question from the large black Auror standing by a set of ornate, heavy double doors. His wand was drawn and he was eyeing both Snape and his ill-fitting clothes with suspicion.

Disdain one minute, suspicion the next...his clothes were certainly making a statement today, Snape groused silently. "Yes," he replied aloud with as much equanimity as he could manage, considering his discomfort with his surroundings.

"Password?" came the immediate inquiry.

"Social Butterfly," he answered.

The Auror nodded, relaxing a little. "Where's your uncle?"

"On his way." Snape approached him. "He's organising where he's...*we're*...going to take Counsellor Abernathy."

"I hope it's somewhere with considerable access to something to mellow her out." The Auror folded his arms, nodding his head back towards the double doors. "*That* is one *unhappy* witch in there."

Snape glanced at the door. "I'd imagine she'd be even less happy if she were dead."

The dark man chuckled. "True enough...anyway, on you go. Best that someone is inside with her. Just glad it's you, though, and not me. Maybe your youth will save you the verbal torrent."

Frowning slightly and not happy to be reminded of his age once again, Snape turned and knocked on part of the ornate door that was covered in friezes from various historic moments in Wizarding history.

As soon as his knuckles left the door, it was opened with an enthusiastic, "Greetings and welcome, young sir!"

Snape looked down and blinked slowly. He had seen only a glimpse or two of the unobtrusive house-elves of Hogwarts in his time there, but he had never seen one like this before.

The miniature being before him was indeed just like every other house-elf, down to the somewhat caricatured face. However, that is where the similarity ended. For this one was fully clothed...and not just clothed but luxuriously so. Her gown was made of brocades and intricately woven, though without any real trim, and she wore a veil of lace over her head so that only her face and ears were able to be seen. She even had little satin slippers on her feet. Indeed, she appeared more the lady-in-waiting than a lowly domestic, her happy, eager expression fixed upon him as she calmly waited for his response.

"You're...dressed..." he blurted in surprise.

She blinked and glanced down, seeming to have forgotten that she indeed was. "Oh yes, sir! Elly is always nicely and best dressed to receive her mistress's guests."

"So..." he said slowly as his mind ran through his understanding of house-elf owning etiquette, "that would make you free?"

She frowned and appeared mildly affronted. "Oh no, sir! Elly would not disgrace herself or her family so! No, Elly promptly makes sure she is taken into trust after each gift."

The teenager frowned. "You renew your indentured servitude every time you get clothes?"

"Oh yes, sir! Elly loves her family and the Mistress! Elly couldn't think of leaving her service!" she answered with a smile. "The Mistress loves Elly as well."

"Obviously." Snape nodded, taking in the luxuriousness of her clothes again with a slightly sour expression...even the house-elves here were better dressed than he was. "I assume she's here?"

"Oh yes, sir! May I ask who wishes to see her?" she requested, obviously told to screen the guests.

"Severus Snape," he replied, his voice growing more confident with his next words. "She's expecting me."

"Yes, the Mistress is!" she agreed with an even brighter smile. "Please come this way!" Gesturing for him to enter, she turned and hurried back into the flat.

Following her in, he stopped to close the door behind him. He was never entirely sure why people relied on house-elves so much. They were loyal certainly...fanatically so. But so eager to please for the most part and so unutterably literal that they often caused all sorts of problems. Then again, you didn't have to pay them and he could see why that appealed to the rich. Typical. Even free labour goes only to the wealthy and powerful. 'Them that has, gets,' as his father was wont to say.

Moving into the apartment, he was quickly distracted by his surroundings. If he thought the lobby and hallways were bad, it was nothing compared to the large spacious sitting room he was in now. Everything was...perfect.

The furnishings, the decorations, the drapes, even the positioning was perfect. The room breathed class, taste, sophistication....and wealth, so much wealth.

His stomach dropped into his boots. There was a vase in the corner that he recognised from his studies as a Ching Dynasty protected urn used to store magical powders. If he saved for his entire life at what he expected to earn in an 'average' job...he could probably afford the left handle of it just before he died.

Every step he took through the room following the house-elf only rammed home how far beyond him the Counsellor and her family were. His diminutive guide took him down a corridor decorated with murals of the great and impressive deeds of the Abernathy family and to his relief, into a brightly lit, relatively unobtrusive study. At least there was one room in this place that didn't have W.E.A.L.T.H. painted all over it with every immaculate stroke.

Once inside, Elly turned and smiled up at the guest. "Please wait here...I shall tell the Mistress you have arrived." A heartbeat later, she vanished through an open doorway.

Reappearing a minute later, she beckoned the still standing teenager into the room. "The Mistress is packing. She will speak with you in her bedroom."

"In...her bedroom?" he repeated, looking from the house-elf to the door and back again, not entirely sure he was ready for that. He had spent a great deal of time dwelling on her, and events were moving far faster than he expected -- meeting her again...being put into a situation where he would suddenly see a significant amount of her...seeing how she lived.

Seeing where she slept might be a bridge too far.

"The Mistress is packing and overseeing what is to be taken...if sir wishes to speak to the Mistress, it will have to be in there. The Mistress is quite busy," Elly replied primly before turning and disappearing back into the room.

Pulling on his shirt collar under his robe and pressing the bandage that still covered the almost healed gash on his neck, he raked his hand through his hair, pushing it back. Taking his cue from his uncle, he straightened his shoulders and strode in with a deal more confidence than he felt, clasping his hands behind his back to keep them out of his way.

Wide windows overlooking the city lit the room, the bright sunlight diffused gently by the sheer white net curtains which hung over them. Immaculately polished mahogany furniture gleamed, the carpet on the floor made his tread completely soundless, it was so plush, and the four poster delicately curtained bed was resplendent with the finest of sheets, rich blankets, and covers.

And in that room, pacing back and forth as she gathered items, was the highly irritated woman of his dreams, the light frown on her aristocratic and normally warm features rather telling of her mood.

"Miss Abernathy," he said as he reached the end of her bed, trying not to let his attention waver to it too much whilst noting that her clothes and hairstyle had changed again. Not that that should surprise him, he supposed. She had just been attacked and changing her attire was a good way to help put that behind her.

She glanced over at him as she waved her wand to send a long blue and light purple dress over to the waiting Elly to pack. "I do not like this idea of hiding," she informed him bluntly. "I am only doing so because Millicent suggested or rather...*manoeuvred* me into it."

"I apologise for the inconvenience." His reply was mild as he endeavoured not to stare at her, while allowing a hint of amusement to enter his tone. "However, I can see why your superior might think it better to have you in hiding rather than dead. Much easier to ensure future service that way."

She paused for a moment, her eyes taking him in longer and in a more evaluating manner. "Indeed...exactly what she said," she said after a moment with a tiny smile on her lips. "That was a rather astute statement...you've grown up, Severus." Her eyes flicked over his form quickly. "And not just in height," she added, her smile turning into a grin. "Though you do tower over me now."

He inclined his head slightly, quelling the quaver her words set through him. "Thank you, Miss Abernathy," he acknowledged her compliment. "And time alters us all...you included," he added, indicating her face, form, and dress with a slight wave of his hand.

Her low laugh filled the room. "Indeed!" she agreed wholeheartedly. "Though I fear not much in the height area." With another smile, she turned and moved to gather some more dresses.

"Might I be of service in any way?" he asked, feeling slightly at a loose end just standing there.

"No, no." She waved him into a chair as another gown floated by. "Elly and I have this under control. So tell me, Severus...what have you been up to these last eight years?"

He eyed an ornately embroidered chair and moved around to lean on the back of it lightly. "For the most part, I have been attending to my studies."

"At Hogwarts, correct?" she enquired as she waved three pairs of shoes in the waiting Elly's direction.

"Yes," he replied, watching the delicate slippers float by. "Hogwarts...and pardon my presumption, but might I suggest," he ventured slowly, "something a little more robust in the footwear area? These are very elegant and attractive but...not entirely practical for the purpose of...not to put too fine a point on it...running."

Moving out of the humungous walk in closet, she eyed the shoes with pursed lips. "I see...you believe I shall..." Her voice trailed off as she nodded. "Of course I may have to." She disappeared back in the closet and three new pairs drifted out, one of them a pair of calf-skin boots, but with definitely more practical soles.

He noted her clothes more closely in the aftermath of that, beginning to wonder where she thought she might be 'laying low.' Not too many hideouts required evening wear. "Miss Abernathy..." he began, "your evening wear..."

"Oh yes! I may need some...thank you, Severus!" she called out, sending two much more elaborate sets of dresses and robes out for the waiting house-elf. "And it's Paidea, remember. After you save a woman's life twice, that more than entitles you to a first name basis."

"No..." He tried to point out his real meaning, only to be distracted by her insistence on his name. "I mean thank you," he said weakly, watching the incredibly ornate dresses join the ones he had thought *were* her evening wear.

He stood mutely for a moment as they piled up before shaking his head slowly. "Miss...Paidea..." he began with a frown. "Your pardon, but, quite frankly I think you have forgotten *why* it is you are packing."

Striding out of the closet, the young woman gazed at him quizzically. "No, I am quite aware why we are leaving. What makes you say that?"

He took a deep breath. "Because...you are packing for a gala event and, with all due respect, most definitely not for remaining...unobtrusive."

Her eyes blinked and after a moment her laughter bubbled forth. "*Gala* event?" she repeated. "No...these are my casual clothes, Severus, and I am most certainly leaving my social occasion clothes behind." Shaking her head and still chuckling, she moved to take several other folded garments out of the drawer before walking them over to Elly.

"Casual," he repeated quietly. "Yes, I can see how they might be considered so...if you were a Byzantine empress." He took a step to stand in front of her as she moved across the room. "I apologise...Paidea," he said, definitely not wishing to offend her. "But...in no way, shape, or form can what you are packing be considered casual to ninety-nine point nine percent of the world at large. Even your non-evening wear," he stumbled for lack of knowledge over what to call it, "would leave most normal people,

magic user or Muggle, agog. You will, quite frankly, stand out like a unicorn in a herd of Shetland ponies."

Her lips pursed a little, but she still gazed at him with amusement...almost as though one would an errant child. "Very well. What would you suggest then?" She waved him over to the closet.

He moved instead to her trunk, taking one look inside of it before drawing his wand and levitating it up to casually dump the entire contents out onto her bed.

Elly gasped in horror, racing to neatly pile and organise the contents and remove wrinkles.

"Now," he said with a modicum of approval, tossing the boots and more practical shoes she had packed back in, "let us see what you might have." He strode past her into the walk in closet to be faced with a monstrously large room. A room that encompassed most of his dorm room in Hogwarts and all of the upstairs of his home and one that was filled with, as far as he could see, nothing but luxurious and utterly impractical gowns.

"Merlin's balls," he muttered under his breath.

Staring at everything, he walked down the rows of garments all categorised by style, colour, material, and occasion. A flick of the wand would cause the racks to switch revealing more and more clothes, shoes, and undergarments. Halfway down, he turned back and stared at her. "Do you clothe the entire Ministry from here?"

The amused expression still on her face, she shook her head. "No...these are all mine."

"All of them." He stared at her from under a disbelieving brow. "All?"

She inclined her head. "Yes...some I've purchased, but many were gifts."

"From every member of the entire population of China, it would appear," he muttered, gazing around again.

"I believe one is from the Minister of China..." she mused, moving down the way towards him.

"Naturally," he deadpanned before taking it all in again for a moment. No, he decided. Nothing. Not one thing seemed remotely appropriate for anything other than entertaining, socialising, or speaking at the highest level. "Is there anything in here you don't wear anymore?"

She glanced around the room and shook her head. "There are some I have yet to even wear," she informed him. "But no, none that I don't. I give those away..."

"Very well...is there anything you are beginning to wear...less?" he suggested hopefully. "Something going out of style?" His eyes perused gowns that seemed to defy all kinds of style fashions.

She shook her head. "Elly already went through my attire for that already last week," she replied. "Severus...I am sure my choices will be adequate."

His eyes met hers as he gave a definitive shake of his head. "No, Paidea, they will not." Reaching out, he took hold of one of the less ostentatious gowns he could see and walked out past her with it.

Following him in a rustle of chiffon, she watched him with a mildly irked expression. "Severus, I am a grown woman and can decide what I will and will not wear. I understand we will need some discretion..."

"No..." He turned to look at her. "You *need* something normal. Not normal for who you are, but something normal for who you must *appear* to be. Quite frankly, Madam Diplomat..." he exhaled quietly, "you need to find your way down to me."

She stared at him. "Muggle clothes?" she enquired with a light frown. "But I do not own any Muggle clothes."

Turning to the dress he held in his hand, he looked it over briefly before raising his wand and uttering an incantation. In a few moments, silk turned to cotton...satin edging to a smidge of lace frill...high collars to a low grandfather collar...full length to calf length and shimmering silver and blue to a mixture of browns, reds, and burnt oranges in typical colour striations of the current fashion. "You do now," he said as he finished, tossing it towards the trunk. "Have you anything with trousers?" he enquired, glancing back at her.

She stared down at the new dress in shock. "Trousers?" she murmured before nodding and absently gesturing towards the closet before he slipped back in. "I might..."

As soon as the young man had gone back into the closet and much to Paidea's relief, Elly took the item and reconfigured the dress back to normal and packed it...along with everything else on the bed before closing the trunk and levitating it out to the sitting room. Placing a new trunk on the bed, she set to work packing her mistress's underthings.

Snape walked back out of the closet with an airy, brightly coloured, flyaway collar blouses, two pairs of snug fit looking trousers, and a pair of bell bottom jeans with some embroidery on the pockets both front and rear. Glancing at Elly, Paidea went a little green at the assortment of Muggle clothes in garish colours and styles.

Pausing at the foot of the bed, Snape frowned. "Where is the other trunk? And everything I *just* emptied out onto that bed?"

Paidea looked furtively at Elly, who had a rather resolved expression on her narrow features. "My Mistress will be properly attired," she said firmly with very evident devotion.

"You changed the dress back?" he addressed the house-elf, his jaw tightening while he draped the new clothes over the bed. The little being's chin rose in defiance.

"Elly," Paidea interjected, hoping to stave off an argument between the two, "why don't you check and see if any last minute dispatches have arrived?"

"No," he said sharply. "I asked her a question." But with a nod, the house-elf vanished, leaving the two alone, and Snape turned to her mistress quickly, glowering. "You allowed her to change the dress," he stated more than asked.

Paidea sighed and turned to the teenager with a placating smile. "Severus, don't be harsh with her. She has been in my family for years...her entire family has. They have a very set way of doing things and I'm afraid my father's training is evident."

"It is *your* dress. Not your father's."

The colour in her cheeks rose at his accusatory tone, though she felt rather ridiculous for reacting so. "Well...I..." she stumbled. "We can change it back if you like when we get where we're going."

Silence reigned between them for a moment, glittering black eyes boring into her deep blue ones. Finally, his arms folded themselves across his chest, his words coming in a cool, hushed tone.

"The fact that you allowed her to countermand my action is of more interest to me, Counsellor. Restore your clothes, or do not. Do what you wish..." A hand gestured vaguely towards the other transfigured clothes. "As it is evident that you will do it anyway. Just as it is evident that you do not think enough of my knowledge of the environment we are venturing into to believe I know what I am talking about. Your offer to change the dress back is merely a sop to the *boy* you obviously still feel you are dealing with."

"I am sure it is quite *adult* to play such games behind another's back...and even more adult to insist on frippery and foolish impracticalities when practicalities are paramount." His eyes flashed as he straightened further, and his gaze moved beyond her. "But I shall say no more and allow you and my uncle to thrash things out from this point on and keep my childish notions to myself."

She stared up at him in complete shock at his steely manner, his words permeating her thoughts. Her cheeks flushing even further, she began to realise the extent to which she had allowed her irritation with the current situation to affect her and with a slow nod, she moved over and touched his arm. "You have my apologies, Severus. It was very wrong of me not to listen or heed your advice and to allow Elly to do as she did. I shall pack these items and will, of course, listen to any other advice you care to give."

His eyes remained resolutely ahead of him for a full minute before they returned to her, and more specifically to her hand upon his arm. "I...know this not easy for you..." he said after a moment, his voice still quiet but the bite dulled, "and I do not wish to make it harder upon you, but..." He gazed at her intently. "Neither do I wish to see your life in danger again."

She smiled softly and nodded. "I know. You are a good friend, Severus," she replied, her eyes warm.

Almost unbidden, his hand slipped over hers, his eyes darkening and flaring all at once as they held her gaze. "I wish to be." His voice came as little more than a breath.

The catch in her throat was audible, his fingers covering her own sending tingles rippling through her skin. His voice...his words...set her off balance and made her head spin. But nothing was so affecting as his eyes, her own widening at the depth and intensity of what she saw there, and it was not friendship that lay exposed within them...nor was it some puppyish adoration. And *that* both thrilled and terrified her.

But it was the shocking urge to fall into those twin dark pools and lose herself completely that dragged her back to her senses. Pulling her hand away, she tried to compose her features, feeling thrown and flustered. "Don't look at me like that," she told him softly.

His eyes remained upon her, his voice stronger but deeper and more resonant. "Why not?"

She didn't really have an answer...so completely bewildered as she was by her own unexpected reaction to him that she was not at all sure what to do about it. And so she retreated, pulling her diplomatic mask back on like a comfortable security blanket. "Because it makes me uncomfortable," she told him plainly before turning and picking up the items he had put on the bed to pack them in the new trunk.

The fingers that had covered her hand drew back on themselves, folding into a loose fist by his side. The flicker of hope of reciprocal feeling caused by her touch and augmented by her flustered reaction was snuffed out by the following cool calm.

"My apologies." He inclined his head as the door buzzer rang. "That will be my uncle," he noted, any sign of disappointment well hidden in a business-like manner. "I will go...no doubt this means we shall be on our way soon." And moving out, he left her alone in her room with her world, and now her thoughts, turned completely upside down.

Closing the door over behind him, Snape stopped to glance back, frowning thoughtfully. His disappointment melted somewhat as he reasoned that a flustered retreat was considerably more advanced a position than he had been in at the end of their last meeting. She had pulled away from him, certainly, but he *had* seen it...just for a moment...hesitation...and more...confusion.

He *had* affected her.

For good or ill now, there was no doubt that she no longer thought of him as just a boy. The look in her eyes crossed his mind once more, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips. He didn't think it was for ill.

On moving down and exiting the muralled corridor, he emerged to see his uncle give the Auror at the door the orders to leave and take his colleagues with him back to the Ministry.

"Uncle," he greeted him as the door closed. "She is almost finished packing. There was some...disagreement...but I believe it has been settled."

Steven's eyebrow arched as a corner of his mouth tugged upwards in amusement. "Disagreement?"

"Yes." The teenager looked around, observing the luxurious living room once more, but this time feeling decidedly more settled. "She felt bringing a half dozen ball gowns, satin slippers, dress robes, official robes, and casual wear that most witches would save five years to purchase was 'downplaying' herself enough. I...disagreed." His gaze turned back to his uncle. "After some persuasion, she has modified her opinion somewhat."

Steven's eyebrow arched higher. "I should hope so..." he breathed, shaking his head.

"I should also inform you that we shall be pitched against two voices. Her maid is somewhat unusually forthright with her opinions for a house-elf. Naturally they all back up her mistress," the teen added, approaching him.

"Wonderful...so we've not only got a pig-headed politician but an accompanying echo too." His uncle sighed and nodded ruefully. In the next breath, though, his back straightened and his hands clapped together and rubbed vigorously. "Ah well...never mind. Let's be off, eh?" He pointed a finger casually at his nephew. "I've spoken to your mother, and she was understandably a bit anxious about your participation but, as she put it, you are at the age of consent now and must be trusted to make your own decisions. Besides, she feels if Dumbledore asked for you, he must feel you are right for the job." He gave the young man a smile. "Your mum was always a sensible one," he announced, striding off down the hall.

Snape followed in his wake. "Was my father there?" he asked after a moment.

The older man's step paused just a little. "He was there," Steven agreed.

The confirmation and preceding pause was enough for the teenager to glean an unspoken addendum to his uncle's words about his father's state. Moving alongside the older man, Snape pushed the vision of his inebriated, railing father brusquely from his mind. "How are we travelling? Portkey?"

"Yes!" came the quick jovial response, the Auror's relieved tone at his nephew's lack of questions in regard to his father was telling. "Do you have everything packed?" He glanced at his nephew's slightly baggy new robe. "I'm sorry we didn't have time to get it fitted for you, but it's first thing on the agenda as soon as this is over, I promise."

"Where we're going, it won't matter." Snape waved the apology away. "And I can reduce it myself if needs be."

"Scholar, hero, and a tailor too?" Steven grinned at him. "My, you are a jack of all trades."

His nephew ignored him. "I have shrunk my bag, which I should have thought to do earlier. It is in my pocket and considerably simpler to carry." He glanced down at his robe. "Should we arrive in Muggle clothes?" he enquired before his tone took on a sardonic air. "If so, I would say that immediately to the Counsellor. Judging from what I've seen, she may take some time to change."

"Good idea," Steven agreed as they entered the large study adjacent to the Counsellor's bedroom. Paidea's bags sat just as Severus had left them, though standing next to them now was the diminutive house-elf.

"Elly," Snape addressed her, still unhappy with her conduct. "This is my uncle, Steven Prince. An Auror. He has been charged with your mistress's welfare. *He* is in charge where we are going," he informed her meaningfully.

The little being curtsied at once. "Elly is most pleased to meet Mr. Prince. Elly is her Mistress's humble servant. Elly will tell the Mistress that Mr. Prince is here," she exclaimed in a rush.

"Thank you, Elly," Steven replied with a smile. "And will you also kindly tell her that Muggle attire will be required for this stage of the journey?"

Glancing nervously at Snape at the mention of Muggle clothes, obviously having been spoken to, Elly looked back at Steven, and with her hands clasped together and an eager expression on her face, she nodded and hurried back into the bedroom.

Left waiting, Steven turned to gaze out of a set of wide and elegantly crafted French doors leading to a balcony, his gaze thoughtful.

"There is something I've been meaning to say to you," Snape said after a minute's silence. "About the hearing and what was said in it." Gazing at his uncle, he frowned a little. "Don't you think it was odd that a Reflectus was required? That someone felt the need to expose themselves in overseeing a crack Death Eater assassin?" He drew out his wand and moved to Paidea's trunks. "I admit to knowing little about assassination, but generally assassins aren't in need of guidance. Or control," he added with emphasis before he started to shrink the expensive luggage.

"Hmmm?" Steven turned back to his nephew, the faraway look still in his eyes but that, too, cleared quickly as he took in Severus's thoughts. "Quite right," he agreed after a moment, clapping the teen on the shoulder. "Quite right indeed. This whole situation is dashed odd...and not the usual tactics for Death Eaters." He tapped his finger to his lips as his gaze moved back over his nephew's shoulder. "It just feels...off...Greetings, Counsellor!"

Paidea stood in the doorway, adjusting the fit of her long open frock coat. Smiling at the older man, she moved swiftly into the room, her usual petite height augmented due to a pair of three inch heeled leather boots on her feet. "Hello, Mr. Prince," she greeted him, holding out her hand. "It's a pleasure formally meeting you at last. And let me thank you again for your aid this afternoon. It seems I owe a great deal to the Prince family." Her smile was determinedly friendly as it turned to include Snape as well, a slightly guarded air about her, before her eyes looked to her clothes and back at him as she sought his opinion silently.

Snape looked over her outfit, his arms folded across his chest as his eyes glided over her, attempting to judge the suitability of her garb. She was not wearing what he had created for her, but she had made a placating attempt to create Muggle clothes herself. Which was a fine thought except that she had obviously hurriedly taken the style from some old Muggle book or other. For along with the frock coat, she wore a ruffled regency style shirt, a waistcoat, jodhpurs, and knee length heeled boots.

It was a little outlandish for Muggles...but he had seen worse, and the snug fit of the jodhpurs was not an unpleasant aspect to the ensemble. "The Counsellor seems suitably attired for the journey," he said to his uncle as he shrugged off his oversized robes, revealing his jeans and shirt.

Paidea smiled a bit more widely at his approval and glanced down with a pleased expression at her outfit before turning her gaze back to the Auror. "Your nephew has been a quite a help to me as we packed. Informing me about Muggle attire."

Steven kept his council, having been informed of their 'disagreement' and well imagining the form in which Severus's 'advice' had come. Smiling, his gaze shifted once more to the teen. "Yet another talent, Severus?" he teased. "Perhaps we should consider a career for you in the Muggle Liaison Office?"

Snape gave him a sour look of distaste. "Thank you. No," he replied definitively with an incline of his head. "You may rest assured that wherever I end up following the end of my time at Hogwarts, Muggles will not be playing a part in it."

Paidea's eyebrow arched at his comment. "But are you not half Muggle?" she enquired, her tone a little confused. "Are you not proud of where you come from? Of who you are?"

Snape's thoughts flew back to his drunken father. "I am who and what I am. I am ashamed of nothing," he answered her somewhat stiffly. "However, I have spent most of my life in a Muggle environment...when I have the choice, I would prefer to explore the other side of my nature."

Giving him a small smile, she nodded. "Of course," she replied. "It is much better to have a well balanced and holistic view of yourself and the world around you." Her smile grew, though her expression became a little more guarded once again. "A very adult view, if I may say. You really have grown up." Her eyes lingered on his for just a moment longer before she turned to the older man. "Shall we depart?"

"Of course," the Auror agreed as the young woman turned to take hold of one of her now smaller trunks. His expression shifted while her and his nephew's attention was diverted -- if only for a moment -- the furrow of his brow showing that he had not missed the look the Counsellor had given his nephew, his estimation of what had been involved in this disagreement altering somewhat. There was tension still between them, but of what form he wasn't entirely sure.

Hoping it wasn't a case of Severus being too acerbic with that lash of a tongue of his and thereby making this mission decidedly more awkward, he sighed inwardly and focused his thoughts on the more immediate need of getting their charge to a safer location. Pulling out a large rusty iron key from his pocket, he held it out before them. "Right...grab on to this then," he told them briskly, glancing at the clock.

Waiting for Paidea to take the key, Severus reached out slowly and grasped the metal, placing his hand alongside hers, his eyes drifting to her face. After each person had taken a hold of one of the shrunken trunks, Elly floated up on Paidea's order to grasp the key. A few seconds later they were all holding on tightly as they were sucked through the swirling magical portal, and on Steven's command they let go to land fairly neatly on a green lawn.

