

Discard

by Doomspark

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

One

Chapter 1 of 7

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

I hear her voice in the other room, casting Charms. She uses them to make her hair soft and silky, to make her skin smooth and flawless. She says it's easier to use Charms than to buy potions that probably won't work half as well. She's probably right about that. I haven't brewed potions for her for half a decade.

She doesn't come into this room very often. No more than duty demands. She brings me my meals and makes generally inane conversation while she feeds me. When I'm finished, she takes the dishes and vanishes and if I'm lucky, I'll see her again when it's time for the next meal. If not, the house-elf will bring me something.

That damned snake. Who would've guessed how potent her venom was? How could anyone have foreseen this? It started with tingling in my hands and feet two years after we married. I didn't pay it any mind. But it spread. Tingling became tremors, and I found myself unable to do what I'd made my life's work. I couldn't hold tools to prepare ingredients, couldn't hold my wand to cast spells. And wandless magic is too unreliable to use in brewing.

We tried to find a cure as the tremors increased. I spent my nights bound to my bed so my thrashing wouldn't throw me onto the floor. They stopped and we thought we were successful in treating them. It wasn't until my fingers and toes went numb that I realized the symptoms had merely changed. Numbness followed shortly by paralysis of the voluntary muscles from the neck down.

It's been hard for her, I know. She had planned a life for us of travel to exotic locations, research of new potions, and possibly children at some point. I'm sure she didn't even consider that she might end up taking care of me like this.

The first year, she was determined to find a cure. She spent hours researching and brewing. I couldn't help with the brewing, but we talked. She would read to me and we'd discuss options. I couldn't hold my wand, but she brought it to me. And she stayed with me in this room. We often had visitors in those days.

The second year, she moved into the other room to sleep. She said it had become uncomfortable sleeping next to me – like being with a corpse, she said. She still worked on a cure and she still read to me every night, but she put my wand away because it wasn't doing me any good. It's over in the top dresser drawer right now. Minerva still came to visit, as did some of her friends from Hogwarts, including Potter and Weasley.

The third year, she warded this room against the use of wandless magic. She had grown tired of my attempts to master it, attempts that too often resulted in messes that she had to clean up. And that year began the occasional night where she would be too tired to read to me in the evening. She'd always apologize for it, and there would be a week or ten days where we'd spend the evenings together talking or reading. The Healers from St. Mungo's officially gave up on finding a cure for me that year also. And that was the year Minerva died.

The fourth year, she went on a weekend jaunt with two of her old friends from Hogwarts. Girlfriends, she said. She hired a house-elf to take care of me until she returned. Only the weekend jaunt stretched somehow into almost five days, and she came back moody and irritable. It was over a week before she came in to read to me, and she

cut that evening short. No apology for it. Just "I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning." That became a common refrain.

She's given up on finding a cure now. If I ask her about potions, she'll look at me as though I've grown a second head. If I persist, she gives me an exasperated look and tell me that she's got a headache. Or stomachache. Or something. And she's mentioned moving me permanently to St. Mungo's.

The front door just slammed. I know that sound. I've heard it all too often. She's leaving. She'll be back, maybe tonight but more likely sometime tomorrow. I wonder who it is she goes to, with her hair all soft and silky, and her skin so smooth and flawless. I wonder what I would do if I had my wand and could move.

I laugh softly at myself. I know the answer to that last question. "*Avada Kedavra*."

Two

Chapter 2 of 7

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

He's giving me the silent treatment again. Four days so far. Last time, it was a week. I try to put it out of my mind and concentrate on the Charms I'm casting. I miss the potions he used to make for me; I've never found any others that work half so well. So I use Charms these days as I've done for the past several years.

I was hoping he'd talk to me when I brought him his dinner earlier tonight. I told him about Harry's oldest boy's latest pranks, and the new students that will be coming to Hogwarts this fall. He just glowered at me. The only thing he wants to talk about is potions research. I get so frustrated sometimes, that I have Delky bring him his meals.

That damned snake! How could anyone have foreseen that her venom would lay dormant for months and then erupt? Sometimes I wish Neville hadn't killed her, hadn't deprived me of killing that reptile myself. I know it's immature to wish such a thing, and I generally laugh at myself. But she took Severus from me. That man lying in the next room isn't Severus any more. He's a shadow of the man I wed.

Should I have noticed that he was having trouble earlier? Perhaps, but Severus was very good at masking his feelings. He told me once that he wouldn't have said anything if it wasn't becoming patently obvious that there was something wrong. As it was, his hands and feet had been tingling for weeks and he chose to say nothing to me. He didn't want me to worry, he said.

It might have made a difference. And somehow, part of me feels that he cheated me out of everything I wanted – children, travel, and a career as a potions developer. I gave it all up for him, and he repays me with silence.

