Torment

by SnapeLove

Summary

Is the survival blessing or the curse for Severus Snape?

Darkness again. He is almost grateful for it. His body still hurts, but it is different kind of pain, one that runs through his veins like liquid fire. Is there no respite for him? Not even after his death? He paid his dues, he died for the brat. Isn’t it the time that he is forgiven? To give him just a little bit of rest? If he is alive he would beg, he would scream, he would plead for just a moment of rest, pride be damned.

WARNING: Not for the faint of heart, the story has really DISTURBING MOMENTS, ABUSE, TORTURE,....

Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world,
which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: This story now has beta, so huge, huge thank you to my beta - Loki God of Evil

And, at the start - fair warning! This story is not easy to read, it deals with difficult subjects and it is written from multiple POVs and you will see events the way the character sees them (not necessarily true).

Be sure to read the Trigger warnings! All TW's are in the Aditional tags and some will be above the chapters when I think it's necessary to place them.
Chapter 1

He was five years old, and this was his earliest memory, as far as he could remember.

Everything was dark and the damp smell of mould and mildew was choking him, but he remained quiet, resisting the urge to sneeze, the same way he was fighting the urge to whimper.

Shouting, man's voice was shouting fiercely. The woman's voice was weak, a pleading tone. Screams, the woman was screaming in pain.

He gathered his knees under his chin and wrapped his hands around them. And he knew he was shivering, partially from fear, partly from the cold dirt beneath him. One drop of water fell down his neck and trailed slowly down his back. It was damp and wet here, but no one would remember to look for him under the sink in a kitchen cabinet.

The woman screamed again and he covered his ears instinctively. Abandoning the knees and the bit of warmth he'd gained from hugging himself. Instead, he closed his eyes tightly, so tightly that his eyeballs started to hurt and he wished, at that moment, that he was far away.
Heavy footsteps followed by the unmistakable sound of a door slamming.

Then he heard the woman crying. And he waited with bated breath, biting his knuckles. Time seemed to pass by so slowly and nothing more was happening. The only sound he heard, which wasn't the most comforting, was the sounds of a woman, crying. He crawled from his hideout and from his vantage point he could see her, lying on the floor next to the rickety coffee table. She was curled in a ball, sobbing. He approached carefully and kneeled next to her, petting her black shiny hair, whispering. "Mama?"

Pain! Seering, bone-melting pain yanked him from memory. This was hell, he wasn't a believer, but surely this was purgatory, his personal hell on earth. To be dragged to that memory, only to be rescued from it into the blackness, full of pain. He wished to scream, maybe he was screaming but there was no sound coming from his own lips. He could feel every part of his body burning. Something soft was on his forehead, or at least where his forehead should've been.

Something bitter. You can't sense taste if you are dead, can you? Why bitter? He tasted bitter. Ah yes, this is hell. Darkness.

Pain. The hits fell on him like rain. And again, suddenly he was on the floor, curled up, knees pressed to the forehead with his hands wrapped around his head. He's seven.

The unmistakable taste of copper in his mouth and he remembers how copper tastes. Because he had a habit of holding one small copper coin in his mouth, instead of the candy, to deceive the hunger pangs. Only now, he doesn't have the coin, and from experience, blood tastes like copper coins too. His own blood, at that. . .

Tasting it as it ran into his mouth, droplets were on the floor from his broken nose.

The thing is, fists and boots do not choose, they land blows where they can, but he remained silent and he stayed that way when his nose cracked. He was mute when his ribs cracked. Speechless when his hand started to hurt, but he didn't change his position, he didn't remove it from his head.

"You miserable. . ." The fist.

"Good for nothing. . ." A boot.

"Ugly. . ." Boot again.

"Excuse. . ." Fists, five consecutive hits.

"Of a son!" Two kicks with a boot.

"You never. . ." The fist then the boot.

"Should have been born!" A kick in the back and pain shooting white in front of his closed eyes. "Cry now!"

Another kick on his back, he bit his lip to prevent sound from escaping but it was hard, so hard not to. It hurt and he knew by the way it hurts that he was going to pee blood again. He wouldn't make a sound though, because sound meant more hits and more kicks. And despite his state, his injuries, he wouldn't abandon his position. To do that would mean kicks in the stomach, and they would hurt more. For protection, he didn't dare move his hands, repositioning them would incite blows to the head. And from experience in his young life, he knew all too well that it was hard to do chores when you were seeing double.
Finally, the man was tired, his blows falter. All stops.

"I'll be in the pub." Heavy footsteps were heard and the door slams shut, as always.

Soft hand caressing, soothing him. "Get up honey, he's gone," she said, in a sobbing voice. "Get up, we have to go to the doctor."

He opened his eyes slowly, unrolling cautiously. And the first thing he saw was that the floor was covered in blood, blood still running from his nose. His face, wet and stained with tears. He gazed at the crying face of his mother and crawled a few paces back. Taking the tattered, now torn book from the ground where it fell from his arms. He carefully folded the book and pressed it against his chest with the hand that didn't hurt as much.

"Can you stand up?" His mother's voice is timid and quiet. "We have to go to the doctor."

He looked at the blood on the floor. "Cween the bwood fst, give me to cween the bwood wfst or we will wit you too."

The air was hard to breathe, and it burned. He couldn't move, his hand, blue and swollen, his nose broken and he could barely see. His back hurt, Hell. . .Everything hurt.

Darkness again.

Almost grateful for it because his body still hurts, but it was a different kind of pain. One that ran through his veins like liquid fire. Was there no respite for him? Not even after his death? Surely he paid his dues, he died for the brat, didn't he?

Isn't it the time that he should have been forgiven? To give him just a little bit of rest? If he was truly alive he would've begged, even screamed. Pleading for just a moment of rest, pride be damned.

Bitterness. He felt choking, but you can't choke if you're dead. Hell, he is in hell for what he's done. Darkness.

Huge hands were around his neck and suddenly he couldn't breathe. His head was bobbing like the head of a rag-doll. His feet twitched in an attempt to find purchase on the ground. The world, it seemed to fade around him.

Darkness. A tickle of magic, warm and friendly, his mother.

"Shhhhhhhhhhh, don't tell him." she whispered, hiding her wand. "Next year, you will be in school, far away from here."

"What about you?" he rasped, his throat hurting like hell.

"I choose my life." She replied. Her eyes are soft and dead at the same time. "Go on, go outside, better not be home when he returns." She warns.

He nodded, taking the oversized old coat from the rack and slipped through the door. Walking fast, casting glances left and right while he walked to the river bank. He chose to sit under the tree, obscured by the bushes. The only issue with this place; the air stank, the water was murky and slightly polluted. But, it was peaceful here.

"I got my letter today!" A bright happy female voice intoned.

"Me too." His voice still raspy but he smiled as two bright green eyes and a lock of red hair came to
his view. She sat next to him.

"Did he beat you up again?" Her voice and expression seem worried.

He shook his head, not wanting to unduly worry her. "He choked me, just a little."

"I have a sandwich, want to share?" she asked, offering it to him.

He shook his head again. The thing is, he was hungry, but his throat still hurt and he was embarrassed to admit that fact. Furthermore, he was ashamed that she knew how he lived, how poor and insignificant he was or seemed.

The girl packed the sandwich in her pocket and sat a bit closer. Both silent just watching a dirty river flowing its course, just like life. A moment of peace and tranquillity, a moment of happiness, a moment of belonging.

Darkness, the pain lessened. A soft female voice talking, to him! He couldn't hear the words, but the voice was so calming. Hand, silky skin, hand smells like chamomile and rose water as it wipes his cheeks. Was he crying? Could you even cry when you were dead?

Lily… Had she finally forgiven him? Maybe now his torment would end.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sighed and leaned back in the chair, her eyes still watching wearily at the patient. Her fingers still wet from his tears, and she gazed at her hand in wonder. She still can't wrap her head around the fact how human he is right now. If she died a few months back she never would be able to say that he was human.

Her professor, the hero. The man made of spite and cutting remarks. She would never think that anything could have touched him. He always seemed so stoic to her. So strong. Never in her life, she thought she would see him this weak, human.

But ever since the war, he was just a shell of his former self. His body was too skinny to fight on its own and he looked so fragile in white sheets. His head an oily black smear on her white pillow. His hands, calloused and streaked with blue-green veins. Under the thin covers, she could see his ribs, lining out sharply.

It reminded her of something her father used to say; "Only skin holds his bones." It was almost akin to seeing a stray skinny dog because she thought that when she saw him the first time in a hospital bed.

And like the war wasn't enough torment, she would have his screams to haunt her for the rest of her days. Rasp and thorn like his unhealed neck. He'd screamed and screamed, for days, months and then he had started to cry. His lips forming words without sound. Soon, his screams and crying begun to alternate.

He wasn't the acerbic spiteful teacher anymore, he was just the tormented soul. She sighed again.

Matron came to the small improvised room, one bed and one bedside table and one chair, separate from the rest of the beds with the white screen and permanent sound barrier along with few heavy wards. "How is our patient today?"

"He was crying again, and trying to speak."
"Nightmares are a good sign." Matron nodded. "It means he is waking up."

"When?" she raised her eyes full of hope.

"It is hard to say. He is lucky to be alive." Matron placed a tray with assorted vials on the table. "Are you sure you can administer the potions today?"

"Absolutely positive." She nodded.

"I'll leave you to it then. I do hope he will appreciate all you do for him."

"I don't do this for gratitude, we owe him so much." She whispered.

Matron nodded and left her.

Hermione took a small towel and soaked it in the water. So gently and full of purpose, she wiped his face tenderly. His skin remained clammy, soaked with sweat and oily. His head reminded her of a skull with skin too thin, like cheap parchment and overly stretched over his bones. She really wished he would wake up, just so he could start eating and gaining weight because to her, this man that she was nursing... he looked like death itself, he certainly was lingering at death's door.
"Hey Hermione, how is he doing today?" Harry's voice snapped her from the uncomfortable nap on an even more uncomfortable chair

"Hello, Harry. Same as yesterday," She sighed. "I don't know if I should be happy or worried."

"What did Poppy say?"

"Same as always. . . 'Only time will tell, girl, be patient.'" Exasperated with the lack of Poppy's enthusiasm, Hermione shrugged. "Ron still not talking to you either?"

"Ron can be a right bloody git sometimes, but he'll come around." He said. Annoyance clear in his tone. "Thank you for doing this for me."

Harry looked good but hauntingly tired. She watched him as he walked to the bed, shaking his head.

"I still don't like him, too much bad blood I guess. But, I can't deny what he's done." Harry sighed, squaring his shoulders. "Honestly, sometimes I wish, I could be more like you, Hermione."

She was silent, letting his words slink to the back of her mind.

Harry could tell she was miles away in mind and him trying to engage her in such a conversation was proving a mute point. "Well, I'll drop by tomorrow then. See ya, Hermione."

She sighed, she wished she could tell him the truth, but she couldn't. Obviously, Harry would be supportive, but he wouldn't understand, no one would.

Standing up from the chair she soaked the towel again and wiped his face. Maybe he would understand, just maybe. She traced her fingers over painfully defined, sharp cheekbones and then the hollows of his cheeks that were marred with rough stubble.

"I will have to tell Matron to use the spell again because I have no idea how to shave you in this state without harming you in the process." She mumbled to herself, knowing he wouldn't answer her. "Wake up, please wake up." Her voice was almost desperate because she feared and yearned for his awakening, yet he remained motionless. Even his breathing was shallow and weak; he was a literal living corpse.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Another painful memory:
He was eleven and standing in a room lit with soft candlelight. It was clearly bathed in a green hue that reached from the water through the windows. The looks of those around him are not too dissimilar from the ones he would get in his Muggle school. He pushed his chin up. But inside he was hurting. The reason; she was in the other house, not just any other house either. . .She was placed in Gryffindor.

A tall blond youth approached him. And the first thing he noticed was the prefect badge glimmering on the youth’s robes and a beautiful young woman with long, curly black hair following him. "You are half-blood, aren't you?" Asked the blond.

The black-haired girl just made a face that he took as an insult. Her nose was turned up like he was emitting a smell that none other could sense.