The first thing that was noticeable to Severus as he put down the trunk, no bigger now than a piece of hand luggage, was the heavy scent of salt in the air. While there was nothing but sunlit green hills and woodland in front of them, it was evident that they were by the sea. When he turned around, his eyes widened somewhat to see the gleaming white chalk cliffs of the southern coast of England sweeping off left and right on either side of them, revealing that they stood on the lawn of a Muggle cliffside cottage.

The stone cottage was well maintained with spackled and white washed walls, slated with old dull orange slates from the potteries of counties closer to Snape's home. He estimated that the old farmhand or crofter's house had been there for some two centuries or more. It was now obviously a holiday home, but it was snug to say the least. From the size of it, he doubted there were more than two bedrooms in the place. And...there was an outhouse. He glanced briefly at the woman beside him, wondering how she would take to that *particular* old fashioned bit of Muggle plumbing.

A side garden that swept to the fenced off cliff some thirty feet beyond the cottage was also well kept and quite pretty with roses, honeysuckle, a few apple and pear trees, and an old stone bench in their midst. There also appeared to be a gate with steps beyond it, no doubt leading down to a cove or beach below. With the blue sea sweeping beyond, it was exceptionally scenic and not at all what he expected.

Which, he supposed, was entirely the point.

"This," Steven said to Paidea as he brushed himself down, "is what Muggles refer to as a 'holiday home.'" He swept his hand out and around. "The estate agent who rented it out was quite a nice chap. Though I had to wipe his memory of both our conversation and, in fact, him even having this property." He grinned at them both, looking rather pleased with himself. "It even has modern plumbing!" He frowned. "I think that's important...because the agent mentioned that a bit."

Snape snorted lightly. "Yes...I believe you will find it is. Mostly as in this case, it will stop us all from wandering over the cliff when in search of that thing..." he nodded at the outhouse, "in the middle of the night."

"Oh, good then!" the older man breathed, the quick mischievous glance he shot at Paidea clue enough that he'd known that fact the entire time. The shared joke unfortunately fell somewhat flat as she had no real idea what either of them were talking about. Chuckling all the same at her smiling bewilderment, Steven waved a hand over to the house. "Let's go see what our home sweet home is like then, shall we?" he said with no small enthusiasm as he took the handle of the other reduced trunk and carried it off down the gently sloping hill toward the cottage.

"Your uncle is a very exuberant man," Paidea commented quietly to Snape as she indicated for the now invisible Elly to follow the Auror.

"Hard to miss, isn't it?" he answered with a certain trace amount of weariness. His eyes turned to her and his lip curled upwards a little. "If my mother had not married a Muggle, he would undoubtedly have been regarded as the black sheep of the Prince family. As it is...she was cast out, and now he is my grandparents' great hope. They are only waiting for him to marry and provide them with grandchildren. I do not count, of course," he stated in a matter of fact tone whilst watching his uncle's retreating form. "Once that is done, he will be deified, I'm sure."

Her eyebrow arched even as she nodded. "I do not think I will ever completely understand the bigotry that is so prevalent in our people."

"I understand it only too well," he replied quietly. "We are small in number and fearful of being swallowed up or destroyed by the Muggle world. That is why we hide behind our spells of obfuscation and monitor our magic so carefully. We are powerful but few. And when you have power and talent, you resent being made to hide it. Resent feeling and appearing weak." He glanced at her. "The bigotry in our society is based on that suppressed power."

"There are those of us who hate having to hide from Muggles. And rather than saying we are hiding because we fear them, they prefer to believe that we 'remove' ourselves because we are better than them. They do not wish to be weak or diminished...no one does. And the easiest way not to feel diminished is to view someone as weaker than yourself. It is about feeling better about one's circumstances...and it is about control. There is nothing any of us wants in our lives so much as control over it."

"Instead of Muggles being strong because of their number, they are weak because they have no magic. They are lesser. Therefore those who associate with them and worse...breed with them...are lesser, as are their offspring. It is simple and logical," he commented with no particular trace of emotion, accepting it as simply the way things are. "People do not take kindly to having the order of things shaken up...even within their own families. What was ordered and controlled is no longer. So they would rather sacrifice their flesh and blood than the control." He shrugged lightly as he finished, his gaze shifting back to the sea. "Bullying others to feel better about oneself is no great mystery."

She regarded him for a moment before she spoke, impressed and finding his judgement quite astute for a young man his age. "You appear to have given this a great deal of thought, Severus."

His eyes remained on the sea. "I have had plenty of time to myself to reflect on such things."

Her brow creased somewhat as she reappraised him yet again, evidence of the difficulties in his life since she had left him that day at the hospital growing with his words. Nodding a little, she offered him a small smile.

"Still...I think we all have the capacity to grow and change," she added. "That everyone, no matter how rigidly fixed they are to their beliefs -- good or bad -- has the capacity to put them aside to hear and understand the other's point of view. However, not everyone chooses to exercise this ability, and therein lies the true shame of people like your grandparents and the core reasons we are now at war."

Snape's black eyes returned to her. "Perhaps everyone has that capacity," he agreed, "but the reason they do not exercise it is that some beliefs brook no deviation...or they cease to be those beliefs. And they would rather die than change them because they fear losing who they are. I see little chance of them being persuaded to talk, let alone change." He pursed his lips a little. "But perhaps you may prove me wrong." He held his hand out towards the cottage, inviting her to walk to it.

"Perhaps I might," she agreed, striding along beside him. "Though I do think your assessment is valid for a few hardcore of our people. But not always *just* for those who hold negative beliefs." She flashed him a wry smile. "For example...me. I am prepared to die for my beliefs if I must, for I hold to them dearly."

His eyes glinted in the sunshine, amusement flickering through them. "That much is obvious, Counsellor. And precisely why we are about to step into this antiquated Muggle farmer's home. You may be prepared to die for your beliefs," he said on reaching the brightly painted red door, "but are you prepared to live like a Muggle for them?" He arched an eyebrow, a glint in his eyes.

Her laughter floated through the air. "I'm looking forward to it, Severus." Her eyes sparkled at the challenge. "I'm looking forward to it indeed."



The First Look by Perselus

Authors' Note: *Many thanks to Savageland and Smoke for their incredible beta edits of this chapter.*

Conflicts of Interest

Chapter 6 of 9

As the group settles into their new home and routine, Steven receives some disturbing information, and Snape and Paidea grow closer together.

Snape looked around the cottage as he entered last of the group. It was exactly as he expected it to be from the outside. With the exception of a couple of pieces furniture dating from about twenty years back and apparently cast offs from the farmer who owned the 'holiday home,' one might as well have stepped back into the eighteenth century.

Around him, each of the other members of the party with him seemed to be having a different reaction to the old Muggle dwelling. His uncle Steven stood in the centre of the open plan, stone-clad floor, his arms folded, and looking for all the world like an exceedingly pleased king of a rather cramped, very dilapidated castle.

Beside his uncle and standing on the back of the manky old fifties style brown couch, which marked the start of the living area and had decidedly seen better days, was a highly disapproving and now once again visible house-elf. Elly's frown was etched like stone on her broad brow as with arms akimbo, she looked around her, the occasional sniff of displeasure emanating from her as she saw something else she didn't like. It sounded rather like she had a bad cold.

Next to Snape stood Paidea with an absolutely fascinated expression on her face. Something, he supposed, was rather akin to the one he himself had had the day he had first set foot in Diagon Alley after a childhood spent exclusively in the Muggle world. He could see it in her eyes -- the old slightly lopsided oaken table in the kitchen, the near translucent yellow and brown curtains hanging limply in the wood framed windows, the ancient stone fireplace with its cracked mantle -- everything seemed magical to her. Or at least it did for the moment, he mused inwardly as he restrained the urge to shake his head. Unlike Diagon Alley or Hogwarts, the Muggle world's practicalities had a tendency to tarnish one's view of things quickly.

Taking one more appraising look around the place himself, he quickly, succinctly, and in a matter of fact tone came to his first point. "This place is tiny and unless I'm very much mistaken there's only one bedroom."

"*One bedroom?*" came the aghast high-pitched voice of the house-elf, her eyes as wide as saucers. "Elly will fix this at once!"

"No!" barked Snape, who though in general agreement with the little being's sentiments for once, suspected that as 'Muggles' it was probably best their tiny cottage *didn't* turn into a palatial villa virtually overnight. Pointing a finger and fixing Elly with a 'don't you dare' look, the teen turned his eyes to his uncle, who was after all in charge of this place and those who dwelled under its roof...something he very much hoped wouldn't come down on them all given the first stiff breeze.

Steven nodded and gave the diminutive being another very firm look. "Severus is right, Elly. If we start throwing large amounts of magic around, someone...especially those we are trying to avoid...may detect it and hone in on our location. The Fidelius Charm should protect us, but let's not take any chances. From this point on, we will *not* be using magic unless absolutely necessary." He arched an eyebrow at her.

Elly appeared suitably chastised. "Of course, Auror Steven, sir! Elly would never do anything to harm the Mistress!"

Paidea blinked and turned her attention back to the others as though coming out of a trance. "Well, I think it's charming!" she enthused. "We're 'roughing it,' I believe the term is...and as there is only one bedroom, shall I sleep on the couch?"

Her house-elf's mouth practically fell open in abject dismay.

"No," Steven told the young woman, trying to stifle a smile. "You can have the bedroom, Counsellor, and Elly can sleep with you, if she wishes. Severus and I will camp out out here."

"Oh, joy," Snape muttered as he looked again at the old brown couch that no doubt would be quite comfortable to sleep on...if all the stuffing had not already slipped *inside* the frame.

Paidea nodded, a slight look of disappointment on her face that Snape could barely credit. "Of course," she replied as Elly collected the miniaturised trunks and scampered into the bedroom, her mistress following in her wake.

As the two men began to move about, a loud shriek erupted, causing them both jump. Looking at each other, both grabbed their wands and ran to the bedroom, Snape's mind racing through several spells, ready to pick one and launch it at whatever threat was inside the bedroom.

But nothing flew, roared, or shot at them as they charged in. Instead they found Elly standing on the bed with the same horrified look on her face as before, this time pointing to a freestanding sturdy, dark mahogany wardrobe, one of its doors hanging open.

"What...?" Snape stared from her to the wardrobe. "Was there something inside it?" His eyes scanned the room quickly in case something had slipped out -- a Boggart or...perhaps something worse. He peered into the shadows under the rustic, wooden queen size bed, considering the possibility of a Lethifold. It was certainly warm enough for one.

"No, Counsellor, stay back!" Steven ordered as Paidea, who had been standing near the foot of the bed, moved towards the half open wardrobe and looked inside, her eyes widening at what she saw. "What?" The older wizard stared at her. "What is it?"

"It's...it's...*small*!" Elly squeaked, still staring at the perfectly functional wardrobe. "It is the same on the inside as on the outside! Elly will never get Mistress's beautiful things into that...that...*thing*! Not without..." She gulped, her voice lowering in revulsion. "Wrinkles!"

Snape's wand hand dropped to his side, his eyes widening and then narrowing to near slits. "*Wrinkles?*" He turned on the house-elf, his voice like the sharp and pointed edge of a knife. "A few stupid creases...*that's* what you are worried over? *That* you thought worthy to scream like a banshee over, making us think you and your mistress were about to be..."

"Elly," Steven cut in with a sigh, slipping his wand back into his robes and trying to diffuse an argument between his nephew and the house-elf before it began, "it is quite simple -- unpack only what you think the Counsellor will need over a week...and then rotate out as needed."

"We should rotate *her* out as needed," growled Snape, moving away from the little being.

Elly's arms flailed nervously as she glanced at her mistress. "But Auror Steven, sir, there is not enough room for even two days of the Mistress's clothes!"

Steven's eyes widened as they shot to the trunks, now enlarged and opened for unpacking. "How...how much did you *bring*?" he asked, staring at contents.

Paidea coughed, her cheeks flushing, as Snape folded his arms and looked at his uncle. "I did warn you."

"The Mistress," Elly announced, "requires her morning attire, her luncheon and dinner gowns, and her afternoon attire...as well as any clothing changes that may be needed depending on the Mistress's activity." She pointed to the wardrobe again, this time a little more imperiously, risking a sharp look at Snape. "There is not enough room. Where should Elly put the shoes?"

"Morning...lunch...dinner?" Snape hissed, not reacting at all kindly to being surreptitiously taken to task by a house-elf and sick of both her and her mistress's seeming inability to take in what was important and what was not. "Where in the nine hells do you think we are? Buckingham bloody Palace?" He bore slowly down on her and the bed. "Take a look around you. We're in the middle of nowhere in a hovel! And considerin' where I come from that's flamin' sayin' summat!"

A slight flush coloured his cheeks as he heard his language suddenly degenerate into the dialect of his early childhood -- the language of the streets he had grown up on and the one he had used before his mother had begun weaning him off it to help him 'improve' himself. It had been a long, long time since he had last lapsed. Clearing his throat rapidly he calmed himself, his voice modulating itself to quiet derision. "Who is it precisely you think we're going to need to impress with all that? One set of clothes a day will more than do."

"Perhaps, Elly," Paidea suggested, touching Snape's arm, "we could forgo normal clothing etiquette and find other ways to make space? We could shrink what we need and fit in that way. It's a very light spell and shouldn't cause any ripples that could be traced." She turned and gazed at the elder man enquiringly.

"Hmm?" Steven seemed to snap out of an almost trance like reverie, looking a little like a rabbit caught in headlights as he stared at the contents of the open trunks, some of which displayed rather sheer garments. "Oh...shrink...light...ripples. Yes...umm...excellent idea!" he over-enthused, already rapidly making his way out of the room. "I'm sure that will work. Um...I'm going to check out the perimeter! Ehh...Severus, why don't *you* help the Counsellor and Elly settle in and get things organised and so forth..." he suggested before disappearing outside.

Snape's black eyes regarded his uncle in disbelief as Steven left, leaving him with this mess. "So that's how delegation works..." he snarled under his breath before, with a barely controlled sigh, he turned back to the females in the room. "Very well...shrink the clothes," he said to Paidea. "But, I ask you to remember where we are...try and keep what you choose to a minimum and practical? In fact, in that vein...for Elly's bed?" He regarded the room about him. "I have a canvas rucksack that we could stuff it with the clothes you aren't going to use. It should make a good mattress."

She arched an eyebrow and turned to Elly, who was already unpacking. "No...thank you, but we packed a travel cot for Elly already. We can set it up over by the window, I think." She bit her lip as she scrutinised the room before turning to take in Elly's clothing suggestions.

"A travel cot?" Snape repeated and looked back outside at the lumpy couch...and the slated stone floor in front of the fire, the latter of which was probably where ~~he~~ was going to end up...especially after witnessing his uncle's 'delegation' techniques. "Yes," he said vaguely, wishing the one in charge of 'him' had thought of something like that, "good idea."

Picking a soft lavender gown that was simple and flowing, Paidea gave her 'guard' a sympathetic smile. "I could transfigure you a featherbed from the rucksack, if you like?" she suggested as Elly shrank the dress and hung it carefully in the wardrobe, a pair of satin and beaded lavender slippers following it in.

"No." He shook his head reluctantly. "The less magic we use the better...and that," he nodded towards the shrinking, "is more than enough. Elly...do them all together, not one at a time!" he chastised in exasperation. "One quick burst!"

The house-elf looked to her mistress, who nodded, and with a sigh, laid aside the clothes that failed to make the grade and reached for another set of five. "Yes, Auror Severus," she agreed.

"Good." He nodded, attempting not to bristle at the way the small servant sought her mistress's go ahead before accepting what he said. Instead, he drew himself up a little, trying to remember house-elves worked differently. "And once you're done, we'll decide on the work rota. Given the amenities we have, there will probably be a fair bit to do. But with four of us it shouldn't be too bad."

Paidea nodded absently, picking several more gowns and other clothes till the wardrobe was filled before turning her attention to the next set -- a variety of nightgowns. Her cheeks flushed as she glanced over at the teenager, feeling a little off balance again.

Looking down at the nightgowns, Snape blinked rather rapidly at the sheer silk, satin, and lace. "Yes...well..." He clasped his hands behind his back, his knuckles whitening as he tried to keep his thoughts relatively untouched. "As I say, when you're done." Turning on his heel, he slipped back outside.

Taking a seat by the fireplace, he laid out his rucksack and unpacked his clothes, leaving everything but his underwear stacked on a chair or hanging over the back of it, wrinkles really not a high priority on his level of consciousness. Satisfied, he tested the carpet which lay before the fireplace. It proved old, but reasonably thick...if he added a couple of blankets and it would be adequate enough.

He spent the next while scouting out the house. With its dark stone slab floors and old brick walls slathered in a thick rough white washed plaster which had crumbled in some places, the place was cool in the summer. And no doubt when the large fireplace was ablaze and the old range hot from cooking, it was warm and cosy during the winter. But by Merlin, it was basic, he thought again to himself.

There was a functioning hand pump over the wide porcelain sink; though the sink itself was stained yellow with age. But there was no heated water, which meant the one bath in the place, which coincidentally was attached to the one bedroom, would have to be filled by water heated on the range. This in turn meant that despite the fact it was high summer, fuel would have to be bought or gathered every day.

He gazed out the kitchen window over the sink into the small forest across the road. Someone would probably have to go gathering wood there for the range. Not that he minded that so much...it would allow him to get away for a while on his own to search for some potion ingredients just as he did in school.

Paraffin was another thing they'd need as well as food from the local village. There was a healthy supply of paraffin lamps but the fact that there was no electricity meant that they would have to go into the village more than twice a week. Fresh foods like milk, eggs, and meat could be stored in the dark cool open larder, but would have to be used and replenished as needed.

Apart from that, there would be the usual domestic chores, something he was well used to helping his mother at home. Clothes would have to be washed by hand in the sink, and the place would have to be swept every day, the chalky ground beneath the house finding its way through the cracks between the slabs of the floor to create a film of dust. There would be general dusting and cleaning as well and of course, the cooking.

Sitting at the large oak table that marked the boundary of the kitchen as it segued into the 'sitting room,' he started his work on the rota, laying all four of their names out on top of a piece of paper he had taken from his journal.

Half an hour later, his charge and her servant, the little being now dressed in a pair of more functional baggy pants and shirt, reappeared, announcing that they had finished unpacking just as Steven returned carrying several bags. Taking a seat on the couch, Paidea rolled up her shirtsleeves, having shed the coat due to the warmth of the cottage, as Elly made her way to the kitchen. Immediately, the diminutive being began hunting through the cupboards and pulling out pots and pans.

Steven set his bags down on the table next to Snape. "I bring...what's the term...oh yes! Groceries!"

Looking up briefly at him, Snape nodded and checked off something on a side list. "Good, that's that taken care of, at least." He looked down at the framework he'd drawn up and addressed the busy house-elf absently. "What are you doing, Elly? You won't be cooking tonight."

The bags floated up and filed into the kitchen, items putting themselves away. "Elly cooks!" she announced plainly. "Elly is an excellent cook. It is Elly's duty to cook and care for the Mistress."

"Stop that!" Snape turned around quickly. "No magic!"

The remaining items froze and lowered themselves onto the counter. "Apologies!" she exclaimed, abashed, and put down a pot to do the rest herself.

"It may be your task to cook and care for your mistress at home, but here we shall all do what is needed. Without magic you are..." he looked her over, "too short to do everything that is needed."

Paidea rose and crossed over to take a seat next to Snape. "What are you doing?" she enquired as Elly gave him an affronted glare and while he wasn't watching, dragged a chair over and continued her unpacking and dinner preparations.

He frowned a little at the young woman. "What I told you I would be doing -- preparing the rota."

She gave it a careful once over. "Oh yes! I have used these in committee meetings." Her brow furrowed. "I think...it may be best though, if I may suggest this that is, that Elly

does do the cooking. I..." She paused, her expression more than a little apologetic. "I do not know how to, but I would be happy to help with the tidying up."

He stared at her. "You don't know how to cook? Even with a wand?"

She shook her head. "It is not a skill my family thought was warranted for me. Besides I am often too busy to do such things."

"Ridiculous." He shook his head and gazed down at his rota which would now have to be redrawn. "It's an absolutely essential skill no matter who or what you are. Not warranted." A light snort escaped him. "They may as well have handicapped you...if you can't so much as boil an egg what're you going to do if you end up in a situation where you can't use magic, like now...and Elly, did I or did I not tell you to stop!" he barked in irritation as she started to clatter around behind him again.

His Muggle pen slapped down on the table as he looked back at Paidea. "Just how can we expect her to cook? Look at the size of her and the size of those iron pots...without magic she'd have to stand on a chair to even reach the top of the range...and her arms won't reach all the way in without clambering on it! The work is too awkward and heavy for someone of her stature. She can share the duties of cleaning, dusting, sweeping, washing clothes, and looking after the fire with you. Uncle and I can take care of the cooking, and I'll teach you that as we go, too."

Elly frowned, deeply insulted, and once again turned her gaze to her mistress for guidance, as Steven sighed and rubbed his head. "Severus...house-elves are very sensitive about their duties. Why don't we let her try? If there is a problem, then we'll step in." He glanced at Elly, who preened and gave the teenager a smug look. "Counsellor, perhaps you could start gathering some wood from the pile outside with Severus?" He gave his nephew an encouraging smile and pat on the arm. "An excellent job on the rota, Severus...but I think it can wait till after dinner? We can all make lists of our strengths and then work it out...it will save you from having to constantly rewrite it."

Snape looked at up at him, his manner icy. "You left me to do this."

Steven blinked. Even though his nephew's words emerged as a simple statement of fact, there was no denying the accusation that underlay them. Rising to his feet, Snape slid the paper and the pen at him before moving to the door and slipping out.

"Teenagers!" the Auror muttered under his breath while sighing and rubbing his head. Glancing sheepishly at the young woman nearby who was trying her best not to have noticed the contretemps, he cleared his throat. "Perhaps you could set the table instead?" he suggested to her before following his nephew outside.

Walking across the lawn, he called over to the teen. "Severus!" He ground his teeth when the boy didn't stop and quickened his pace till he came upon him gathering wood. "Severus, what the devil was that back there?"

"What?" the teen rummaged through the woodpile for what he deemed suitable smaller pieces to start the fire in the range with.

"That wonderful show of teenage dramatics, that's what," the older man pointed out as he grabbed some larger logs for later.

"Teenage dramatics," Snape replied in a voice that would cut glass as he turned to look at his uncle. "You asked me to get things settled and organised. If you did not wish me to do as I did, you should have outlined what *you* wished *before* you ran away from dealing with the counsellor, her servant, and other feminine things...instead of contradicting my decisions afterwards." He drew himself up. "Thank you for undermining me, Uncle. I'm sure it will do my standing with that house-elf a power of good."

Steven looked a little embarrassed at having so clearly been caught dead to rights on his actions. "Yes...well...perhaps I shouldn't have," he agreed and then sighed. "But damn it, Severus, I'm just not good with...women! All their frippery and nonsense. And house-elves are extremely touchy about their duties and masters at the best of times. And you get along rather well with the Counsellor..." He sighed again. "I should have been more specific...but I was also trying to keep the peace. We are stuck with them for the foreseeable future."

"Yes, and I was trying to be kind to the elf," Snape replied swiftly, his voice still cool. "Instead, we will now have to watch her try to struggle with pots that are too big for her, risk being burned as she tries to reach things she can't, *and* we have enabled the Counsellor in her wealth induced helplessness," he pointed out. "In addition, now every time I ask that house-elf to do something, she will not only look to her mistress but to *you too* before she listens to me. Yes, that will undoubtedly keep the peace."

He inhaled a lungful of the sea air. "If, as you say, Uncle, we have to stay with them for the foreseeable future, then you will have to learn to deal with women and reel in your *own* dramatics...because I assure you frippery and nonsense seems damned important to this one!"

Steven sighed again, wrinkling his nose. "Very well..." he agreed. "But I stand by Elly at least trying. If it's obvious she's having trouble, then I won't stop you from reining her in. As for the Counsellor...she has agreed to help, so it's not that bad. I'm sure she's open to the cooking lessons you suggested as well. For all her wardrobe nonsense...she does have a hardy and helpful spirit. Probably why she's done so well so quickly in her work."

"Yes, most probably," Snape agreed as he grabbed a few more pieces of wood. "But, I would appreciate it if you restored a little of my loss of face with her servant. If something goes wrong I need to know she will obey me without having to go through an entire chain of command!" he pointed out pragmatically before his lips curled up a little as he turned to go back to the house with his load. "And if you don't mind, Uncle, *you* can inform the elf she can't do it when she starts to struggle. If you think it's hard telling her she can't do it now when it is just our being cautious...imagine what it's going to be like when you tell her to her face that she *failed* at it."

"All right," Steve said weakly, knowing his nephew was right, before picking up another log and following him. "But the Counsellor is still all yours to deal with when it comes to Muggle training. My knowledge is strictly survival...as in not getting clipped by your mum!"

The next two days managed to run for the most part rather smoothly. Though Elly did a decent job making salads and preparing items ready for cooking, it did tend to fall on either Steven or Snape to actually do anything that involved pots or the stove. That seemed to irk her quite a bit at first, but she was, the men realised, a rather sensible house-elf and acknowledged her limitations...albeit grudgingly.

Paidea, however, found the novelty of being in a small environment beginning to wear off, and after her hot water had again run cold on her the third morning, she found she was actually rather irritated and homesick -- longing for the amenities that she'd always taken for granted.

Yet, she did love the scenery and environs that they were ensconced amongst. The sea especially drew her. She'd always been drawn to the ocean and being near it once more provoked happy reminiscences of when she'd been small and her family had gone on holidays to various exotic seaside locales...or she'd merely run free to the shores of her family estate. She remembered making sandcastles with her sister and running down the beaches with her before having contests about who could swim further out. But most of all it was the memory of floating amongst the waves...and the simple freedom that went along with it.

And so she'd found herself often escaping the small cottage and sitting on the lawn, or under trees, or simply taking a blanket to sit on the beach with her guards to read or prepare for the hearing, should it ever be resumed and it deemed safe for her to come home and attend. Not that she'd let that stop her in the slightest.

Snape, too, had found both pros and cons to the place. Even though the bulk of his year was spent in the crowded halls of Hogwarts he had long since found ways to maximise his time alone. In a school that size there were always places to go to be by one's self, to work, study, write, and contemplate. With four in this tiny cottage it was not so easy, especially at night. At nights he was used to spending his time committing his words to his journal or textbook -- depending on what he felt like. But with his uncle lying on the couch behind him as he lay on his makeshift bed by the fire, both were out of the question. On top of that, his uncle was...as ever...chatty.