It wasn't so bad at first. We spent hours talking, discussing possible lines of research for a cure. I did all the brewing of course. He tried a few times to help, but wandless magic is far too imprecise. As the tremors grew worse, I had to tie him to the bed to keep him from falling out. It helped that Ron and Harry would come by a couple times a week. While they weren't Severus' favorite people, they could engage him in conversation, and Ron would even play chess with him. Minerva and the rest of the Hogwarts staff visited regularly. Neville even came to see us once, though I thought he would faint when Severus glared at him. Then the tremors eased slightly and we thought he was getting better – but we were horribly wrong. Within weeks, he was paralyzed from the neck down. And he's been like that now for five years. Looking back on it, the first year wasn't really that dreadful. We still talked and worked on potions research. He insisted on keeping his wand with him, even though he couldn't hold it. I thought it might help him focus. He was a little short-tempered, but it was understandable.

The second year, he decided to try to master wandless magic. I tried to tell him it wasn't going to work. While Severus had an aptitude for it, the precision needed for brewing requires the focus of a wand. After the third exploded cauldron, I took his wand away from him. I was already cleaning up after him in some ways, and I really didn't want to have to keep cleaning up failed potions on top of that. He wasn't happy about that, and I don't think he really understood where I was coming from. I know he didn't understand when I moved into the other room. I tried to explain it – he snored and mumbled and talked in his sleep all night long. I was exhausted, he was angry. We both said much more than we should have. But I needed to be able to sleep.

He didn't give up on the wandless magic for months, and then only because I warded his room against it. It wasn't a hasty decision. Neither of us had worked in two years, and our money was running out. I didn't want to worry Severus, so I took a part-time job at Flourish & Blotts. It wasn't much, but it paid our bills with a few knuts left over each month. So I'd come home from work to find yet another mess on the floor – knocked over ingredients, or some such. And he'd just lay there and grumble about how he couldn't do anything. Minerva's death that year – she never really recovered from the injuries she received during the war – hit both of us hard. I cried myself to sleep every night for a week, and Severus was more sullen than ever. The capper on that year was the owl from St. Mungos saying that they'd exhausted their research funding and were going to have to give up on finding a cure.

I think I would've gone mad if Ginny hadn't invited me on a mini-vacation with the Weasley family. It was a weekend trip to Dover. It was such a relief to be around life and laughter again. It was a tonic, balm for my soul. I slept soundly and woke rested for the first time in years. I realized that I needed to do this more often. And that meant more money. A better job, or more hours at F&B.

I'd hired Delky to take care of Severus while I was gone. He's Dobby's nephew, I believe – a free elf. So instead of going directly home when the weekend was over, I went job-hunting. I borrowed fifty galleons from Harry, though I wouldn't tell him what it was for. It would've been just like him to insist on begging his own family to fund more research at St. Mungos. I owled Delky and let him know that I'd be a few more days and Floo'd to Diagon Alley.

I finally found a job at Gringott's in their Spell Research division. Much of what we do is examining old magical artifacts – ones that the Curse-Breakers have deemed safe – to determine what they were used for and to learn the spells used to create them. It's very exacting work, and can be quite tiring if an object doesn't want to readily give up its purpose.

When I came home that night, I had planned to tell Severus everything – that we desperately needed my income, and that I wasn't abandoning him. But he began shouting before I could say anything, ranting about my vacation as if it was the end of the world. He hadn't known about the extra three days. And that was solely because he had screamed at Delky when the poor elf tried to tell him. I told him he needed to apologize to Delky and that set him off again.

He alternates now between shouting at me and the silent treatment. Right now, it's the silent treatment. It's been almost a year since we've had anything like a civil conversation. My friends have stopped coming by the house; it's better if I go to see them on days I'm not working. They don't need to know how awful it is.

I cast the last Charm and take a look at myself in the mirror. It's a Muggle mirror; I don't need something else talking back to me. My hair is Charmed back out of the way so that it won't be snagged by some of the more precocious artifacts I'm working on. The Counter Charms for every curse, hex, or jinx I know are set on my work robes. Not that we don't trust the Curse-breakers to do their jobs, but sometimes things slip through their skilled fingers. I tell Delky I'm leaving, and remind him that I might be working late.

I'll have to remember to ask Delky to fix the hinge on the door so it won't slam any more.

Three

Chapter 3 of 7

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

"You wished to see me, Garvon?" Hermione asked. A summons to her supervisor's office at the end of the work day usually didn't bode well.

The goblin nodded, his long fingers tapping on one of the rolls of parchment that festooned his desk. "You know, I assume, that we recently acquired control of the Zurich Consortium." It wasn't a question; Garvon knew that Hermione rarely forgot anything.

It was her turn to nod. Rumors concerning the take-over of ZC had been flying around Gringotts for months. With it completed, Gringotts now controlled wizard banking in America and Europe as well as Britain. What this had to do with Spell Research, though, she couldn't guess. She knew, though, that Garvon was about to tell her and then give her a chance to ask questions.

"Our acquisition was not entirely desired," her supervisor continued. "Many of the Consortium chose to leave their work areas bespelled before they left, vaults, offices, and so forth. This has hampered our ability to provide a smooth transition in services to our new customers. It has been decided that our best Spell Researchers and Curse-Breakers should relocate to America to facilitate our work there. Your name is at the top of the list. Do you wish a transfer to our newly created American Division?"