"Yes." He replied, looking the blonde in the eyes. His mother taught him well, good eye contact.

"What is your mother's house?"

He had nothing much to hide. "Prince" He stated, quietly.

"Old line, noble one."

"He is just a mongrel Lucius." The girl sneered.

"Now, now, Bella. He has a good blood in him. Have you thought of the ways of our society?"

"As much as it was possible."

"You should know then to address him with sir." The girl mocked.

"Only, if he is in status above me, and I still don’t know his name, nor yours for that matter."

"You little piece of dirt…"

"Bella, kindly remove yourself from us." Blonde's voice was cold and it cut like a knife. But it had the desired consequence because she promptly left. "I do apologize, she can be...overzealous at times." He said, monotonously. "The name is Lucius, Lucius Malfoy."

"Pleasure to meet you, Sir."

"No need for the formalities." He said, smiling. "Salazar knows, there are plenty of those who will insist on them, starting with Bella. Call me Lucius."

Lucius looked at him in silence for awhile. Scrutinising the man, looking him over. "Show me your wand."

He stretched the hand that gripped the wand but didn't loosen his grip.

"Do you know any spells?" Lucius questioned, eyebrow raised.

"A few," Snape replied, shrugging. Not wanting to brag or anything.

"Show me."

"On whom?" He knew only curses and jinxes for the time being.

"Use...Bella as a target." He offered. Motioning to the earlier female he had been introduced to.
“She is the Lady of the ancient house,” Snape argued.

“She is…the house of Black. But she’s no Lady. Now, do as I say, boy.”

With a sigh, he pointed his wand at the woman and sent the curse in her direction. Magic surged through him, brushing against sadness and pain and anger. And then very suddenly, he felt, amplified and his cast spell hit her. The woman yelped out a painful cry.

Malfoy was nodding, smiling. "Impressive. Starting tomorrow you will have tutoring classes with me."

"It wasn't that bad." He rebelled.

"No, it was quite impressive. And you need extra knowledge, if for nothing else than to defend from her own curses."

The woman was marching towards them, wand pointed at him with a furious look in her eyes. Her face twisted in despise as she approached and jabbed his throat with the tip of the wand.

"Do you have a death wish?" She hissed as he looked her straight in the eyes, he was afraid, but he was doing his best to cover it.

"He only did what I told him to do," Lucius drawled calmly. Removing the woman's hand with the wand from his neck. "No retaliation."

"He jinxed me." She countered, voice rising like a screeching cat.

"On my order. He's under my protection, Bella. You should remember that. Now, it is your time to go home, you have all the information you need."

She glared at him and her eyes were warning him to watch his step and his back. She mutely nodded and walked away.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Nodded Lucius and strolled to other first-years sizing them up.

This was good. This was bad. He was protected and he'd just made a powerful enemy.

But his mind was conflicted. She was still in Gryffindor and he wanted to scream, to cry, to go back and ask the sorting hat to place him in the house he originally wanted to be placed in. But he didn't belong there, no, he didn't. He was too ambitious. He had to succeed here, to be the best. To rise from the gutter he came from and in doing so, to become someone if he wanted her to notice him. To choose him. He had no other way, she was the only one. . .

Darkness. Was this his resolution? Or would he live through every miserable moment of his life? Through every hurtful moment? The pain, it lessened but it remained present. It simmered in his bones. Do the dead have bones? Ah, yes, hell...his hell. So no rest then, just torment, eternal torment. This gentle touch, a feminine hand. No...never. Not for him. Never for him. Torment.

He was in his third year. Sitting on the library floor, in the section that wasn't often visited. Large, leather-bound books obscuring him from any accidental onlookers. He bit his lip, hissed and mashes his lip tight. It hurt, his lip was he was the proud owner of a black eye and his back is bruised.

No, they didn't touch him, in fact, they didn't lay a finger on him, but in this school, it wasn't necessary. They used magic to make him lose balance on the top of the stairs and tumble down. The Potter boy and Sirius Black, it was always them.
Ever since the train in the first year, it was them. But physical pain wasn’t what made him hide, nor was it what hurt him the most. He blinked to chase the tears away.

Lily. Why she can’t understand? What does she want him to do? He had to be good with people in his house. They could help him. True, most of them can hardly stand him, but they were at least nice to him. Well, as long as Lucius Malfoy remained his protector, they would respect him. And furthermore, Lucius appreciated his talents. He patronised him for extra ingredients so he could practise his potion skills. Because, the thing was, Lucius was a talented potioneer, it was his true potential.

He also gave him books, ones on the darkest of arts.

His chest constricted painfully. Why couldn’t she understand?

Lily. His Lily. She had barely talked to him as of late, but she did on occasion. And, typically, she didn't like his friends, so what was he supposed to do? She didn't share the same interests and didn't enjoy learning of the Dark Arts, but how could she hate something she didn't understand? How could she possibly defend from something she didn't perceive or foresee? Why couldn’t she understand that he didn't have anything to offer?

He was always of the belief that he had to make a name for himself if he wanted to offer...her...something? How could she choose him if he was a no one? A lowly half-blood with no name.

If he were to rise through the ranks and make a name for himself, maybe then? If his mother were to recognise his achievements. . .They hadn’t as of yet because he was at the top of his class. The best student in the school in regards to potions and Dark Arts. And yet no one liked him, really, no one except for her.

But then he knew that he would have to succeed, by any means necessary. He had to! And then, maybe, they wouldn’t like him, but they would fear him and perhaps. . .respect him. It wouldn’t matter that he was ugly. Nor would it matter that he was from a poor family or that he happened to be half-blood. He grit his teeth. It would not matter in the slightest.

Darkness shuffled. Who’s there?

The pain still simmering, it never stops. The pain, only constant when he was alive. Only constant now, because he feels dead. Not even death wanted him the way it would suit him. Or maybe this was his punishment for not wanting to die. No this can’t be true, he did want to die, but on his own terms…and more specifically, near her.

He'd failed, maybe this was his punishment for his failures?

Murmur in the darkness, a male tone and he recognises it. He knows that voice. Did he die too?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She gripped her wand tight. It's a new wand but she's not overly confident with it, not like she had been with her old wand before. But for fear of retribution, she couldn’t afford let him see her fear. That…monster…was here, in this improvised room! Who'd let him in? She stood near the bed, one hand pointing the wand to the intruder's chest, the other gripping her charge tightly, afraid to let go, in case the intruder does something unspeakable. He wouldn't harm her professor because Hermione would not allow it!

"What are you doing here?" she hissed. Wand firm in her hand, no signs of her grip abating.
"How charming, little mud... muggleborn protecting a Death Eater." His voice came across as cold and mocking.

He looked haggard, only a shadow of the man he once was, but he still had that smug look on his face and the same level of contempt in his cold emotionless eyes.

"He is a hero! He's not a Death Eater!" She protested firmly.

"You have no idea who this man is or what he is capable of." He argued. "He would chew you up and spit you out in a blink of an eye. Now remove yourself! Step aside and let me see how my old friend is faring."

"I won't let you harm him mal foi[1]"

"Harm him?" Malfoy glared at her and she suppressed the shiver and the fear.

Honestly, if looks could kill, Hermione would be dead and buried now. He looked utterly appalled with her insinuation but then, she didn't trust him at all. "Move aside before I remove you from the face of the Earth, permanently."

"Let him, Hermione." Her eyes darting at hearing Harry had appeared at the entrance to the hospital wing.

"Harry?"

"Let him," He repeated. "He won't harm Snape."

She flashed her eyes from Snape to Malfoy and then to Harry, indecisive and now conflicted.

"Do you want to drink tea with me and Poppy while Malfoy is here?"

"I won't let Malfoy stay alone with a professor while he's defenceless." She declared firmly and sat on the chair. Her wand still aiming at the intruder, tight in her grasp.

"Suit yourself. I'll be with Poppy." Harry sighed. He had tried, there was nothing more he could do, bar hexing her with a sleeping spell.

She watched as Malfoy walked slowly, heavily leaning on his walking stick. Malfoy hobbled slightly. Hermione thinks that it served him right for all the trouble he caused during these past years. He stood near the bed, too close for her comfort and then looks at her professor with an oddly sad expression on his face.

[1] Mal foi – Malfoy's name pronounced in French as an insult, Google tells me it is „bad faith"
He was still thirteen, but not for long.

Feeling uncomfortable. Out of place and surrounded by glamour and riches. He had found himself at a posh Yule ball party. Dressed in borrowed robes. The silky wool caressing his skin. He knew he didn't belong here, didn't feel like he belonged anywhere.

Sticking his chin out, squaring his shoulders, he was still grateful. Grateful to his mother for teaching him Occlumency, after he almost had an outburst of wild magic from his father's attack last summer, she had taken her time to teach him. He was talented, naturally because, according to some; Occlumency was not an easy skill to master, but it was a most useful one to have.

There he was, standing in a secluded corner, present yet removed from the crowd. Lucius had spotted him and approached with a tall dark man, a pleasant smile on his face as he neared.

"Severus! Why are you hiding? Let me introduce you to a family friend." He turned to the man. "This is Igor Karkaroff, a professor at Durmstrang Institute. Igor, this is my protégé, a very talented young man – Severus Snape, future Lord Prince."

"Lucius!" He greeted, feeling himself blushing at the admiration. "Pleasure to meet you, Sir." He bowed politely to the dark man.

"Future Lord Prince? As far as I know, the Prince line will die out with the last and quite elderly Lord."

"My mother was disowned, erased from the family tapestry, Sir."

"Ah. Well, in that case, the pleasure is all mine, Lord Prince." The man replied, returning the bow.

"Please, Sir. Severus will suffice. I did not claim my title yet."

"I will respect your wish Severus, as long as you show me the courtesy of returning the favour by calling me by my name, Igor."

"I am honoured." He bowed again, hating every second of this false conversation.

Karkakoff nodded and strolled away, turning to the blonde who leaned against the wall nonchalant as ever, amused in fact.

"I wish that you could stop doing that, Lucius."
“Nonsense, Severus! Once your uncle dies, you will be Lord Prince. The family may decide one, but last living relative is blood and that is the only thing you need.”

"I would prefer if you stuck to my skills instead of my future title."

"Now, now, Severus, this is nothing to be ashamed of. You are of the old bloodline, it is something to be proud of." Lucius peers at him "You do not look like you have fun."

"I am, but I will have to return to school soon."

"Don't tell me you are still pinning for that little mudblood of yours?" Lucius ignored him, he held his face impassive as much as he could.

"If you mean Lily, yes."

"She, my friend, is not good for you. Pursue her, kiss her if you must...bed her...get her out of your system. And then, we will find you a nice and decent pureblood, or half-blood if you prefer, to settle with. One of good name and standing."

"I will see what can be done, Lucius. I really should be going now," he replied, hoping that his voice came across as neutral rather than angry because anger is what he was currently feeling. And yet he was angry at himself because he couldn't force himself to be angry at Lucius, not even after those cruelly harsh words.

Lucius had done so much for him. He'd introduced him to the society. And even if he always spoke with disdain about Lily, he made him feel appreciated and recognized. He hoped that Lucius would come around, same as Lily would once he managed to gain the power and respect owed.

Walking to the fireplace, he grabbed a handful of floo powder from the small cauldron and uttered the destination clearly. Arriving shortly thereafter at the Three Broomsticks.

He walked the path to the school alone, as usual. His heart crying out for her presence until he felt a curse hitting him. The pain. A malevolent cackle came from above his head. A female voice, annoyingly familiar.

"Did you think I would forget? Do you think you would get away with it, mongrel?" She taunted.

He scrambled to get his wand. He was stupid. Stupid to let his guard down. And he felt it, for the first time in his life. The pain of fraying nerves. His muscles twitching, constricting. Pain scorching. He gritted his teeth trying his hardest not to scream. Honestly, punches were nothing compared to this. He felt like he was being skinned alive. Pushing against the pain, he curled into a ball as darkness swallowed him.

The pain. Familiar pain, felt so many times in his life that he'd lost count. It was unbearable. It tore through him like an old adversary. There were no more bones to break and no more flesh that could be mangled. There was only pain.

