

School for Young Seigneurs

by janus

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Abraxas arranged for Severus, his young protégé, to vacation away from the Malfoy estates along with all the other children of the Dark Lord.

It was a manor house in Cornwall belonging to the Lestranges' uncle. It was less elegant than Abraxas' own estates, but it had rambling walls about it and fields rimmed in stone hedges. Like Hogwarts, it was all cold stone, dark panelling and old leaded glass that threw rainbows on the oak floors when the sun shone in the afternoon. The house-elves were silent and busy, ensuring the linen was crisp, the crystal was sharply clear and the silver was glinting and reflective. The meals were hearty but enhanced with all the touches that wealth provided. At breakfast the butter was sugared for the crumpets, and the orange juice was laced with champagne. There were dishes of mushrooms and plates of asparagus shoots along with the omelettes, which were prepared as each one liked. At home Severus would have had a largely unvarying diet of beans on toast.

It was a little as if they were living the lives of royalty, if the wizarding world had such a thing. It was a little like school, for they had lessons in the big summerhouse, with its long windows open to the breeze and sun. It was a little like camping, for they spent a great deal of time in the open air engaged in games and challenges. They had time to hike and converse with one another and with their new teachers. Severus never wanted to leave.

Big quiet Rabastan had brought his dog, Bernard, and Severus walked with them in the mornings. They threw sticks for him and laughed as he plunged enthusiastically into the swimming pond. Sometimes they joined him, for they had only light robes and light shoes, easily shed, and there was no one to see but the others. There was dew in the grass, and the stone and shadows were cold, though the rest of the area was warm with sunlight. Severus learned the first day that his socks would become soaked if he troubled with them in the early day. Somehow it was freeing to wake in the fresh-scented sheets, to walk barefoot easily and unsupervised over the bright floors, then to open the door to a richly empty green and silver-grey world touched with white gold.

It was utterly unlike Spinner's End. It was so quiet one could hear the natural sounds of birds and small insects or the laughter from a little distance where Evan wrestled Rodolphus in some sport or other. There were no machines, roads or Muggle conveyances. There was no grimy resentful parade to filthy jobs and brick-box schools. There was no stench of mill and polluted river. It was clean and night-washed outside; it was simple and healthy. The manor even contained a full magical library of rare books and a laboratory where he was free to pursue his ideas, or to fulfil the needs of his mentor and his Dark Lord. Severus never wanted to leave. Ever.

Except. The whole world waited. He did not live for himself alone, and there were certainly other wizards like himself who had been subjugated beneath Muggles and Muggle law in their childhoods. He would do anything for the brilliant, the ambitious, the skilful young wizards who were left to survive without defence or chance. He would do anything to allow them to become as they were born to be. This meant that he could not live here long, despite the pleasure, despite the growth of his mind as he learned from the older ones, as he learned to have friends. This was demonstration of the ideal, the new world. In the meantime it was only responsible and diligent to work to attain it.

Abraxas had plucked him from the lowly fate to which he should have been resigned, given his birth and Muggle heritage. Though he was worthy of salvation, by right of vision and intelligence, a part of that worthiness seemed to be contingent on his striving to be ever more and ever better. That meant sacrifice, and it meant doing all he could for the new world, where serious young wizards could enjoy this elasticity of study, camaraderie and pleasure as a matter of course. He noticed within himself an occasional admiration of the others who had been born to this quiet richness. They worked for Severus and those like him, who had no privilege. Their sacrifice was neither for pain they had suffered, nor to ensure such pain did not flow for their heirs. Pain was not theirs. Their causes were beauty, purity and right. And *freedom*. And perhaps for the old idea of *noblesse oblige*, so far as Severus could see.

There was also the matter of Azkaban. It was an edifice of torture, and it served almost solely to torture those Severus loved and served. Death was one thing, and they all swore they would prefer it to the endless, almost unimaginable nightmare of one's heart and mind ... one's very *self* ... stolen and destroyed. One's soul would not simply vanish either, but would be drawn from one in torment, pain and fear over longer and longer years. Once captured, Azkaban would be all one would ever know. There were wizards lost inside it now ... human just like them, no matter what the Ministry said. Gellert Grindelwald had been kept imprisoned for almost fifty years now. He was one of the greatest wizards there had ever been. It was *wrong*.