Hermione bit her tongue to keep from blurting out the first thoughts that came into her head. After a moment, she asked. "Relocation expenses?"

"Paid by Gringotts, of course," Garvon answered. "Housing is available in the wizard town of Otter Creek. The position carries a hardship stipend of ten galleons per work day, and our customary bonuses for exemplary work will apply. Overtime may be required in some circumstances, with appropriate compensation. We estimate that it will take ten years to restore complete functionality, and you would be required to commit to staying in America for that time. Of course, on your days off, you could return to Britain."

"I must discuss it with my husband," Hermione said. "I will let you know tomorrow morning."

"Acceptable. I will speak with you then." He opened up the ledger on his desk and bent over it, signifying that the conversation was over.

Hermione slowly walked out to the Apparition point, considering. Ten galleons per work day. Unless the cost of living in Otter Creek was significantly higher than Hogsmeade, she'd be taking home another two hundred galleons each month. It would be nice to have the extra money; she hadn't forgotten how awful it had been when she was working at Flourish & Blotts, and every knut had been counted twice.

On the other hand, it would mean leaving her friends behind. Did she really want to start over again, like the little first-year she'd once been? She still winced internally when she recalled Ron's callous declaration that she was a fright. He'd never apologized for it. Of course, they'd been a bit distracted by the troll immediately afterward, and then spent the next several years fighting with Voldemort. But she remembered. And ten years was a long time to be lonely.

There was also Severus to consider. Assuming she could even get him to discuss the opportunity. He'd be much more likely to launch into a tirade about her working without telling him. Or worse, he'd glower for a minute and then relapse into an unresponsive silence. Perhaps it would be better – if she accepted the transfer – to put him in St. Mungos.

She bit her lip and Apparated.

Delky had noticed the door hinge apparently, for it swung smoothly and closed almost silently as she entered the house. As if the thought was enough to Summon him, the elf appeared, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Dinner is almost ready, Mistress," he reported. "And the Master ate most of his lunch today."

That was a hopeful sign. Severus ate little to nothing during his sulks. "Any owls?"

Delky nodded and produced three rolls of parchment. One from Ginny, one from St. Mungos, and one from Gringotts. Grumbling a little under her breath, she accepted them. "Thanks. I'll read these and then have dinner." She chose to start with St. Mungos. As expected it was their quarterly 'sorry, no money for research, can't help you' owl. The one from Ginny was an invitation to dinner at the Burrow for the following night. And the one from Gringotts was a formal invitation to transfer to Spell, Curse, Antidote Research, American Body – SCARAB for short. Apparently Gringotts was reorganizing internally, for her current position was listed as Spell, Curse, Antidote Research and Revision, English Division. She snorted at the acronyms and then put the letter from St. Mungos in the trash, resolving to owl Ginny back later that evening.

"I'll take Severus' dinner into him tonight," she told Delky. The house-elf nodded and sat down to have his own meal. Hermione picked up the tray and went into her husband's room. He was sitting up the way Delky had propped him, waiting for her.

"Slumming?" His voice didn't sound angry. More like resigned.

She set the tray down on the bed-table. "Please, Severus, I don't want to fight with you. I actually want to talk to you."

"I was wondering when you would decide to. But could we put off the unpleasantness until after I eat? I find my digestion prone to upset these days."

"You were? Sorry." She brought the tray over. Yorkshire pudding. She carved it into bite sized pieces and offered him one.

"The elf's outdone himself tonight," he said. "Or did you get a new one?"

"No, this is Delky's cooking." She thought of something – a relatively innocuous question. "Severus, how much do you know about American wizard society?"

He chewed and swallowed. "Very little. Thinking of emigrating?"

The direct question caught her off-guard. She'd forgotten how sharp his mind was. "Well, yes, actually."

"I see. I shan't stand in your way, you know. You should be happy."

"You mean that? What about you? Would you be happy?"

"One room's very much like another. I'd be no less happy than I am now." He ate the next few bites of his dinner in silence.

"It would probably be cheaper," she mused aloud. "And I wouldn't have to worry about maintenance charms every two or three weeks. That would all be taken care of."

"Very practical. I'm surprised you haven't made a list of pros and cons yet."

"I was – I just hadn't written it down. You're really ok with this?"

He paused for a long moment. "You deserve to be happy, and if America will make you happy, so be it."

Her eyes shone. "I hadn't expected you to be so understanding. Thank you, Severus!"

Four

Chapter 4 of 7

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

Snape's lips pulled back in something resembling a smile as his wife brought him breakfast. Despite the almost friendly evening they'd passed the night before, he'd half-expected her to send in the elf this morning. He looked at the tray in her hands. Pumpernickel with marmite – his usual fare. After a few moments of silence punctuated by chewing and swallowing, he asked "What are your plans for the day?" He didn't want to be too caustic. Not yet. But he would twist the knife just a little bit. Just enough to make her feel a twinge of guilt that she was running around while he was confined to his bed.