Hell. His hell.

Would he have to feel every single one he endured while he was alive? It will take an eternity just for that. Lucius, he heard his voice before. Was he here? No, he wasn't. He was alone, so hopelessly alone.

A Soft female voice. Was she here? Mocking him? Laughing at his misery?
Frantic from fear because something was most definitely happening, only she wasn't sure what. She watched the man like a hawk, Malfoy hadn't even touched the professor. And she definitely hadn't felt the presence of magic being cast. What had he done to the professor?

"Poppy! Poppy!!" Her voice breaking, highly pitched with fear.

Watching, helpless, as the body in front of her began shaking. His limbs were twitching and it was so similar as to how someone would look if they were touching some high voltage cable. His mouth had opened in a silent pained scream, like in the old movies that depicted demonic possession. Arching his back, Snape slammed back down into the hospital bed.

"Poppy!!!!"

"Why are you yelling, girl?" Matron entered the room, seeing for herself. "Oh dear."

"What's wrong with him Poppy? What did Malfoy do to him?"

She was silent, Looking over her patient with due care and attention to detail. "Malfoy? Did he cast a spell?" Poppy enquired.

"No, I was watching him all the time. What is wrong?"

"Calm yourself down girl! Watch carefully, what do you think it's going on."

She took a long, steadying breath and cast a glance at the bed. Her eyes were glued to her professor and his twitching limbs. Tears were filling her eyes and then she noticed it.

"Cruciatus. These are post-cruciatus tremors. But none cast the spell." She said, anxiety creeping into the pit of her stomach.

"The mind is a funny thing, dear. Oh dear, help me…"

"I can manage it, now that I know what is it."

"Are you sure?" Poppy asked.

"Absolutely positive." She said, nodding. Watching from the corner of her eye as the Matron leaves them alone again.

She couldn't understand, why he looked like this. Why he was deteriorating in front of her eyes. Sure, she knew that he was terribly underweight and frail when they brought him in. He was just skin, bone and a small amount of muscle that barely defined him. The dark circles under his eyes were almost as noticeable as his prominent cheekbones, all made horrifically worse by his emaciated state.

What kind of evil magic was working now? His shoulders had tilted back to the mattress, while skeletal hands grabbed the sheets, fisting them tightly as tremors continued to shake his form.

"No, no, no. Don't harm yourself, professor." She pleaded.

But she knew, from her own experience, there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Not even if he could hear her, not even if he wanted to. His body bucked off the bed and she tried in vain to press him back with her hands. Remarkably, for someone who was only skin and bones, he was deceptively strong in his malaise. He would have fallen off the bed if she didn't do something, and
fast.

In desperation, she threw herself over him, praying she wouldn't break any of his bones. Specifically, the ones that were sticking from his skin at disturbingly sharp angles.

This was one anatomy lesson she didn't want, not in this way. She pressed his head with hers, pushing his forehead down. Arms sliding down his. Fingers waved, his grip was strong and painful and she grit her teeth in response. Typically, her legs were shorter than his, but what surprised her was that didn't seem that tall and intimidating anymore. In her mind, he had always been as tall as a tower, but as her feet pressed his legs in the middle of his calves, his body shook beneath hers. She realised he wasn't so tall, like this.

Unconscious, lost, separated from his mind, or maybe too much in his mind. His tremors stopped, only to start again moments later.

How long was this going to last? She was so tired.

But he was strong and it took all that she had to pin him down, to hold him so he wouldn't injure himself. Because, honestly, if he got injured now, even the slightest he might not survive it. Hermione wanted to keep him out of harm's way because Snape had been under too much stress recently.

She wouldn't allow further harm.

And, she wasn't really caring all that much that Snape was a hero, it was additional motivation for sure, but not the reason behind her actions. It was just, he couldn't die, just... His death was not an option she was willing to discuss.

So tired, her strength was slowly slipping away. Sweat beading on her forehead, coating her body and soaking his skin with the fierce tremors fought. Tiredly, her head slipped from his and she hid her face in the pillow as the silkiness of his hair began tickling her nose and lips. She soon realised that she was sobbing in his ear.

"Please, please, professor. Calm down." She said, crying softly, not knowing why.

Suddenly, she became aware that he had stopped shaking. Cautiously, she raised her head and looked in his face for signs of anything. All she could see was the same dark circles, and his sunken eyes pulled into the sockets.

He was still at least, so still that she could feel the sharp contours of his body against hers.

All of him. All! Of!! Him!!! Panic rose in her and she rolled over, as fast as she could without harming him in the process. Her tears fell on his face and she sighed, panicked, uncertain, ashamed, but relieved.

Still, his movements had faltered for the time being and he was barely alive, but he was breathing and for now, it was enough.
His fourth year. It had to be some sort of trap.

Crouching in the shadows, watching as Poppy led Lupin to the Whomping Willow. He observed, hidden, as the tree stopped moving its flailing limbs while they enter near the roots.

So, Black wasn't lying then?

But if Poppy was in it, Headmaster would be too.

So, it wasn't something he could use in that capacity. Even so...maybe, just maybe it was something he could still exploit, or utilise for his own gain? Sitting there, he waited until Poppy had reappeared and began her slow purposeful walk to the castle. He ran fast, keeping in the shadows and low to the ground.

Reaching the safe line, he levitated one large stone and aimed it at the designated root, landing the stone on it and adding the extra push. As he had expected, the tree froze and he ran fast into the hole near the exposed roots. Blinking, in the dark, he had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he could continue his journey and when his eyesight had cleared sufficiently. All he could see ahead was that this passageway was exceedingly narrow, and mostly made of dirt and soil.

Walking slowly, the tunnel stretched deep, much deeper than he was expecting because he was trying to orient himself as to where it would bring him out. Surprisingly, it had led to a door, a wooden one, battered and shabby, likely from the damp down here.

There was a sound akin to a whimper and pained howl, almost like whatever was making the sound was being tortured. And, he hated it because, in his young life, he'd never liked seeing animals suffer needlessly.

What is that good for nothing spineless idiot doing there? He wouldn't allow it, not even if Headmaster did?

On instinct, he pushed the door and ran full pelt into the room.

Blood freezing in his veins. He was frozen, petrified at what he could see in front of him. He now fully understood that saying of 'a deer caught in the headlights.' In fact, he had a perfect understanding because he knew that at that moment he should've run or taken his to fight for survival, but he simply couldn't. He was unable to move. Fear was biting at him. So profound, like he'd never felt before.

So he stood there, rooted to the spot; watching the yellow eyes and a slobbering snarling maw. It
was a werewolf, in plain sight! He should've run...petrified! Suddenly, a huge stag appeared in the room. Its huge antlers lifted him up and pushed him out of the room, clear of imminent danger.

Darkness...

...When he finally regained consciousness he found himself to be in the Headmasters office. There was the smug Potter boy sitting across from him, pale. Black was standing against the window, shoulders raised and squared in anger. He could hear the Headmaster, he wasn't happy in the slightest.

"I hope that you realise how serious your offence is, Mr Black?"

"It was an innocent prank," he countered.

"One that could have cost Mr Snape his life. Not to mention, Mr Lupin's life as well?" He intoned.

"Remus has nothing to do with this." Interjected Black.

"Nevertheless, if he bit or killed Mr Snape, he would be prosecuted for those crimes, no matter how innocent he is in the matter. And, there would be nothing I could do to prevent it."

"Fine, it won't happen again!" snapped Black.

The headmaster didn't nod, his face was expressionless, hiding his true feelings. "You will report to your Head of House for detention, and for proper lessons. Both of you! Now you will leave and let me tend to Mr Snape?"

"Why don't you just send him to Poppy, he's just scared." Spat Black.

The headmaster narrowed his eyes. Forgiving of these young pupils for their lack of empathy. "Yes, but he also knows Mr Lupin's secret. If he talks, Mr Lupin will be forced to leave school." He paused his sentence, looking back to the two boys. "That would be all gentlemen, off with you now."

They exited the room, leaving him alone with the Headmaster.

"Mr Snape, you can open your eyes now," he urges.

Snape sits slowly, blinking and still evidently very afraid. Certain that he was in some sort of trouble.

"Mr Snape, what you did was extremely foolish. You do, however, owe your life to Mr Potter."

"You allowed a werewolf to reside in school?" He questioned.

"Yes, and I took every precaution to minimise the risks to the pupils' population. Now, I am well aware of the animosity between you, Mr Lupin, Mr Potter and Mr Black. But you see, you were also outside your dormitory after the curfew, so you will report to your Head of House for detention as well."

"And what about a werewolf?"

"Ah yes. " Headmaster said, raising up slightly. "We cannot have you running around, telling everyone what you know Mr Snape. Your hand if you please, we are going to exchange an oath."

"An oath?" He questioned nervously.

"Yes, wizarding oath. Your hand?" Headmasters' voice was stern. Snape felt compelled and before
he knew what he was doing. He had found his hand being held firmly, outstretched and intertwined with Dumbledores. Oddly, repeating the words he didn't wish to recite. Magic was binding him and he had no real say in the matter.

"It is fulfilled. Though I do apologize Mr Snape, this had to be done."

"What have you done to me?" Snape queried, looking at the faint marks adorning his hand.

"Did you ever hear of the Unbreakable Vow?" Snape nodded, cocking his head in understanding. "That happened. You promised, on your very life, that you will not repeat what you saw tonight to any living soul as long you are a pupil here."

"And after?"

"After? It will not matter. You, Mr Snape, are free to go."

Glaring at Dumbledore, he walks off without a word. Humiliated, defeated. He hated it and he hated Potter and now Dumbledore. Most of all, he hated Lupin!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Beeping sound snapped her from slumber. She glanced at the wall where a monitoring charm had his vitals on display. His heart rate was insanely high as was his blood pressure. Turning her eyes to him, she froze. All she could see etched on his face was a look of pure unending fear.

Fear was never an emotion she would have connected to him. He was certainly the cause of some fears but he was never, fully afraid.

Bleeping! She promptly jumped from the chair and began to run. Not a moment later had she fallen over, realising her mistake. Her leg fell asleep in that same position, cutting off most of the circulation, leaving her with tingling pins and needles from hell.

With a resigned groan and a slight gratefulness that no one saw her slip, Hermione lifted herself from the floor and hobbled, in a style, to get Poppy.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He was on the floor again, hits falling on his folded arms like rain.

Being the best in his class, in his year, in school holds a little in his home. He grit his teeth. He can fight back now, but he doesn't. He promised.

He can't use his magic, it was a rule decreed by the ministry of magic because if he did use magic, he would be expelled.

He knew that Headmaster would protect some of the students from expulsion, but he wasn't one of them. Simply, if Snape fought back, his mother would suffer too. Maybe not right at that moment, but when he would be due to leave. He promised her. . .He would protect her as much as he could.

So giving in and curling up against the wall, was the best strategy. The wall would at least protect his back. His legs and arms, protecting the rest, unless they were to break with the onslaught.

He knew there were only two more days until he was due back at school again. This was to be his fifth year and then, after that? One more, just one year more and his father wouldn't be able to touch him ever again, nor his mother.
The pain, it was still there, but it didn't touch him anymore. It was just hurt. And compared to the pain he'd suffered in school, this was nothing. He knew at this age that there were things more painful than this. Cruciatus, that had hurt, as had a stinging hex sent to the balls, that was one he wouldn't forget in a hurry. Laughter, name calling? Every time attackers were released from punishment – yes, that had hurt.

*Her words and her unwillingness to understand him or see things from his perspective – that was devastating. But this, this was nothing. Next year…*

It still hurt, even in this darkness. It was a different kind of pain though.

Broken bones could mend. Bruises would heal, eventually as would cuts and contusions. And, there was a truth in the fact that curses would hurt you, but there was a cure for those curses too, some of them. The pain of the heart? Your soul? That pain wouldn't be so quick to dissipate. It would be unbearable, stopping your lungs from taking an invigorating breath.

But he didn't need air anymore because he couldn't bear it any longer.

Thirty-eight years of pain.

He couldn't stand it anymore. Take it away! Please, someone, anyone…take it away! Release me!