More often than not they would go to bed at eleven, after playing cards or an evening's conversation, only to still find himself awake at one in the morning, his uncle waxing lyrical, mostly about his childhood with Eileen. It occurred to Snape as he was lying there on the second night that his uncle seemed to be talking almost to avoid the inevitable silence or having to think too much. Though about what he wasn't entirely sure. It couldn't be about their situation, for they had discussed the who and why of what was happening with Paidea quite openly. It was something else...or someone else.

To make up for this loss of privacy, first thing in the morning, Severus would rise and while the early morning mist still lay on the ground, the heat of the early day burning the dew from the ground, he would head out to the still and silent wood. Carrying his samples case with him, he would collect wood and fill his case with what he could find. Then, on finding a peaceful spot, he would sit and write for half an hour before returning to the cottage to refill the wood bin, providing him with his second bright spot.

The wood bin was in the garden -- the garden overlooking the sea. Here he found Paidea alone before breakfast seated on the stone bench, gazing out over the view or the garden itself, generally in a dressing gown that would quite ably pass for an evening gown on someone else. While he felt cramped and crowded inside the house with the others, when alone with her that feeling never materialised. Even if they didn't talk, their silences were companionable. He was comfortable around her, and she put no pressure on him to talk and in doing so, she made it easy for him to do just that, and he surprised himself with the length of his eloquence.

With Elly confined to the house, the men accompanied Paidea down to the beach, giving her space but never leaving her completely alone. And while she remained in long light dresses, Snape stayed solidly in jeans and a shirt, simply moving under an umbrella or opening his shirt a little if it got too warm during the day. However, the teen was aghast at Steven's display, his uncle making something of a show of his Muggle beachwear.

The swimming trunks his uncle had chosen to buy and bring for them both were...in his opinion...too small, too orange, and decidedly too snug to be decent to wear. Though Steven seemed oblivious to the surreptitious glances he was getting from their charge and the outright glares he was getting from his nephew.

Snape watched Paidea as from time to time as her eyes couldn't help but be drawn to his uncle and his well chiselled torso and...sundry other features. A stab of jealousy slipped through the teenager, Steven's muscular and tanned physique not making him any keener on parading his own attributes around in front of her. Having said that though, he was smug to note, he could at least match if not outstrip his uncle in one salient department.

Lunch was eaten at the house to give Elly some company, though it seemed she hardly missed them. On the first day, they returned to find her covered in grime but the old range newly blacked and sparkling. The house-elf, having found a tin of black and some polishing rags in the back of a cupboard, had joyously spent the morning making the stove look new. On the second day, she had concocted some kind of cleanser from vinegar and other domestic products, and both the yellowing porcelain sink and the bathtub had been virtually restored.

She was breaking the rota of course, and she knew it. But she evidently had picked up some diplomatic tips from her mistress along the way, which she deployed upon their return. Ignoring both her mistress and Steven, she bounced up to the teenager as he arrived. Apologising profusely for getting carried away with herself, she explained excitedly to him how she wished to show him how useful she could still be to them all. Her eagerness was only augmented by playing up being slightly mournful over her inability to cook without magic, her big round eyes wide and sad as they looked up at him.

Snape knew full well he was being conned, but appreciated the house-elf making *him* the focus of her show of respect in front of the others, a silent balance being struck between them as she did so. He had to admit, too, to being impressed with her work, and the fact that house-elves' training seemed to extend beyond the magical. At this rate, the Muggle owner of the cottage would be able to double the price for the place by the time they left. Once the proud little elf's work had been inspected and they had all eaten lunch, they would then decide upon dinner before leaving it up to Paidea to decide how she wished to spend the rest of her day until the evening meal, which took place as the sun began to set.

For all his uncle's playful behaviour and gabbiness, Snape could see the older man was keeping a keen eye out around their surroundings. And often Steven would take Snape with him as he conducted the careful sweeps of the perimeter and checked on the wards that helped protect their environs, using their current situation as a perfect means of on the job training. Nothing was taken for granted, though Steven's manner remained ever cheerful, ever determined to enjoy himself while they were here and keep their little household's mind off any danger.

On the morning of their third full day there, Snape awoke to find his uncle reading a letter, a deep frown on his face as one finger brushed back and forth over his lip. Though as soon as he noticed his nephew was no longer asleep, the letter immediately found its way into a pocket on his nightshirt. "Morning, Severus! Sleep well? It's going to be a scorcher today...I can feel it," the older man said chattily as he got up to fill the kettle.

"No doubt," the teen agreed watching him closely. "Anything important?"

"Hmmm?" Steven asked in distraction, placing the kettle on the stove before bending to bolster the fire.

"The letter." Snape sat up and stretched, his muscles always a little stiff after a night on the firm floor.

The older man sighed as he added a log to the still smouldering embers. "Oh that...yes...perhaps. A very nice phoenix showed up at our window with it this morning...so I assume it's from the Chief Warlock. Could be a clue...could be nothing..." He shut the door of the stove and locked it, straightening as he brushed his hands. "Worth looking into, I suppose."

"Dumbledore sent *Fawkes*?" His nephew sprang up and padded across the cool stone floor. "What did he say? Why didn't you wake me?"

"You were sleeping and I'd yet to read it." The older man pulled the note from his pocket and handed it to the teen. "Just some information on what they found after they cleaned up the wreckage of the 'car bomb.'" He smirked a little at his pun. "Sorry...that was bad taste, wasn't it? At any rate, read it if you like."

Taking it and glancing at the still closed door of the Counsellor, Snape moved to the windows that overlooked the garden and opened the parchment. His brow furrowed as he read it over. "The Reflectus," he murmured, "the one they found in the remains...it held workmanship by a man who was supposed to be..." his eyebrows raised slowly, "dead?" He glanced at his uncle. "Max Nevermoon -- a friend of yours who disappeared four years ago near Glastonbury." Lowering the note, he turned to look at the older man. "Do you think he might have defected to 'You Know Who'...or that they might just have some of his equipment?"

Steven let out a loud snort. "Max? Defect? Not bloody likely!" he replied with quite a bit more vehemence than he possibly intended and with a quick glance at his nephew, lowered his voice. "He was a Muggleborn. He wouldn't have been very welcome by *Him* or his people. Chances are they were the ones that..." His eyes turned to the kettle and a pained expression spread across his face. "That killed him. They probably took his work. Death Eaters may hate those they think are 'beneath' them, but they aren't past scavenging their stuff. Particularly if they were half as brilliant as Max was."

"Was he a close friend of yours?" his nephew enquired as he moved back to table and took a seat.

Steven's attention seemed to be focused rather steadfastly on making preparations for tea. "You might say that," he replied quietly before turning to the teen and mustering a smile. "Hungry? Care for a spot of breakfast?"

Snape shrugged the offer away, intent on the letter in his hand. "Are you sure he's dead...I mean really? What if they took him? What if they're using him? Is Dumbledore going to do something about this? Does he expect you to? He never just sends things like this for no reason," he said quickly.

Filling the teapot with the now boiling water, Steven arched an eyebrow at the deluge of questions. "Very likely he does want me to follow up on it..." he replied, carrying the tray and setting it on the table. "And I honestly don't know if Max is still alive. It's possible...but after four years..." He sat down with a swallow. "I really don't know." Inhaling slowly, he set about pouring them two cups.

Black eyes watched him steadily, the teen unable to put away a growing feeling about his uncle. "Considering the importance of your mission here, you and Max must have been quite close for Dumbledore to even alert you to this, distracting you from your current mission, never mind anything else. If he does want you to follow up on this, he must think you are the only one who should go."

Steven glanced up at the teenager, silently agreeing with the young man's astute point. "Perhaps," he agreed. "But I cannot exactly leave you and the Counsellor alone here either." He gave him a half smile. "That does create quite a conundrum, does it not?"

Taking his teacup with a nod of thanks, the teen enquired, "How do you plan to resolve it? Considering he went to all this trouble, I would imagine he's sent this information

to you before it's been released in general. Perhaps he wants you to know before everyone else...before the rest of the Ministry, I mean." He dumped a spoonful of sugar into his tea. "If there is a leak in the Ministry then once the information gets out, it's possible that if there are ways of investigating this they might be quickly cut off, which means..." he stirred his tea slowly, "you have little time to decide."

The older man grimaced. "Caught that, did you?" He took a sip from his cup. "But if I do go...and you get into trouble..." He shook his head. "Inventive thinking and quick reflexes or no...you're not trained to be left alone in this type of situation. And take away all the protocols and possible danger to yourself and the Counsellor...your mum would have my hide."

Snape gazed levelly at him from over his cup. "Perhaps...once he knows you're going to take up the position...Dumbledore will send someone else? Or..." a vague curl appeared at the corner of his mouth, "maybe the old man feels that hiding us here is sufficient caution. After all, 'You Know Who' may be powerful but not even he is going to come looking for us in this place. As long as we stay here, keep our heads down, and don't do any magic, maybe he thinks that will be enough until you get back." He took a sip of his tea. "He is the Secret-Keeper after all."

Steven arched an eyebrow, his green eyes narrowing. "You are not just saying this because you would then be alone with the Counsellor, are you, Severus?" His tone was light and teasing, though his eyes were sharp and serious.

The gaze and words that were returned to him were just as level and pointed. "I would never put her life in danger for my own benefit," the young man paused and sipped some more tea before adding by way of an aside, "And...of course...I have no idea why you think I would wish to be alone with her."

There was a subtle clink as Steven's tea cup came to rest on its saucer. "That's a lovely necklace she wears...reminds me of the one my grandmother used to wear."

"Understandable," Snape murmured, "considering it's the same one." Putting his cup down in a fashion mimicking his uncle, the teen exhaled slowly. "I gave it to her when I was nine, Uncle. I had saved her life and she was kind to me. We were children, and it was an act of friendship. My feelings for her are ones of friendship...and I assure you she has only friendly feelings for me." He picked up his cup again. "No different to the ones you and Max shared."

Steven nearly choked on the tea he had just sipped and hurriedly wiped his mouth with a napkin as he eyed his nephew. "Very well, Severus. If I decide to go, you'll be the first to know." He frowned lightly. "Does your mum know the Counsellor has our family heirloom?"

"Unless she has suffered a severe lapse of memory since last I saw her," the young man replied, his eyebrow still partially raised at his uncle's spluttering reaction to his previous comment. "She was present when I gave it to her."

"I see," the other man said softly, finding his cheeks flushing a little at the teenager's stare like he was the schoolboy caught out and not him. "Right!" he continued quickly. "Breakfast! Weetabix or porridge?"

"It's too warm for hot food." Snape took the last sip of his tea and rose to his feet. "Weetabix is fine. I'd better wash and dress first," he added, glancing down at his singlet and striped pyjama bottoms. "I have to get to the wood. There was a particularly fine batch of margrat grass near the base of an old oak...and I have to get some more wood for the bin." Making his way to the kitchen sink, he pumped cold water into a basin and grabbed the soap he had been using.

As Steven set about making breakfast, Snape grabbed his face cloth, the basin of water, and the garish rainbow towel his mother had packed for him. As the bathroom was out of bounds until the women had risen and done with it, which frankly wasn't worth the wait, he did as he had done every morning and went outside into the morning sun. Making his way around to the side of the cottage that faced away from the road, he removed his shirt and scrubbed himself thoroughly.

After, he looked at the soap in his hand and the water remaining to him before taking a lock of his hair and examining it. With a frown and a quick glance at the house, he sighed and promptly stuck his head in the basin, scrubbing the soap into his wet hair till it frothed up into a lather before dumping the basin contents over his head and onto the ground. Shaking his wet hair out like a dog, he straightened up and grabbed the towel, rubbing it through his hair roughly as he moved back inside to dress.

Steven didn't even look up as his nephew passed, merely held up a brush, wagging it to get the teen's attention as he had every morning since they'd been there. It was one thing if the boy didn't want take care of his appearance at home...quite another if he was on duty, and Steven wasn't about to let their charges think Aurors were unprofessional...even unofficial ones.

Stripping himself of his pyjamas and pulling on his underwear and jeans, Snape glared at the implement in his uncle's hand. "Fine..." he relented with a sigh and trudged over to get it. "It'll just get messed up again though."

"It's the making the effort that counts, Severus," came the same reply that had answered that same gripe over the last three mornings as Steven took another bite of his cereal.

"Not much point when you've got hair like mine," his nephew grumbled. "It's not like it's thick and...flowing...like yours." He raked the brush through his shining, damp, and very fine hair. "Not all of us are blessed with a mane."

Steven gazed up at his nephew with an arched eyebrow. "Nonsense. You have your mum's hair and she manages quite well. If you're that annoyed with it, just cut it off."

His words instead garnered him the look that every parent who had raised a teenager received at least once in their life -- the young man stared at him as if he were quite irretrievably stark raving bonkers...with a smidge of incredibly out of touch thrown in for good measure. "And be even more of an outcast amongst my peers than I already am? In case you hadn't noticed, everyone is wearing long hair these days, Uncle, both in the Wizarding and Muggle worlds. I already attract enough unwanted attention, thank you very much," he sniffed, pulling hard on a knot of hair until the brush finally moved through.

Steven blinked a little at his nephew's look. "Well then, you could always tie it back," he countered, trying to think who he knew with long hair and coming up with no one. Was he really that old and out of touch, he pondered inwardly.

Snape considered his advice, and this time, the sniff that emanated from him was not exactly dismissive as he went back to his own version of brushing his hair -- six more pulls with the brush and it was done. Picking up his black t-shirt, he pulled it over his head, rolling the sleeves up to his biceps. "Are you going to tell her?" he enquired, glancing towards Paidea's bedroom door as he tucked his shirt tails in. "She may not want to stay here if you go."

"Yes," Steven replied, finishing his cereal and rising to his feet. "She has a right to know."

His nephew watched him closely as he took his bowl to the sink and washed it out, taking in the way he was standing, the tone of his voice, even the way he scrubbed out the bowl. "You want to go don't you...quite badly."

With a sigh, Steven turned to the teen. "Wouldn't you?" he asked almost with exasperation, though not with the boy.

"Then you should," said Snape after a momentary silence. Moving to fetch his samples case, he picked it up. "He was your...friend." He looked back at his uncle. "At the very least, you deserve to know the truth of what happened to him. Dumbledore obviously feels you should go. And whether they send someone to replace you or not, I will stay with the Counsellor no matter what happens." Crossing over to the door, he paused, turning back to Steven. "And in the long run, you might do more good for her by going than staying."

The older man nodded quietly as the teenager left.

Snape spent some time in the wood, his explorations made fruitful by his finding of a few rare mushrooms and toadstools hidden in a thicket which he took cheerfully. Dried out and ground or chopped, their combined worth would save him a considerable amount. Money was always tight, and his regular, illicit trips to the Forbidden Forest helped keep what funds he had for the more exotic elements in the alchemists stocks.

Gathering up the wood, he wondered about what would happen if his uncle left, whether someone else would come in...and whether that someone would insist on sending him home. Would he be able to live up to what he'd just told his uncle about staying with her? His brow creased at the idea of having to leave too. Despite the cramped quarters, he was overall enjoying being there and being with her again. But...he thought as he made his way back, his bundle in his arms, if his uncle left and no one came, could he truly look after her? He had saved her life twice, but that was entirely circumstantial, and Steven had been right, he wasn't trained. Yes, his instincts were good, but there were other things -- procedures -- about what was the right thing to do in certain circumstances. He knew what he would do if problems arose...but would they be the *right* things to do. Still, he decided as he moved up the path to the wood bin by the house, if push came to shove, he would do his best. He would protect her.

On walking in the door, he found Paidea at her breakfast, but more pertinently, his uncle in mid, near silent conversation with her house-elf on the far side of the room and knew then that he was going to have to do just that. At least for a time. "Uncle?" he enquired.

Elly nodded solemnly at something the older man was saying and whispered something equally as quiet before hurrying off to attend to her duties. Steven turned and gave his nephew a grim smile. "You're back," he stated, raking a hand through his hair and crossing over to the boy and helping him with his load. "I've informed the Counsellor of the latest...development...and she has agreed with you. I'm leaving as soon as we're done talking." His green eyes met dark ones. "You'll be in charge, Severus, until I return." He glanced over at their charge before giving a slightly more characteristic smile and in a lower voice added, "And she's even promised to keep her arguments to a minimum."

Snape's tone was relatively casual, and a small tug pulled at the corner of his mouth as he spoke before he nodded at the older man. "I'll do my best, Uncle. You may rely on that."

With a nod, Steven gave his nephew's shoulder a squeeze. "I know...you'll do your family proud. But if you need help, the custard tin has been charmed as a Portkey and the mousetrap as an alarm. If it looks bad, get the Counsellor and yourself to safety. Don't take them on unless you have no other choice, understood?"

"Understood," Snape agreed grimly before glancing at the sitting young woman again and lowering his voice. "You are sure she is happy to remain here with just me alone? She did not ask for someone else? Or seem uneasy or unsure of my ability?"

Steven drew him a bit further away. "She was a little concerned. Not in just your lack of training...but of being the only one here. But she vetoed the replacement suggestion immediately with a rather firm pronouncement that she's not entirely without defensive skills herself." He gave the teen a small smile. "Plus she is rather sure I'll be back soon and this will all be over. So it seems her optimism isn't the least bit dampened."

Snape nodded, a little disappointed in her reaction on both scores but also fully aware that both reactions were entirely understandable and practical -- which made her not asking for a senior Auror even on a short time basis all the more interesting. "Yes," he finally answered, "it seems she is still determinedly positive." His attention firmly on his uncle, his expression turned grave. "Will you be all right alone?" Snape coughed a little. "I know you are fully capable of looking after yourself, but, this strikes me as being a particularly dangerous path. I...I wouldn't want my mother upset by your getting hurt."

Steven nodded, the corner of his mouth curling up just a smidge. "I'll be all right, and..." his voice grew confidential, "just this once...let's not tell your mother."

"Tell her what?" came the quizzical reply as Snape moved to get his breakfast.

"Good lad!" There was a hint of relief in Steven's voice, as the older man turned back to the others. "Now...I'd best be off. Early bird catches the worm and all that." Clapping his hands and rubbing them together, he picked up his robes and headed to the door. "Watch the spending with Muggle money. You should have enough for ages, but be aware we can't replace it without help. Keep an eye on the wards, Severus...do regular perimeter checks, no magic unless strictly necessary, and you crazy kids behave yourselves," he told them with a glint in his eyes.

Paidea arched an eyebrow, though there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

The dark, quiet teen glanced at the regal diplomat and her diligently working house-elf, before turning back at his relative. "I believe you can trust us, Uncle. Good luck."

"Jolly good! Just don't do anything I wouldn't do," Steven said with a wink before disappearing out the door, Paidea watching through the window as the tall man's long strides took him quickly down the path to the beach steps and out of sight.

Snape considered his uncle's parting words and then glanced at the young woman seated opposite him. Lowering his head to his Weetabix, the only thought that came to his mind was -- to hell with that.

At first they had eagerly waited for news back from Steven, or for his return, but it became more and more evident that his new mission was obviously going to take some time. And soon it had been a week since they had been left alone.

Each day fairly much followed the same pattern to Paidea. She would rise, bathe, dress, and roam about outside somewhere, her younger 'guard' in tow. He had taken her down to the Muggle village of Portloe twice in that time, and though she had done her utmost to appear blasé about the whole experience, she knew he had been quietly amused at how excited she was by everything from picking out which piece of ham looked leanest to dealing with Muggle money.

Along with their groceries, he had surprised her by taking her into a small hardware store and while she had stared goggle-eyed at what it actually took to keep to keep a Muggle house in good repair, he had purchased a large can of white paint and a bag of plaster. Though he maintained they were merely to keep the house-elf quiet and productive while they were out of the house, she knew they were gifts of a kind for Elly -- an acknowledgement of just how useful she was, even when working on a Muggle level. Needless to say when Elly saw what he'd bought her, she'd been so touched and grateful that he'd had to grouchyly peel her off his leg after she'd clung to it.

On their second visit to the village, he proved himself very patient with Paidea when she'd found a small second hand Muggle bookstore and reacted with wide-eyed delight at a treasure trove of unknown literature. Despite not wanting to stay too long away from the wards of the cottage, he had indulged her almost childlike glee and allowed her to stay for almost an hour, browsing through the stacks and pointing out what she might like and why. Thankfully, being second hand, the books were cheap and he'd acquiesced to the purchase of one or two from their Muggle money budget. They had talked at length about comparative literature after that, and she had been both fascinated and keenly impressed by his knowledge of both worlds' writings.

Their conversations, however, were certainly not restricted to that subject, for as the days passed, they would talk for hours on this, that, or the other. He would tell her stories of his life or she would share similar stories with him. And he would listen -- listen, it seemed, with his entire being -- his attention not wavering for an instant. And his eyes...those eyes that seemed to swallow her up and hold her within a gaze of pure promise and devotion...and she *knew* when he listened it was with his complete person.

It was amazing...intoxicating...and more frightening than anything she'd faced in her life.

She knew how he felt...it was as plain as the rather prominent nose on his face. She simply wasn't sure what to do about it. Or rather...how *she* felt about it.

And so there were times when she was glad of his absence. But his absence brought its own difficulties, for despite everything she had just told herself, that was when the thoughts came. Thoughts that she told herself that she had no right to have...and the glimmer of feelings she had even less right to acknowledge. Admonishing herself thoroughly, she would bolster her resolve anew...only then to inevitably seek him out. Some strange compulsion setting in her to be near him...though she told herself she was just needing some form of human company.

She had first realised something was different that afternoon in her bedroom. The look in his eyes had bored deep into her and his intentions had been unmistakable. She hadn't been lying when she'd told him that it had made her feel uncomfortable. But what she hadn't told him was how...or that she'd been more disquieted that she had reacted.

She'd scoffed to herself about it as she'd changed her clothes, insisting that she was only reacting because it had been so unexpected and that she had great shock to her system that day.

But with each passing day at their new cramped quarters, she slowly had come to the realisation that her reaction to him was not just a one time event, and that her mind was only more frequently turning to the young man now that Steven was gone. Even after Elly had pointed out offhandedly one morning that Severus seemed quite attentive on her mistress, especially now his uncle was away, Paidea had a hard time convincing herself, let alone her servant, that the young man was just doing his duty and that he was simply acting out of friendship.

And friendship was where she was intent on keeping it. It would do her no good to develop feelings for a young man who was not even out of school yet. And letting him continue to foster them was certainly out of the question. She could scarcely comprehend what the results might be to their lives...though she did have a fair idea. No...best not to think about it. Indeed, there was *nothing* to think about. They were friends and that was that.

Still, she was not surprised when she announced one evening a week and a half into their stay that she was going for a walk on the beach to catch the sunset that her stomach flipped a little as he rose up from his chair to accompany her.

"Will you require a cloak? I can fetch it for you?" he enquired.

"No, it is still quite warm outside," she replied, her long braid swinging as she shook her head.

"You're sure?" He eyed her light chiffon gown while trying not to alert her to that fact. With its tight bodice and only thin straps, it was very becoming and...clingly...but rather light. "The sun is already setting and it is apt to be quite chilly once the wind gets up."

She merely smiled. "I think I shall be okay, after all I thought we were not supposed to be out too late after dark," she teasingly reminded him. "But if you insist, I shall fetch a light shawl."

"You don't have to," he said rather hastily under her teasing, "I didn't mean to be insistent...if you're comfortable...of course..."

Her eyes seemed to twinkle at him before she disappeared into her room and returned a moment later with a light cashmere shawl. Folding it over her arm to carry, she gestured to the door with a wide arm. "Shall we?"

The walk down to the beach was rather quiet and comfortably spent in silence. Once they reached the sandy shores, Paidea slipped off her shoes, leaving them there to retrieve when they got back and began to move over the sand, relishing the soft textures between her toes.

Walking beside her, respectfully a foot or so apart, and his hands behind his back, Snape watched her as he always seemed to be doing. In one way or another, his eyes were always on her. Still this time, his gaze contained an element of curiosity as her face betrayed her pleasure. "Will you miss this place? When it comes time to go?"

She continued to look ahead, not showing any awareness his eyes were on her though she knew they were. "Yes. I have always enjoyed the sea. We used to go every day during the summer when I was small. My sister and I would play in the water and build castles in the sand." A nostalgic smile formed on her lips. "My parents would play with us too...it was always a happy time." A sigh escaped her lips. "I would swim out as far as I could...until I felt the tide tug me out...and then swim back. It used to give my mother an awful fright. She was constantly afraid I would be sucked out to sea and they'd need to perform a rescue."

"It does sound a little reckless of you," he admitted, slightly intrigued.

The smile slipped a little off her face. "Yes...it was. But one does reckless things when young." She moved a little closer to where the water was lapping at the sand, allowing it to slip over her bared feet. "Then I grew up."

He looked down at his own booted feet. "Growing up doesn't mean one can't be a little reckless from time to time. One does not just take risks when one is young after all. Some of the most satisfying of achievements and victories come with a little risk attached."

She nodded ever so slightly. "Yes...I suppose. But when one is in public service, everything is so calculated, there is very little need for risks -- especially personal ones." Her eyes stared out over the water, marvelling at how it reflected so beautifully the yellows, pinks, and purples of the setting sun. "You are bound to the people you serve and your duty to them...so in essence your life is no longer yours to risk."

"Then perhaps it is even more important that you should learn to take them in other areas," he suggested. "Especially personal ones. Even small ones."

Perhaps it was something in his tone...perhaps it was something to do with the location...or that his words hit right upon her muddled feelings, but her head turned to him, her eyes taking in his profile in the glowing light as he continued to speak.

"No matter what the area of experience, it's in those moments that one that feels truly alive. Risks present themselves every day. Taking them, is how one knows when life is real...and exhilarating." Turning his head to her, he was surprised to catch her eyes regarding him closely.

She said nothing, though it was quite clear from her softening expression that she was listening and taking in what he was saying. Here was someone who even at this age knew himself so well and was not afraid to feel or speak what he was thinking...or wanted. To be able to live that way, to allow herself the luxury to feel that completely, or...even though every logical thought in her mind was chastising her...to allow herself to fall into that dark gaze...to let go...

His fingers were gentle as he touched her arm. "Even in magic -- in spell crafting or potion making with their strict regimens -- one must take the occasional risk to better understand or get stronger results. There is life beyond public service...even for a public servant. How can you give of your best to the people, if you cease to be one of them...always removed, always methodical and reserved? I'm no expert but it seems to me, in order to best serve, one has to understand people...and how they respond."