"I'm, uh, going out for a while. I've got a lot of, uh, errands to run. And Ginny's invited me to dinner tonight." She paused a moment, offering him the last bite of his breakfast. "I'll try to make an early night of it."

"I'm sure Delky will be able to manage. He's been taking care of things for the last several years after all." *"Does she take me for a fool?"* he wondered. *She doesn't stammer unless she's trying to hide something. That business about having errands to do is so obvious a lie that a first-year Hufflepuff could see through it.*

She kissed the top of his head. "You're being very understanding." Then she swept out of the room, her robes billowing around her. He was so used to hearing the door slam when she left, that he almost missed the soft sound of it closing.

Once he was sure she'd gone, he called, "Delky!"

The elf appeared looking a bit nervous. "Yes Master? How is Delky to help?"

Snape pasted a smile on his face and softened his voice. He didn't want to frighten the creature. Yet. "Did we get any owls last night?" He distinctly remembered hearing the tapping on the window at least twice.

"Yes, Master. There is one from the sad place, and one from Mrs. Harry Potter, and one from the talking stones."

"Let me see them." As the elf began to demur, he continued, "Come, Delky. Hermione's my wife. Has she told you to keep any of these secret?"

"No, Master. Delky will get them." The elf was back almost instantly with two pieces of parchment. "The one from the talking stones, the Mistress has taken with her."

"Show me the one from the sad place." Snape snorted as he recognized the St. Mungos seal. "What do they want?" Delky held the page so that Snape could read it. "A begging letter. Short sighted of the Ministry to cut their funding. Show me the other one. Thank you. So Mrs Potter did invite Hermione to dinner tonight. That's convenient." He thought for a moment. "I want to plan a surprise party for Hermione, and I need your help. It's a surprise, so you can't tell her anything about it. Understand?"

Delky bounced up and down on his toes delightedly. "Yes, Master! Delky understands! Delky will help! Mistress will be surprised!"

"Excellent. First, I need to send some messages."

"If Master will tell Delky, Delky will write them and send owls. Delky would go instead, but Master is not to be left by himself."

"Very well. Send an owl to Gringotts and ask for an inventory of our shared vault." He gave the elf a conspiratorial wink. "I need to know how much I can spend after all. Make sure Hermione doesn't see the reply."

"Yes, Master! Delky will do this. What else?"

"Since Hermione doesn't want me left alone, I'm going to need someone to run a few errands for me – buy a few little trinkets. Send an owl to Maxwell Sebastian and tell him I need to see him. Ask if he is available this afternoon. And Delky..."

"Yes, Master?"

"Thank you. You're being quite helpful."

As soon as the elf had popped off to send the owls, Snape settled back on the pillows and let his customary scowl take over his features while he polished his plan. Hermione had simply transferred the contents of her vault to his when they married, and she hadn't actually visited it that he knew of. He'd kept very little in actual coin; all his accumulated wealth was sitting in an old tin box engraved with the name of Eileen Prince. This, in turn, lay at the bottom of a crate filled with what appeared to be sentimental keepsakes. It was the sort of thing that Hermione would never search through as long as he was alive. At any rate, the vault inventory should tell him if Hermione was raiding it for her move across the Atlantic.

If she was, or even if she wasn't, well, he was making other plans for that. Plans that involved Maxwell Sebastian's legal expertise. Max was the solicitor that people went to

when they needed problems fixed quickly and quietly. It was Snape's opinion that his current problem was one that Max would be able to take care of – by one means or another.

He stopped and considered his actions for a few minutes. "Let's obfuscate my plans a little more," he muttered to himself. "A party for Hermione would have to include the Boy Who Should Be Smacked and The Ever-Present Sidekick. And their progeny, of course." He pasted his false smile back on and then called for Delky again. "I need to send some more owls. To Mr. Harry Potter and to Mr. Ronald Weasley. Tell them that I am hosting a surprise party for Hermione next week to thank her for everything she's done for me. Tell them I would appreciate their presence along with their families. Also, ask Mr. Potter if he can stop by tomorrow afternoon, and Mr. Weasley the day after."

"Delky will do this right now for Master!"

"Very good. Now Delky, Hermione has ordered you not to leave me alone, is that right?"

"That is right, Master."

"But you could take me somewhere, right? That way you wouldn't be leaving me."

The elf hesitated. "Delky is thinking Mistress didn't have that in mind."

"Surely Hermione wouldn't mind my getting out for a little while, as long as you're with me."

"Yes, Master. Delky can do this."

"Very good. First, I want a shave, and then to be properly dressed. I can't go out in this nightshirt."

"Delky will help Master!"

Snape almost laughed at the little creature's excitement. It actually felt good to remove the three days of grey-black stubble on his jaws and throat, to get out of the nightshirt and back into proper wizard robes. The elf had assisted him with his other ablutions before breakfast. He almost felt like his old self again, especially when Delky got him out of bed and into a wheeled chair. It was slightly strange to be completely upright again.

"Where is Master wanting to go?"