Alone! So, alone. Abandoned! If he could, he would've cried but the ones who were dead inside, they didn't cry, did they?
Holding her wand firmly, she was pointing it at that monster again. Why did Harry keep on bringing him here? She couldn't stand to be in the same room with that bigot. And yet she stayed. Even if Harry always called her out.

The thing is, Harry was never around for the visits, he always left, choosing not to remain for some unknown reason to her. And Hermione, she was too afraid to leave the room.

Then there was the bigot. The first few times she'd observed him, Malfoy was quiet. He would stand and watch the situation, observing his friend. Seeing if she would count his intended insults. Right now, however, he was purposefully ignoring her.

She noticed that each time he'd visited, Malfoy seemed more and more haggard in appearance. His clothes were pristine though and his hair, clean and well kept, but he looked like he was falling apart at the seams. He sat on the edge of the bed, shaking his head. His hand reached and she stood up reflexively, in anticipation of something happening.

"Don't you dare..." she threatened through clenched teeth.

He ignored her, reaching out and wiping tears from Snape's cheeks. An almost gentleness to it, that Hermione had rarely seen from him.

"Is this happening a lot?" he asked and she was confused by that. There was a sadness in his voice, a genuine care for her professor that she was sharing unknowingly.

"What is it to you? You want to gloat?"

"You insolent little shit," He hissed, turning his pale eyes to her, cold and tortured, angry. "This man saved my son's life. Whatever else he did, that sole fact is enough for me to wish for his well-being."

She fell silent for a moment, unable form any words to the insult but also to his sentiment.

"Now then," he started again. "Is he doing this often?" His words cut like a knife.

"Sometimes." She offered reluctantly.

His eyes were sad again, he directed them to her professor. "My friend, how much life had hurt us both. Hang on, persevere. Just persevere, and I will see to everything else." He stood up, heavily, unsteadily, and walked away without even a glance in her direction.

Obscurity, oh, how small, how insignificant it made her feel.
Why would Slughorn want to talk to him?

In fact, why did he talk to the Muggle police? Because now he wants to talk to him?

He climbed the stairs to Headmaster's office. Why did they have to talk to him there?

He pushed the heavy door open and he saw Dumbledore, sitting behind the huge desk as usual. Slughorn looked happy as always, covering it well with a straight face. That man was a brilliant potion maker but he was also truly repulsive every other way. And Snape needed his good will so he was willing to put up with it.

"Mr Snape, thank you for joining us." Dumbledore offered him a chair, motioning him to sit. "Please, sit down."

He sat on the edge of the large upholstered chair with a polite nod. The man didn't like him, not one bit. His blue eyes were cold and unforgiving. "I wished the circumstances were, different, for your summons to my office today."

Snape frowned in response to that. "I didn't do anything wrong." It just burst out of him. Snape knew that he wasn't very good at occlumency as he'd wished to be.

"No, you did not, Mr Snape, that is not why we called you here," he was quiet, waiting for Snape to pay notice. "Horace, if you will…"

Horace Slughorn took on a softer repose. His face was actually exuding real sympathy. "My boy, I am sorry to bring this news to you." He sighed, taking a deep breath. "You see, there was an accident in your home…" he stopped, unable to continue or maybe he didn't know how to.

"He killed her?" He asked, with a tone that was flat and dry, almost emotionless and he'd surprised himself with it.

"They're not really sure. The bodies were found at the bottom of the stairs. They say it was an unfortunate accident. I am so sorry, my boy, neither of them survived."

Nothing.


"Should I claim her body? M-make the arrangements?" He asked, voice monotonous.

"No, my boy." He shook his head softly. "Her body was claimed already. Your uncle has taken care of it, and he will be burying her at the family tomb."

His shoulders relaxed, that was all that mattered to him.

"You will be granted leave to attend the funeral, of course."

"That is not necessary," Snape replied. "Thank you Professor Slughorn, but it is the end of the year and I have to focus on my O.W.L.s." he replied.

Empty, he felt utterly empty. He was just about to ask if he could be excused. "If that is all?"

Slughorn was genuinely confused by the pupils' behaviour pertaining to his deceased parents. "Your
father's body is still unclaimed?"

It was a question and Snape didn’t care. "That is not my concern. Am I free to go?"

Flabberghasted at that unexpected statement. Slughorn nodded, quickly. "Yes, of course." He mumbled, confused.

"Headmaster, Professor," He said, excusing himself as he bowed in their presence. Then, he turned on his heels and left the office without uttering another word.

Later that night, in his bed, he lay awake and waited. Nothing. He was still empty.

Darkness. He welcomed it. This wasn't the memory he'd wanted to revisit, not once in his life because it still hurt. It truly hurt because he'd failed. Failed to protect her.

If this was his hell, he hoped that his father's hell was worse, much worse. For him this was unbearable. He had no choice like he had none, his entire life, up to this point.

The moment was ultimately humiliating. Like it hadn't been enough they'd rounded up on him when he wasn't paying attention. Like it wasn't enough that he was foaming like a dog with rabies. He was actually gagging at the taste of suds. And typically, she had to be there, didn't she, bloody defending him!

Sardonic laughter, everyone was laughing at his expense.

Anger! He felt it, bubbling under the surface. Probably the first thing he'd felt since that day in the Headmaster's office.

He wasn't down and out. Snape had managed to fight off some of the jinx effects cast his way by reaching for his wand. Nothing mattered anymore but this, revenge. So, he sent a slicing hex at James. Too bad, he thought. The hex had only caught his cheek and not his neck. His pulse was booming in his ears, adrenaline and his eyes were burning from the tears he was suppressing. He'd let his guard down because there were too man and the next thing he knew; he was hanging upside-down.

The ultimate humiliation. Not that he would expect anything less from those complete mongrels. They were all traitors. And what was worse, she was still defending him, that hurt more than the laughter did. It hurt more than anything. Hitting the ground hard, Snape swallowed a painful groan. Straightening himself out, he managed to get his robes under control and raised the wand to deflect. But he was hit with another curse.

And Lily was still defending him. Laughter rang from the circle that formed around them. He could've defended himself surely?! Did he really need her to join in on his humiliation? He could hear it still, James was taunting him, using her to mock.

Blood boiled! He saw red.

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her! [1] " he spat, looking angrily at James and he froze at his own uttered words.

What had he done?

James was saying something. She was hissing in his and James's direction.

Snape was petrified. Honestly, what had he done, had he gone too far? She was leaving, not
glancing at him, not even the once.

In no time at all, he was hanging upside-down again, but it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered anymore. Not when his underwear went off, flying in the lake. Not even when he was launched in the very same lake. The laughter didn't matter. Snape was frozen once again and inside he was petrified like a piece of wood or someone who had caught the glare of a basilisk through a mirror.

What had he done? The water hit him hard and he sank down into it. He felt like a rock, sinking deeper before snapping out of his depressing reverie. He had stuck his head out of the cold water and gasped for air. At that moment, as the cool air hit his face, the tears ran free. The laughter surrounding him had been amplified like someone had cast a wide-range Sonorus on the grounds. It was humiliating to say the least, enraging in fact.

It mattered to him and then it didn't matter. What had he done?

No, no, no! He didn't want to remember that either. The day he lost her. Not that memory. It tormented him, daily, all his life! He surely didn't want to relive it! Not ever again.

Stop! Stop it! Please! Let me rest! Let me be dead, obliviated! Don't let me hear her cruel words! I know I deserved them. I deserved everything that came after that! Nooo! I served my time! I lived my life for her brat and I did all that was asked of me, in her name, in memory of her.

Please! I don't want to remember that anymore! Forgive me, Lily!

He entered into the gloomy house. It was eerie.

The house was cold and dank, dark as it ever was, and quiet so very quiet. White markings were still at the bottom of stairs, a muggle crime scene of course. He sighed at that and vanished them. He didn't want to connect this house to the floo network.

Alone. He was so alone!

No one, he had no one anymore. His mother had passed away and Lily, he was dead to her anyway, it was one and the same. So why was he still alive. Alive and empty? He turned around the living room like he was looking for something. And then it hit him. Grieving pain! He'd lost his mother... He couldn't breathe! The room, it was spinning around him, faster and faster.

Alone! Abandoned! Alone!

Once again, he was on the floor, sobbing. "No!!!!!!" Desperate wails erupt from his constricted lungs. And through his grief, his cries remained unheard.

The pain. It hurt him like nothing had hurt him thus far. He had no mother. No Lily anymore. Nothing and no one. He was so completely alone!

Why? Why that moment. Darkness mocked him. A soft voice was calling but he knew it was a trap. The moment he followed it would turn to laughter. Honestly, was there anything after death? Anything he could do to stop this torture from repeating? Would he ever be forgiven? Or just left to float in this darkness for all eternity.

Alone. He can't take it anymore.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The word, first word since they brought him here. Not a scream, but a word. She would be happy,
ecstatic…except… the word was "No."

His voice, so harsh and rough, barely above a whisper, and yet he looked like he was screaming. His face, contorted in pain. His lips were quivering and his cheeks were wet from the tears that wouldn't stop.

"Professor, professor?" She urged, wiping them as they fell. "It's only a nightmare." Her face was wet too. "Please, professor, wake up."

Poppy told her this might happen. She just had to let him be, to watch over him and notify her of any changes. But how could she just watch? He was in obvious pain and surely he'd cause harm to himself.

If she could make him wake up.

The thing is, Hermione knew that if he woke, he would start eating and hopefully the nightmares would cease to plague him every hour of every day. Besides, it was the war, and everybody had bad dreams at some point, but they woke up. Even she did. He didn't though, even now.

"Please, please…Severus!" she glided from the chair to the ground and then she realised. Her hand flew to her mouth, clasping her lips shut tightly. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, professor."

Why? Why did she call him by his name? He was going to kill her when he woke up! But he'd calmed down somewhat. Maybe, if he got mad at her, then perhaps he would wake up? Would he wake to bellow at her or to call her names? She sat back on the chair and pondered that while wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Taking one shuddering breath. She clutched one of his hands in hers. "Please, wake up….S… Severus."

No response. He was quiet again. His tears had stopped running and he was barely breathing again, falling back in to that state of uncertainty. She sighed, leaning her forehead on her hand, the very same that was holding his.

Tired, so tired.

[1] Harry Potter and The Order of Pheonix, JKR, page 598
"I appreciate you bringing me here so early in the morning, Mr Potter."

"Yes," mumbled Harry. He was still sleepy and not overly happy to be dragged to Hogwarts at these early morning hours and especially as a nanny to one Lucius Malfoy. For someone on house arrest, the man really had too much influence.

Poppy saw them and approached hastily, whispering in a low voice. "Harry, Mr Malfoy, I am afraid you came here for nothing. You can't visit now."

"Why?"

"What happened?"

The two questions came simultaneously. Poppy smiled, two pairs of worried eyes stared back at her. Pressing her finger to her lips she beckoned them to follow her, pointing to the improvised door. Through the gap, they could see Severus Snape laying down as was recently know. The man looking scarily thin with skin as yellow as parchment. He was barely breathing. Hermione was sitting on the chair, both of her hands clutching Snape's left hand, her head was resting in the crook of her hand. She was sleeping.

"Rough night?" asked Malfoy.

"I'd say so. She didn't call me so I guess it was more of post-cruciatus tremor," Replied Poppy. Lucius nodded with understanding.

"Is she resting at all?" Harry was evidently worried about his friend more than the professor.

"She's barely leaving his side. I'm seriously thinking about placing a cot for her as well."

Harry wasn't sure if she was joking or not.

"You have a very dedicated friend, Potter."

"Bit too dedicated. Poppy do you think she could be replaced with someone half of the time?"

"She could if she would allow it."

"I don't understand..." Harry shook his head in frustration. "I know I asked her to be next to him at the beginning because it was necessary. She was more of a bodyguard than anything else, but there is no need for that now, surely?"
"She also needs healing, don't you think, Harry?" Quipped Poppy sharply.

"How is she going to heal while playing a nurse?" He intoned.

"Do you doubt my methods?" Poppy frowned and Harry backed away. Matron was scary when she was angry.