Evan asked Severus to slice his finger with his small knife spell ... just a thin cut, less than that of a razor blade. He swore, on his Dark Mark, that he would never ever let himself be taken. Rabastan's face was solemn, trying to twist away without seeming to do so. He did not want to die. He had his brother to watch over, after all, now that Rabastan had to worry about Bella's influence over him. He had Bernard and Severus. At the same time the thought of Azkaban itself was revolting and undignified.

Severus read secretly of the Muggles' French Revolution. He was sure there had been wizards behind it because the cry for *Freedom* burned so hotly through the almost-fever of the Jacobins. Of course he wasn't supposed to concern himself with such mundane matters, but the revolution inspired him for its parallels with the revolution of himself and his friends. He looked with excitement at the paintings of the Bastille, even though they were just Muggle pictures and they were still. It was just like Azkaban, and someday, someday, he and his friends would storm through the wall of the prison they had been told would outlast them all.

But in truth nothing was so simple as a head-on assault of the fortress. And they had not been invited to this manor merely to bond with one another, to learn to rely on one another, to learn to appreciate one another or even simply to experience an example of the new world. It was true that all these things were elements of their stay, but there were more.

There were visitors from Bulgaria and Russia. Along with everything else, it was exciting for the British students to know that they had foreign counterparts. It was thrilling to know that they were the only ones in Britain privy to these plans, work and secrets. They welcomed their new friends as equals and fellow conspirators. Severus and his friends felt more influential than the very ministry because they themselves could talk directly to those who would rule their countries. Their world would be a new *world*, not just a new Britain, and they would change *everything*.

They read the *Daily Prophet* eagerly, not just for news but to reinterpret the news. There were always stories from the Ministry of Magic in particular. In their lessons in the big sunny summerhouse, Abraxas taught them that even the smallest articles were clues to the doings of the Ministry. The purpose of the *Daily Prophet* was not to tell wizarding Britain what was happening. It was to tell them what the Ministry decided they should think and what they should do. It was largely a collection of cautionary tales.

Abraxas showed them articles detailing the arrests of those found guilty of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts. He showed them articles detailing the arrests of those found guilty of using magic where Muggles might witness it. He explained how these articles reinforced the acceptability of the controversial International Code of Wizarding Secrecy and created a perceived *need* for it. Many of those found guilty had not even been truly tried. He explained how the language used to describe the luckless wizards arrested was designed to portray them as objects of scorn and revulsion, as deviants and outsiders, as destructive, random and mad. He explained how these articles exaggerated these events, touting them as rare and dangerous anomalies, whereas they were really quite common occurrences.

He showed them the genuinely rare articles which tried to gloss over the intelligence, planning and conviction of those who shared their own beliefs ... those who had been defying or working against the secrecy statute. There was mourning for these lost brothers and sisters ... a moment of respectful silence.

He explained to them that the heart-warming human-interest stories of 'good' wizards and the reports of endless Quidditch matches were really just distractions. Quidditch and its very rivalries were designed to set up false adversaries. It was promoted to prevent wizards from noticing that their real opponents were in the Ministry, keeping them from their pride and place. Severus smiled, slightly smug behind his thin lips. He had always thought so. They still *played* Quidditch, of course. But they were not merely observers and consumers. They were players in their own games, for camaraderie, exercise and strength.

Antonin Dolohov sat in the back of the classes listening and nodding, his owl Anya rustling her beak and toying with the little stones he turned into mice to please her. He showed them the deep and ugly scars he had received from the burning Dark Magic of the Bulgarian Aurors. Only Aurors were permitted to use the Unforgiveables, and in Bulgaria they had even wider latitude and fewer legal restraints than in Britain. Antonin did not speak in cool measured logic as Abraxas did. This was no straightforward pedagogy, though the Russian was clearly as aristocratic and well-educated as any of Severus' friends' parents. His manners and language were formal and impeccable, but his lessons were taut with palpable *reality*.