Snape's first inclination was to have the elf take him to Knock Turn Alley. But that might frighten the creature into talking to Hermione. Plus, he really didn't want to go there without being able to defend himself. He decided that something completely innocent would best serve his purpose. "Just out into the garden. I've been inside too long." From the way the elf beamed, he knew he'd made the right decision.

And it was good to be outside, to feel the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. He looked around noting that the plants were well-tended. "Who takes care of this?" he asked Delky.

"Delky does, Master. Mistress has showed Delky how. Which plants need sun, which need shade, and how much to water them. Mistress said it was important, so Delky works very hard on it."

"You've done a fine job." He'd never heard of a house-elf with an affinity for plants before. Perhaps Delky would be worth keeping around. "Do you know how to brew potions?"

Five

Chapter 5 of 7

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Delky shifted uncomfortably at Snape's direct question, his long fingers twisting around themselves. "Delky is knowing what potions are, Master. All house-elves know what potions are."

Chair-bound or not, Snape could spot an evasion a mile away. "That's not what I asked, Delky. Do you know how to brew potions?"

"Delky is not knowing how to brew wizard potions."

Wizard potions? Snape pounced. "What other kinds of potions are there?"

"Is many different kinds of potions, Master. Different kinds of magic too. Wizards know wizard magic. Sidhe know sidhe magic. Goblins know goblin magic. Dragons know dragon magic. All races has their own magics."

"All races?" His mind reeled at the implications. Every wizard knew that what was called 'goblin magic' by Gringotts was nothing more than specialized charms that any wizard could learn if they cared to. And any wizard who'd stayed awake in History of Magic knew that the theory of racial magic had been considered – and disproven – more than a century ago.

Apparently the house elves knew differently.

"Delky is not supposed to talk about this," the elf replied nervously. "Is... not permitted."

"I'm your Master. I say you can talk to me about this." Snape didn't really believe it would work, but thought he'd try it anyway.

A headshake. "No, Master. Is against the rules."

"Rules? What rules?"

"Delky is not supposed to talk about rules," Delky admitted. "Delky is free elf, but rules still rules."

"Who made these rules?"

Delky paused for a long moment, his lips moving soundlessly as if he were having a conversation with himself. Finally he looked at Snape directly. "Master, Delky will take you to one who can answer, if Master wishes."

Thoroughly curious now, Snape nodded. "Yes, I'd like to know more about these rules."

Delky put one hand on the wheeled chair and raised the other hand. With a loud snap of overly long fingers, they vanished.

~*~

The house was completely dark when Hermione finally returned home from her evening with the Potters. It had run much later than she'd expected, but she'd truly enjoyed herself, especially when Ron arrived with Luna. She'd told them all about the job offer. To her surprise, her friends were completely in favor of a move to America. They thought it would be 'a grand adventure', as Harry had put it. Luna and Ginny had talked about how educational vacations 'over there' would be. Ron had even offered to play chess with her via International Owl Post. Behind all the effusion, though, was the unspoken assumption that she'd be moving her husband to St. Mungos rather than taking him with her. And the more she thought about it, the more she agreed with that assumption. He really would be happier staying in Britain where everything was familiar. Hadn't he said as much the night before?

She frowned as she walked toward their cottage. Usually Delky lit the lamps at sunset. No lights shone in the kitchen windows either, and that was very unlike the elf. She drew her wand and unlocked the front door, the most incapacitating hexes she knew ready on her lips.

At first glance there was nothing wrong. No one jumped out at her from the shadows. Her eyes darted quickly around the room, noting the cup from her morning tea was still sitting on the counter. Delky should've washed it and put it away hours ago. And the door to Severus' room was wide open. Normally she kept it closed so he wouldn't be as aware of her comings and goings. She tightened her grip on her wand and crept over to look inside.

The room was empty. More accurately, the furniture was still there, but Snape was not. A thought struck her, and she opened the top drawer of the bureau. It only took a moment for her fingers to tell her what she suspected. His wand was gone as well. A series of precise detection spells showed no traces of hexes within the house. Delky was nowhere to be found either. A Sanguinary Detection charm failed to reveal any bloodstains. That, at least, was a relief.

Hermione considered the problem. Severus was unable to leave his room by himself. Someone must have taken him somewhere after incapacitating Delky in such a way as to leave no traces. Or could Delky have been the target all along? If so, then her husband had been taken along to insure that he could not identify the persons involved. She shook her head as the beginnings of a headache blossomed behind her eyes. She needed help. A moment later, she was at the fireplace making a Floo call to Harry.

Six

Chapter 6 of 7

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

House-elf apparition was nothing like the wizard variety, and Snape made a mental note to avoid it in the future if at all possible. The only thing he could compare it to was riding an ill-maintained Gringott's cart while suffering from a hangover caused by consuming a barrel of Firewhiskey. His head spun for several moments and his eyes watered furiously, and his stomach wrapped itself around his spine in protest. He swallowed hard, blinked several times to clear his vision, and then looked around.