"N-no. I don't doubt your methods at all." He sounded unsure though.

"Good." She replied. "As you can see they are resting. Now, off you go!" She said and motioned them from the infirmary. Turning to check on the couple behind the bi-folding privacy screen, she went to tend to the other ill patients in the hospital wing.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The sixth year was...not what he would expect. He was working diligently, avoiding Potter, Black and their followers at all costs. Especially the dog one and his werewolf friend.

The place where his heart used to be was black, empty and hollow. Anger, bitterness, and hatred had gathered in the pit of his stomach mostly because of them but also because of everything else that plagued him.

At least he was good at what he knew, and that kept him focused. By now, Snape knew more about the different types of potion than his head of house did. It probably helped that the Malfoys had been providing him with a place to practice over the summer months as well as furnishing him with all the books he could read, wasting the knowledge that they possessed had actually proved beneficial. And not just in potions! His occlumency was getting better by the day, he'd even started to learn Legilimency. In fact, he'd discovered he had a natural talent for it.

Snape would be eighteen soon and all this would be but a distant memory. For now though and in his mind, it was New Years Eve and he was alone in the dungeons. The fire down here was comfortable, lighting the dark space with an ambient glow. He was comfortable and reading. Yes! This was how he prefered it, to be alone and undisturbed. There were still emotions running rampant through his troubled mind. He wasn't completely devoid of life and humanity. Because, there was hatred and bitterness, anger, and lust. Lily, it had always boiled down to Lily. He loved her, and at the same time, he hated her. She was the best thing in his life but she was also his curse.

She was selfish, spoiled and uptight and furthermore, she was cruel! But regardless, she was with Potter now. And he couldn't stand that fact. He curled his lip up and sneered, she deserved a wanker like Potter. He'd use her for sure, maybe break her heart too and then he would be there, to pick up the pieces afterwards.

The pressure increased.

Almost everyone in his house talked about blood supremacy. And even if he winced every time the word "mudblood" was used, it was commonplace to hear this phrase used so often nowadays. They wanted him to join in. It was an honour really, after all, he was half-blood. But he was also the future Lord Prince, and as such he was in high regard of his fellow classmates because of that. Still, he showed reluctance.

If he wanted her back in his life, he would have to tread carefully. But for now, as stalemate would be a good option.

Darkness hissed. That was a bad decision!
Don't do it! You fool! He was losing his mind. In this...hell...he was losing his mind. A female voice again, calling him by name. Taunting him. A reminder of what he could never have. Good! Losing one's mind is good! It cannot hurt if you don't care, right?

He was in his home. It was January 9th and he was tediously installing bookcases along the walls of the living room. He left the furniture, it was at least serviceable, and he didn't need more than that. He lined the bookshelf with the books he already had but they barely cover a small portion of one shelf. Pitiful really considering how talented he is but what choice has he got?

And now, he was finally free to pursue his love for knowledge the way he'd always wanted. In this house, none the less, out of spite.

"Happy birthday to me," he muttered.

"Indeed." He jumped at the voice, turning on the spot with his wand in his hand.

Lucius was standing on the doorstep snickering. "You should lock your door, or at least ward them."

"In this neighbourhood, it is the only invitation for thieves."

"Yes." Lucius had a face like he could smell something particularly vile. His nose had turned up slightly. "This is a dump, and it won't do."

"Do for what?" Snape enquired crestfallen.

"Your birthday party, of course! Now..."

"I wasn't planning on..."

His words were cut off before he had a chance to finish his sentence.

"I know, I was. Come, really it would be a shame for my present to go to waste."

"Lucius." He exhaled. But Lucius grabbed him, apparating the both of them to his posh London flat.

Narcissa was there and one other witch. They were chattering pleasantly, and he knew the other woman. He'd seen her at Malfoy parties before. She belonged to one of the pureblood families, an old family but poor nonetheless. The only reason he'd noticed her in the first place was that the girl had a red shine to her hair and moss green eyes. She was certainly shorter and rounder than Lily. They weren't alike at all but he still noticed her.

"I bring the birthday boy! Can you believe that he had an atrocious idea of celebrating his birthday by planning how to fill his bookshelf?"

A few titters were heard but none were at Snape's expense. It was light-hearted humour.

"And you didn't tell him?"

"Tell me what?"

"My dearly departed father left a good portion of his private library to you." Malfoy commented, "He thought that I would feel ashamed if he gave those books to you, seeing that you are a more talented potioneer than I'll ever be." He sighed with mock despair. "But you are, you have a natural talent my friend, and there is no competing with that."

"Lucius, where are your manners?" Narcissa smiled. "Severus, this is Morgana."
"I am honoured to finally meet you." The witch smiled, offering her hand.

"The honour is mine, Milady." He nods cruelly, observing Lucius out of the edge of his eye. His friend has a sneaky look about his person.

The women were sitting on a two cushion settee so he and Lucius occupied the other, across from them. Conversation was polite, empty but he was on a high alert. Suddenly, Morgana excused herself and Narcissa asked them to prepare drinks for all. They obliged, fussing around the liquor table he hissed under his breath.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you like your gift?"

"She is a gold digger. And I am far away from my inheritance. Or had you forgotten to mention that little detail?"

"As a matter of fact, I did not. She is from a respectable family, and she wants to restore its glory. It doesn't have to happen fast. Besides, she fancies you."

"I'm sure of it." He let the poison slip from his tongue. "The Lady would be thrilled to show up at some important event, on my elbow."

"You would be surprised, my friend." Lucius sounded overly cheerful. "No one says you have to marry her."

"And what am I supposed to do with her? I've seen sharper letter openers."

Lucius looked at him with a raised eyebrow and grinned at Snape's timeless sarcasm.

He was at a loss, what hell was he suppose to do with the boring, airheaded, pure-blooded Lady?

Sitting arrangements had changed. Lucius took his place next to Narcissa, they were whispering, planning their wedding. So, Morgana sat next to Snape, smiling at him. He scoffed at her as she chattered about social gossip.

Bored out of his mind, his eyes had begun to wander. It didn't help that her robe was flashy, modern in cut, and displayed a good portion of her reach cleavage. His eyes, naturally and involuntarily had flickered to her breasts, it was unavoidable really.

The house elf had popped up, and very quickly, he handed a note to Lucius then excused himself just as quickly. Both Lucius and Narcissa had read the note and after, they got up and excused themselves, leaving Snape alone with Morgana.

He was uncomfortable, it was plain to see. He had no idea what to say to her or what to do and there was nothing he hated more than idle chat or small talk. He froze, back muscles stiff. Her unwelcome hand was on his thigh.

Don't you do it you fool! Don't you dare!

Lost. If you do it all will be lost! Gone, like your mind. His mind. But even dead he was still a man. He was corruptible.

He was flickering, wavering. He just couldn't resist the temptation laid before him. He could before.
He always could but he chose not to! That's why he was reliving this moment now. His choice. It was the wrong choice! Did he sell his soul...his love...for this moment of lust? He deserved it, this hell! He deserved it!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The sound had snapped her from her slumber. When had she fallen asleep again?

The sound again, it was coming from him. Hermione glanced at the wall and noticed that his heart rate was elevated, his blood pressure too, but nothing too alarming. Lowering her eyes to look at him, she was observing and watching for any signs of distress, but there was none this time. He was breathing a little faster than usual, but his face was calm, even serene.

She was still worried though, and she bit her lower lip, thinking. Standing up to take a better look at him. His lips were parted slightly, but his face was indeed serene. And again, he made that same sound. To Hermione, it resembled a soft moan, but he was in no pain as far as she could see. She sat down, confused. Her eyes flickered from his face, to take in his whole figure and then back to his face. And then her eyes, they had widened in sheer panic at what she could see.
Her moss green eyes bore into his. "Is it true that the girl you were after, chose another?" She asked, and the hand that was on his thigh, strayed a little higher.

"That is none of your business." He snapped.

Proper manners be damned, that topic was still an open wound. An open sore and festering wound that never seemed to heal.

"I bet--" she said, seemingly unphased by his lack of manners, her hand glided that bit higher. "--that I can make you forget about her."

Her face was mere millimetres from his. So much so that she could feel his breath on her skin.

"I sincerely doubt that," he replied, mood dampened at her audacity. His breath became irregular, hitching at her straying touch. He could feel a stirring in his undergarments. Oh jolly, this was just what he needed, an erection when he was in the apartment with a witch he'd just met.

"I bet I can," She said, grinning seductively. Her lips, brushing against his. Instantly, he was frozen at her unasked for ministrations. He wasn't sure what to do with this? Fine, well he knew what he would like to do, but that was not the question. Instead, panic grabbed at him when he realised that his robes were sporting a tent-like portion in his groin. Her hand slid higher, almost brushing the...

"Madam..." his voice was cracked, sort of scratchy.

"Morgana," She corrected gently, trailing soft kisses along his jaw.

Snape was fighting to stay calm and composed. "I do not want to be rude, but--" he gulped when she started nibbling on the softest part of his earlobe. "I sincerely doubt that Lucius would appreciate..."

"Lucius was thrilled with my idea!" She laughed softly. "Don't worry, they won't return for a good couple of hours, and I took a long-lasting potion."

"What is this?" He demanded, but even to him his demand sounded feeble and weak. Only now, did he realise that her hand was resting on his groin. She was lightly squeezing his arousal, that damned betraying body part of his.
"Happy birthday Severus," She whispered, standing up to reach for him.

Taking her hand, his mind and body were raging a war. It seemed like his body was winning this battle, given that he was following her into the master bedroom. She giggled and pulled off his robes, leaving him in black boxer shorts.

Slowly, she removed her own robes and Snape noticed that she was naked underneath. Her breasts were rounded, full and heavy. Milky white globes with dark circles. She was completely hairless.

His breath hitched in his lungs at the sight of her in her natural state.

Knowing what he wanted to do and doing it were two completely different things; especially if he'd never done them before. He gulped, suddenly nervous when she pushed him on the bed. Typically he fell upon it gracelessly, almost clumsily, suddenly aware of his too skinny form without muscles. He was anything but what he would deem as attractive, or what he could even call remotely pleasing to the eye. Carefully and with practised experience, she pulled his shorts down, tossing them across the room.

Her eyes widening at the sight. "Oh, my! What a treat!"

She focused all of her caresses and ministrations on his groin and he was suddenly lost in the moment.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Pushing him up, Snape struggled on his back to climb up the bed towards the headboard. He felt like a stranded turtle laying on its back while he scrambled against slippery sheets. She was following him, crawling. Her breasts were swaying in front his eyes, she was determined to seduce him. And so, her hand was on his shaft again, pumping it slowly, gratuitously long drawn out strokes, showing her experience.

The motion was not unfamiliar to him, but her hand was silky soft compared to his, and it felt so good in comparison. He let his eyes close, still, lost in the moment. The moist warmth of her breath could be felt on his exposed skin, just a moment before her lips closed around him again.

And suddenly, he was lost in a sensation that was new to him. His brain had shut down completely as the soft moans rip out of his throat in response to her actions. Unable to stop the sounds and the feelings as the pleasantness continued. Erotic euphoria was running through his veins with her continued motions. Her head was bobbing, tugging at the soft yet hard skin, she was devouring him, well most of him.

His sack was heavy and heat pooled in it, tugging the overstimulated balls upwards, ready for the inevitable climax. Her lips and her tongue were certainly skilled, or maybe not, but he couldn't tell either way. The thing is, He didn't last long. In fact, he blew in an incredibly short time. But she was still elated at the reaction. She had climbed up his body, smiling.

Snape was breathing rapidly, his breaths coming in deep gasps. Sweat coated him in a fine sheen, some of it beaded on his forehead. But still, she persisted, as she pressed her breasts against him and kissed his lips. He noticed that the taste was sweet and bitter. Odd, but he could taste himself on her lips, his essence but he wasn't bothered with it.

She had quickly rolled onto her back, snuggling up next to him. "Now that we took care of that, you'll last longer next time." She whispered.

The words 'next time' echoed in his mind.
"In the meantime, wouldn't you like to touch me?"

His eyes flew open at her request.