She opened her mouth to reply but could not find the words to refute his argument. His point was sound...and though she felt quite able to understand the needs of the people well...he was right. How long had it been since she had been one of them? How long had it been since she even acknowledged she had needs of her own? Even now, she could feel his fingers brush over her arm, feel the ripples of heat and tingles of energy ripple over her.

Alarm bells echoed in the back of her mind, and yet she did not pull away...could not even compel herself to do so.

"You may be a diplomat," he said softly, "but you are still a woman. You should be aware of the difference between a life and the illusion of one. Be careful that the trappings of life don't become your life." His eyes gazed down into hers, as the moment took on the mantle of so many of the dreams he had had. Dreams of her close to him just like this. Emboldened by his own words, he was driven to prove that it was not merely that.

"Don't forget what is real," he murmured a fraction of a moment before he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. His fingers took a gentle hold on her arm as his lips moved again to mingle softly with hers, exulting in how soft they were and how fragrant she was...the sum of all his adolescent dreams combined, and more.

It was though someone had turned a switch on inside her and brought her to life. Every fibre of her was charged and humming, and as he brushed his lips over hers again, she found herself yielding to him and to the pure sensation he was bringing out of her...allowing her eyes to flutter shut and her lips to draw and mingle with his. And as her mind marvelled at how soft and warm his lips were, she finally surrendered to him.

His heart surged at her actions. Not only was she not retreating, she was responding, turning to him. His hands slid to her waist, drawing her close to him, his kiss growing more insistent and intense with each passing moment. She wasn't denying him. She was returning his ardency...his feelings.

And then suddenly, sharply, it was over.

Her mind once more reasserted control of her body and swirling emotions, reminding her he was only seventeen and in school and that to further entertain him or his advances was foolhardy at the least, cruel at the worst. There was no hope in this. No future. Pulling away she took a step back, her face slipping back into one of reserve, the diplomatic veneer trying to hide her guilt, loss, and intense desire to continue.

"I...I shouldn't have done that," she said tightly, turning her gaze back to the sea, partly to concentrate on containing herself and partly so she would not be able to see his face in the darkening light.

He blinked in confusion at her loss from his arms. "But..." he began only to stop on seeing her stance -- erect and stiff, cool and formal, the soft, vulnerable woman in his arms subsumed beneath her 'armour' again. His hopes sank, the fractional allowance of belief...of elation...that had lifted him so high made the fall that much greater, the pain that much stronger. "Of course, my apologies," he murmured.

She didn't say a word for several minutes, merely continued to gaze out into the water before pulling her shawl around her shoulders and turning to gaze at him, taking care to keep her gaze cool but friendly. "We should go back inside," she told him, her tone not as harsh as before, before turning and moving swiftly back over the sand to where she left her shoes.

His hands longed to reach out and touch her, to turn her back to him and start again. But he couldn't. He had taken his chance, and it hadn't been enough to convince her of anything but a minute and clearly embarrassing loss of control for her. She had lain down the law on it. It was done.

He moved after her, catching up to her when she reached her shoes, the deep hurt of rejection well hidden as he stood dutifully beside her, looking around. A good Auror as his uncle wanted, a good bodyguard as she needed...it was still better than nothing.



First Kiss by Perselus

Authors' Note: Thank you so much to both our betas, Savageland and Smoke for all your efforts on our behalf.

Foolish Games

Chapter 7 of 9

Steven begins his quest for the Counsellor's would-be assassins in a wretched hive of scum and villainy, while Snape and Paidea try to put aside the events of forty-eight hours ago only to find themselves in even more of a quandry.

Chapter Six: Foolish Games

Barely visible, the hooded man leaned against the old brick wall, bathing in its recessed shadow. He'd been there for hours now; the sun long since having set on the Watford street. Most Muggles had wisely returned home before the fog that wisped around him could chill their bones as it did his. Still, he paid it no notice, the only sign of movement a forefinger rubbing his lower lip.

The motion ceased, replaced by a slight furrowing of the brow as he took in the small wooden door that had just appeared in the wall of a local laundromat. The two Muggle customers within continued their washing and drying, paying the new addition no heed at all...simply unaware of its presence.

A corner of Steven's lips pulled into the faintest of smiles. The spiky haired young man, with the assortment of safety pins through his clothes, and the neatly attired elderly woman paid little notice to the assortment of odd customers that exited through the new portal. Considering the alarming appearance of some of them, it truly said something about the power of magic over the Muggle mind.

The emergence of a rather short man with a pointed nose from the doorway brought the watching wizard's full attention back to the door. The familiar surge of eager anticipation coursed through him as it always did when he was about to embark on a new phase of an investigation.

The only irritant was that it had taken him just over a week to get this far.

On receiving Dumbledore's letter eight days ago, Steven had bid his farewells to his nephew and their charge and after giving a set of strict instructions to Paidea's household, had made his way immediately to Hogwarts to meet with the elderly wizard. Once there, he had had been told in detail what had been briefly outlined to him in the letter. The Reflectus used in the attack did indeed appear to be the work of Maximilian Nevermoon, a former...acquaintance...of Steven's, as Dumbledore had put it. A man who was supposedly dead for almost two and half years -- a death that had turned Steven's world upside down.

He had tried not to show to the headmaster just how stunned and disoriented he had been, but it seemed he was just as good at hiding his reactions now as he had been when the old man had taught him Transfiguration in school all those years ago.

After an hour, the two men had decided that Steven's best course of action was to consult with a young wizard of dubious reputation by the name of Mundungus Fletcher. A thief, pickpocket and fence, he had an intimate understanding of the underground of the Wizarding world and could point Steven where he needed to go...for a fee.

His meeting with Fletcher had been fruitful but aggravating, testing the limits of even his already strained good humour. After paying the unsavoury young man a good deal more than Steven had bargained for, he was rewarded with the name of a possible contact who *might* know someone who could have an idea where this bloke he wanted to find was...and a location -- a tavern called The Wicker Man. Naturally, there was a catch.

This tavern was no ordinary tavern. For the safety of its patrons and their less than legal business, it tended to shift location every night, the disconnected entrance appearing within a certain window of opportunity. Unfortunately, unless you were really in the loop...which thanks to a certain light-fingered incident Mundungus was not...there really was no knowing where the pub would show up.

Luckily for the Auror, Fletcher could still give him a few possible locations...again for the right price. And gritting his teeth, Steven had paid him, gotten his list, and even the password, though the wretch had finally seen the end of his patience when attempting to bargain for that. Steven smirked to himself at the memory; the boils should go down in three or four days.

He checked the time. Midnight. He was as likely to find his quarry now as he ever was. Adjusting his hood, he made his way across the street and past the laundering Muggles. Three raps on the ancient looking wooden door later and the recitation of the password -- Lost Opportunity -- saw him inside the noisy, dimly lit tavern.

Not unexpectedly, there were one or two oddities about The Wicker Man. To begin with, it was as if a mass of design styles had been gathered up by some giant hand and glued together higgledy piggedly. Here there were traditional English pub leather booths, there Parisian style café tables or medieval oak tables and benches, and over there heavily shadowed Moroccan style alcoves, their tables deeply inset into the whitewashed walls.

Then there was the matter of the noise emanating from the crowd. For there wasn't a crowd. At most there were perhaps twenty people in the large bar. Inhabiting the gloom, there were goblins, wizards, witches, and perhaps a few half-breeds, but the buzz that was being magically created would have normally required at least three times that number. An effective way to ensure discretion of conversation, Steven thought as he seated himself at the long, polished mahogany bar, pushed back his hood, and ordered a pint of ale.

The bartender who served him was a sharp faced little man of indeterminate years with slicked back hair and a handlebar moustache that twitched involuntarily every minute or so. The hair at the back of his neck at full attention, Steven could feel his and several other pairs of eyes on him.

"Anythin' else I can getcha?" the bartender queried.

"Just the pint, thank you." Steven smiled and shook his head, slipping the older man several coins. "For your trouble."

As the little man looked down, his moustache twitched again at the sight of the gold under Steven's fingers. His own smaller hand slipped out and covered it. "Mighty civil of yeh, I'm sure." He sniffed as he pocketed them, returning to cleaning his glasses but standing a good deal closer to Steven now.

Sipping on his ale, the Auror looked out around the bar, taking in the surrounds. Catching the barkeep's eye, Steven gave him his most winning smile. No smile returned; however, the gold did purchase him a slight cock of the head, the barkeep showing he was willing to listen to whatever it was the younger man had to say next. The Auror steeled himself. He was a ridiculously bad actor, he knew, and undercover work was really not his forte, but he had to give this a shot.

"You seem like a wise man...knows who's who and what's what..." A gold coin appeared in his hand and he twirled it in his fingers.

"Do I now?" the bartender murmured, no hint of a smile in his eyes or around the mouth. "Perhaps I am...perhaps not. But seeing as yeh think I know who's who and what's what...would you like to know what I'm thinking right now?"

"Oh, I could hazard a guess," Steven said with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm a suspicious newcomer free with his gold and soon with his questions. You may even think I'm in law enforcement, and you may be quite right. Or..." He took a long sip of his ale and leaned in, his voice now carrying an edge. "I *may* be an agent of the Dark Lord." His eyes grew hard until he shrugged lightly. "Or I could just be here on business. No matter what you are *thinking*, unless you are quite the Legilimens, you really have no idea. But you know what I think? I think for the right price you'll tell me exactly what I wish to know...or..." A vague hint of menace entered the air before, rather bewilderingly, his grin returned in full force. "You could miss out on a very profitable opportunity."

The bartender regarded him silently and then cracked a small smile, bending his head. "If yeh are one of *His* lot, then yeh wouldn't be the first one I've seen off. But I'm *thinkin'* yeh're not; for if yeh were a dabbler in the Dark Arts, yeh'd have sense enough to recognise that if yeh raise your wand anywhere around my pub there would be no more of yeh left than a pile of smokin' ashes to regret it." Retrieving Steven's glass, he topped it up and pushed it back to him. "I've not survived in this business fifty years with men and creatures that'd give the likes of yeh night sweats not to know someone out of his element when I see him.

"So...yeh're either venturing here looking for something or *someone* of great importance to you personally...or yeh *are* the law." His voice dropped down on the last word. "Seeing as yeh've given me the first amusement I've had in a month, I'm going to choose not to believe my gut and assume yeh're here on 'personal' business." He arched an eyebrow. "Ask...and if it's not too much, I'll see what I can do for."

"Sounds awfully fair," Steven agreed, still smiling while making a mental note to add warts to Fletcher's ails for not telling him about the potential of becoming a dust bunny. Taking a sip of his ale, he leaned a bit closer. "You see, I'm looking for this woman..."

"To contact, bargain with, kill, buy, or shag?" the bartender responded as casually as if he had been asking what kind of potatoes he'd like with his dinner.

Steven merely arched an eyebrow, repressing a shudder at the idea of shagging his contact. "Bargain," he replied, sipping his drink.

The moustache twitched. "All right." He picked up another glass to wash and clean. "And what might this lady's name be, then?"

"Brody," Steven replied, glancing around the room again. "Red-head, tall...bit of a looker."

Sharp eyes returned to him, the bartender's years of perceptiveness brought to bear upon the Auror. "Yeh'd best be telling me the truth. Ariadne Brody is well liked around here, and none of these fine people will take kindly to yeh messin' with her. Just a friendly warning." He jerked his head towards one of the Moroccan alcoves at the far end of the bar, his gaze still on Steven. "Down there."

Inwardly sighing with relief, Steven nodded, his expression serious. "Many thanks...and not to worry." Finishing his drink, he gave the barman another coin and preparing for his next challenge, made his way to the booth. Whereupon, he walked smack into the chest of one of the largest men he had ever seen as he stepped directly in front of him.

He had to have been seven feet two inches at least, and so perfectly proportioned that he had to undoubtedly have at least some giant blood in him. Muscles fairly bulged out from under jacket and trousers, which were softly tanned suede leather under a white silk shirt. Dark brown knee length boots and a matching sleeveless robe of dark brown completed the ensemble.

A mane of sleek and tidy blond hair hung to his shoulders, and twin pale blue eyes stared down at Steven from a tanned and surprisingly good looking face. Two exceedingly large arms folded, biceps bulging, across the man's chest right in front of Steven's face as he stared wordlessly at him, waiting.

"My...you are a big fella," the Auror murmured, rubbing his nose a little. Arching his eyebrow, he straightened, folded his arms, and stared straight back at the other man. "I'm here to see Miss Brody." His words were short and to the point and there was a definite hint that the tall man was not going to get much more out of him than that. There was a momentary pause before the man nodded and stepped back, affording Steven the view of a slender, athletic young woman. For once Mundungus had not exaggerated; she was indeed a 'bit of a looker'.

Ariadne Brody was in possession of a head of flame red hair that Arthur Weasley's family could only have gazed upon in envy. Sharp green eyes were set in slender features that might well have been described as aristocratic if it were not for the jaunty smile that she wore. Clad in a wide collared white shirt under her button up robes, she appeared tall and nicely packaged with only just the hint of cleavage on display -- no doubt to provide distraction and therefore advantage in her dealings with her mostly male patrons. Leaning back against her giant companion as he resumed his seat, she lounged in the booth, the fingers of one hand circling the rim of her straight glass slowly as she appraised the new arrival.

"I don't believe we've had the pleasure," she said in a pleasant contralto flavoured with a mild southern Irish accent.

Steven smiled at her from where he stood. "No, for I would most certainly would have remembered if we had."

Her lips turned up a little more at his charm. "Ariadne Brody," she introduced herself.

"Steven Prince," he replied, taking her in and weighing up any potential threats.

"You're quite safe, Mr. Prince." Amusement touched her voice. "Neither Fionn nor I carry weapons...not here. And of course neither do you, do you?" she enquired lightly.

He doubted she was telling the truth, though with as big a man as Fionn...did she really need to? That man was a walking weapon. "Of course not," he replied. "I'm just a man looking for some simple information...and willing to pay nicely for it."

"Oh good." She sipped on the Firewhisky slowly. "I do enjoy it when a customer is upfront with me. So now it will just be a formality when Fionn searches you, won't it?" A full beamed smile was aimed at him as the glass lowered.

"Of course," he said without hesitation as his eyes turned to Fionn, his smile widening. "But be gentle...it's my first time."

A second later, he found himself unceremoniously pushed face first against the rough wall, the giant performing a vigorous and intensive search -- turning and repositioning him like he weighed nothing, while frisking and probing him thoroughly, all to the intense amusement of those present. Satisfied and leaving Steven rather mused, he returned to sit by his female companion, his arms folding across his chest once more.

"Thank you, Mr. Prince." Ariadne indicated a seat. "That was most civil of you."

"You're quite welcome," the dark haired man replied, straightening his clothes and shaking his hair back into shape as he sat. "No bother at all. Quite bracing really." Running his fingers a few more times through his black mane, he smiled, inwardly relieved the jerry-rigged concealment spells had worked and the giant hadn't found the two short daggers, as well as one or two other items, concealed on his person. "And now we all trust each other, I humbly suggest we forego the sing-a-long and get straight to business?"

Her smile hardened in an instant. "Mr. Prince, business began the moment you approached." The glass scraped over the wood of the table as she pushed it away slowly. "I don't *do* 'sing-a-longs' and I don't take insults."

Steven's lively baritone laugh filled the enclosure. "Quite right too. And, of course, no offence was meant. In fact, I quite enjoy a good sing-a-long...a nice rendition of 'Roll Out the Wizard'? Perhaps later?" he suggested and as she blinked, he leaned forward, looking completely serious. "I have it on good authority that you might know a thing or two about these." Fishing a hand into his robes, he pulled out the pieces of the destroyed Reflectus he'd received from Dumbledore. "Before it was ruined, it did a smashing job relaying my little instructions to my partner, but then he had to go and break it. You really can't get quality like this anymore and I was told you might know somewhere I could. I would be profoundly grateful if you could point me in the right direction."

Drawing the pieces towards her, she gazed at them before picking one piece up, turning it back and forth to examine it carefully. "Interesting." Sharp eyes turned towards him. "I'm not surprised your partner broke it, Mr. Prince. I'd be in a hurry, too, to escape any fire hot enough to char the edges of such a strongly magic imbued piece as this."

"He should have been more careful with it," he sniffed, his tone irked. "Don't get me wrong...I am glad he is all right...but such equipment is near impossible to replace!"

"Surely." She placed the piece back on the table. "Being as they are completely banned by every Ministry of Magic this side of China."

Steven nodded adamantly. "Exactly!"

"And I suppose you are also aware that even the possession of these few mementos," she pushed the pieces back towards him, "carries with them a mandatory twenty-five year stretch amidst the comforts of Azkaban."

He sighed long-sufferingly and gave her a look. "Of course I know the risks." His eyebrow arched. "Now can you assist me or not?"

"Mr. Prince, I was referring to my own safety, not yours," she replied, her jaw tightening again. "I remind you, *you* came to me seeking a favour. If you do not wish to move at my pace...you are free to leave me at any time. It is no hardship to me, I assure you."

He sighed and sat back, relenting. "Very well...we shall play it your way."

Ariadne's piercingly green eyes remained on him. "I am sorry you find my company tedious, Mr. Prince. So I shall be as blunt as you like -- two thousand Galleons."

His eyebrow arched. "Two thousand?" he repeated coolly.

She leaned back against her companion. "The information is valuable."

"*Just* for information?" He sniffed and gazed at his fingernails. "One thousand."

"Now you are the one wasting my time, Mr. Prince. Two thousand..." she insisted with a sigh, "and not a Knut less. That is, unless you would rather deal in some other commodity?"

He smiled suddenly, giving him the appearance and genuine feel of someone who was possibly a touch deranged. "Oh come...bartering is the spice of life. The give...the take...the thrill of the deal?" He pouted a little as she remained silent. "I was rather looking forward to that bit. But all right, you win -- two thousand it is."

Her brow creased ever so slightly. "Mr. Prince..." she queried, "are you sure you weren't caught up in that explosion? A little flak to the head or an awkward landing perhaps?"

He appeared completely mystified. "No...no. I was miles away...why do you ask?"

She turned her head slightly to look at Fionn, who shrugged lightly. Shaking her head, she turned her eyes back to Steven, slipping back into business mode. "Never mind, Mr. Prince. I'll be needing the money from you upfront, of course."

"Of course," he agreed, fishing around in his pockets before pulling two bags from his boots and four from his robes.

The two with him in the booth exchanged glances once more, the giant looking a deal more perturbed this time as his search had obviously proved lacking. "I trust, Mr. Prince..." Ariadne said quietly, "that whatever spell you used to conceal that gold from Fionn's search doesn't also conceal a weapon."

Steven blinked, his face beatific. "Why on earth would I conceal a weapon? Don't like them...messy things. I'm just a simple businessman."

Ariadne's lips curled in a mirthless smile. "Yes...and I'm a Leprechaun," she answered. "Speaking of which." She pulled one of the magically load-reducing bags open and reached in to take a handful of the coins, spreading them on the table and handing one at random to Fionn. The coin was tiny in his huge hands as the big man held it up to the light, his pale eyes narrowing as he turned the coin this way and that. "There's a lot of stunts pulled with Leprechaun gold, Mr. Prince," Ariadne said. "It's not that I mistrust you...I simply mistrust everyone."

"Then I shall not feel the least bit offended," he replied, secretly glad he hadn't decided to try that particular trick.

The quasi-giant's expert eye finished its perusal and he handed the coin back to his red-haired partner with a terse nod. "Very good," she pronounced, gathering up the coins and pushing the other bags towards Fionn for him to examine. "I shall refrain from questioning your sanity further in coming in to a place like this with so much cash on you.

"The one who can help is not, I'm afraid, one of my regular contacts." She picked up her glass again. "He casts a wider net and deals with a rather more atypical clientele than we average smugglers. You may not have heard of Wigglesworth's, the Muggle department store in Birmingham?

"Run by Sinister Wigglesworth, it's an excellent cover to track magical artefacts lost to the Muggle world. It used to be both him and his brother, but he disappeared two years ago in the search to acquire a Nundu for private collectors. Probably just as well, as Dexter's use for Muggles was beginning to take a darker turn...he never was the most appealing of men," she mused. "Ask any Brummy; they'll know how to direct you."

"And shall I tell him you sent me?" Steven enquired.

"If you wish." She smiled. "It won't do you any good, though. As I say, his is a more exclusive clientele. If you wish to be seen by him, I'd suggest a more *notable* introduction."

"Such as?" he prompted, keeping on the charm.

"Mr. Prince," she laughed to herself, "refined for this place I might be, but do I look like a walking social register? I'm a smuggler and purveyor of information, not a PR consultant. If you have a highly connected friend or patron, I suggest you use his or her name. If not...then you may join the rest of the plebs queuing outside Sinister's office."

He smiled cheerily at the woman, internally already planning a trip back to Dumbledore to see what could be arranged. "I think I have one or two with whom I can gloss the way. My thanks to you, Miss Brody, and your perfectly silent friend." Gathering the broken pieces of the Reflectus, he shoved them back into assorted pockets.

"You're welcome, Mr. Prince, it was a pleasure to meet you," she extended her hand, "and an even greater pleasure to see you leave."

Taking her hand, he shook it with a smile and with a wink to Fionn, rose to his feet and left. With his head lowered and the hood covering his eyes, no one saw the thankful glint in them nor, as the door shut behind him, the gradually triumphant smirk on his lips.

The flower filled meadow beside the cottage overlooked the deep blue of the sea on one side and the sweep down to the verdant valley on the other. It was both picturesque and an excellent vantage point to watch for intruders, and yet Snape wasn't entirely sure why he was here.

He eyed Paidea surreptitiously as she laid out the picnic she had requested he join her on. A request that had followed her avoiding him like a manure flavoured Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Bean for the previous forty-eight hours, ever since he'd kissed her on the beach. From that moment to this, everything had been tense. Short sporadic questions and answers followed by silence or her locked in her room, reading or working on speeches. He had been stunned when, just as he was settling down to annotate his Potions textbook, her door had opened and she'd breezed out with a smile, asking him if he enjoyed al fresco dining.

And now he was sitting on a blanket with a basket of food Elly had packed, quietly bemused. Keeping himself still, he waited, half expecting her to say something along the lines of 'I've been in touch with the Ministry and they're sending someone down to replace you. Thanks for everything and enjoy your life.'

These past two days had been horrendous with him constantly berating himself for his ill timed approach of her or for his even having such feelings in the first place. But he still didn't want to leave...though a part of him felt it was inevitable. He shifted a little and glanced at her again, waiting for the boom to be lowered.

She smiled up at him, the breeze blowing tendrils of her hair and the ribbons that were woven into it. "And what have you been working on these past couple days? I have seen you with that Potions book...have you been given an assignment for school?"

"No..." He shook his head, doing a reasonable job of keeping the wariness from his voice. "I have my own projects. I just tamper with them from time to time."

She nodded, offering him a sandwich from a platter. "Like what?" she enquired, appearing genuinely interested.

"Improving antidotes...enhancing elixirs..." He took a sandwich slowly and placed it on his plate. "It varies, depending on my mood or what has caught my interest. Sometimes, I just work on my own spells instead."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Your spells? You have invented spells?"

He looked down, having said more than he intended to in his edgy state. "One...or two..."

Taking a sandwich herself, she helped herself to some fruit. "That's very impressive," she told him, her tone mirroring her words. "I have not heard of anyone inventing a new spell for quite some time...except perhaps...well, 'He We Do Not Speak Of.'" She shuddered a little. "You must be quite the prodigy. Your family and teachers must be very proud."

He cringed slightly. "They don't know. No one does, except you now. You're not going to tell the Headmaster when you see him, are you?" The question came quickly.

Her brow furrowed. "Why would I do that?" Her smile grew softer. "Besides, I highly doubt I shall be seeing Albus Dumbledore any time soon. And I must say I feel rather privileged that you've cared to share this with me. I shan't betray your trust."

He relaxed a little, rebuking himself for the slip but knowing it had come from a lingering desire to impress her. "I shouldn't have told you, what with you being a government official. I wouldn't want to compromise you in any way." The kiss flashed through his mind. "That is, having to report on things like this...and not..."

"Severus...relax." She reached out and touched his hand, which had the exact opposite effect. "We are still friends and I'm under no obligation to tell them anything of the sort. Unless they are Dark Arts spells and you use them to harm anyone." She gave him a teasing smile and turned back to her food, releasing his hand and trying to ignore how the simple touch had made her entire body tingle.

He gazed at his hand for a moment more, resolving and smoothing the frown on his face at the thought of how she might react if she knew of the malevolent power of his Sectumsempra spell. Not to mention one or two others still in their infancy.

But as he took a bite of his sandwich, he picked up on something else she had said -*Friends*. They were 'friends.' Even as he realised he probably wasn't going to be sent away, his heart sank at the word all would-be lovers dreaded to hear.

"It's good," he mumbled, forcing the words from his mouth to break the bitterness of his thoughts. "The sandwich."

Pouring out two glasses of wine, she handed one to him. "I'm glad you like it and shall most certainly pass on your compliments to Elly." She gazed down at the food around them. "There are cheese and crackers, fruit...pate...and I think some..." A most avaricious gleam formed in her eyes. "Chocolate cake."

He regarded the salacious expression on her face, and despite the depression sitting on him, just managed to keep the amusement from his face at an example of one of the more unusual items he had discovered about her during this time together. "I wonder what the Wizarding world would think if they knew that the idealistic star of the diplomatic world could be bribed into almost anything by a devil's food cake with hot fudge sauce."

A full bellied laugh escaped her lips, her eyes shining. "Yes...well, that is *your* secret to keep," she told him with a wink. Taking a sip from her wine, she looked out over the flower-filled meadow.

She had decided that morning that she was going to cease tip-toeing around her companion. The tension had been so thick after her mistake, it could have been cut with a knife. It was not only disquieting but downright irritating. It was not his fault she had caved in to her desires, and she shouldn't keep treating him as though it was. And so she'd decided to make a peace offering -- to take him out of the cottage and get him in the sunshine...to allow him to stop looking like a plant that had been kept in the shadows and allow him to flourish.

She also had simply wanted to spend time with him again. It had been a surprise, though not a huge one, to find that she had missed his company over those last two days...that *she* had been flourishing under his quiet light. These newfound revelations and current upheaval of her life were hard enough to handle as it was without self-inflicted solitary confinement. And so, she decided that if he agreed, she would put away the diplomatic veneer and just allow herself to be...herself. Within newly careful limits, that is.

But even now, as she took another sip of her wine and popped a cube of cheese into her mouth, she could feel his eyes on her...and it made her tingle pleasantly, a little whisper inside making it clear that it no longer felt uncomfortable or unwelcome...quite the opposite. Still, she insisted inwardly to herself, she could handle it.