He was in a forest clearing surrounded by fine old evergreens. Ancient trees, judging from their height and girth, for the smallest one he could see measured at least ten feet across. His breath steamed slightly in the air; it was considerably colder here. Shafts of sunlight played in the branches above his head and the splashing of water told of a nearby stream. The forest floor was covered with a light dusting of frost, and a fire burned nearby within a circle of stones. The scent of burning pine tickled his nose gently. Delky was nowhere to be seen.

Before he could call the elf's name, a tall figure stepped out from behind one of the trees. Cloaked and hooded, the figure gave no clue as to race or gender, though Snape estimated its height at near to his own six feet. The figure went over to the fire and added more wood so that the flames danced freely. That done, he or she sat down on a fallen log and regarded Snape from under the hood.

This silent study was thoroughly disconcerting. Snape stood it for a few moments and then cleared his throat. "Delky says you can answer my questions."

"Delky?" The voice was definitely masculine, rich and vibrant. "I suppose that will do as well as any name for him. What would you know?"

"Who are you?" That wasn't what he'd come here to ask, but he was definitely feeling out of his depth.

The other gave a deep laugh and threw back his hood revealing a fall of silvery hair that framed a long, thin, pale face and was parted on either side by pointed ears. Startling blue eyes were set beneath upswept eyebrows. "Do you recognize my kind, mortal?"

"You are Sidhe," Snape answered definitively. The stakes had just gotten much, much higher. His mind dredged up what he knew of these forest dwellers. When he was little, his mother had often threatened to send him off to the Sidhe to be boiled and eaten alive if he didn't behave. They were trickier than a goblin. Dangerous. Not to be trusted. Ever. Everything he'd ever read about them told him that he'd need all his wits and Slytherin cunning to get out of this.

"Bravo, mortal. Sidhe I am. You may call me Erias. You are called Severus, I am told."

Snape nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak. Why in the name of Merlin's left little toe would Delky have brought him here?

"Well then, Severus, what would you know? Delky would not have brought you here simply to ask my name."

"Delky implied that your magic isn't the same as the magic I know and use," Snape answered, deciding that the absolute truth was called for. He didn't know if the Sidhe could sense lies or not; some stories implied that they could. "I would like to learn more about that."

Erias snorted. "We look much the same, you and I. But we are not. Why should our magic be any different? It runs in our blood and bone. You mortals have made magic into something with rules, all done by rote. For you, it is not Art, but Science; science that you don't truly understand so you make up laws of magic to try to explain

everything." He held up a clump of mistletoe. "You know this plant? You use it in making your elixirs?"

"Of course. It's used in several potions."

"So it is. Where do you get mistletoe when you need it?"

"I purchase it from an apothecary."

"And there are, of course, numerous apothecaries. Do you find, perchance, that some have a better quality of ingredient than others?"

Snape thought about that for a moment. "Yes, but it depends on what I need. The one in Diagon Alley usually has fine plants, but some of their other products are lacking. I have a list of preferred shops for the ingredients I use most commonly."

"And you've never wondered why this disparity?"

"Not until this moment. I've assumed," he said thoughtfully, "that apothecaries have different sources for their wares, and that the quality of the source for a given item varies from one to another."

"Mistletoe, to be at its best, must be harvested with a silver blade and stored in a ceramic container. If it comes into contact with any metal other than silver, its effectiveness is reduced. This is true of all things that come of the plant, the berries, and the leaves, all of it. I suspect that your mistletoe supplier has learned some of this."

"Mr. Sipps does keep his mistletoe in ceramic rather than glass," Snape allowed. "I've always thought it was just an affectation." He looked at the Sidhe. "There's more differences in our magic, though. What you've told me so far is just a more complex set of rules."

"You are quick," Erias applauded. "Yes, our magic is made of instinct and reflex rather than rules and books." A brief pause. "Are you answered?"

"Somewhat, yes. I have much to think on."

"Think on this as well: Nearly three thousand years ago, a small band of Sidhe lost a wager to a human. As a result, they and all their descendants were bound by Geas to serve the human and all his descendants. There were other conditions of the wager, but the only one that need concern you is that the term of service was three millennia. When the term runs out, they will be free again."

Snape blinked at the swift change of subject. "And this human was... or became... a wizard?" He did not like the sound of this at all, and wished he knew more of Geas theory.

"No, but his children did. His name was Merlin."

He pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. "Merlin is acknowledged to be the founder of wizard-kind."

"So he is. Briefly, the tale is thus: Merlin sired twenty children on the Sidhe who served him. Those children were raised as humans, their appearances altered, but had their mothers' magic. They, in turn, were bred with the goal of increasing their children's magical abilities, and their children likewise. Those with no magical abilities were killed out of hand a custom that some of your people still practice today." Erias reached out with a long stick and stirred the fire, making the flames dance. "Merlin forced the Sidhe to warp their appearances into something that could be mocked, and he bred them like cattle so that his descendants would never lack for servants. He called them elves to separate them from the Sidhe who did not serve him, and he taught his children to hate and fear us. By the time four generations had passed, wizards had become used to arranged marriages, and having servants."

"So if Merlin was a mortal, the legends of the great wizard are false?"