A nice memory. Why? Was she there? Is that why he was allowed to remember this? She must be there, somewhere, in the darkness. Watching? Judging him. No, that would be bad. Not that memory, not anymore.

I am sorry! So sorry, Lily!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

"No, no, no, no! Gods, what am I to do now?" She paced in the room, panic swirling in her head. She could fight anyone, within reason. Specifically anyone who entered through that door. She would even face Voldemort in the blink of an eye. But this!!! How on Earth was she going to solve…this…problem?

She glanced at him laying there. His delicate frail form was moaning on the bed, then she turned her head fast, blushing. Why doesn't it just go away?

How long had she been pacing now? Fifteen, twenty minutes? She stopped, sighed and glared at the bed. There it was, a huge…flagpole…in the middle of the bed.

"Maybe I should call Matron?" she asked aloud and waited. But no answer came to her, the only sound was a low guttural growl from him. "Fantastic! He's growling now!" She muttered. Like his moans weren't disturbing enough. "But if I call Matron, what if he doesn't want to be seen like this?"

Confliction...

Then again, what did it matter? She was sure he didn't want to be seen in this state by either of them. So what would it be, the lesser of two evils? To call the Matron or not? But, if she didn't call her, what then? And if this arousal didn't go down on its own, what would she do then? Should she, could she?

No, no, no! He was her professor! That would be highly inappropriate!

She glared at him, angry, uncertain and scared. The peaked sheet twitched a bit and she jumped. Literally, jumps off the ground? How long could he be in that condition…before it became unhealthy? Of course, she knew about sex, she wasn't stupid! And she knew male anatomy too.

It wasn't like she hadn't seen a naked male before. Not like she was a virgin or anything. But…this was totally different! Fumbling in the dark, on a cot in a tent was not the same as this. And it had happened only the once. He moaned again and she focused her attention on him.

"You are a professor, professor, you shouldn't sound soo…." But that was the problem. He didn't just happen to be her teacher, he was also a man. What did she know about him outside the school? Nothing!

The sheet twitched again. "Gods, he's either woken up and hid a snake in there or he is--" she blushed. No, she didn't even want to think about that. At this point, she would prefer a snake to the other option. "Python by the looks of it," she mumbled, drawing her eyes.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He was fumbling around, not quite sure what to do. And then it hit him; Legilimency. If he was not
sure what to do, he would just let...Well, his natural talent for the skill manifested itself mostly in instinctual ability to "read" people around him.

So, taking a deep breath and steadying himself. He shut out all the annoying emotions behind those still shaky occlumency walls. He focused on her and what she wanted of him. Looking at her eyes, he lowered his lips to the dark circles of her breasts. Even if he'd wanted to squeeze the round globes, he used only the gentlest of touches. Remarkably, she was mewling under his arms in no time, writhing at his touch as he had been with hers.

Continuing with his gentle caresses, he trailed kisses down her skin. It was as soft as flour, smooth as butter as his hands trailed down to her mound. Then the unthinkable happened, she parted her legs for him, lifting her pelvis and swinging slightly in the air. Instinctively, he brushed his fingers against her labia as the pearls of dew gathered between them. Curiosity got the better of him and he opened her slightly to look. Tentatively, he pushed one finger into her. Why she wanted just the one was beyond him when he could tell she could accommodate more. But then again, he didn't need to understand it, he just needed to follow her wishes.

After a while, his hand was getting tired and he pulled his finger away, again he sniffed it. The smell was pungent, not unpleasant per se and again, curious at the texture and viscosity, he licked it experimentally. The taste was salty-sweet, a bit strong, but he could easily get use to it. While he was pondering on whether he should try and actually lick her down there; he read her mind again seeing that she was rather hoping that he would unsheathe himself inside of her. He was unsure of course, until he cast a glance down his body, surprised that he indeed could oblige.

That caused another round of fumbling. He knew what was expected of him, he knew mechanics. However in theory, the practice was somewhat clumsy. But he worked to find his way, like a mole, blind and mostly by feeling. He finally managed to align himself correctly and plunged in to the hilt in one swift movement. She gasped at the sudden intrusion, squealing in delight at the fullness and depth.

Oh, this. Was. Heaven! She was soft and warm and slippery, her body fit him like a glove, caressing and smoothing over his aroused appendage. Sweet Salazar, he felt like he had stuck his dick in a jar of warm jam, not that he'd ever done that. But, that is what he imagined it must have felt like.

Pushing away disturbing images, he started on working his hips into a satisfying rhythm that matched his frenetic grip. It was utter bliss, but tiring and hard work. However, if he neglected the pain and muscle cramps that accompanied such physical activity, the feeling was magnificent. It didn't really matter who she was, as long as he could just close his eyes and focus on the sensations.

Then he felt it, her body started to shake lightly, her muscles pulsing and rippling around him. He gritted his teeth, he was close but not quite yet there. He kept on thrusting, even when his back screamed in pain for him to stop. Her muscles were quivering around the hardest part of him as it remained buried deep, this was divine torment. When she was still, he rolled off her. Her screams were still echoing in his head. They lay, panting, staring at the white ceiling.

Moving gently, she smiled at him and reached her hand down. "I cannot be ashamed by you," she whispered, watching as he closed his eyes in exhaustion.

Release, he needed a release. The dead don't have organs or appendages. Dead don't have hands you can use. Female voice again. He couldn't recognize the words, but the voice was pleading. Why would any woman be pleading of him? What did he have to offer? Maybe it was her, mocking him, most likely, it was.

The need was painful and great. Maybe this was just another torment, another trick of the eternity he
had to spend…suffering?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She approached him with determination. And, reaching her decision, she prayed to all the deities that would listen that she was indeed making the right one. Her face was burning, and she was happy because it was the dead of the night.

"Right, now, professor please, please don't get mad at me…too much. I know you would, at least a little. Now, Poppy already told me that if ever issue of bathing arises, I'll have to do it…so…I would have to see you eventually, and my guess is…you would rather not share this state of yours. I've already witnessed it, so no harm there." She was babbling, gathering her courage.

She didn't want to see him, not really. She admitted to herself that his moans did sound sensuous. And for that moment, Hermione was jealous of the woman who was able to elicit that sound out of him. It was nothing really, she didn't care for him in that manner, it was just…No, she pushed the strange thoughts away.

Grabbing the hem of the sheet, she steadied herself, taking a long breath. "Now, as I said, no reason for you to worry. And, if you prefer you can obliviate me after you wake up." She was already flustered at what she was about to do, but it couldn't be helped. "Merlin's beard, I hope you will obliviate me. J-just please, don't kill me. I really don't want you to suffer from…what did Ron call it? …Blue balls, that's it!" she yanked the sheet and exhaled sharply.

"Gods, professor!" timidly her hand reached forward.
Harry crept into the room. Taking a glimpse around, his eyes landed on the two that he was expecting to see. Snape was sleeping as he always seemed to do these days. And Hermione, she was curled up on a chair by the side of his cot.

He approached her and tenderly lay a hand on her shoulder to rouse her from slumber. She jumped, startled at his touch. Harry wasn't surprised by this, he'd been fully expecting of it. "Heya, Hermione. How are you?" He asked, genuinely worried and concerned for her. Looking her over, Harry could see that her eyes were bloodshot, with dark circles around them. Possibly from lack of proper rest, food and sunlight.

"Oh, he is fine, better I think," She answered, not fully paying attention to what had been asked. "I wanted to know how you are. You look tired?"

She recomposed herself, not enjoying the look of sympathy cast her way. "I am, a bit, nothing majorly concerning about me though."

"Look, I know I asked you earlier. M-maybe it's time to see if you can share…"

Her head had shot up at Harry's words. Eyes suddenly wide, she shook her head violently, cutting Harry off mid-sentence. "No! No, sorry, please. I can't… People still coming in, and you keep bringing Malfoy and I don't trust them. Besides, you know how Professor Snape can be, why would you want to trouble more people later? He will be mad as it is."

Frowning Harry faltered at her words. "But surely…"

"Harry, please. You can't imagine what I've been through…what I've, seen. Please, I can't bear the thought that someone else can sell that, or him for five minutes of glory. I-I can do this, please let me. Trust me?"

He had always trusted her judgement. Though this nagged at him, she was neglecting herself, in a way. "Fine, if it is your decision, I'll respect it," he sighed. Well, what was done was done. "Wait, what did you see exactly?" He was naturally inquisitive.

"You, you ah don't want to know." She sighed, averting her gaze.

"Hermione?" He questioned, confused.

She was silent, chewing her lower lip, a frown wedged on her brow. "Well…what do you think?
Who gives him his baths?” She snapped.

"Poppy?” He replied. Though it was more of a question because he was mostly unsure.

"He is my responsibility, Harry.” She sighed, shaking her head.

Harry had the feeling that Hermione was treating him like a child. "Isn't that a bit too much of a responsibility?” He asked, worried.

"It is, what it is. I don't mind it."

"He will kill you" he whispered, horrified and she grinned.

"Not if I can run faster than he can cast a spell." She countered. A tired smile graced her features and between them, they laughed at the inappropriate humour. "Harry, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Can you bring me some books? I have an idea, I don't want to raise hopes, but if it works, he might wake up. I need you to be quiet about this for a while. Can you do this for me, please?”

Snape stirred and started to shake.

"Go, Harry."

"Maybe I can help…." He offered.

"NO! Go. Please, go."

"Hermione?…"

"I won't let anyone see him like this. Not even you Harry, GO!” She turned to him, wand in hand. Sticking to her word because it wouldn't be fair on Snape. Her professor was already vulnerable as it was, he didn't need additional rumours going around.

"I'm going, I'm going." He shuffled away. "Owl me to let me know how he is?"

"Sure, Harry. Thank you for dropping by." She mumbled, turning back to Snape. Picking up a damp cloth, she wiped at his face carefully and as delicately as she could. Hermione was crooning to him.

Harry was confused by Hermione's insistence that he leave but who was he to question? Wandering aimlessly, Harry was trying to find Poppy, but after a while, he'd given up. Maybe he could send her an owl too?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Something had happened, he didn't know what it was, but something definitely happened.

More often than not, Snape found that he was being invited to social events. It felt like every pure-blood family wanted him to visit them. And Morgana was, willingly, at his elbow if he attended.

Annoyingly, Potter and Black were still attacking him at every opportunity they could get. Black preferred to do his attacks openly, Potter on the other hand, he seemed to favour the covert, choosing those situations without witnesses to speak of.

But his occlumency and legitimancy were now enhanced, much further than he had been from the
year before.

He was not that anymore…the moment he'd managed to establish his occlumency walls around himself, Snape realised that it was something he didn't want to share, not even with Lucius. Swiftly, he had learned how to create a double set of walls surrounding himself. One was always hidden and the other one was more a backup, or one that might be feasible for those skilled enough to break the first. Some walls he never dropped, not even in his sleep, the others...he would decide as the situation arose.

Legilimency was another matter, and he openly discussed it with Lucius at every given opportunity.

Lucius was impressed, not just with that but also with Snape's skills as a potioneer and duelist. Additionally, his skills at charms and the Dark Arts were impressive too, surpassing those of his own.

Snape had started to practice, smuggling some Muggle books home and learning from them, martial arts too, defensive manoeuvres just in case. Amazingly, his reflexes were getting better by the day. He'd also perfected his sneaking skills, but that wasn't really something he'd wanted to hone, because it was much more about need than it was about interest.

Something else had changed as well; when he was being attacked, his fellow housemates would come to his side, or to his aid. Strength in numbers, as he called it. Not just that, but the girls would also smile at him when they passed in the vast corridors of Hogwarts. He was always on high alert though.

Lily, she was still ignoring him and it stung, painfully. But this pain would easily transform into anger; and often, it was so easy these days.

And, by the end of the school year, he was out of his mind with worry. He knew that something odd was going on yet no one kept him in the loop. Perhaps it was because his summer was full of social gatherings and events and he'd been too preoccupied to take notice. The thing was, Snape was finally gaining recognition, climbing the social ladders, at least he thinks he was.

It was all so, strange to him, considering his upbringing.

Darkness. That was a good year...wasn't it?

Or was it the worst year?