"It is clear you never went to Hogwarts." He sipped on his wine. "If you had, you'd know better than to tell your secrets to a Slytherin." The more she appeared to feel at ease, the more his tone seemed to relax. "We're inclined to use such information to our advantage."

Her eyes turned back to his, the smile still on her lips though a little more sly. "Yes, well...I choose to see the individual and not what House they belong to. If I were to believe the propaganda, then you would be a power hungry, untrustworthy prat. But I have yet to see any of that. At the risk of insulting your Slytherin nature, so far, you have been loyal, kind, and thoughtful...though perhaps a pinch caustic and sarcastic at times." Her eyes glittered mischievously as she popped another cube of cheese into her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow. "Just a pinch?"

"Mmmmm," she agreed, still chewing and held up her hand, her forefinger and thumb parallel. "Just a little."

His eyebrow rose still further. "No..." he reached up and widened the gap between her finger and thumb, "more like that. Even at its weakest, sarcasm is a Slytherin specialty."

She lowered the gap again, taking an extra millimetre off it for good measure and barely repressing the laugh that threatened to bubble up again in her. "No...I think perhaps...this much," she managed levelly.

He gazed at her. "Madam Diplomat, you overstep yourself. Be wary lest I spirit away your chocolate cake in revenge."

Popping another cube of cheese into her mouth, she giggled. "I dare you."

"I see," he said quietly as he put down his glass. "A poor move. From you I would've expected more...diplomacy." He held up his hand and whipped the entire chocolate cake from the basket with the other. Leaning back, he placed the plate beside him and examined the cake thoughtfully. "Some for the mice..." he marked off a chunk, with his knife, "the birds...possibly a slice for myself..."

Her eyes widened. "You wouldn't!" she gasped. Fumbling in her pockets, she pulled out her wand, preparing to summon the cake right back.

Sitting up, he snagged her wrist. "I think not." His head shook slowly as he drew her wand from her hand with a smirk. "The cake is mine," he rumbled darkly.

It wasn't until he looked down at her that he realised how close to her he was.

Drawing back slowly, he let one corner of his mouth crook, covering the sudden heat that had infused his body and the desire to move closer still. Her wand twirled lazily in his fingers as he lay back. "Now what do you do, Madam Diplomat...in a case like this?"

Her lips pursed and her gaze still mischievous, she gave no hint of how his proximity and touch had shaken her. After a moment, she sighed and sat back. "Very well...the cake is yours..." she acquiesced before turning away and silently summoning her wand while he was in mid twirl. Once in her hands, she turned back with a grin. Though this time, she pocketed the wand and instead threw a cube of cheese at him.

His own wand was already pointing right at her and the cheese flew across the field and over the cliffside. "Such aggressiveness, Madam Diplomat...for shame."

"What happened to no unnecessary magic?"

"That was a defensive spell. I deemed it necessary."

Her eyes narrowed and she huffed, "Well, if you are going to be that way..."

He eyed her sudden pout closely. "And what do they call that ploy in the diplomatic corps...the Footstomping Failsafe? The Tantrum Tactic? The Moaning Manoeuvre?"

A cube of cheese hit him square on the forehead. "No...I call that distract and conquer." The follow up cube got him on his overly large nose.

"Very tactful." He sat up, rubbing his forehead as his face darkened. "I never realised conquering played such a big part in diplomacy. I was always of the opinion it was about peaceful resolution."

"I am currently on a leave of absence," she replied with a giggle. "Therefore...I am free to indulge myself a little." She aimed another cube at him, but then suddenly popped it in her mouth, grinning from ear to ear.

"Oh...really?" he replied, glowering at her a moment before he stood up, taking the chocolate cake with him, and strode off across the meadow towards where the cheese had shot over the cliff. Still grinning, she rose up and, skirts and ribbons blowing in the breeze, ran after him.

On reaching the edge he looked over it and dropped the cake, plate and all, over the drop before folding his arms and looking over his shoulder at her smugly.

Skidding to a halt, she stared at him in shock. Her gaze went from him, to the cliff, and back to him again. "You...you...I can't believe you actually did that!" she gasped.

A moment later, something appeared to give under him and unbalanced, he lost his footing and disappeared over the cliff's edge.

"Severus!" she cried, her heart in her throat, and pulling her wand out, she ran forward trying to think of a spell to keep him from being turned into paste.

"Yes?" came a casual voice from just over the edge. On looking over, she was greeted by the sight of him lying on his side on a wide grassy ledge just over the cliff's edge, the cake still on its plate by his side as he picked at it.

Her mouth opened and closed several times like a goldfish's before her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "Oh! Oh you! That's a horrible thing to do!" she scolded, staring down at him in a mixture of relief and annoyance. And with a swish of her wand and a silent use of a levitation charm, she returned the cake back to the picnic blanket.

"No..." he looked up at her as he lay back, "it's a Slytherin thing to do."

Folding her arms across her chest, she continued to stare down at him. "Very well," she acquiesced, the glint reappearing in her eyes, as she turned on her heel and disappeared from his view.

Standing up quickly, he stuck his head over the edge of the cliff to see what she was up to. But she was nowhere to be seen. Pulling himself up over the top of the ledge, he got to his feet and wiped his hands as he gazed around once more. "Paidea?"

There was no answer. Crossing back across the sweep of the meadow, he stopped by the picnic, and turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees to look around the uncovered area. "Paidea!" he called out loudly.

The cheese cube came out of nowhere and hit him square on the back of his head.

Standing still, his shoulders tensing, he growled, "Very funny. So are you intending to stay under the Evanesco spell all day?" He turned around, trying to get a bearing on where she might be. "No...you're still here, aren't you." There was a slight rustle to his left and another cube of cheese hit him in the back, followed by a giggle. "I can still hear you so it can't be Evanesco, can it..." he murmured to himself, "it must be a charm or an enchanted object. You have either cast the spell, which you left too early from school to learn how to do...or you have an object imbued with a Disillusionment Charm!" he accused the air.

A cheese cube hit him in the chest.

He dived forward, heading for the rush of silks in front of him that came with the movement, and connected. "Got you!" he snapped triumphantly, both hands closing around her waist. There was a gasp and a laugh, and a moment later, she reappeared, grasping his arms and grinning like an idiot.

"Where is it?" He started to explore her without thought, searching for the charm, his hands delving here and there. "Hand it over. I can hardly watch you without seeing you!" he huffed again.

She giggled, laughing and squirming in his hands before finally wriggling away and running off down into the meadow, throwing a mischievous smile back at him...the gleam in her eyes daring him to catch her.

He took off after her as she zigged and zagged, her skirts slowing her up, and the lope of his seventeen year old legs caught up to her quickly. Tackling her to the ground lightly, he resumed his search. "You *will* hand it over," he assured her, hands wandering again as he turned her over, smirking softly.

She laughed harder than she had in her life, tears welling up in her eyes. "No! Never!" she managed to blurt out before dissolving into giggles again and wriggling in his hands.

"Give it to me." He batted her hands away and rummaged again. "Give me what..." he snorted in amusement, a moment before his eyes met hers, "I want." His hands and movements slowed as he finally realised what they were doing -- how close he was to her, how he was lying over her.

She stopped fighting the moment he did, both the outward battle...and the inward. Staring again up into those dark eyes, she knew...knew exactly how she felt...what he made her feel. But she couldn't give him what he wanted...what she wanted too. Everything inside her told her it was wrong and beyond foolhardy to even consider it. She had never wanted *this* before, why did have to be him? Politicians didn't romance schoolboys...even if the schoolboy was now a legal man in the eyes of Wizarding society. She couldn't allow herself that luxury...and not only did it hurt...it tore her to pieces inside.

His hand rose to touch her cheek as he saw the vulnerability in her eyes.

Closing them, she took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to still her rapidly beating heart and when they opened again, the moment was gone. The friendliness in her smile was still there...but that door inside her was closed. She held up her hand, an emerald ring on her middle finger. "I believe this is what you're looking for."

When the gates slammed shut before him again, he almost groaned audibly in frustration, though its only manifestation was the curling of his fingers before they could touch her skin.

He longed to just burst out and ask her why. Why she wouldn't let herself go? In that single surging moment, he knew she felt something for him. Knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt. He dragged his eyes from hers to her hand, trying to swallow back his savage disappointment, his voice thick. "I see." He rolled to sit beside her and cleared his throat. "Family heirloom?"

"No," she replied, sitting up and pushing back the waves of guilt inside for what she knew he must be feeling, busying herself with brushing the grass out of her hair. "My sister bought it for me for my seventeenth birthday. She told me now I was legal I'd need it to disappear from ardent suitors." She rolled her eyes. "Not that I've had any..." She paused, trying not to look at him as she realised what she was saying. "I don't exactly have time or energy to date..." Kicking herself for her words, she hurriedly rose to her feet. "Hungry?" she asked, gliding back to the picnic.

He caught a fistful of the grass and wrenched it into his hand. "No suitors," he murmured to himself. "None that you take seriously at any rate." He shook his head and rose up and followed her. Somehow, someway, he would make that change.

A soft pop, the familiar herald of Apparating, echoed in the narrow alleyway. The figure that appeared, haphazardly and garishly dressed in a variety of Muggle fashions, adjusted his wide-brimmed and rather floppy fedora to a jaunty angle and glanced around in amusement. It was a bright and sunny day in central Birmingham and yet this little alley, though completely open to the sunlight, was quite overly drab and dark. He sniffed. Not really blending in at all, he thought offhandedly to himself, straightening his long, burgundy velvet coat.

With an offhanded shrug, he moved briskly from the alley to the side door of Wigglesworth's Department Store. Muggles browsed around inside, several more mature types stopping to stare at the mishmash of colours, fabrics, and styles that moved past them as Steven headed through the aisles. Right...then left...then right. He paused, glancing around. "Does this look like the right way to you?" he asked a pair of half-dressed mannequins that appeared to have seen better days. Nodding thoughtfully, he tapped his finger to his lower lip. "Yes...just down here, I think."

And on he continued...until he reached the lone solitary door to a Gent's WC that had a large note stapled to it that said -- BROKEN! DO NOT USE!

"But I have to go!" he complained with a chuckle as he pushed open the door and headed inside to find himself in a rather polished and clean lift with brass fittings, oak panels, glowing buttons, and a deep rich red carpeted floor.

"Yes, well...going in here may not be such a swift idea," he murmured, pressing the large button at the top labelled YOUNG MR. WIGGLEWORTH'S OFFICE.

Steven blinked. "Young? I thought they were twins?" he commented to the thin air.

The lift plummeted downwards, sideways, and shot upwards again in a ride that took about two minutes, continuing without pause until the dial on top of the door reached the final floor and the doors opened with a chirpy ping. He stepped out to face a rather glum line up of visitors sitting in a plush, if rather drably designed, waiting room with

a neatly coiffed blond secretary initiating some typing with the wave of his wand.

There was a bright, shining silver bell on the secretary's desk that said -- FOR ASSISTANCE, PLEASE RING BELL. Letting the typewriter run on, the blond secretary sat back, glanced at the newcomer, and pulled out a nail file, settling back to work on his manicure.

Steven approached the desk and stood there...waiting. After about three minutes, he said, "I'm here to see Mr. Wigglesworth."

The blond man did not even look up. "Did you ring the bell?"

Steven blinked. "But I'm right here..."

"Yes, but I can't help you until you ring the bell," came the patient response.

The Auror was dumbfounded, his brow furrowing. "So...even though I'm right here...you *know* I'm here...and can blatantly see me here...you can't help me 'til I ring this bell?"

The blond man looked up and considered that for a moment before taking a deep breath and replying with a bright, "Yes." He then went back to filing his nails.

"Well, that's kind of rubbish, now, isn't it?"

"No, sir...that's the rules," the blond commiserated.

With a long inward groan and a few inner choice words about how he felt about bureaucratic nonsense, Steven lifted the bell and gave it a quick jingle.

Instantly the file was put down and the blond man smiled winningly at him. "Good morning, sir! How can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Mr. Wigglesworth," the Auror explained patiently.

"Do you have an appointment?" the young man asked with an even more particularly charming smile, the small gap between his two front teeth only adding to the effect.

Steven blinked. "No...did I need one? The matter is a most important and delicate one."

The secretary tutted and shook his head. "Well, Mr. Wigglesworth is most particular about seeing people on by appointment. You really should have thought ahead..."

Steven swallowed back his irritation. He'd sent in his letter of carefully forged introduction and waited for a response...and waited...only to receive a very curt letter saying that if Steven wished to drop by early in the morning he would try to squeeze him into his schedule. Taking a deep breath, the Auror pulled out the letter he'd received via owl late last night. "Mr. Wigglesworth, as you can see, asked me to drop by this morning. He has kindly volunteered to try and fit me in..."

Twin blond eyebrows rose to their hairline as the young man looked over the letter. "Oh my!" he breathed. "So he did!" His gaze shifted to the dark haired man, an appreciative gleam in them as he considered the obvious importance of this newcomer. "Well, if you'll take a seat, I'll just send word to Mr. Wigglesworth that you have arrived." And with that, he waved his wand, sending a silvery cloud floating over to the door and through the keyhole inside.

Rolling the scroll back up and with a brief nod, Steven moved over to the line of chairs by the wall and took the only available seat between a hag -- who seemed to be knitting a sweater for something with an odd number of legs -- and a one-eyed goblin who was dressed impeccably but kept glancing at his pocket watch with much irritation.

After half an hour, the impressive office door finally opened and an erudite voice called out, "Mr. Steven Prince?" A moment later a tall, dark haired man with a pinched face and moustache stepped out, brushing down his pinstripe robes.

Steven stood up smoothly, only for the goblin to rise as well.

"I've been waiting 'ere for my nine o'clock appointment for two 'ours!" the short being growled. "'e's only been 'ere 'alf an 'our...and without an appointment!"

The dark haired man walked towards them, eyeing the goblin with disdain; however, on reaching them, he turned towards the lift and pressed the button. At the sound of a small cough, all eyes turned towards a diminutive, cherubic faced man in his fifties with neatly cropped golden blond hair and a matching goatee beard standing in the doorway with a smile.

"I am dreadfully sorry, Mr. Grapplehook...I shall of course make it up to you by treating you to a sumptuous lunch." Sinister Wigglesworth, a man whose features were decidedly unworthy of his treacherous first name, turned to his secretary. "Mr. Inman, would you be so good as to make reservations for myself and Mr. Grapplehook at my usual eatery...and please provide him with whatever he would care for, for the moment?"

Sniffing, the goblin appeared vaguely appeased, grumbling as he sat down that a hot drink might be nice.

Sinister's bright blue eyes and wide smile turned upon Steven. "Mr. Prince," he beamed, stepping back to usher him in, "please...do come in."

Pushing his floppy fedora back on his head, Steven nodded to the small man and moved inside, giving a quick grin and wink to the secretary, flustering him somewhat.

Sinister Wigglesworth's office was not what one would expect of any department store owner in Muggledom. Inside the office doors was a study filled with books and arcane devices that thrummed and hummed with magical power. It resembled, in a way, the office of Albus Dumbledore, except that the snoozing portraits on the wall were of the ancestral Wigglesworth line and there were absolutely no windows. Candlelight was the sole means of lighting, none of the electricity that lit the department store entering the inner sanctum, it seemed, and banks of candelabra bathed the room in a magically enhanced glow. The room was long and carpeted with a comfortable couch and chairs in one corner near a fireplace large enough to be a Floo Network connection. At the far end, there stood a huge black lacquered desk behind which was a matching black lacquered chair with gold upholstered backing and two eagle heads carved into the arms.

Steven said nothing as he watched his host shut the door and move into the room, Mr. Wigglesworth obviously much more than he seemed.

"Come in...come in..." The small man ushered the Auror to a pair of comfortable leather seats in front of his desk, indicating to either. "Please, sit down." Wigglesworth crossed over towards a rather large drinks cabinet. "Something to drink? I can offer you five excellent vintage Firewhiskies if that is your poison?" He arched a quizzical eyebrow.

"No, thank you," the tall man replied, taking the proffered chair with a smile. "It was very kind of you to fit me into your schedule like this...you seem to be booked solid."

"Yes..." Wigglesworth sighed ruefully, as he poured himself a drink. "I'm afraid between trying to deal with Muggle employees in my other office and fitting in my more valued custom..." he glanced meaningfully at Steven, "my day is one long series of meetings. Quite tiresome." Once back at his desk, he pulled across a scroll that Steven recognised as his letter of introduction. "Still, never mind...how is Walburga? She and Orion Black have long been stalwart customers of mine. It is a shame they don't get out to do their own shopping anymore." He sipped on his drink. "I suppose it was coming though. Their dislike for Muggle company, even in short bursts as with visits to me here, was bound to keep them from my door eventually."

Steven sighed and nodded. "She's well...just had this new portrait commissioned, don't you know. Though she won't let anyone see it until it is finished. Oh and she's been not in the best of moods since her son Sirius...well, we all know about him, don't we? Such a good thing Regulus is there to comfort her." Settling back in his chair, he crossed his legs as he shook his head sympathetically.

"Indeed...indeed. Always seemed a bright lad to me, odd that he should go so against his parents," Sinister agreed with a nod. "Still, Black sheep do seem unavoidable when you have that family name." He chuckled softly. "How do you know them?"

"My mother, though older, is a good friend of Walburga's," Steven replied honestly. "They make it a point to pay calls on each other at least once a week to chat and catch up on the gossip. And though my family is not nearly so illustrious as the Blacks...my mother has been comforting poor Walburga during this trying time as she and her mother were a great help to her when my sister...well, let's just say she should have been a bit more particular in her choice of husbands." Inwardly, Steven winced at the lie about his feelings toward his elder sister but unable to disagree with part of the sentiment -- not about her marrying a Muggle, but one who obviously made her and her son so unhappy at times.

"Ah..." Sinister nodded, "I see. I have nothing against Muggles per se, I must tell you...after all," he smiled, "I do employ a good five hundred of them across the country and they do make my acquisitions of certain items far easier to come by. You would be flabbergasted to know just how many magical items fall into the hands of Muggle museums and collectors. They have no idea what they are, of course, and they are completely useless to them but they carry value as objets d'art.

"Most wizards and witches have little dealings with the Muggle world and the Ministry has never sought fit to set up a reclamation department for magical heritage lost to Muggles. My connections with Muggle import/export people and art collectors allow me to reclaim and return these items to their rightful place in our society quietly. At a tidy profit, of course." He chuckled before sipping on his drink. "So you see, I cannot dismiss Muggles out of hand as so many of us do. They are tremendously useful to me and they do bring in a goodly income via shopping. They are shopping fiends; you have no idea. You put out one advertisement, magically enhanced or not, and they all come flocking to you. With wizards, it would take at least four or five to permeate the consciousness...but Muggles are so pre-disposed to shiny new things."

Steven nodded with an amused smile at the thought, unable to disagree with that statement. "I concede you the point," he agreed.

"Ah, good." Sinister relaxed back into his chair. "I am glad you understand my position...because oft times and more and more of late, I find myself at odds with wizards from certain families or...backgrounds...that are glad of my work but disapprove of my association with Muggles, failing to understand my need to work with them. It has gotten to the stage now where I feel I must lay my cards upon the table in this regard so as to avoid unpleasantness later.

"I am, Mr. Prince, first and foremost...a business man. I do not care which side I deal with, providing the Wigglesworth establishment and name continues to provide good service." He watched Steven's reaction carefully. "If the time comes when one side prevails over the other, that will be different, of course..." he conceded, "but for the moment, I find the best course the middle one."

Steven nodded placidly, though his keen eyes were taking in the man in front of him, and though he nodded in agreement, he cursed silently inside him. Idealists and purists were easy to deal and to fake allegiance with...those who had no care in one side or the other were much more difficult to fool or to win over.

"So..." Sinister arched an inquisitive eyebrow, "now that you know where I stand, and I see you are not departing so I assume that must sit fair with you...how can I be of service to you and Walburga? Or is it just your good self?"

"I'm afraid it's just me," Steven replied apologetically. "And since you were so candid with me, I shall be candid with you. I need a little help obtaining an item that is most necessary for me but not entirely legal." He sighed. "I had one such item, you see, but it got a bit...damaged." He grimaced and shrugged. "And so I find myself in need of a new one. It's quite a pain really and most inconvenient."

"I see..." Sinister nodded amiably. "Well so far it doesn't sound too out of the ordinary, I must confess. But then the devil is always in the details, and the level of illegality is always the tricky part. So what is it precisely you are looking to replace?"

"Oh, it's highly illegal." Steven's voice was again very apologetic for the inconvenience. "But I am willing to pay a fair price." He uncrossed and re-crossed his legs to get a bit more comfortable. "Dashed nuisance...but I really do need a new one or I can't complete my commission." He leaned forward a bit. "It's a Reflectus." He almost seemed to pout, his expression one of a man that was completely put out. "And a high quality one too!"

"*Really?*" Sinister's eyebrow arched as he leaned on one arm of his chair. "My, my...that *is* illegal. Two-way private mirrors capable of transmitting anywhere and undetected. I've only come across two pairs in my entire life. No wonder you are put out. Of course now I understand completely why Walburga sent you to me. Out of curiosity, may I ask where it was you originally got the one you lost?"

Steven sighed. "You could...but I wouldn't have the best answer, I'm afraid." His hands smoothed down his velvet overcoat. "I can't really remember, you see." He rolled his eyes. "I believe he had a memory charm on him that scrambled one's memory of him as soon as he leaves your presence. Which is quite daft if you ask me...because if one gets into one of these situations, *how* is one to get a replacement?" Again the put out expression appeared on his face. "Shoddy business technique, I say!"

"Quite so, quite so," Sinister agreed quietly. "Although perhaps -- given the extreme rarity of these items and the talent required to create a magical item that can transmit into and out of any area unseen -- he hardly expected to come into another one. As I said, even I have only ever seen two pairs, and the original pair stand in the office of Albus Dumbledore, of course." He laughed. "I trust it wasn't his you had!"

Steven snorted, one side of his lips curling up in a half smile. "Hardly."

"Of course..." Sinister continued to chuckle. "This is intriguing all the same. Would you happen to have the remainders of the Reflectus with you? Or perhaps the undamaged part of the pair? Tracking its origin and manufacturer will help, I'm sure."

Steven's nose wrinkled. "Oh, I have it...but it's all damaged, I'm afraid." Reaching into several pockets, he pulled out the various pieces of the Reflectus. "And some bits are just melted." He gazed down at the parts with disgust.

"Thank you." Sinister reached across the expanse of the lacquered desk to take them. If anything, he spent even longer scrutinising them than Ariadne Brody before he put them down. "Right!" he said in satisfaction before giving the younger man an apologetic look. "One more question if you don't mind, Mr. Prince?"

Steven gestured for him to continue.

"Do you take me for a complete fool?"

The young man's eyebrow arched, looking outwardly not the least bit as flustered as he felt. "Quite the contrary," he replied smoothly.

"Oh, I think not," Wigglesworth scoffed. "In fact, considering the way you blundered in here with your forged letter of introduction and quite frankly, thin as toilet paper fabrication, I think you think I am an idiot." He held up the pieces of the Reflectus. "I...and I alone sold this item and its mate *and* to an individual, who I can assure you, given his...affiliations...would *never* have sold it. Obfuscating charm or no!" He leaned forward on his desk, his cherubic face now shrewd and no nonsense. "I somehow have my doubts, sir, that you are of the same affiliation. I'm sure a quick examination of your left arm would prove that."

Steven merely smiled at the onslaught, his suspicions about this man's intelligence and dangerousness being more confirmed by the minute. Leaning back in his chair, he nodded. "That, and I'm an exceptionally bad actor. Never really had the talent for it...now singing...that's my forte." He shifted the angle of his hat, his voice still jovial but his eyes very serious indeed. "That, and duelling...and darts."

"You..." Sinister sat back, "are either a very odd or very foolish man. Either way, for your own sake, I suggest you leave now."

"Why?" the dark haired man asked, not moving a muscle. "So, I lied...everyone lies in this game. So you know I'm not a Death Eater...so you know I'm not a purist. Actually, if you really want to know I'm an Auror, and if I wanted to, I could arrest you for trafficking illegal goods. Your words alone would damn you to Azkaban for a few years." The younger man smiled but there was no warmth in it. "But...I don't want to. I do want information and I'm still willing to pay a hefty sum for it." His eyebrow arched. "So...we can deal...or you can threaten me a bit more. Your choice really...I've got all day."

Sinister returned his smile. "There is only your word against mine, Auror. And that is not enough for the Wizengamot to convict...and you are the only one here with illegal items on you." He chuckled softly, looking around them. "Besides...you misunderstand me. I'm not threatening you...I'm warning you."

Steven snorted. "We're in a time of war, Mr. Wigglesworth. Words alone are enough to incriminate anyone. And you must really think I'm daft to just walk in here without any protection of my own."

Sinister rolled his eyes. "I'm not warning you against *me*, you clownishly clothed buffoon! I'm warning you against proceeding further along this line of investigation...and where it might lead you." He leaned forward. "Believe me, I know the law, Auror, and you cannot frighten me with words of 'war' and erosion of civil liberties. I know Dumbledore, Bagnold, and the Abernathys too...our civil rights have not been reduced to the words of Aurors becoming judge, jury, and executioner. I have danced around the likes of you enough to know that. You have no hold over me save what I choose to give you. And I am attempting to stop you from blundering into something you have no conception of."

Steven frowned and rose to his feet, pacing the room for a minute as though pondering something very serious before he stopped and turned back to the man behind the desk. "You really think my clothes are clownish?"

"Velvet and a fedora -- quite frankly, sir, you look like a Muggle pimp!" Sinister informed him flatly.

"Well, it looks loads better with the knitted scarf." Steven's words were humorous, but his expression was quite different and with a sigh, he moved back. "Look...I know what I'm getting into more than you think. You may not care a whit one way or the other whether a good woman lives or dies, but I do...and it's my job to stop it."

"You refer of course to Counsellor Abernathy," Sinister said, resuming his more relaxed pose, a slight crease on his brow. "I confess, Mr. Prince, that had I known the purpose the Reflectus was to be put to, I would have thought twice about selling it on to our erstwhile assassin. I wish no ill to the young lady; in fact, I wish her nothing but well as her equivocation over the war suits me no end at the moment. But my customer appeared to know for certain I had the Reflectus, which was unusual to say the least as I had only come into possession of it a few days before and had not as yet advertised that fact."