Eastern Europe had been the seat of their greatest triumph and their greatest loss when even Abraxas had been a child and Grindelwald had been defeated. It was still seeded with men and women of loyalty and conviction, willing to work for The Greater Good. Antonin had gone to Durmstrang and remained in the country so rich in the great man's ideals. As Antonin saw it, it was the heart of the wizarding world. And Antonin's lessons were designed to raise the hearts of his students.

They listened to his stories more keenly and with more focus than they ever did at school. History was *their* history now. It was personal and immediate. They were making history now. They all took notes, and Severus noticed Rodolphus leaning forward, his fingertips tightening unconsciously on the table. This was real. It was so strange. Their lives and concerns paled as they listened to their teacher's tales of running battles; of the daring of his compatriots as they threw spells against their enemies and the symbols of their power; of his experiences with the prisons and Aurors in Antonin's far-off country. His foes were their foes too.

But Antonin's lessons were not merely vivid or impersonal. Had his students been with him, they too would have needed to respond with daring and courage for the Cause. Severus and his friends must prepare themselves for the day when the need for stern fortitude and lightning action came to their own country. They must leave nothing to chance. They must be mentally prepared for everything because physical hesitation could mean disaster when the time to act came suddenly upon them. Hesitation could mean worse than death. They must already know exactly what they would do, what decisions they would make. They must already *know* with deadly certainty that they could cast and kill without pausing for consideration or thought.

There were not only tales of battles with Aurors. There were other more dire tales with cautionary... questions. There really were such men as informants ... those who had betrayed their fellows. It was a sad tragedy that they had been taken over by their enemies. Perhaps they were afraid or afraid for their families. Perhaps they had their means of livelihood snatched from them, and were starving, on the run; perhaps now they had been offered the respite of money or security. These were not abstract or foreign situations. Informants were those who may have been one's friends, who may have sat with one in even such classes as this one. It was demanded that Antonin's

students would be *better*, but if not they too must be eradicated.

Antonin punctuated his lesson by turning to them, leaning his face close to one or another of them, his eyes intense. "Could you kill your brother," he demanded of Rabastan, "if you knew he had given information to the Ministry and could give them your secrets and the hiding places of your comrades?"

"Could you kill your wife?" he asked Rodolphus.

"If Regulus had been taken and had been privy to the entire plan and strategy you needed to follow, could you cast Avada Kedavra at him as you escaped? You know he would be tortured until he revealed everything." This was his question to Severus, stark and brutal. They all knew that it was true. Once one was taken there were no more secrets. Everyone was broken in the end.

Regulus was the most beloved among them, willing, brave and kind. He was youngest and warmest, always focused, reliable, organised. His humour was lively and gentle; his pride unflinching. He looked at Severus, his eyes wide and solemn. Severus looked at him, at Regulus, then turned to Antonin. "Yes. Yes, I could." It was true.

Rabastan had slid his eyes past Antonin's. "I don't know...."

Rodolphus had looked in horror at Bella, who had confidently expected him to agree. He had said nothing.

Truth was assumed; a lie, even an internal lie, was unthinkable. Such questions must be answered with inner honesty. They were all friends, brothers, comrades-in-arms. But beyond these ties there was something that bound them to the truth. They *wanted* to shine for the older ones, to be like them. To be like them was to be valid, to be elite, to be a worthy part of this grand sweep towards the future. To fail was to be swept away, sucked this way and that in the tide and ocean of wizards who did not stand for anything, who merely took advantage of the power of those who did.

Crabbe and Goyle were both dull and heavy. Normally they were unable to manage even the least of essays. Now even they became intelligent members of the elite. Even they, with Abraxas' clear lessons, were able to interpret the *Daily Prophet*. Even they were able to raise their hands in these classes with reasonable questions to which the others listened. Even they were able to grasp the concept of The Greater Good. Even they could look within themselves to develop the ability to kill. They were soldiers who knew why they were soldiers, who had finally received dignity, and they were willing to work for a cause that appreciated them as such.