That was the year of his decline. So why now? Why that peace? Was it to show him his past mistakes? To distress him or to emphasize that he was not ever meant for happiness, not even in small doses?

Was this memory meant to punish him for the respect he'd received? Should all of his happiness be stolen away? He'd earned it surely, worked damned hard for that respect, so why take it now?

Snape was in the living room. Sitting composed in the old tattered wing-back chair he favoured and he was reading. A favourite pastime of his. To his side, his walls and bookshelves were finally filled with literature, a stark contrast to how it had been those few years ago. In fact, Abraxas library had filled almost three walls of bookcases. Snape knew that knowledge was never easier to access, not like it was for him now. And because of this, and his expansive book collection, he sat back and soaked it all in.

The door rattled, disturbing his concentration. Snape could hear Lucius's voice calling out to him.
"Severus?"

"In here Lucius." He bookmarked the page, getting up to greet his friend.

"Ah, you are dressed?" It was a question, not a general observation. Sometimes Lucius couldn't be sure of Snape's mood.

"Disappointed?" He smirked.

"No, not particularly" Lucius replied with a coy smile. "Come, we are going to the club."

Rolling his eyes internally, Snape looked up briefly. "Lucius, I am in the middle of the Draconian chronicles and I would like to finish it. I am in no mood for air-headed witches or Morgana," he added the latter, scathingly.

"Who mentioned Morgana?" He chuckled. "Surely it is time to move on, my friend. She served her purpose, did she not?"

"And what of her reputation?" He wasn’t really concerned but he asked anyway. He was just relieved in a way because he didn't have any further obligations towards her.

"What reputation?" Lucius laughed darkly. "Didn't you hear, her family are negotiating her marriage with some Russian?"

"Thank you, Salazar," Snape mumbled, gratefully.

"It is time to broaden your horizons, my friend. Let's go."

He allowed himself to be dragged out of the house to an apparition point.

The apparition point they were travelling to was the remnant of an old half burned house at the very end of the street.

It was the type of house and street that often garnered unwanted attention from curtain twitchers and nosy neighbours. The types who would peak through the windows, muttering because they had nothing better to do. On their way to the point of destination, there was a woman screaming down the street.

Stench, filth and poverty surrounded them as they wandered. How he hated his neighbourhood. How he hated...Muggles too, what with their small petty lives and their broken ways.

No, no he didn't hate them! He didn't!

He hated bullies and those who hurt their wives and children! He hated those that tortured for pleasure and the lowlives that would beat their kids!

Furthermore, he hated his father! He'd never really had a reason to hate Muggles! But for some reason, he did...then. And he wanted to eradicate them, the same way one would eradicate vermin.

It was a Yule Ball. And, again, he was in Malfoy Manor, hidden in a library, of all places.

Snape was actually hiding from witches now. His mind was still reeling from that fact. And then of course, Lily was still with Potter, and the rumours about their planned wedding had begun to float around the school.

That was painful to hear, it hurt, it still hurt, even now. He had hoped she would have come to her
senses but it wasn't to be. The door to the library opened and Snape lifted his head from the book to look at the entrant as he steadily approached.

"I knew I would find you here, Severus." He smiled, knowingly. "I want to introduce you to someone." Lucius had an edge to his voice, his posture, rigid and official. Snape had thought that, judging by Lucius' stance that this person was surely someone highly important. He noticed a cloaked figure standing behind Lucius and the power rolls in waves from that person.

He stood up, face blank but polite, back straight. "My Lord, Severus Snape."

The cloaked figure paced to him, standing in front of him before shedding its cloak. The man was, for lack of a better word, beautiful. No introductions were needed, and he bowed his head deeply.

"My Lord, I am humbled by Your presence." He trembled because he'd heard that at school and in the dormitories, pupils' would talk about this man, but he was really rather like the Wizard of Oz. Hiding and keeping his mystique about his person, an invisible voice behind a curtain and only the most deserving ones would ever manage to see him, even after they had been recruited.

"Lucius has told me so much about you over the years. When I heard that you were present and here tonight, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to meet a wizard that even old dear Abraxas held in such high regard."

"My Lord..." he whispered, voice stuck in his throat. "...It is a too higher praise for an unworthy half-blood like me." He felt that his face was burning.

"Come now, Severus, one cannot choose the family one was born in." His eyes flickered at the man, then back to the floor. The feeling of his heart wanting to burst out of his chest. At this rate, Snape was certain it would, only if it wouldn't cause a stain on the man's robes. "I hear you are hoping to join my ranks."

"I do, my Lord." Words slipped easily from his tongue.

"I also heard that you were lusting over a mudblood?" He caught a glance of Lucius, his eyes pleading him, to be honest.

"I am ashamed, but I still do, my Lord."

"No one is perfect Severus, but I am pleased to hear that you managed to control your unhealthy obsession and turn to Ladies more deserving of the people in my ranks." His voice was soft and compelling, but it held a brittle note of warning.

"I am doing my best, my Lord."

"Lucius tells me you surpass him in potions?"

"I could never..."

"If Lucius isn't humbled by admission, you should not be as well. I want you to brew me a potion, a poison of sorts. Can you do it?"

"Yes, my Lord." He didn't need to know what kind of poison it was. All he would need was the instruction and he'd do it without any problems, Snape was certainly confident in his skill.

"Look at me," ordered the man and Snape's eyes met his. They weren't quite human but hypnotising nonetheless. He could feel a breach in his brain and he dropped his outer set of walls, welcoming
the intrusion. After a while, the man pulled back, not gently but he didn't complain "There is a place among my ranks for a man of your skills, Severus. Do you know what the tasks are, in order to prove yourself worthy?"

"Tasks are different for different ranks," He replied and the Dark Lord nodded approvingly.

"Correct. You, Severus, will brew me a poison as a first task. You will duel against the adversary of my choice as the second task. And should you prove victorious, you will bring me...ah, but your father is dead, is he not?"

"He is, my Lord."

"Then, you will bring me the body of one Muggle male of your choice."

"Dead or alive my Lord?" He asked in a crazy boost of pride.

Three tasks, inner circle, he would never have hoped to reach such a high rank, little less to be recruited into it.

The man stared at him. "I was just inquiring as to whether the dark Lord would like to watch the filth as he dies at my hand or not?"

"Why not? Entertain me, prove yourself worthy." The Dark Lord finally answered after a nerve wracking pause. "Lucius vouched for you, do not disappoint me."

"I wouldn't dare, my Lord."

"I expect the poison by tomorrow evening. Lucius has the instructions." He didn't need to motion to the blonde wizard behind him. "The duel will take place sometime in April, you will be excused from school for this. And you will, ahem, entertain me, two days after school finishes?"

"Yes, my Lord. I humbly thank You." He said, falling to his knees. Partially because the power he felt around the Dark Lord was overwhelming because his knees gave in.

The Dark Lord nodded again, Turning on his heels, he took his cloak and exited the room without saying another word, followed just as promptly by Lucius.

Trembling, Snape dragged himself to the chair. The blood was coursing through his veins, fast, his heart was hammering wildly. And he felt something different for once, he felt...pride. He was duly elated by the prospect of promised power. He wouldn't just be admitted to the Dark Lord's ranks, he would be receiving a mark. And what an honour, a high honour indeed. Intoxicated by the Dark Lord's praises and those of his closest friend. The book remained laying on the table, forgotten.

No! No! No! Not that! I know I made a mistake! He respected me, he showed interest, I was swayed! I know it was a mistake. Please, I don't want to remember anymore. I don't want to remember the rest of it. I don't want to... Please! Stop! I don't want to relive the rest!
He was skimming through the headlines in the Daily Prophet, frowning. Rubbish, this daily informer published nothing but nonsense. Lucius strolled into the dining room, his blond hair, a dishevelled mess, eyes still puffy from sleep.

"Dobby, coffee, strong. Now!" Lucius flopped on the chair, yawning without even trying to cover his mouth. "It is so hard to find good help these days."

"Yes," he mumbled absentmindedly. In a way, he felt honoured because not many had seen Lucius in this state. Suddenly, he froze, his heart pounding in his chest, climbing his slow painful way up to his throat.

"Anything interesting?" Snape enquired.

"Nothing," Lucius replied, closing the papers and folding them. The title of the article was still floating in front of his eyes. It read- 'POTTER HEIR TO BE WED AT THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR – SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS'. He focused on the food in front, his porridge was overly cold while Lucius nursed and hugged the cup of coffee like his life depended on it.

"I have to congratulate you, it is a rare honour..."

"I am well aware of that." He cut off his friend, cold emptiness settled in his chest, he slammed his second occlumency wall hard, locking any thought behind that might try to evoke positive emotion or remorse. Snape really had nothing more to lose, so now he would only take care of himself, and that's all he was intending to do.

"You can use my potions lab, all the ingredients are there." Lucius offered. "The instructions are in the family Grimoire. I admit, I never thanked you for returning the book to me." The blonde haired wizard spoke, mulling over his coffee.

"It should be your inheritance, Lucius. Besides, I already offered you to return all the books he left me. It was only to anger you, surely he never meant for me to have them?"

"As adequate brewer as I am," Lucius intoned, "My strengths lie in diplomacy. Therefore, I had no interest in potions. With you, these very books have more purpose. Surely Severus, allowing my children and their heirs' access to your library we will be fine and sufficient in itself."

"No granting is necessary and you know it," Snape replied. Seeing that Lucius was casting him an odd glance. "Shall we? I have a poison to brew."

"I knew you had it in you, but honestly I never thought that you would admit to it."
"You underestimated me, Lucius." Snape offered, eyebrow quirked, teasing.

"Yes, it appears I did." Lucius stood and motioned Snape to follow. "If you will…"

Why? Why did I brew that poison? Why after learning its name?

No more memories, I know what I did. I already know. Darkness was silent, floating all around him.

I know… I know why. They saw me. They recognized my potential. They saw what I could be instead of how I didn't fit. Was it, was it that wrong that I had wished to be recognized?

Ah, but it was. Lily!

The flutter of ice touched his insides like a butterfly wing when he read the name of the poison. He was familiar with it, given that it was one of the potions from the Malfoy family Grimoire, and he'd already read it more than once.

"Lucius, The Dark Lord said you have all the ingredients." He turned to his friend, seeing that Lucius had produced a minuscule flask.

"What can I do to help?"

"Do not distract me, prevent any distraction." He ordered. Knowing inside that it wasn't smart to order one Lucius Malfoy around but he was already focused on the potion. And this one was incredibly...challenging.

What many potioneers failed to see was that potions, even if the intricate art of blending ingredients demanded no wand or spells. It did, however, necessitate a considerable amount of magic and knowledge of the liquids. The intent played a great part in potion making, but not an intent as such rather it was in a form of a potioneers focus on the effectiveness of said potion while making it.

The potion he had to brew was not difficult on its own, ingredients wise, though some were rare and illegal. Brewing rhythm was another matter altogether. This was the Unforgivable poison among potions, Avada Kedavra in liquid form and as such asked a lot from the brewer. He took the knife and started to peel...Seven hours later he gave Lucius a flask with clear, water-like, liquid. And with pride swelling in his chest, Snape could breathe a sigh of relief. He had made it perfectly.

"It is poetry, my friend," Lucius smiled. "Truly remarkable watching you work."

"It is not hard to be a poet in your lab Lucius." He returned the smile.

Darkness fluttered around him. Caressing his non-existing face with the silkiest of touches. Why was he so prideful then? It was just the potion. Accepted! Maybe he wanted to be accepted, recognised and that potion was the ticket in, that's why. Fool!

He was a fool back then...was still a fool now and this, this was his punishment.

Mild April evening, he was next to Lucius in an unfamiliar Manor.

So many faces known and unknown to him were gathered. Annoyingly, some of the faces were partially masked and some were not. Snape wasn't nervous, he knew he should have been but he wasn't. The respect he'd received in those four months helped to steel his resolve.

Whispers followed him wherever he went and he knew of the words spoken. 'A half-blood' recruited directly to the inner circle, one reserved for the Sacred 28. There were other half-bloods among the
ranks, of course, but they never saw the Dark Lord, little less talked to him. Then there was Bellatrix, she simply sneered at him. And to annoy her further, Snape ignored her.