Erias snorted and threw more wood on the fire. "Not precisely. Merlin became a hereditary title handed down to the most powerful wizard of each generation. Their exploits were told and retold, and the tales grew with each telling. Over time, the distinction between the various Merlins blurred into one. The tradition ended rather abruptly when a the last Merlin attempted to seduce one of my people." He smiled in a rather unpleasant way. "We had no mind to become slaves like our brothers. At any rate, the term of the wager is drawing nigh."

"And all the Sidhe will be freed." Snape ignored his desire to ask what they had done to this last Merlin, and thought for a long moment. "They will want redress for the way many of them have been treated over the centuries."

"Yes. And they will want it in blood. When the shackles binding their magic are snapped, they will look to war. That is what I wish to prevent. Thousands of lives on both sides will be snuffed out if we cannot make our peoples see sense."

"How long until the wager runs out?" Snape asked. "If our two races can come to an agreement before then, it may be possible to prevent a war. I know people with some influence in our government." His mind raced. Hermione, of course. Potter, certainly. But the Sidhe was speaking again.

"A year and a day. As for negotiations," now Erias graced him with a sardonic smile, "we have chosen you to speak for us to your people."

"Me?" That was one too many shocks even for Snape's practiced self-control. His mouth fell open in astonishment. "I am not... My people will not listen to me."

"Because your magic is fading from disuse?"

"That, and because of things done in the past. You would do better to choose someone else. Anyone else."

"We have selected you because you have borne the wrath and scorn of your people. As for your magic, could your healers do nothing for you?"

"They tried," Snape admitted. "I didn't make it easy for them. I... do not like healers poking and prodding me like I was a side of beef at a market."

One corner of Erias' mouth lifted slightly. "I misdoubt I would like that either. It can be mended if you are willing. But these things are best done swiftly and it has been five years already. If you tarry overlong in deciding, the chance will be lost."

"You can restore me? Give me back my magic? What do you want in exchange?" Snape did his best to hide the hope that flared inside him at the Sidhe's words.

"Speak for us."

EWE. Marriage is not all roses and sunshine, when Nagini's venom proves unexpectedly potent. Angst, angst, and more angst.

"House-elf Apparition," Harry said. "That's the only thing I've found, and I've been around the perimeter of your property twice. So Delky must have taken Snape somewhere." He raised a hand cutting off any questions. "Hermione, your wards are intact, so no one could have Apparated onto your property without alerting you. There are no signs of anyone else, human or otherwise, in the house. There's no other reasonable explanation."

"Where did they go?"

"The only thing I can tell you definitely is that they went west. I think they went a long way, hundreds of kilometers, and I'm fairly sure that they left relatively early in the day."

Despite herself, Hermione found her curiosity piqued. "How do you tell all that?"

"It's first-year Auror stuff. When you Apparate, it leaves behind a magical signature. It's more or less cone-shaped, with the point of the cone indicating the direction. The size of the cone tends to indicate distance to cross the Atlantic leaves a pretty big splash and the clarity of it shows a very, very rough approximation of how long ago the Apparition was cast. This is a big signature, but it's faded. It'll be gone in entirely in another hour or so." He shrugged. "I'd guess they ended up somewhere in North America."

"Why would they go there?" Her eyes widened. "I told Severus I was thinking about emigrating! I was going to tell him about the job, but I asked him about America!"

"How'd he take it?"

"Rather well. He said he wouldn't object if it was what I wanted."

"Did you tell him you were going to put him in St. Mungo's?"

Hermione shook her head. "It didn't come up. I'd been expecting a huge fight with him, but he was civil, almost friendly. It was..." She thought a moment. "It was like he already knew that was what I wanted, and he'd resigned himself to it."

"I hate to say this, Hermione, but that doesn't really sound like Snape." Harry yawned hugely. "Sorry. It's much more likely that he think you're betraying him and this is his way of punishing you."

"Harry!"

"Think about it, Hermione. He never was what you could call a nice guy, and being paralyzed made him a thousand times worse. Earlier tonight you mentioned that you'd never told him you'd been working, but did you ever wonder what he thought you were doing when you'd leave him alone all day nearly every day?" He shrugged. "I can tell you what I'd think. I'd assume my wife was having an affair."

Whatever reply Hermione was going to make was lost in the appearance of two disgruntled owls on the windowsill that hooted madly and then grudgingly consented to give up the messages they carried before flying off in a huff. She picked up the envelopes hoping to see Severus' familiar scrawl. Instead, one bore the Gringotts seal and the other... "Harry, who in the world is Maxwell Sebastian, Esq?"

"Max Sebastian? He's trouble. He's a solicitor, and his practice is just on this side," he held up two fingers a hair's breadth apart, "of legal. He's the one who defended the Malfoys at their trial and got them exiled rather than imprisoned. What's he want?"

"He sent an owl to Severus..." Hermione opened the envelope carefully, and then breathed a sigh of relief. "It just says that he couldn't make a meeting today and invited Severus to reschedule."

"Max is bad news. Max working for Snape is even worse news. Hermione, Snape... Severus, then. If he's hired Max Sebastian, he's planning something very, very bad. What's the other owl? Gringotts?"