Steven actually looked surprised. "A few days...you say?" He frowned. "How odd." His lips pursed a bit, his expression still thoughtful as he took his chair again. "Perhaps the person you purchased it from referred the man to you?"

Sinister returned his eyes to him, the corner of his mouth curling up a little. "Perhaps you are not as foolish as you dress, nor as dense as your words make you appear, Mr. Prince." He nodded. "Yes...I believe that almost certainly to be the case. And yet, I know for a fact," his smile grew, "that my 'dealer' is anything but sympathetic to the cause of the Dark Lord." His fingers closed about his glass again. "Odd, no?"

The Auror's brow furrowed even more. "Very..." he agreed lowly.

"In any event..."Sinister said conversationally, "I trust you know I won't be giving you the name of my dealer, Mr. Prince."

The younger man sighed and nodded. "Oh yes...*that* would be way too easy." His eyebrow arched. "I don't suppose a complete or partial description would be forthcoming though?" he enquired with a wry smile at Sinister.

The short man's low laugh wafted to him again. "I'm rather afraid not. I know it must be a dreadful bore," Wigglesworth commiserated, "but, you see, I must be even more careful in the steps I take as it is quite clear to me now that I am walking a very thin line between two extremes. Two extremes that oddly seem to be colluding on one very salient, very agreed upon point."

"The death of Counsellor Abernathy," Steven said tightly. Rising up, he stalked the room back and forth with long strides. "Someone who is against His side is using His people to take her out." He frowned. "However, it makes no sense for 'He Who Must Not Be Named' to want the Counsellor dead! Her pacifist ideals and notions are, if anything, rather beneficial to Him for now..."

"My thoughts exactly...if a little less succinctly put," Sinister agreed with a smile. "It does seem a queer thing to do. But then there is often method to madness, Mr. Prince, and in my experience, when one discards a prize, such as Counsellor Abernathy, it is often to get a far greater one. Of course," he shrugged lightly, "what that might be I have no idea, and as I wish to keep my head upon my shoulders, I shall be making no further enquiries. You would be well advised to do the same."

Steven shook his head, his eyes frank and a little tired. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Of course you can't." Blue eyes regarded him with total non-surprise. "Well..." the older man pushed the pieces of the Reflectus back to the Auror, "as I say, I cannot give you any information regarding either my dealer or my customer. That information is sacrosanct. What I can tell you, however, is that the maker of both the Reflectii pairs that came into my hands must be quite the remarkable auteur...considering he was reported missing, presumed dead some time ago."

Steven's jaw tightened as he gathered up the pieces. "Yes...I know," he said quietly.

Sinister's eyes moved to the pieces on the table. "Ah, but of course...you were no doubt involved in the investigation of his disappearance at some point. Where was it he disappeared? Near Brecon Beacons in Wales, wasn't it?"

"No, it was Moreton on the Marsh in the Cotswolds," the dark haired man replied, stuffing the last piece into an inside pocket. His eyebrow arched as he looked over at the businessman. "Which I'm sure you knew."

"Of course..." Sinister nodded, "my mistake." He rose from his chair and gestured towards the door at the far end of the room before he walked around his desk. "I am sorry not to be of more assistance to you, Mr. Prince, but you know how things are. Business is business after all."

Steven rose to his feet. "Yes...of course it is," he replied and held out his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Wigglesworth. This has been a most...enlightening...conversation and I thank you for your time."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Prince..." He took the Auror's hand and then walked him towards the door. "Just ensure that next time you intend to try and dupe me, you and your superiors put a little more effort into it, eh? A little challenge brightens all our days, wouldn't you say?" He opened the door further for his guest.

Steven couldn't help smiling at that. "Then they won't send me. I'm utterly crap at acting." Walking out the door, he doffed his hat to the short man and headed toward the elevator.

Dinner that night in the cottage was one of the tensest meals that Paidea had ever experienced in her life...and that was saying something, given the line of work she was in. She had sat at dinners where the two figures at either end of the table were so completely antagonistic that any little word could set off a feud that could last for a decade, but she had still never been as on edge as she was at this moment. And it didn't help that Snape's face was utterly unreadable.

Not a word had been spoken...from either of them. In fact, both of them seemed to be more occupied with eating, drinking, pushing food around their plates, and simply gazing anywhere *but* at each other. It was nerve-racking to say the least.

Once Elly had cleared the plates and leftovers and disappeared for the night, Paidea had finally been forced to say something to her companion. Giving him a smile, but in knots inside, she had enquired if perhaps they should...talk? Seeing him flinch, she'd quickly amended it to talking in general...not anything specific. She knew they would have to have a 'talk' but she wasn't entirely sure what to say...nor how to say it. 'Oh yes, Severus, I feel the same as you, but I can't be with you because you're barely legal and I could get thrown out of my job. Oh, and you'd be hounded your whole life for it...' Oh yes...*that* would go over very well. Add that her family would be horrified that she hadn't married 'well.' Well, maybe not her sister...but most certainly her parents and she could just call it all a hat trick. She could just see her mother fainting.

So, here they sat. Neither saying a word. Neither knowing what to say. And Paidea found herself wondering if perhaps they should just have that 'talk' and get it over with.

Snake's mind was racing but next to nothing was coming into it. "Perhaps we should talk in more comfortable seats?" he enquired, shifting on the wooden chair at the table.

"Perhaps you are right," she agreed readily, rising to her feet and moving over to the couch to sit at one end.

Standing as well, he followed her to the couch, pausing behind it and hesitating to look down at her. A part of him wondered -- was she doing it on purpose? -- picking those dresses that seemed demure but revealed just enough to make his palms sweat nervously and his fingers itch...hardly an attractive combination. Inhaling slowly and pulling on his button down shirt just a little, he continued around the couch with equal slowness to sit at the far end. "Comfortable?" he asked stiffly after a moment, his hands on his knees.

She looked anything but, and in fact was sitting just as ram rod straight, hands -- long ago trained out of nervous habits -- folded placidly on her lap. "Yes...the cushions are very...soft." She moaned inwardly, cursing the sudden desertion of her verbal skills.

"I've slept on worse," he agreed with a nod, cringing at how 'pauperish' that made him sound, like he'd just crawled out from under a footbridge somewhere. What a wonderful way to convince a wealthy pureblood girl you're worthy of her...sound like a Muggle tramp comparing flop houses.

She merely nodded quietly, racking her mind for something to talk about.

"Attractive gown," he commented, shooting a rapid glance at her.

She glanced down at the gown with a tight smile. "Thank you," she replied, suddenly wondering if perhaps her dress was adhering a little too snugly to her figure.

He frowned, staring ahead of him in silence for what felt like an age before his hands suddenly fisted, his black eyes hardening as he turned a little toward her on the couch. "The weather tomorrow is supposed to be fair, I believe. We could go for another walk along the beach if you want...and I'm in love with you, Paidea."

She stiffened immediately, shifting in her seat but not getting up. "Severus..."

He allowed her go no further, his words calm but decisive. "You know it. There is no way it can have eluded you. I've been stumbling around half-blinded by it the entire time we've been here. I've loved you from the first moment I saw you all those years ago. There's not been a day that's passed I've not thought about you, wondered about you...wanted to see you again...to feel your eyes on me.

"It is foolish, I know, and you may think it childish still, but it was clear to me then that you were the one for me. And when chance brought me back into your sphere there was no way I could deny it. But it's not childish infatuation, Paidea. Don't think to dismiss it or believe I'll get over it. Because I won't. I love you," he stated firmly.

"You fill my dreams. You are the sum total of my thoughts. I still feel your lips on mine. Even though you say it was wrong, I know it was not. I have no right to feel this way, I know, but I refuse to believe that it can be wrong. I know it's not." He inhaled, and then pressed ahead, his words quiet and serious. "I would do anything for you, anything you ask. I'm young, yes...poor, yes...not in your class nor am I pureblood...but I have talent...intelligence...ability. Give me a chance to prove myself to you; to prove what I feel for you is real...that I can be good for you."

His hand inched along the couch, his chest achingly tight from trying to keep the full raging force of what he felt reined in, trying to keep his words smooth, adult, and civilised. But finally his youth broke through in a quiet ringing plea, "Please."

She stared at him, taking in each word...each syllable of his speech, her heart aching to agree, to allow him to sweep her up. She had never been so touched and honoured in her life. That someone could love her so strongly, deeply...devotedly. She longed for the world to be different so she could give in. But it wasn't, so she couldn't.

"Severus...I can't," she whispered, quickly rising to her feet and away from his hand, her voice growing more impassioned. "Forget where we are for a minute and come back to the real world. I am a diplomat...and you...you're still in school. Do you really think the world is going to support such a union? I would be thrown out of my job; you would be expelled from school. Your life and all your hopes, dreams, and ambitions would be over...tainted beyond repair. I cannot and will not allow that to happen to you regardless of how we feel about each other."

He stood up slowly, his black eyes widening. "How we feel about each other?" He took a step towards her, his next words half statement, half hope. "You feel the same."

Her expression, which had been steadfastly determined, wavered a little under his naked and exposed optimism. Optimism she had to crush. "It doesn't matter what I feel. That path is one we cannot go down, Severus," she told him shakily before straightening. "I will not give into this. I will not let you throw away your entire future for me."

He drew himself up, looking down at her, his voice low and adamant. "You are my future. Any kind of real future, I mean. You and the thought of you have been the one bright spark in my life all these years. I don't care what others think; it's not any of their business," he spat before moving a little closer. "I only care what you think. If you love me, that's all that matters. I understand your work is important to you, and I could damage you, but I will do anything. No one else has to know. We can keep it secret if you wish," he offered, trying to reason with her. "I'll take on any role you want. Keep to the shadows. I can still work, do what I need to do, build a name for myself...and see you. Be with you." He tried to touch her...to convince her.

But she stepped back, looking down for almost a full minute before raising her eyes. "But we'd be living a lie. A lie that could destroy us. Could you live with that? I am not sure I could."

"A lie?" His eyes bored into hers. "If that is living a lie, what is denying what we feel? How much more of a living lie is that, Paidea? How much more destructive would that be?"

Her lip trembled for a moment, her aching heart clear in her eyes before again, like each time before, the door slammed unceremoniously shut. "I can't...I won't give into this," she stated again before turning quickly on her heel and striding to her bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her.

He took a step after her as she went but ultimately let her go. He'd said all he could say, anything more in the same vein would be teenage histrionics. He'd pleaded the best case he could and it wasn't enough to convince her. Either she was too scared or just didn't feel the same strength of what he did. And all the pleading in the world wasn't going to change it.

He had tried and he had failed, and the pain he had felt before was nothing to now. Now he knew for certain she felt something for him, loved him even if not the same way he did, and it tore at him all the more to know that nothing would come of it. That he was only causing her grief by his presence.

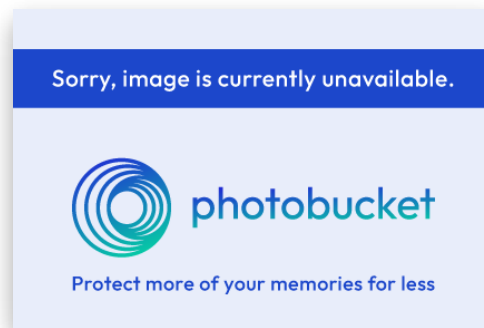
After sitting for a long time, he rose up and walked to her door, his boots' footfalls quiet on the granite. Stopping by the door, he waited and then raised his hand to knock softly.

"Paidea," he said, his voice quiet but steady, "I will go if you want me to; if you tell me to. I have no wish to cause you pain. I never wanted to hurt you, your career...your work. If my presence here makes you unhappy, then tell me to go. I will contact Dumbledore and have someone replace me. Tell me to go, Paidea." His hand touched the door, his forehead a moment afterwards. A pleading murmur she could not have heard escaped him. "End it."

There was a long silence before a weary voice came softly through the wooden door. "It's late...go to bed, Severus." And a moment later, the light shining under the door was extinguished.

His eyes closed at her order. He had failed once again. Sent to his bed like a boy -- a boy she couldn't...wouldn't...risk loving. He turned from the door and moved about the room, extinguishing all the lights, and crossed to the couch. Half collapsing onto the cushions, he pulled off his boots and zombie-like, tossed them onto the floor before

removing his clothes and curling up in his shirt and underpants. Drawing his blankets over him, he stared into the dark, facing a sleepless night...rejected but not dismissed, in pain...and in limbo once again.



The Picnic by Aeryn

Thank you so much to both Savageland and Smoke for their betaing efforts on our behalf. You gals both totally rock our socks!

In the Moirae's Shadow

Chapter 8 of 9

While Paidea wars internally over her decision, Snape's nightmares call him home to Spinner's End.

Chapter Seven: In the Moirae's Shadow

There were nights when sleep came as easily as if the Sandman himself had dusted her eyes. And then there were nights that felt as though he'd gone on permanent strike. This night, no matter what Paidea tried, no matter how she tossed and turned, sleep refused to come.

Retiring to bed had been the easy part after her 'guard's' earlier confession of his feelings for her. She had busied herself with undressing, letting down her hair, brushing it out, a quick wash of her face...though she had done so in the darkness so that he would think she'd gone right to sleep.

She turned again, the back of her head thumping on the pillow as the words that she had blocked with minor tasks refused to leave her mind. Severus. It had been so hard - no, agonizingly painful -- to turn him down, to deny what she felt and refuse his quiet pleas. She'd not even been able to look at his face as she'd fled to her room, knowing if she'd glimpsed the pain openly shown there, she would never have the strength to continue in her resolve.

And continue she must. She knew it. She would not be the cause of his ruin. She'd made the right choice.

Hadn't she?

Rolling to her side, she gave the pillow a second thump as she tried to find just the right position to allow her some rest. Rest that plainly at three-thirty in the morning was *not* happening. Glancing down at her house-elf's beatifically slumbering face, she allowed herself a surge of envy. There was something so incredibly simple in the life of a house-elf...something Paidea would pay greatly for right about now.

Yes, she'd made the best and right decision for them both.

She nibbled her lip.

Hadn't she?

It was quiet in the house...yes, that must be it. That's why she wasn't getting to sleep. Despite the crash of the sea on the shore and the whisper of the wind through the trees, it was too quiet, too peaceful, and the world had no right to be peaceful when she was in turmoil. The noise of London would be welcome now, the Muggle world nearby helping to drown out her thoughts.

But there *was* a sound, a low almost murmur vibrating through the wall, on and off periodically since eleven forty-two that night -- which she knew from staring at the clock on the wall as it lay bathed in the moonlight. The sound was odd, erratic...swelling on occasion but usually simply too low for her to know for certain what it was. She stared at the ceiling. It's your conscience, a little voice told her insistently before she quickly and efficiently shoved it to the side once more.

She *had* done the *right* thing!

As if in response to her thoughts, the murmuring in the next room grew louder...more persistent...and almost to the point that she wondered if surely Severus could not help but hear it. She frowned as a thought occurred to her almost in time with the sound's sudden increase of volume and length -- if she didn't know better, she was sure someone was in pain.

Sitting up, she placed her ear to the whitewashed wall. The moans drifted though more clearly, and now she could distinguish words -- whispers, pleas.

Severus.

Concern for him welled up inside her, her stomach twisting in knots. She hurriedly climbed out of bed and grabbed her silk dressing gown. She had never meant for any of this to happen! She hadn't meant to fall in...

Shaking her head and her treacherous thoughts from her mind, she briskly left the room, though she took care to open and close the door quietly so as not to disturb Elly. With tentative steps, she moved into the living room, the need for reassurance that he was well outweighing her jumbled and frayed nerves.

Pausing behind the couch, her hand resting on top of it on a discarded t-shirt obviously flung there during the night, she looked down into his face and breathed a small sigh of relief. Physically, he was fine...and asleep. But it was most certainly not a restful slumber. His hair was strewn over the cushion he had placed behind his head and his eyes were screwed shut, his brow deeply furrowed. A light sheen of sweat covered his sallow skin as he muttered incomprehensible words over and over. A flood of guilt swept through her again. Had *she* caused this?

The blanket had shifted in the night, exposing his bared chest, and the worry seeped further into her at how thin he was. Drifting higher, her gaze fixed on the silvery jagged pattern in his shoulder -- the scar he'd received long ago as the price of saving her -- and for a moment, she wondered if perhaps he would have been better off if they'd never crossed paths that day. She sighed a little at the thought. Perhaps he might have, but would she?

He moaned as he shifted in his sleep, his arm wrapping around his stomach protectively, while soft pleading calls of "No!" poured from his lips.

Paidea couldn't have stopped herself if she wanted to. In an instant, she was at his side, her hand lightly touching his clammy brow as she whispered soft, soothing words into his ear to reassure him he was safe and well. But if he heard her, he did not show it...at least, not at first. Eventually though, after she covered him back up in his blanket and whispered her promises of safety over and over, he stilled, the moans turning to whimpers as she stroked his hair back from his forehead, before he finally drifted to a fitful, if calmer, sleep.

She spent a good half of an hour by his side, simply stroking his hair and watching him as he slept. Though she was not completely sure if she was trying to assure herself that he was well or that she could salvage their friendship. All she did know in those moments was how completely unfair life was. She had gone her whole life without need for romantic attachments, for love...and now here it was, but she couldn't accept it. She wanted to cry...to scream...to rail at the heavens, but what good would it do? It would not change anything. She could quit her job now...and it *still* would not change anything. But he was right...denial was also living a lie, and she was beginning to wonder if she'd picked the right lie to live.

As a bird began its pre-dawn song, she rose to her feet, bending forward one last time to kiss his forehead and whisper "sweet dreams" into his cooling skin before padding back to her room and trying again for some sleep of her own.

The cool of the fading night immediately pricked the sticky heat of his skin as Snape stepped out into the garden. Even though he had pulled on his pyjama bottoms, more by habit than anything else, he still shivered as the cold seeped into his bones. Wrapping his arms around himself once more, he made his way to the stone bench. Hunched over, he sat, his body aching from the tension that had held it during his nightmares.

Nightmare. It didn't seem a fitting enough word for what he had experienced. He'd had nightmares before, plenty of them and more than he cared to dwell on. This hadn't felt like any of them. This felt real and insistent as it played over and over again, holding him in and making him *live* it rather than waking him as nightmares normally did.

He rocked gently back and forth, his eyes screwed shut as the memory flooded his mind -- clear and concise and with no fading of the images and the feelings as usual when one woke from a bad dream. He could still feel the shock, the panic, and the pain.

His mother's pain.

Her absolute fear.

The memory of eyes, hands, fear, the knifing pain in his gut, a blinding white light and pounding in his head, the iron taste of blood...his stomach turned over as nausea ripped through him and he hunched further, holding himself tighter.

It was a nightmare, that's all, his rational mind told him over and over, even while the rest of him screamed in violent protest. It felt too real. Far too real. He opened his eyes to stare at his bare feet in the dew sodden grass. But what if that was *exactly* what he was supposed to believe? What if he was being somehow manipulated to believe his nightmare was real? He wracked his brain for any hint of magic that might cause such a thing. Magic that would allow someone to invade his thoughts that way. To make him believe his mother's pain might be real.

But how could they? Even the strongest Legilimens would have to be near him and look right into his eyes to invade his mind so. A potion or charm designed to induce such nightmarish visions might do it, but again, no one knew where he was. That is unless something had happened and Dumbledore's defences had been breached. He snorted in internal derision. No one was as cautious as his headmaster. The old man would have ensured that only *he* knew who had taken Paidea and where. He would have kept the secret himself; after all, that was the whole point of being a Secret Keeper. There was no way any possible assailants could have found out from Dumbledore.

But what of his uncle? They had not heard from him in some time. He could be anywhere...someone might have caught him, and they could have used Steven's knowledge of his nephew's attachment to his mother to...

No...that couldn't be. If they had caught Steven and found out who was with Paidea in order for them to somehow concoct an attack on Snape, then they would just as easily have concocted a much simpler and less messy plan to lure Paidea away directly.

It was either a nightmare or a vision. But he had never had a vision before. He was no seer. He had no power of sight into the future. But then it might not be the future; his blood ran cold at the thought. And if so, then it need not have been magic at all. At least not the kind he lived with every day. It need be nothing more than simple connection. The most basic and powerful of connections on which some of the most powerful spells in the Wizarding world were based, over which wars were currently being fought -- blood.

Even Muggles spoke of premonitions about loved ones, foreknowledge or shared experience over distances with those they were attached to most deeply. As Snape came to understand magic, he also learned to understand that there was much in the world that was still beyond anyone's explanation, wizard or Muggle. He was a sceptical person, cynical even, but primarily about the conscious motivations of those who inhabited the world around him. He mistrusted people, their reasoning, and the actions born of those reasons, but did not mistrust the world, magic, nature, or the gifts they so often gave.

Above all, he trusted in his abilities and his knowledge of himself. And he could not now deny what he felt. The intensity of the experience was too strong to just dismiss as a nightmare. A gnawing need existed within him to discern the truth of it. A need which could be assuaged one way and one way only.

His hand closed into a fist as he raised his eyes to watch the sunrise lighten the horizon. He couldn't stay here. He couldn't take the chance that the nightmare was simply that. Something *had* happened to his mother; he could feel it. He had to go. She was the one person in the world in whom he had absolute faith. The one person he could rely on to reciprocate his love.

He straightened on the bench, his gaze moving back to the sea as he carefully began to formulate words to try to explain the situation to Paidea without her thinking he was running away because -- pain of a different sort struck him -- of what had happened last night. He would not have her, or Dumbledore for that matter, think him a coward. This was not some foolish trick of the mind to give him an excuse to run away from rejection or a job that was beyond him. He would leave neither of them in any doubt of that...*no one* would ever accuse him of cowardice.

Neither his stiff posture nor forward gaze changed as he suddenly broke the silence around him. "You can stay...if you wish."

Paidea froze where she stood just three feet behind him on the grass. "Are you all right?" she asked him quietly, still anxious about him after his night of nightmares.

Silent for a long moment, he rose to his feet and turned to her, his shoulders drawn back and his chin up, but there were unmistakable signs of tension on his face. "No, I'm not."

She nodded slowly, her hair fluttering in the light breeze and her expression deeply concerned. "You had a nightmare last night. Well, several of them."

"The same one," he replied, "with varying degrees of progression." He looked down for a moment and took a light breath before looking back at her. "I have to leave."

Her brow furrowed as she wondered how he had come to that conclusion. "Why? Because of your dreams? Or because..." Her voice drifted away as a deep, sharp pang hit her stomach.

"No," he said sharply, his fear of her thinking it was because of her or because of his inability to handle...whatever it was between them...making his voice harsher than he would have wished. "No..." he reiterated. "It's because of my dream," he told her as levelly as he could. "I don't believe it was a dream." He paused at her inquisitive expression, wishing he'd had more time to frame his explanation and knowing it sounded both foolish and just like an excuse to get away from her. But it had to be said, and he was intent on the truth. "I believe it was a vision of sorts...of my mother." His hands clasped tightly behind his back as he gazed at her unflinchingly.

Her brow furrowed even further as she tried to understand what he meant. "Your mother?" she repeated. "Is she...is she all right?"

"No. Or rather, I don't think so..." He swallowed. "I dreamt...or felt..." His brow furrowed, his gaze drifting as his mind went back to the experience. "There was...terrible fear. It was cold and dark...and damp...and she just wanted to go home...just wanted to get home...but she couldn't. There were hands on her...closing about her...suffocating her so she couldn't scream..." His entire body flinched. "And then the pain..." His head snapped up, his eyes wide, and he was gone, moving, speeding past her towards the cottage. "I have to go."

She hurried after him, which was hard to do in her rather voluminous dressing gown. "Severus! Severus, wait!" she called after him, finally managing to catch up as he reached the footpath to the door. Her hand caught hold of his arm. "I don't doubt for a moment that what you felt could be true. However, have you considered that this may just be an elaborate trap?" She stared at him intently, willing him to be sensible for just a moment longer. "That they are luring you away by harming your mother? Or perhaps simply attacking her for other reasons entirely?" She took a deep breath. "Your mother is a witch...married to a Muggle. That is not exactly a popular stance in its own right as of late."

For the first time ever, her touch felt like an irritant. "Of course I've thought of it. And what if it is? I can't sit here while she's being attacked...harmed. I need to know what's going on! Besides..." he shook her hand off and made for the cottage door, "how could anyone trap me this way? No one knows where I am. They wouldn't be able to cast such a spell to reach me, nor place a charm or potion to cause this without knowing it, and if they know where I am then why not just come for you. After all, it's not me they are after." He pushed the door open. "And if what has happened to her is coincidence, then there's no harm in my going."

"There is in your going alone and possibly getting yourself killed," she told him, outwardly calm, even though her worry for him had her stomach in knots and her nerves on edge.

"I have little choice," he replied, entering the cottage and making for his haversack. "I'm sorry. I'll take you back to Dumbledore using the Portkey. Explain to him. He will assign someone else to you. Someone better." He grabbed the bag and began to throw things into it. "It's for the best." He averted his eyes, knowing he didn't want to leave her even now, that to do so was to risk this being the last time he would ever be alone with her, leaving her the perfect excuse never to fall into temptation again.

She stared at him as she followed him inside. "If you think for one moment, Severus Snape, that I'm letting you go into possible danger by yourself...you have another thing coming." Her tone was firm as she folded her arms across her chest. Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room and headed for her door. "I'll be packed and ready to go in ten minutes."

He stopped and looked over at her. "You can't," he blurted more out of bewilderment than in opposition.

She spun around to face him, her eyebrow arching, but then moved back over to him, taking his hands in hers and squeezing them gently. "You are not alone, Severus."

"I..." He looked down at her hands and back at her, a surge of gratitude running through him even as he shook his head. "I'm supposed to keep you safe. You have to go back to Dumbledore. You're too important to risk."

Her mouth set just a little. "I am a grown woman, Severus, with the ability to make my own decisions. Now...do you really wish to spend precious minutes arguing with me about this...or shall we go and see to your mother? Together."

Her presence would be immeasurably comforting, he knew, but he should not let her come, should insist on her returning to safety. She had been ordered to, after all, by the Ministry. He *should* hex her and carry her back to Dumbledore if necessary.

And yet, his duty and obligation to her warred with his worry and simple need for a friend.

Though there *were* advantages to bringing her with him. His home was virtually at the ends of the earth. The Muggle world was hardly even aware of its existence, never mind the Wizarding one. No one, not even 'You Know Who' would ever think Dumbledore would leave her with a seventeen year old wizard, and certainly, they would never look for the aristocratic Paidea Abernathy in the grim industrial environs of Spinner's End. It would be like thinking to look for a diamond in a slurry pit.