But Severus was different from the others. This was all he had. There was nothing else, no chance or hope. There was no other life that he could lead that was acceptable or worthy of him. There was no other life than that promised by Abraxas, Antonin and their Dark Lord. He would sincerely rather die than live like his parents. Ready to die, he was also ready to kill or to do any thing.

There was something else within him that the others did not possess ... that few possessed. It was the ability, natural and inevitable, to turn away from himself. It was the gift that made him a prodigy of Occlumency. For Severus it was impossible to turn from concrete events. It was impossible to *deny* violence, brutality, offence, insult, or travesty. It was impossible and perilous to disregard them, ignore them or pretend they were not occurring. Severus was no coward. But... his horror and pain would have broken his heart, would have left him shattered, would have left him helpless and nullified long before he came to Hogwarts.

As a young child he had discovered this special magical protection, this salvation of his heart and soul. He found he could turn away from himself. He could simply step away, his eyes growing opaque, his lips relaxing motionless, his expression neutralising to a blank facsimile of a face. Masks could be torn from him. Others could look behind a mask. This ability was not a mask, for he experienced no feelings to hide. Later he learned to augment it with the amplification of smaller emotions that would not harm him. This was his Occlumency and even in the worst situations he had absolute confidence he could draw upon this first early ability.

Antonin looked into Severus' eyes as he answered the questions and saw that he spoke the truth. "My dear good boy." Severus received an approving pat on his back from one of Antonin's big hands. After that his teacher paid more attention to Severus. There were walks in the fields and this led to the promise that they would work together, developing spells. It was one more prized hope for Severus to carry like a coin of favour and the future.

Antonin encouraged his own young charge to get to know him. Igor Karkaroff was Severus' age and physically similar, thin, dark and nervous. The others were older and Regulus was younger. Both Antonin and Igor were in exile, as it were. Severus was interested in the other boy's experiences in his own land as well as what he had learned from his mentor. With a mentor of his own, Severus was curious.

Severus' mind and judgement were quicksilver though, and he was disappointed to find the other boy weak in his predictability. There was no further dimension to him, no complexity or question, at least none he was willing to share. Though Severus hid it politely and respectfully, he felt an irritating impatience in his company. Any outside interest, any will to innovation, was brushed aside in favour of The Greater Good and the ABC's of reality. There was no subtlety, no suppleness in his discussion, and Severus simply but sadly decided to decline to speak of the things that really mattered to him. There should be time and room for the art of magic, for dreams of sublime beauty and potential wonders, Severus thought, but Igor was uninterested.

Severus preferred the moments of quiet contemplation with Rabastan or the relief of simple congenial peace as they played with Bernard. He preferred Regulus' openness and gentle enthusiasm, which always made him smile.

There were more lessons. Antonin spoke to each of them in the classes, and they all discussed their thoughts, winnowing old ideas and re-evaluating all values until each of them honestly could say that they could die, that they could kill ... even one another ... for The Greater Good and for the pure clean world that was surely to be.

There were exercises in the fields. They shared Dark Magic, and there Severus shone again. They practiced on one another, casting torture and violence. In this way they developed the inner fortitude to act. In this way they developed the ease and almost careless familiarity they would need to inflict these things without thought, or to resist the spells of the Aurors. They healed one another, comforted and eased one another. In this way they learned trust and they learned to value one another. In this way they developed unity and pride as a unit, a cadre, a force to move unflinchingly with strength and their heads held high in certainty.

They came to know pain intimately, from the inside and from the outside. They came to know intimately for whom they were fighting.

By the time they left the homely stone manor, nestled in the green dew-drenched sun-sparked meadows, they were ready.

Author's Notes: I would like to give my effusive and heartfelt thanks to my beta slytherinlaurel who does such thoughtful, thorough, enthusiastic and re-assuring work.