"Yes..." she opened it, too dismayed to be upset by Harry's reading over her shoulder. "An inventory of our vault? Why would he want that? He'd only find out that we don't have a lot of money left, even with my salary."

"If he's thinking of hiring Max, he would need to know how much money he had available. Max doesn't work cheap; the Malfoys deeded him the manor and lands in exchange for the work he did for them because we'd seized their Gringotts vault." He grinned a bit wryly. "Of course, we insisted on going through the house top-to-bottom before we allowed the transfer, and we found a lot of Dark books and such which we confiscated." The grin faded. "Hermione, Severus is up to something. Something not good. I think it might be dangerous for you to stay here by yourself."

"Severus wouldn't hurt me!" But even as she said it, she remembered the impotent rage in his eyes as he shouted at her.

~*~

Snape woke up to a tingling in his fingers and toes. With waking came memory. He'd nodded his agreement, and Erias had touched him between the eyes with one long finger. Then nothing until now. He raised his head and looked around the room. It was almost wedge-shaped, with the door at the narrowest end of the wedge. At the widest end, sunlight poured in through a single large window. There was nothing in the room within his line of sight except for himself and the pad he was lying on. He felt himself flush when he looked down at himself and realized he was completely nude.

The tingling in his extremities was growing more pronounced, and spreading. It wasn't precisely painful, but it was somewhat uncomfortable. On the other hand, Snape thought to himself, at least he was feeling something again.

The door opened, and a Sidhe came in with a pack casually slung over one shoulder. "It was easier to cleanse the venom from your body with you asleep," he said by way of greeting. "The tingling is your nerves reconnecting. Once your body is recovered, we will mend your magic." At Snape's obvious amazement, the Sidhe grinned. "And to answer your next few questions, you were asleep for a day. You should be physically recovered in another day and completely healed in a week. Your clothes are here in this bag, as is your wand. You are our guest, not our prisoner; if you wish to leave, you have but to say so." Another grin. "And I am called Delchir"

Snape looked up at the Sidhe. There was something about the voice that was very familiar. "Are... were you Delky?"

"Oh bravo! Erias was right, you are quick. Yes, here I can assume my true form."

"Where is here, if I might ask?"

Delchir put down the pack and sat down next to it. "This is the Sidhe city of Kes Rihan. There are several among my people who wish to speak with you, so it was easiest to bring you here."

"Sensible," Snape agreed. He suddenly realized that he had been less than kind to the Sidhe who was sitting not three feet from him. "Delchir, I must apologize to you. I

have treated you shamefully for years."

The Sidhe looked over at him; the grin had vanished, leaving his face a closed mask. "Are you apologizing because you now find yourself in my power, or do you truly believe your actions to be wrong?"

Snape took a long breath and thought before replying. "Both," he said finally. "The things I've said to you and about you, those were wrong and I have neither excuse nor explanation. And it's not likely that I would ever have admitted that to myself if I weren't in this situation."

"And when we go back, what then? For I will have to become Delky again, and obey the Geas."

"I have to return to England to speak to my people, to make them understand the situation. But you don't. You're a free elf by wizard law; you could stay here."

"And if I do, how will you find the Sidhe again? No, Severus, you will need me there. But remember who and what I truly am." Warning delivered, the grin flashed across his face again. "For now, try moving your hands and feet."

Snape did so, and was pleased to see that his fingers responded however slowly to his mental commands. "It's as if I was buried up to my neck in mud," he said as he continued his experiments flexing fingers, toes, wrists, ankles, and so on.

"That will pass." Delchir reached out and grasped Snape's hand. "Do you feel this?"

"Yes... I can."

"Excellent. You progress more rapidly than expected. Grip my hand in return, and pull yourself up so you are sitting. Good! Now, dress." The Sidhe shoved the pack over against Snape's legs. "No, this is no jape. To dress, you will have to move. It is an exercise for both mind and body." He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall nonchalantly. "Now."

Slowly, Snape complied, fighting with limbs that felt encased in a mire and muscles weakened by long disuse. Delchir had brought him clothing in the Sidhe style: a soft linen shirt that pulled over the head and laced up the front, belted knee-length loose leather trousers, and knee-high leather boots. It was just as well; Severus couldn't imagine trying to deal with all the buttons on his frock-coat in his current condition. By the time he'd wrestled himself into the shirt, he found that he was moving easier. And by the time he was completely dressed, he felt almost normal again.

"Bravo, Severus," Delchir applauded. "Rest for a moment and then try standing." He took two steps closer and held out a hand. "You've not been on your feet in years, so it may make you dizzy. Slowly now." Then, as Snape unfolded himself to his proper six feet. "There! Don't try walking just yet. Take the measure of standing."

Snape reeled as his head spun, and he felt Delchir's quick hands ease him back down so that he was sitting again. "That feels just a little short of the worst hangover I've ever had." He rubbed his temples futilely. "At least it doesn't hurt as much."

The Sidhe laughed. "It will pass. Take a long slow breath, blow it out again, and we shall try again."