They would only be there a short time. And if it proved otherwise, well...he could take the Portkey -- the enchanted custard tin Dumbledore had created that would instantly take whoever touched it and spoke his name to the headmaster. It could, therefore, be easily packed. If he had to remain -- Snape swallowed at the thought -- then she could use it to return to Dumbledore. The same was true if anyone came that he or his family did not know, for she would simply use the spell and be sent from danger immediately.

"Very well," he agreed quietly.

She nodded, squeezing his hands again before reluctantly letting them go. "Now..." she said softly, "I better find myself something suitably Mugglish to wear." And with that, she turned and hurried back to her room.

Dressing quickly and returning to his own packing, he could not help but wish his uncle was here to join them. He was midway through stuffing his meagre belongings into the haversack when he stopped, remembering something. "Elly!" he barked.

There was a faint pop and Elly appeared on top of the couch. "Yes, Mr. Severus?" she enquired, seeming a bit confused at what was going on.

"Your Mistress and I are leaving." He grabbed his books and jammed them into the increasingly bulging bag. "We are going to my home." Moving across the room, he gathered up his auto quill and scrolls and carefully gathered up the Portkey. "You must stay here."

She frowned and appeared even more confused, her hands twisting her apron anxiously. "Leave? Stay? Where is Mr. Severus's home?"

"In the north, far to the north," he snapped hurriedly, trying to keep images from his dream from flashing through his mind as he moved about. "Your mistress and I are going there. I don't know how long we will be, but you cannot come. You have to stay here to tell my uncle if...when...he comes back. He knows where it is."

Elly nodded quickly. "Of course, Mr. Severus. Elly shall keep this home running smoothly while the Mistress and Mr. Severus are away."

"If anyone comes...hide," he told her, yanking the drawstring of the haversack shut. "Make it look like the place is lived in. Move things around outside, but don't let anyone see you." He stopped and looked at her, his black eyes boring into her large brown ones. "If...if you don't hear from either me...or my uncle...after five days, go to Dumbledore, do you understand?"

She nodded. "Five days. Yes, sir! Elly will do."

"Good." He nodded brusquely and was about to let her go when he stopped, gazing at her intently again. She had annoyed him greatly this past while, but she had also proven her worth and her usefulness...and she was most certainly trustworthy. "Here," he relented, beckoning her closer as he undid his bag and pulled out his parchment and pen. Scribbling something quickly on a corner of a scroll, he tore it off. "Here..." he handed it to her, "in case you need to find us. It's where I live."

She took the paper, reading it and committing it to memory before slipping it into her apron pocket. "Elly will find if needed."

He gave her a grave look. "If anyone comes...anyone at all, destroy that and tell no one. No matter what."

Her chin rose and a very firm expression set on her face. "Elly will keep the Mistress safe."

"Good," he said again, though this time a hint of approval was reflected in his eyes. "And I will do the same."

Elly's eyes watched him closely for a moment before she too nodded in approval. "Elly trusts that Mr. Severus will."

The teen and the house-elf regarded each other a second or two more before the former rose up and retied his bag, adding sharply, "And don't add any new floors to the cottage while we're gone." Swinging his bag over his shoulder, he grabbed his robes and folded them over his arm. "Paidea," he called loudly, crossing to the centre of the room, impatient to be off.

She hurried from the bedroom almost immediately, a large bag over her shoulder as she swung a long cape on over her body and fastened the silver clasp. "I'm ready," she told him, adjusting her long, wavy chestnut hair.

Normally her appearance would have been the first thing he took in, but beyond her state of readiness he didn't care what she wore or how she looked. He just wanted to be gone, the knot of tension in his stomach like a lead weight. "Say your goodbyes quickly," he urged.

Paidea nodded and turned to her servant, whispering instructions of her own to her and promising to be careful before she turned back to her companion. "I'm ready."

Turning, he made for the door and looked out, checking the road. "It's clear," he said tersely and strode off down the path and out the gate, heading down the grassy sun soaked slope and into the shade of the wood beyond, his eyes fixed on the path that would lead them into the quiet clearing.

On reaching the dappled, earthy area, he stopped, only then turning back to see if his charge was still in close attendance, and on noting that she was, stretched out his hand to her. "We'll be Apparating...side by side."

"All right," she agreed with a nod, taking his hand and pulling her hood over her head.

Tightening his hold on his bag and robe, he tried to push away all his thoughts and fears and concentrate solely on the spell, the danger of Splinching magnified with a passenger in tow. A moment later, the pull of the Apparation spell grabbed both of them and with a pop, they reappeared under not nearly as blue a sky.

A blue grey pall hung above them, blocking the sun's full light into the quiet, cobbled backstreet of an industrial northern town. The only colour around them was the dull blackened red of the bricks in the walls that led on either side of them into the backyards of the small terraced houses, and the occasional yellow of a dandelion that grew through a crack along the cobbles' edge.

Looking around quickly, he satisfied himself on the relative safety of their surroundings. "Take your hood down. It's all right," he said, only then thinking to let go of her hand.

Nodding, she slowly pulled back her hood and gazed around their new environment. "Is it going to rain?" she enquired about the darker skies.

"No," he replied, readjusting the bag on his shoulder. "That haze is just the smog. This way." He pointed, heading to their left.

Following him, she stared around at the scenery in open fascination. "What is...smog?"

His mouth was dry, his stomach churning nervously. "What?" Her question distracted him from his fevered hopes that he was wrong and desperate thoughts of what he would do if he wasn't. "Oh...smog. It's a build up of pollution in the atmosphere from over use of fossil fuels...coal and oil used in the factories, mills, and engines mostly."

"I see," she replied, not really understanding him at all but not wishing to look completely stupid. Her eyes looked over the brick houses with their gleaming brass knockers, scrubbed steps, and complete absence of greenery apart from a small tree here and there and a communal park in the distance. Everything seemed woefully cramped. She had never really ventured around Muggle London, and had to wonder if this was really how Muggles lived. "Is it far to your home?"

He shoved his hair back off his face as a gust of wind channelling down the street pushed it into his eyes. "Not far."

They took a left turn out into the street proper where children were playing in small groups along the flagstone paths, some playing football in the road. Two or three little girls impeded their way, chanting as they played hopscotch, one of their number expertly wending her way through the chalked out numbers.

Paidea watched them out of the corner of her eye in fascination. She had a million questions but, aware of the need for haste, hurried along next to him.

Moving out onto the road to avoid the girls, he strode on, stepping back up onto the path as a battery driven milk van hummed around the corner, the bottles clinking as it bounced over the uneven road. A tall, strident-looking woman, dressed in a floral housecoat, her hair in rollers under a scarf, and her arms folded over her ample bosom, nodded tersely at the milkman who gave her a cheery wave. Her eyes fell on the passing young couple and one eyebrow arched at Paidea in her cape, the gesture as regal as the diplomat had ever seen. A sniff completed the act of mild disapproval before the woman reached behind her and drew out a box of cleaning materials, setting to work on polishing her front door's brasses.

Smiling in bemusement at the woman, Paidea gave her a respectful nod before returning her eyes to the rest of the homes around them. "She disapproved of me...have I done something amiss?"

"You're a stranger..." he muttered, "and you dress differently."

Her brow furrowed lightly. "Oh, and that is...bad?"

"Strangers only tend to mean two things in areas like this -- trouble or someone looking for their money...generally both." He glanced at her. "I wouldn't take it personally."

"It seems that the Muggle view and the Wizarding view are not so different after all when it comes to things that are new," she considered.

"People cling to what they know and trust," he said. "Familiar is often preferable to new even if new means better."

He took a right turn onto a narrower street, not looking neither left nor right, his eyes solely on his destination. He tried not to think about the complexities of bringing Paidea here, most particularly in the company of his father. He had no idea how the elder Snape would react to his son's sudden arrival. If he was wrong about all this, Tobias would likely be furious at his son's traipsing another witch into his home...especially one who so obviously knew next to nothing about Muggles, despite her pro-Muggle stance. Right now though, even that humiliation was preferable to his being right about his mother.

Finding the heat rather stifling without the fresh sea air of the coast to cool her, Paidea drew off her cape as something caught her eye. "What is that?" she asked in mystification and no small concern as she caught sight of a large, brick, cylindrical object in the distance. "It's huge! And on fire!"

"It's the chimney at the factory, and don't worry -- it's not on fire," he answered, barely glancing at the object of her attention, his mind focused on what was ahead and what he was about to bring her into. It was only fair to prepare her somewhat, he thought with a quick glance at her, only for his head to snap back around in a double take as for the first time, he saw what she had been wearing under the cape.

She nodded, her eyes wide at the size of it. "Amazing." Shaking her head, she turned to smile at him, only to notice his expression. "Is something wrong?"

His eyes flickered from the patchwork gypsy style skirt hanging low on her hips to her jumper, or rather the lack of it. The short, cropped sweater, straight out of the poster of a flower power concert from a decade previous, ended just under her rather full bosom and left plenty of her tanned midriff on show. At any other time, he would be lost in admiration...and more. But right now, walking down the streets of his home, trying to be inconspicuous, and about to meet his father, it was an entirely different story. "What are you wearing?" he hissed.

She looked down in puzzlement. "A typical Muggle summer outfit," she replied. "I copied it from the picture of a fashion magazine I found at the cottage."

"A typical..." he began and bit down hard on the acerbic comment he could feel bubbling up. "Never mind. It doesn't matter. Not now," he finished quietly as they arrived at the small row of houses marked 'Spinner's End.'

Noticing his change of tone, she turned to gaze at the row of houses on the dead-end street. "Are we here?" she asked, her voice equally hushed.

With a single nod of his head, he moved on, slower this time, all his focus on one solitary door at the end of the row. Every muscle in his body felt as rigid as iron as they covered the last few yards to his home. He swallowed hard, nausea welling within him once more as he pulled on his off-black shirt collar. "I should warn you..." he said in something just barely above a whisper, "my father, he doesn't care for magic and has a tendency towards...drinking."

Her hand slipped into his both in reassurance and to remind him he was not alone in this. "Duly warned," she replied softly.

This time, he didn't move his hand from hers, holding it in his as he stepped to the door. Standing there for a moment and trying to steel himself for whatever was to come, he knocked on the door with quick, loud raps.

When no answer came, he banged again, followed by a third round and fourth, each unanswered knock increasing the sick feeling in his stomach. His mother was at work, he told himself, his father out...or drunk. That's all. That's all it is. He was just about to reach for his key when the sound of the lock being unlatched made him freeze.

The door opened to reveal his father standing there, pale, glassy-eyed, fragile...and completely sober.

"Severus," Tobias murmured in surprise, his eyes flickering from his son to the woman beside him and down to their conjoined hands before moving back to his son's face.

"Mother?" was the only answer Tobias received.

The elder Snape flinched, and his son knew without a shadow of a doubt it was all true -- everything he'd seen...and felt. Tobias stepped aside. "Come in."

Severus didn't move. "Where is she?"

"Not here, lad..." Tobias answered, his voice shaking. "Come in."

"Severus," Paidea whispered encouragingly, squeezing his hand.

His head moved imperceptibly at the sound of her voice, and after another second or two, he stepped inside into the small hallway, drawing Paidea after him and allowing Tobias to close the door after them. Putting his bag down on the floor, he turned back to his father, his face half in shadow. "Tell me."

Paidea held back a sigh at his abruptness, well able to perceive both men were in pain. "Severus...not here," she said softly. "Let's go sit down...and talk."

She laid her bag and cloak down next to her companion's and glanced to see if that was acceptable with Severus's father.

"I don't want to talk. I want him to tell me where my mother is," the teen answered, cutting off any response from his father in a voice that seemed cool but which trembled on the edge of something much deeper.

"And he will..." Her tone was soothing but firm, for she sensed that this situation could quite easily spiral out of control. "But it's obvious that there is something going on and I've long learned that standing in hallways is not the best way to get answers." Her hand squeezed his again as she gestured to an old couch and chair. "Give him a chance to tell you what happened."

The two men stood, staring at one another, until the younger nodded sharply. Tobias turned and moved into the tiny front room to take a seat in his well-worn chair, every movement that of an exhausted man. Severus by contrast sat quickly, bolt upright, virtually quivering on the edge of his seat.

Paidea sat down gracefully, alert but with her hands folded on her lap. "Mr. Snape, it is good to see you again," she greeted him, slipping into her familiar role as mediator. "I am sorry it is at such a time. Please...can you tell us what happened to your wife?"

Tobias stared at her, her words confusing him. "Sorry, lass..." he mumbled, "do I know yeh?"

She smiled a little, her fingers rising to her locket. "My name is Paidea Abernathy. We met eight years ago...also in less than ideal circumstances," she answered with a tinge of irony in her voice but also deep sympathy for his plight.

"Paidea...Abernathy..." He puzzled over it, like a man trying to see through a fog, his local accent, hidden in an effort to 'better' himself, more pronounced now in his weariness and sober anxiousness. "Aye...yeh're..."

"TELL ME!" Severus blasted, half rising to his feet, his eyes flashing furiously, and setting his father reeling back.

"She's i' St. Mary's..." Tobias said hurriedly, half raising his hands for fear his son was going to launch himself at him, which truth to tell, given the teenager's stance, was a direct possibility. "Ah've been there all neet with her. Ah...ah came 'oome to try 'n fin' some way...some way t' contact yeh..."

The young man's blood ran cold. If his father was attempting to find him magically, then... "What happened?" he hissed.

"She..." Tobias's hands shook as he spoke, his eyes dropping from his son's. "She's bin working late t' factory. Overtime. She'd taken on special order...summat elaborate or other. Boss promised her triple time...plus bonus if she brought it in on time." He glanced at Paidea in embarrassment. "Ah'd got a job see...part time..." He looked back at his son. "Bin cuttin' the drinkin'...we're hopin' to take a holiday."

Snape kept in his scathing commentary about his father still not holding down a permanent job. "Go on," he barked.

"She...she left, later even than usual...'n..." His voice started to shake almost as badly as his hands. "'N...ah don't know why but...she...she took t' shortcut."

Paidea's hand again found the young man next to hers as she got an inkling of what was going to come next, and tried to feed him strength enough to cope.

His hand was like unyielding steel as he sat unmoving, and his father continued, "She was...attacked..." Tobias whispered, "beaten...they...they threw her against t' wall. They...knifed her. For nowt, Severus..." he said aghast. "She'd nowt on her but pennies!"

Paidea's free hand rose to her mouth in shock.

"Why didn't she defend herself?" Snape asked in an ice cold voice.

His father blinked back tears, wrong-footed and disorientated by his son's question. "Defend? I...appen they took her unawares, Severus...took her so she couldn't hit back...nor run."

His son's voice was as hard as diamonds. "No..." His lip curled back. "*Defend* herself, Father. The way she knew how...the way she could have helped herself even if taken unawares."

Tobias swallowed and said nothing.

Paidea squeezed his hand again. "Severus, this isn't helping," she told him, her tone soft and pleading. "How is she, Mr. Snape? Were the Healers able to help her?"

"Why didn't she have her wand, Father?" the young man repeated, ignoring her words, his voice still low and hard. "Why no defensive hexes at the ready, or charms?" He leaned closer. "*Why, Father?*"

Tobias trembled as he reached for his jacket on the chair beside him and slowly drew something out of the inside of it. "She 'ad her wand wi' her..." he whispered, holding the dark wood out in front of him. "They found it on t' ground by her...reachin' out..." His words stopped suddenly as his voice broke.

Severus stared at it and the way Tobias was cradling it gently in his hands. He'd never even seen his father acknowledge the existence of his mother's wand before, never mind hold it. To see it there, to see his father react so...the fear in his eyes, in his voice... In an instant, the teenager had risen from the couch, his blood like ice in his veins. "I'm going to her."

Paidea quickly got to her feet as well. "Do you know where she is?"

"In St. Mary's, *he* said." The word was filled with withering contempt despite his father's own suffering. "What ward?" he demanded of him

"St...St. Michael's, in intensive care." Tobias stared at him. "It will take yeh an hour to get there. T' buses are on go slow...pendin' a strike."

"Buses..." Severus sneered and moved to the doorway.

"You're goin' to..." Tobias rose and made a gesture which just prompted his son's lip curl in even further disdain. The older man nodded. "Can you take me back there with yeh, lad?"

Severus regarded his father, never smaller nor more vulnerable in his eyes. "No." And with that, he turned and headed for the kitchen, grabbing his haversack from the hall on the way.

Giving the older man a sympathetic look, Paidea ran after her friend. "Severus! Severus, wait!" she called to him, managing to catch up with him as he was opening the haversack roughly. She watched as he pulled out his jacket and the Portkey custard tin, leaving the latter on the Formica kitchen table top. "Do you want me to come with you?" she asked softly.

Moving away from her and yanking on his jacket, he opened the door forcefully. "No."

Her hand touched his arm, turning him a little and a breath later, she was in his arms, holding him tightly. There was no thought in her any longer if that was wrong or right, she was simply filled with the knowledge that he needed her and she needed and wanted to be there for him. She held him quietly, listening to the sound of his heart, taking his pain into her...feeding him her calm.

He thought to push her away, his hands moving to do just that. He didn't need her sympathy on top of everything, and he certainly didn't need her perplexing and confusing reactions to make things even more complicated and painful, not now. The situation was hard enough as it was without her offering him her warmth, only to turn and withdraw it all again once this crisis was over.

But instead, his arms closed about her and he held her, taking what she had to offer, even if for just a moment...because he needed it and needed her. "My father will take care of you. Let him answer the door, and keep away from the windows. Do not leave the house for any reason. Place some wards if you wish; my father is in no mood to object. You are to use the Portkey at the slightest suspicion of danger," he told her, his voice quick and forceful.

"All right," she murmured, nodding her head against his chest.

He relaxed slightly at her acquiescence, his voice slightly calmer as he drew away. "I'll be back soon."

"Be safe," she whispered, touching his cheek. Her gaze caught where her hand was and with a deep breath, she removed it, but only to slip the emerald ring from her finger and place it in his hand. "Take this," she told him. "Just say or think *Cela* and the charm will be cast...and *Appare* to make you visible again. It might be useful if there's...if there is danger." She bit her lip, deep worry in her eyes. "Please be safe. You and your mother."

He nodded, enclosing her ring in his palm, grateful and touched even if he didn't say as much. Turning from her, he walked outside into the yard, moving to the small shed away from the prying eyes of any neighbours' upstairs back windows.

Paidea stood in the doorway, her gaze never leaving him until with a jerky swish of his wand, he vanished from her sight. "Please be safe," she whispered once more, irrevocably knowing that he not only took her ring with her on his quest...but her heart.

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Walking to Spinner's End by Perselus

Authors' Note: A huge thank you to both Smoke and Savageland for their amazing and thorough efforts on our behalf...especially this chapter. You are both amazing.

The Roar of Nemesis

Chapter 9 of 9

When a tragic fate befalls his mother, Snape makes a choice that could have repercussions for years to come.

Chapter Eight: The Roar of Nemesis

In no mood to be stopped or questioned, Snape used Paidea's ring quickly. Following her instructions, he made himself invisible as soon as he found an unobserved position within the Muggle hospital's car park. His march through St. Mary's was direct. Forcing himself to stay calm, he located St. Michael's intensive care ward on the wall map and unerringly made his way through the maze of corridors.

Dodging doctors, orderlies, and visitors who came directly at the space his invisible self was occupying, he moved past the cluster of nurses by the ward sisters' desk. Their discussion of their upcoming summer holidays amidst the illness and pain around them seemed wildly out of place and set his teeth on edge.

The hot, sterilised air of the hospital was claustrophobic, and he could feel the beads of sweat breaking out upon his temple and the nape of his neck as he moved at a rapid pace. Looking into the ward rooms via windows and open doors, he worked his way swiftly to the quieter end of the corridor. Reaching out to yet another door, he pushed the white painted wood inwards and was immediately subjected to the intermittent sound of beeping.

Looking to his left, around the door, he stilled. Framed by her long black hair, his mother's bruised, bandaged face, almost as pale as the pillow she was lying on, came into view. Snape's stomach turned over as the dream washed through him again.

His eyes fell to her hands outside the covers. An IV drip snaked hideously from one to join the rise of wires that hooked her to the ghastly Muggle machines. Against the mint green weave coverlet on her bed, her fingers were clearly scraped and bruised.

Recalling the white hot feeling that had knifed through him time and again, he knew without seeing it the damage that lay beneath the covers -- the swathe of bandages covering the raft of stitches and the deeper injuries within her.

So that's what it felt like to be stabbed, an oddly detached voice said inside his mind while the rest of him remained rooted to the spot in horror. After a moment, the same voice reminded him rather forcibly to move. Telling him that -- invisible as he was -- the door was now standing open all by itself and even Muggles were bound to find that strange.

The heated air of the hospital and his fear conspired to make his mouth feel like a desert. Perhaps it was the memory of the dream, or maybe it was just a part of him didn't want this to be true, but everything felt surreal to him as he stepped inside. The door swung back to click shut behind him, cutting out all noise but the beeping machines and his mother's painfully shallow breathing. His hands clenched by his sides as he hesitantly made his way to her bedside, the sound of the heart monitor an odd counterpoint to his footsteps.

The crown of her head was padded and wrapped, and he remembered the flashes of light, the disorientation, and the nausea as his...her...head had been struck and struck again, smashed against...or with...something...or... Why? Why do this to her? She had nothing. Had done nothing!

"*Appare*," he murmured to himself, ending the spell cast by Paidea's ring on his hand. The same hand that reached for and closed gently around his mother's. "Mother?" he whispered. "Mam?"

A soft pained groan was his only answer.

"Mam?" He cupped her hand gently with his own. "Mam, it's me. It's Severus; can you hear me?"

After what seemed a lifetime to the teenager, the woman's dark eyes slowly opened, blinking as they tried blearily to focus, her mouth trying to work though no sound escaped. Her breath was laboured as she swallowed, trying to speak...to see her son. Her hand squeezed his weakly as her eyes focused on his face. "Sev...Severus..." she gasped, her voice soft and shuddering.

Leaning over her, he bent closer so she could see him more easily, a corner of his mouth quirking up. "Aye Mam...alreit?" he murmured softly, unconscious of his sliding into the language of his extreme youth.

Her lips grimaced as she tried to smile, a cough erupting as she tried to breathe. "My boy..." she gasped, reaching up a little blindly to touch his cheek, the surgical tape holding her IV in place barely standing out against her nearly white skin. "How...how I...missed you..."

"I'm fair capped to see thee, 'n all." He moved his cheek against her touch. "Are y'alreit, Mam? Would yeh like water?" She did not respond either way, causing him to frown. "Mam...wha' appened, Mam? Who did this t' yeh?"

If she heard him, it did not show, her eyes simply fixing on his face like an anchor as she stroked his cheek. "My son...so grown up..." Her soft breathy voice was filled with a mother's love. "I'm...so...proud of you..." She nodded slowly, a serenity filling her eyes and smile. "I...love you..."

His throat closed, growing tight with emotion. "I love thi' too, Mam..." Turning his head, he kissed her hand, trying to push away what his mind was telling him, what was reflected in her eyes. He should have brought his potions, a voice screamed at him inside his mind. Stupid fool, you could have brought something...found something...to help her! Something these dim-witted, knife happy Muggle doctors might have missed! Or...or...you could have called St Mungo's asked them to transfer her there...brought a healer. Moron! *Why* didn't you bring a healer?

He wanted to reach up and rip off his jacket, it was so hellishly hot; why was it so hot? His hand clutched hers tighter as the fear swelled inside him. "Mam...Mam..." He called her attention to him urgently. "When yeh are feelin' better laike, ah'll teek yeh wi' me away oot ah here." He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, calm his voice, his words. But while his accent receded, the serenity didn't last long.

"You'd...like it where I am. It's sunny with clean fresh air. By the sea. Da said you'd wanted to get away, go on a holiday? You can come with us," he babbled for the first and only time in his life. "You and Da both...there...that's how much I want you to come. I don't even mind if he's along." He tried to smirk and failed. "You'll like it, you will. And you'll like Paidea. I think you'll like her a lot. You can talk and relax, and it'll be good for you. Uncle Steven will help. But you must get better first."

His heart clenched as she continued to gaze at him, seemingly unable to hear him or comprehend his words.

"A great wizard...always knew...I love you...Severus..." She coughed, her breath coming in great pained gasps.

"No," he moaned, the sound bubbling up from deep within him as he tried to deny what he felt was coming, what was inevitable and far too soon. "Mam..."

Her eyes fixed on his, blood appearing on her lips as it was expelled from her lungs. "I love...you..." Her tranquil eyes glazed over, she gave a deep shuddering breath, and her hand slipped from his cheek to fall limply to the blanket as the heart monitor squealed.

"Mam..." His dark eyes widened. "Mam!" Grasping her fallen hand, he raised it from the bed, clutching at it reflexively as he moved closer to her, staring into her fixed, lifeless eyes. "No, Mam...don't! Don't Mam...don't y' be goin' on me!" he ordered before desperation won out. "Please Mam...don't y' leave me! Mam!" His voice grew louder, more insistent. "Don't leave me aloon, Mam...not now...ah need thee...please Mam," he begged.

He couldn't lose her -- the one person in all the world he trusted absolutely, the only one he knew loved him completely -- ~~he~~^{he} couldn't lose her. She couldn't be gone. Reaching out, he shook her gently, trying to wake her like the child part of him still was, his entire being anguished as he whispered, "Mam, please."

His eyes clouded with tears as she didn't respond, and it finally began to permeate that she wouldn't respond ever again. He'd never hear her rich, soothing voice or feel the protective warmth of her arms again, save in his dreams. Bowing his head, resting it on her chest, he lost himself to his sorrow, his body heaving with the force of the first of his sobs.

Only the sound of the crash cart being scraped against the wall outside saved him from being caught that way, loud, intrusive voices in the hallway jolting him upwards. His hand remained clutching his mother's, not wanting to let go, not wanting to leave her. He hesitated for a moment. Perhaps they could still save her? Perhaps they could bring her back?

"Cela," he whispered, releasing her hand.

If the first of the emergency team bursting in through the door caught a flicker of a dark figure by their patient's bed before it disappeared, they said nothing as they got to work.

Neither Dermot 'Motty' Brennan nor Matthew 'Sliver' Perkins had led what one might call benevolent or philanthropic lives. If their lives could be described as anything, it would be violent, devious, callous, and somewhat fortuitous. Fortuitous, in that they still had them.

At aged fourteen and a giant in the making, Motty beat up three boys who had failed to give in to his bullying and extortion, sending them all to the hospital. Contrary to the stereotypes about big, hulking boys, Motty was sharp -- sharp as they came. Facing expulsion from school and several years in remand, he cleverly pulled off a coup. Playing upon the good-hearted gullibility of the school headmaster and the stereotype of the drunken Irish, he had produced a sob story worthy of an Oscar.

This manipulation of an overzealous and bigoted system had ultimately succeeded in his having his unfortunate, teetotal, immigrant father from Cork banged up for drunken abuse that had never happened. Exonerating Motty from blame, the boy had merely been subjected to nothing more than six months of counselling, most of which he'd sat mutely through until it was over.

There had been one other highly useful side-effect to this masterly stroke of Motty's. With his father banged up, it had left the overgrown, muscular teenager free to assume his reign of terror at home. Exploiting and ill-treating his mother and two younger sisters, he had taken anything he wanted and had wrought retribution on anyone who defied him.

His bullying, cruel, scheming ways almost inevitably led him into the path of the boy who would become his best mate -- 'Sliver' Perkins.

The same age as Motty, tall, and lithe with a nose as thin as his name, Sliver was nicknamed for the unwholesome fascination he had had from a very young age with knives. The sharper, sleeker, and more capable of slicing cleanly they were, the better he liked them. And by the time he was eighteen, his collection of 'shivs' was without parallel in the northeast of England...his raging hot temper and his superstitious nature not far behind. The two boys had clashed continuously over territory around the school, but after one particularly bloody and filthy fight, they managed to develop a mutual respect for one another and an unlikely friendship had evolved.

Not long after, at age sixteen, Motty dropped out of school, and he and Sliver spent their time swiping what they could and fast-tracking themselves into a life of crime.

After five years, when Motty was nineteen, his father was released. In turn, Fergus Brennan freed his wife and daughters by obtaining a gun from a friend and throwing his son out. Not caring in the slightest about this change in events, Motty simply moved in with Sliver and his mate's seventeen year old girlfriend Sally and their baby. Apart from having to put up with the full extent of Sliver's superstitions -- wood-knocking, salt-throwing, ward-hanging bollox -- Motty quite enjoyed it.

It wasn't as if he cared that the arrangement was hardly wholesome. Sally was not only Sliver's girlfriend but also one of his main sources of income. 'Gentleman callers' were regularly taken upstairs while the lads watched Jimmy Armfield's Leeds F.C. hack the living daylight out of the other football teams on the telly below.

While obviously Sliver would've preferred to keep his mot to himself, the use of Sally was necessary to his mind. After all, *someone* had to feed their baby and pay for the drug habits both men had first developed at aged seventeen while in the employ of a local crime lord, Norman Lawrence.

Twenty-one, cut loose from their boss's largesse, and lucky to escape with nothing more than a bad beating for skimming profits from their drug dealing, the boys now had to learn to make their own way again. Something made more imperative when Sally had, inconsiderately, become pregnant again.

It was doubtful the baby was Sliver's, but then he wasn't even sure about 'their son' and he didn't really care one way or another for there were more important considerations. Firstly, it was another mouth to feed, and more importantly, it meant that Sally's appeal was pretty much nil to her regulars.

Ironically, it was this pregnancy that had provided the boys with the most lucrative form of self employment they'd ever had.

Shortly after Sally's announcement and in the early onset of drug withdrawal, Sliver had pulled his favourite blade on her. Pressing it to her belly, he had threatened to cut the baby from her womb if she didn't get rid of it and get him money for his fix. He'd almost done it, too, when Sally, normally docile to the point of being a doormat, was suddenly emboldened by a surge of protectiveness towards her child and back-cheeked him.

His drug craving fierce and his temper enraged, Sliver had chased her upstairs, roaring, only for Motty, who had a dangerous soft spot for Sally, to stop him by using his considerable brute force to drag him from the house. Outside, Motty had convinced him that if he wanted to slice someone open for money, he should pick a more productive target.

And so they moved into a new phase of their careers.

Their first 'mark' had been a drunk. Rolling out of the pub at one in the morning, the poor man had unwisely decided to take a shortcut home through the alleyways, the majority of his week's pay in his pocket. A quick blow to the head and it was easy money.

Other 'payday marks' followed. The area was depressed economically, but there was no shortage of men heading straight from the factories to the pubs on Thursdays and Fridays, their plan always the same -- get a feed of drink into you, feel like a king for a night before the wife took the remainder for the housekeeping and the kids. It took no real brains to pick one or two off of an evening. Most of the time, the marks never saw what hit them, thanks to Motty's strength doing the business.

Those who were a little quicker on their feet or not quite as drunk as they appeared, however, generally regretted any resistance they put up. Masked by Leeds F.C.

scarves, the young men, quick-witted and aware of all the twists and turns of the back streets, often enjoyed the hunt, and Sliver took a great deal pleasure in finding ways to make their marks repent any such attempted escape. Their marks' screams as their flesh was sliced didn't often make their way to other human ears, what with an oily rag stuffed down their throat.

In celebration, and to establish alibis, each evening's successful mark was followed by a trip to Motty and Sliver's former boss's club.

A business man to the end, Norman had held no grudges in the aftermath of exerting his authority. He was happy to receive his former employees as customers now they had money to spend. An evening in the backroom of the club was spent shooting up and partaking of the house girls if the boys felt up to it. This was followed by a satisfied wander home in the wee hours of the morning, a week or two's supplies and cash in their pockets.

That hadn't been the case last night, however. Last night, things had gotten messy.

The boys had been a little remiss in their work as of late, and had stayed at home smoking pot and doing smack. Before they'd known it, their money and, more importantly, their drug supply had been used up, and Sliver was feeling the pain rather keenly. It wasn't pay night, but something had to be done. After all, Norman wasn't in the habit of giving credit.

So they had headed out on the off chance of catching someone foolhardy or unfortunate enough to choose to take the back ways home.

Eileen Snape had worked a double shift that day, happily, eagerly even. Tobias had finally managed to land himself a part-time job working in an engineering shop of one of the factories. If he held it down and kept his drinking under control, there was the possibility of the hours being extended and even permanency. They had even begun to talk of taking a holiday if they could save enough, their first since Severus had been born.

Exhausted and dreaming of some time by the sea, she had unthinkingly taken her usual way home. A way which was safe enough at five-thirty in the evening, but not at eleven thirty-five, and certainly not when the likes of Perkins and Brennan were on the prowl.

Normally, Sliver played the decoy, the person who would step out of the shadows and distract the person long enough for Motty to grab them and neatly bash them over the head. Last night, however, to Motty's shock, neither their mark nor Sliver had reacted the way he would've expected them to.

As soon as the woman had frozen at seeing the sudden appearance of Sliver with his knife drawn, she had reached into her coat for...a stick of wood. That hadn't fazed Motty at all; in fact he had been on the verge of laughing. But to Motty's surprise, his normally cool partner had reacted as if the woman had pulled a live grenade from her pocket.

Sliver's knife flashed, and the woman cried out as the glinting blade slashed viciously across her wrist. The stick in her hand fell to the ground, while Sliver yelled in what sounded to his friend like panic.

Motty sprang forward to grab the wounded woman and cover her mouth with one of his meaty hands. Turning his head, he fully intended to let his friend have it for reacting so badly to something as trivial as a stick. But as he did, he heard the woman gasping incomprehensible words -- words that sounded like the language the priests used in Mass when his mother used to bring him as a boy.

The use of a stick and some Latin was nothing more than bizarre to him, but over the Leeds scarf wrapped around Sliver's mouth he could see his friend's eyes. And they were terrified. Before Motty could say or do anything, the knife flashed again in the moonlight. The muffled words trapped beneath Motty's fingers descended into a feminine grunt, the woman's body stiffening as the blade entered her stomach.

Sliver screamed at her to shut up as the knife struck again and again. Fearful of his friend's near shrieks alerting the neighbourhood, Motty, stunned until now, finally reacted.

In an effort to shut them both up, he pulled her away from Sliver and smashed her head into the wall, hoping to knock her unconscious. But as a light or two came on in the upstairs windows beyond the back entrances to the houses in the rain slicked alleyway, Motty, too, panicked. When she didn't slump down immediately, her hands scrabbling at the walls, Motty struck again and again, until finally, bloody and battered, she went down.

They never took her money in the end. Never even checked for any. Stumbling and slipping on the wet cobbles, they just ran for the safety of the club, hoping Norman's alibi and the fact that she hadn't been robbed would divert suspicion from them. It was only a half hour later, after Sliver had calmed and had cleaned his knife, hands, and jacket sleeve of the woman's blood spatters, that Motty shoved him up against the bathroom wall. Roaring at his friend, the bigger man demanded to know what the hell had gotten into him.

He could hardly believe the stream of gibberish that had come from Sliver's mouth. Something about the stories his mother had told him about a strange reclusive family that lived in Spinner's End -- a family with an odd, dark haired, pale woman and sour faced child with cold black eyes.

Motty gaped when the word 'witches' dropped from his friend's lips. 'Magic,' 'evil'...unnatural,' and 'wand' followed as he tried to explain his fear before Motty knocked him flat in disgust at the superstitious drivel that had turned them from muggers into probable murderers.

After that, Sliver laid low in the club the rest of the night, while Motty stormed off to work off his anger on one of the girls. They slunk home the following morning, and during the course of the day, it was confirmed to them via local news that murderers were what they'd become.

Agitated and unable to sit still, they decided to act as normally as they could. Leaving a curious Sally behind, they made their way to their local pub, staying as cool and sociable, as possible, though all talk around them was of the murderous attack. It emerged that many of those there had known Eileen Snape either by reputation or from working with her in the factory. And in the aftermath of her death, everyone was agreed that no one deserved such a fate, no matter how 'odd' she might have been.

The police had been in, asking questions as they did the rounds of all the pubs and clubs in the area, searching for witnesses. Who had been here? Who hadn't? With no robbery and no sexual assault, there was talk of an affair gone wrong, or a nutter on the loose. The boys relaxed a little. A nutter. That was good. And the police could ask all they liked, Norman would never turn them in. At least, not unless the police made his life enough of a hell so that he'd fess up to harbouring criminals, which was doubtful, considering Norman had a fair few of the cops in his back pocket.

They considered making their way back to Norman's club but thought better of it. Staying put and having a few bevvies amongst the locals was a far better idea, Motty thought. In fact, Motty took Sliver's breath away with his audacity as he supped on his pint, while talking over not only this murder but other murders in the past where bodies had turned up on the moors. Motty had a reputation for violence, and in some perverse way, it created a modicum of respect for his opinions in this forum. People listened and took heed while he created false links in their minds. He was calm and satisfied when he later switched topics, moving on to football and whether Leeds stood an earthly chance of winning the league next year.

When closing hour came that night, the boys, far more sober than they would normally have been, waited. When everyone else had cleared off, they made their way homewards on the same dark, back streets where they had attacked Eileen. Growing more confident, Motty was determined that they keep to their same routes and routines.

Sliver, however, wasn't in total agreement.

"We shouldn't a gan this way, Motty," he grumbled, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets and shoulders hunched as he glanced about him uncomfortably.

"Ah hod yer mouth, y' daft gawp 'ead. Wha' are y' afeared of?" Motty growled. "Or is it ghosts too that makes yer crap yer pants laike a bairn?"

"Shurrup." Silver hunched lower, his pale blue eyes darting into the shadows. "She were a witch ah'm tellin' yeh!"

"Aye a witch...appen Sally is too...aye 'n me 'n all!" Motty scoffed.

"Yeh don' know!" the sligher man barked. "Me mam...she sez she saw stuff laike. Afore, when she were livin' anenst Spinner's End."

Motty was growing irritated, sick and tired of his friend's excuses for what were obviously drug related reasons for his overreacting. Reaching out, he shoved him casually, his brute strength driving Sliver against the wall. "Appen she saw 'em flyin' aboot on their besoms, did she?" he sneered, not remotely interested in hearing what Sliver's mother had seen when she lived alongside the Snapes' street.

Sliver flared, intending to answer him back, but felt a shiver run down his back as he was left alone, Motty marching on down the alleyway. Looking about him in the dark, he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Hurrying on after his friend, he caught up to him quickly.

"Motty."

"Wha'?"

"Ah want to go back on t' gate," Sliver muttered, eying the turnoff coming up in the alleyway that led back to the main street. The lure of the brighter lights of the street and the passing traffic was strong. He swallowed as he gazed into the dark shadows ahead.

"Aye 'n ah want t' ride Angela Rippon off TV, but tha's nut gonnae 'appen noo, is it?" Motty retorted, not about to give Sliver his way.

"Ah c'mon, Motty, it'll be better."

"Hod yer blather ah told ye!" The big man glared at him. "Ah don' know why I bide you. Yer soft in the 'ead, y' are. Soft 'n sackless!"

Something crashed in the alleyway behind them as they passed the turnoff to the street and Sliver spun around, hand on his knife. A cat yowled mournfully, no doubt lamenting some rat that had got away as it had chased it through the rubbish bins, knocking them over as they went.

"There's nowt there," Sliver muttered to himself, his eyes straying into the dark from which they emerged. "Nowt..."

"Ger a shift on, Sliver!" Motty snarled at him from up ahead.

Turning, Sliver realised his large friend had left him well behind again. Gazing longingly back at the turn to the main street, but unwilling to lose more face, he headed after Motty.

His skin was crawling now as followed after his friend, trying to catch up with Motty's longer strides. He felt like there was something behind him in the dark. Something watching him from the shadows. Something blending...silent in the gloom where the weak light from the houses failed to illuminate the red brick, cobbled alley. Sliver's hold on the comforting feel of his knife tightened as he sped up. "Motty, hold up wi' yeh!" he called after him. Keeping his eyes on the silhouette of the big man ahead of him as he hurried after him, Sliver muttered an incantation his late mother had told him to ward off the evil eye. The black evil eyes that had floated in front of him ever since he'd stepped in front of Eileen Snape.

"Kaynaborah," he muttered, and spat on the ground. Why was Motty moving so fast?

"Kaynaborah." He spat a second time. Didn't the great lummox hear him? He broke into a trot.

"Kaynaborah!" He finished the incantation with the third and final spit, breaking into a run and after three steps, crashed right into the back of his friend who had come to a dead halt in the middle of the alleyway. "Y' great apeth!" Sliver swore, moving around him and rubbing his thin nose ruefully. "First yer gan like the hammers of hell his self, 'n now you..." He stopped as he gazed up at Motty's face, his expression as rigid as if he'd been stuck in the deep freeze down at Sainsbury's.

"Motty?" He swallowed, reaching up to touch his mate's arm, only to stop as the corner of his eye caught something moving in the dark.

All of a sudden, all Sliver Perkins could hear was the sound of his own breathing and the pounding of his heart in his ears. The effort to swallow seemed massive, his throat feeling like it had closed over completely. Fear coursed through every vein in his body.

His breath shuddering from his lungs, he turned his head, and then there came a whimper. It was so pathetically scared and childlike, it took him a moment to realise it was his own, the sight of those deep, black eyes gradually emerging from the shadows dragging the sound from him.

Ebony eyes, coal pit deep and harder, far harder than they had been before, the gaze of the young man in front of him was penetrating beyond belief.

It's not her; she hasn't come back, a part of Sliver cried in relief. But it was a muted, short-lived reprieve. Those eyes were unmistakable...as was the short shaft of wood held in their owner's hand.

He was too terrified now to move. Too terrified to even make another sound as he saw the boy's lips move, and felt something subtly moving inside him, inside his mind. All he could do was stiffen as, unbidden, the memories of the attack on Eileen flooded back, replaying themselves down to the last detail.

And then he was facing those eyes again, only there was a flicker in them now. A light, furiously bright, but icy and contained. "Thank you," the boy whispered to him in the manner of one who had been given what he needed.

"Who...?" Sliver croaked, unconsciously moving against the still form of Motty.

"You know." Silken words cut him off, louder now, the voice far older in timbre than a boy that age had any right to have. "Just as you *think* you know what is going to happen next, don't you, Sliver?" He took a step forward, those eyes filling more of Sliver's narrowing world. "But you don't know. You have no conception at all of what I'm going to do to you."

Move closer, one desperate part of Sliver called out silently to the Snape boy, his hand still on his switchblade in his pocket. *Just move a little closer.*

The boy obliged.

Sliver's hand moved, withdrawing the switchblade and flicking the button that sent the blade outwards with an audible, deadly click. He lunged to strike in one fluid upward motion, right on course for the heart. It was the cleanest, fastest strike he had ever attempted. And it wasn't remotely enough.

The words "*Petrificus Totalus*" were uttered almost dismissively, and Sliver could only watch his hand hover six inches from the Snape boy's chest, his arm frozen in place, just like the rest of him. Just like Motty.

The boy regarded him, his face awash with complete indifference to his efforts, and his expression barely changed as he looked downwards at the blade that faced him. "This is it, isn't it. This is what you used?" Sliver watched as the boy pried his fingers open with surprising gentility, turning Sliver's hand until the switchblade lay in his outstretched palm. "The knife you used to kill my mother."

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," the boy murmured quietly and the knife floated upwards untouched by him. Guided by the wand in his hand, it turned, blade point forward, to hover between Sliver's eyes. "You feared her; I saw that in your mind. That's why you hurt her...ripped the life from her. Just because you thought she was a witch. You were right, of course. She was. But you were wrong to fear her. She never would've hurt you. No matter how pig ignorant and backwards you were." The words coming at the captive man grew harder and more pointed. As if in response to that increase in sharpness, the blade floated nearer and Sliver could feel the cold steel tip press against his

skin. "You. You're the reason we have to stay hidden. Why we have to lurk in a protected world unable to be what we are openly and proudly. Why we have to fear you. Why so many of us *hate* you."

If he had been able, Sliver would've flinched, but all he could do was silently bear the prick of pain as the knife pierced his skin in tandem with the growing venom in the boy's voice. The thug felt a warm trickle down the bridge of his razor sharp nose and knew before it ever touched his lips that it was blood.

"She gave up *everything* to live in your pathetic Muggle world," the boy hissed in his ear as he walked around him. "Her family, her good name...and all Muggles ever did for her in return was use her up. Break her heart, break her will, and now her body." The boy's eyes moved back into view as he returned to stand in front of Sliver. "Now / will break you.

"*Finite Incantatem!*" he spat, his wand arm shooting out towards Motty, who lurched forward as motion flooded his body again. Having been aware of everything had been said, Motty spun quickly, his eyes fixing onto Sliver and taking in the floating knife pressed to his friend's forehead.

The big man's mind tried not to dwell on it, on how what he was witnessing could possibly be. Instead, he snarled, focusing on the threat, and turned his eyes to the slender boy that he could snap like a twig. "Yeh freak..." he growled. "Ah'll shoo yeh who'll break who!"

Sliver watched as Motty lunged at the boy, feverishly praying for his friend to connect, to grab the scary little bugger by the throat and choke the life out of him. But the boy spun at the last minute, a lithe, ridiculously graceful movement that spoke of years of honing such tactics of evasion. By the time the dark haired teen came about, his wand had risen up again, his face disconcertingly serene. "*Imperio*."

In front of Sliver, Motty stilled again, but not as before. Instead, he merely rose up, chest rising and falling smoothly, his snarl slipping away to be replaced by an expression of utter blankness. Sliver groaned deep inside, his fear increasing as he saw the look on the boy's face as he returned to examine his work. There was a hint of hesitation on the Snape boy's face as he stared up at Motty. Sliver knew that look, had seen that look.

It was the look of someone who had just crossed a line and was considering his next step.

The terror was suffocating the thug from the inside out as he begged and pleaded with the universe to make the boy recant. To step back from what he was doing. For Sliver knew that if someone with his power had broken a boundary, then what was to follow could only be...

The wand moved.

Motty moved.

With unrecognising eyes, Motty Brennan turned to face his friend, a huge hand rising to grasp the floating knife still pricking Sliver's skin.

There was nothing Sliver could do but scream inside as the blade sliced a bone deep line along his forehead above his eyebrows. And then Motty, carefully, began to carve letters in his skin.

Snape's form was a black shadow framed against the inferno behind him as he walked away from the burning club. Far in the distance, the sound of fire engines' sirens joined the screams and shouts of the men and women on the streets. Men and women who could only watch the raging blaze that had been their place of work or recreation.

The teen's mouth was a thin, hard line, his shaded eyes skewering the world around him as he silently dared it to approach him, stop him, question him over his actions.

Norman Lawrence would never pimp another woman, sell another drug, or harbour another murderer again. His blackened, dead body would be found seated in his cracked leather chair in the ruins of his back office. His safe open, the charred remains of the money he had accumulated ruining people's lives would be discovered scattered like confetti around him.

The Muggles would find some way to explain it. They would figure out Norman was dead before the flames or smoke could have done it. They'd attribute his death to a stroke or a heart attack. Say he convulsed, or had a fit, somehow accidentally starting the fire. They'd have to, because they would certainly never accept it when the autopsy revealed that there was absolutely nothing wrong with Norman when he died. They would come out with something...anything...to fit their limited view of the world.

The rictus on his face would be ascribed to a heart attack or the force of the fire retracting his muscles. Not to fear, or the force of the Killing Curse as it had struck him full on -- the final piece in Snape's work this night.

He had used every single one of the Unforgivable Curses now.

He could spend his life in Azkaban. Could be given to the Dementors. But he didn't care. Not at all. The hatred coiled inside him like a hissing, spitting snake smothering all fears. All that mattered was that he'd paid them back, avenged his mother, and he'd do it again without a second thought.

Norman had been the lucky one, though he'd never known precisely why he'd died. But that was apt as according to Sliver's thoughts, Norman had never known precisely who the men he harboured in his club had killed.

His quick, clean death had been more than he deserved, but the dank, squalid pit that Norman had inhabited had been too full of Muggles to risk more. So he'd escaped the fate of Motty and Sliver.

He'd been fortunate to find those two...or perhaps, as his Divination teacher would have had it, it had been fate.

After watching the doctors fail to revive his mother, he'd turned and walked, still invisible, from the room. Trembling, he'd curled up in an out of the way corner at the end of the corridor. His head on his knees, he'd just sat there trying to cope, trying not to cry, until the arrival of two more Muggles. Wearing Macintoshes and with a vaguely weary air, the two men were stopped as they headed for his mother's room.

Police detectives.

On hearing she was dead, they had turned and walked back down the corridor, and he'd risen and followed after them, listening to them as they walked to the canteen and fetched themselves some swill-like tea. They spoke quietly of names, of possible suspects, thrown them out and more often than not, crossed them off in the same breath. But *he'd* clung to them, taken them all in. Something solid, something practical to focus on in a world suddenly turned on its head.

His aptitude as an Occlumens was exemplary, he knew, but he was a passing fair Legilimens. And certainly more than capable enough to get what he needed from a Muggle. An encounter with one of the detectives alone in the hospital bathroom before he left was all that was required. Extracting the information about where he could find some of the names mentioned, Snape had Obliviated the man's memory and moved out onto the streets to begin his hunt.

That pattern was repeated over and over as he moved from name to name -- Apparate, find, isolate, investigate, modify their memory. Paidea's ring and his wand were all he needed to safely track and find the varying men the police had spoken of. Until finally, he'd stumbled across the quarry he was after, breathtakingly close to the scene of the crime.

His lip curled into a sneer as police cars raced past him. He wondered what the police would make of the two muggers when they found them. What 'Muggle rationality' they would apply for the condition of the two young men and why no one had heard them during the night.

Would a bad trip or overdose be used to explain it all?

Would it be enough to explain the slack-jawed, horror-filled stares, and the tangled tortured mess that was all that remained of their minds? Enough to give a reason for the agonised curl of their limbs as they lay there on the cobbles, their muscles spasmed iron tight from the prolonged application of the Cruciatus Curse?

And what of the words they had carved deeply into each other's flesh? Words that would brand them forever, tell anyone who came across them what they were.

Scum.

Filth.

Muggle scum. Muggle filth.

He hoped they lived until ninety, prisoners in the memory of what he had done to them and made them do to each other. Unable to hear anything, see anything, feel anything but *that* forever, their own private hell before death took them to the fiery pits of the real one. He pulled his jacket tight against the chill of the night, dawn just around the corner.

For it would be a cold day in that hell before he'd ever pity them.

Brecon Beacons, Wales

The sound of the lorries filled the air between the trees, smoke belching from their exhaust stacks, as they left the compound on this clear, star-filled night. The worker crews had long since gone for the day, talking cheerfully amongst themselves, their minds on their dinners, the football match that would be broadcast later that night on the television, or making plans to meet up with their mates at the pub.

The gate that usually clanged shut behind the nightly lorries as they drove off down the dirt road failed this time to do so.

Not that anyone noticed.

No more than they'd noticed the dark brown shape that had been sitting for hours amidst the branches of one of the many trees surrounding the half-moon shaped compound.

The silence now was broken only by the light boot tread of the cloaked figure, hood over his head, his covert path leading him to the rock face opposite the corrugated steel shed and the just too perfect log cabin.

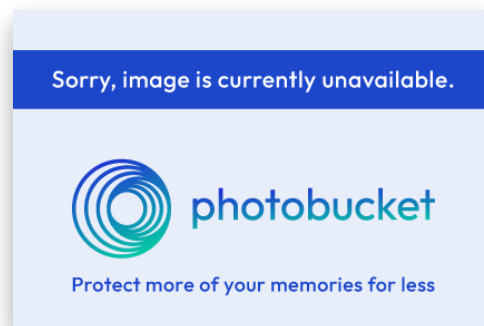
Pausing beside the shed, he scanned the compound quickly, his senses alert to any potential danger. Ascertaining that all was quiet on this Welsh summer night, he returned his attention to the now quite evident gaping maw in the cliff face. Something he'd only seen just enough of from his vantage point in the trees to even know that it existed.

A cave.

A cave into which two men had slipped last night and, moments after the lorries had pulled out, had disappeared into again tonight. And they were not just any men, but the supervisors. Left alone after seeing their crews off, they had made their way to the cave and entered, emerging only minutes before their crews returned the next morning. Now, unless that was the most unlikely hotel in history, or those men were conducting a particularly odd and uncomfortable affair, *that* opening was his goal.

In there lay all the answers to his questions -- some mission related, some deeply personal.

Wand in hand, his mouth set in a grim line, and his green eyes darting around one last time, Steven Prince set his shoulders and took the last ten steps into the cave and the point of no return.



Dark Alley by Perselus

Authors' Note: Thank you so much to our betas D'arcy and Smoke for all your hard work and honest criticism in this chapter. We couldn't have done it without you.