Finally, The Dark Lord entered the room, his radiant beauty and the aura of his power was captivating not just Snape but the masses gathered here this night.

"My Lord, there is an intruder among us, allow me to get rid of him before he sours you with his presence." Shrieked Bellatrix.

Almost immediately, his red eyes were directed to her face. "Intruder?" He repeated.

"The half-blood filth my Lord," She spat. "Brought here by none than my brother-in-law."

"Severus is here on my personal invitation, Bella." Dark Lord's voice was sharp and condemning, almost angry at her insult. "Why would my wards let anyone in who was uninvited? Do you doubt my skills that much?" The tone was silky but deadly nonetheless.

"No, never my Lord." She fell to her knees, head lowered in embarrassment. "I-I beg for your forgiveness."

"I admire your loyalty, Bella," he looked down at her, where she remained in a crouching position. "And your williness to follow my wishes. Rise!" He ordered.

As expected, Bellatrix rose from the ground like an unwelcome weed in a flower garden. Her beautiful shining eyes bore adoringly into the Dark Lord. "For your eagerness to please me, Bella, I will...reward you, if I don't change my mind."

He shivered, whatever Dark Lord had in store for Bellatrix was not likely to be pleasant. Specifically for her or anyone who would be there to witness it.

The Dark Lord silenced the room with a flick of his wrist. It was apparent that he wanted to speak to the group. "We are gathered here with one purpose." He said clearly. "There are rare ones among us who qualify to sit at the same table with me, and those I see as such, I test vigorously. In light of this, we are here tonight to witness the completion or failure of one such recruit. The one I see worthy of such position." He glared at the gathered group and Severus felt his chest swell with pride.

"His initial task was executed perfectly. He surpassed all of you in his first duty." The Dark Lord turned to him. "Come, Severus, join me."

Snape walked to the Dark Lord and fell to his knees, head bowed down, even when he yearned to raise it. Hand patted his head, he was shaking, this was too much honour, more than he dared hope to receive.

"Bella, as your reward, Severus will duel your husband. I will rule the victor as well as how far the duel will go. Should you become a widow, I will personally find another suitable husband for you. Rodolphus, approach me. Raise Severus."

He stood up. Rodolphus was an experienced dueler, he'd been in the Dark Lord's inner circle for years, leading the raids. Snape only saw him as a dangerous foe, not the type to duel with. The man looked at him with hatred in his expression, a look of contempt on his face.

Snape was calm, emotionless.

And then the duel began. Curses were flying but they weren't touching Severus. He was so focused on the man's eyes and he easily dodged and parried all attacks. He played with him. Dark Lord
never told him that he could kill, so when he cast a spell, one of his own making, he aimed it so that it would inflict maximum damage, not a kill shot.

Rodolphus was on the ground, bleeding profusely. Snape stood above the body, empty, winded, and waiting.

"Marvelous fight! Severus, you please me once again! Can anyone heal..." The Dark Lord waved his hand, motioning to the bleeding man in his midst. "Him?" The word seemed to come out as more of a hiss.

"My Lord," he intoned respectfully. "If I may?"

"Go on Severus." He ordered, standing back to observe.

"They won't know how to heal him from this wound. If my Lord wishes him dead I can finish him off, but if my Lord wishes him to survive, only I know how to heal him."

An eyebrow rose at Snape's words. "Explain Severus."

"The curse that cut him was of my own making, it will bleed until I stop it."

"You surpassed all the others, Severus." The Dark Lord sounded pleased. "Heal him."

He knelt and with his wand, he cut the man's clothes. Slowly and purposefully, he dragged his wand over the wounds, softly chanting an almost song-like incantation. The scar will stay, no magic will be able to remove it. For enemies, to be marked for eternity.

"Raise Severus, walk with me."

Severus obeyed, flattered by the attention he was receiving. He cautiously took a stroll with the Dark Lord, half a pace behind with his head bowed.

"That was an interesting and very powerful spell. I am truly intrigued to learn of it."

"Of course my Lord." Snape had made it, he'd made a name for himself, a status. He was truly elated.

The darkness caressed his cheeks. It cooed to him, creating a completely different sensation. Mixing and blending with a feeling of elation. No, that was wrong! Even after all those years, a single uttered praise was enough to feel that way. Even after death. Stop! Stop it! This was wrong! He was a sick and twisted fuck, but this was around the bend, even for him.

Don't, please! Please! Especially because he knew what would come next. He lost his mind, but not in a way he hoped. Hell! Ice gathered in the pit of his non-existent stomach.

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Hermione blinked at the Matron, she was holding a bowl full of water and several flannel rags in her hands.

"How is our patient this morning?" She asked cheerfully.

"The same. Well, not quite the same but..." Hermione mumbled.

"He's started to sweat a lot, he needs a bath, charms just won't do it anymore."
She jumps on her feet, standing next to the bed, protectively. "I'll do it."

"Child, it is not…"

Matron was cut off with Hermione's insistence to be heard. "I've seen him before, and I don't think he would appreciate if more people see him in his current state of undress."

"If you think that is the way to convince me, you are sorely mistaken." Matron's voice was sharp. "What were you doing, lifting his sheets?"

"I had to." She almost cried out. It wasn't like she had a choice, not really. "He gets in that…state, as of late and…it doesn't go away on its own, so…"

"And you had no brains to call me, handling a situation on your own?" Hermione noted that Matron seemed really quite angry.

"I didn't think he would want many people to see…" She really wanted to say more but she refrained.

"He is my patient, even from before you were born, don't you think I've seen him by now? And on top of that, what do you think, how it would reflect on me if it gets known that I left you to attend to the grown man's needs?"

"But I didn't touch him, I swear, I didn't."

"What did you do then?" She inquired.

"I used the charm, ice cold air…on that part…until it goes away."

"Good grief girl! Are you trying to help him or add to his misery?"

"I….I…"

"Fine, if you want to help, then ask. I will teach you the spell."

"There is a spell?" She gaped.

"What do you think? He is not the only male patient to have an erection while hospitalised. Of course, there is a spell."

Hermione gasped at Matron's words.

"If you want to handle the situation, then you have to get used to naming it properly. Did you even ever…?"

"Yes, of course, I did. I am not a virgin. Through, I'd say that professors…equipment is far more advanced than Ron's is." She wrinkled her nose and the Matron chuckled.

"And you say you know your stuff, you do not demonstrate that knowledge well. He is a grown man and well within the parameters of normal dimensions. Mr Weasley is still a boy."

She sighed, digging through her medical knowledge, normal dimensions...how much is that? If he was, he was surely at the upper line for sure. She took the bowl and Matron left, still chuckling to herself.

So far she'd managed not to touch him too much. Just his face and hands, but now she would have
to. Not that she wanted to, but… She’d sort of developed a possessive, protective streak towards him. And now, she wouldn't allow anyone, not even Matron, to witness him in his weakened, helpless state. She wouldn't.
She was still reeling from the "bathing" experience, pondering. Not if he would kill her, but in what way he would do it. Hermione knew without a doubt, she was heading down the road of no return with this, with him.

Snape, however, he was peaceful, resting.

Then, unexpectedly and all of a sudden, Narcissa had barged into the improvised room, completely unannounced, followed by Lucius hobbling fast and Harry, nearly running trailing behind them.

"You are irresponsible Lucius!" Narcissa scowled, berating her husband for all to hear.

"How was I supposed to know?" He countered.

"You should have told me!" she said, glancing at Hermione who was standing in front of the bed, her wand raised in defence of her charge and herself. "How sweet. Move away girl." She ordered.

"I told you that he is in a bad shape." Lucius ignored Hermione like he always had and was still continuing to do so.

"You didn't tell me that he is losing so much weight and muscle tone." She hissed, turning to Hermione. "Move away girl!"

"She won't harm him, Hermione. She might be able to help." Harry reasoned, breathlessly.

She moved reluctantly. Watching Narcissa intently as she repositioned herself at his side. Hermione remained alert, dubious of Narcissa's intentions.

Narcissa uninvitingly had sat herself on the edge of his bed. Very gently, but with little thought, she scooped Snape's thin weakened left hand in hers, trailing her fingers over the frail forearm. Her eyes appearing sad and now somewhat tired too but still, she looked.

It had only been herself and Bellatrix who had been present the last time, and because Severus was unconscious, only Narcissa knew which hand held the curse. His left hand, of course. The soft marks had still remained, like fine scars interwoven across his skin in a crossed pattern. Gently she clasped it, locking her free hand beneath his limp elbow. Her own tight grip allowed for her to remain hand in hand with the unconscious man. Even if his own grip was loose, this would still work.
Lucius stepped up, wand in hand.

"No! You can't do anything." She hissed at Lucius. He flinched at her tone. "You girl, come, use your wand," Narcissa ordered.

"What's going on?"

"Why can't I do it?" Lucius argued. "He is my friend after all."

"Did you completely lose your mind?" Hissed Narcissa. "The Vow was sealed by the woman. And since my sister is dead, I need another woman. The girl's magic is strong, almost strong as Bella's, she will do just fine." She reasoned, staring pointedly at Hermione.

"What Vow? What are you going to do to him?" Hermione asked, her voice raised in a mild panic.

"Release him from his promise. Honestly, what do they teach you in that school? She is completely uneducated."

"What promise?" Hermione ignored the insult, she knew plenty, probably far more than Narcissa, come to think of it.

"Unbreakable Vow, Hermione, the one professor made in our sixth year." That was Harry, he seemed small and withdrawn while the Malfoys continued to argue and bicker. Hermione was shocked by the way Narcissa addressed her husband, and by his almost pleading tone.

"But, professor killed Dumbledore, he fulfilled…"

"I asked him to protect my son, and never released him, so the bond still stands."

"But Draco survived," Hermione argued, weakly.

"Draco was hit by a curse on his way home from the trials. He is alive but I do not know for how long. Unfortunately, the only person who would be willing and able to help is lying here. So the promise stays."

"Draco is dying?" She whispered, shocked by that snippet of news. This family were so private, they only seemed to crawl out of the woodwork when their private lives were crumbling. None more so, than now. Hermione was suddenly sad. Even if it was only Malfoy, she still hated the fact. She glanced at Harry for reassurance but he shrugged, confused by this too.

"I hope not." Came Narcissa's firm reply. "But if I want to save my son... So, if you want to save your professor, point your wand at our joined hands, and help me to release him from his promise."

"What?"

"The bond is doing him harm at the moment, killing him in order to force him to fulfil his part of the deal. If I do not release him, he will die. Now, do as you are told, girl!"

She nodded and came closer, tears running down her cheeks, pointing the wand at the designated spot as ordered. She didn't know what she was supposed to do but it seemed that her magic did. Their hands started to glow, wrapped with bright golden swirls that delicately wrapped around both grasped hands. Snape's lips shuddered in response and Narcissa closed her eyes for a second.

"I Narcissa Malfoy, release you, Severus Snape of your promise. I consider your Vow fulfilled. You are free." The swirls coiled around their hands like ribboned snakes and Narcissa gazed at her,
warning her silently not to let go.

The magic she felt was strong, hard to control. Sparks flew out, shooting around, the golden strands glowing before breaking and sinking into their skin.

Narcissa stood, rubbing her forearm. Leaning, she set a gentle kiss on his forehead, her eyes were still sad and tired, pained. "Get well." She whispered before turning to the group.

"Well, my job here is fulfilled." She muttered. "Take me to my son." Then glancing at Hermione. "Help him get better, so I can have my son back."

"But surely, there must be someone else who can help. Faster than a professor, I mean."

"There are," She agreed. "Plenty of them, to be exact," Narcissa replied coolly.

"Then, why don't they help?"

"Why would they?" She queried, nose raised in the air. "We are Malfoy's after all." Her head remained raised to the heavens. She began her purposeful walk. Her composure, still, fiercely royal in style. Unwavering and dominating all at the same time.

Lucius turned to follow, pausing, he turned back to Hermione who had stood at seeing their swift departure. A thoughtful expression on his cold face. "If you want to assist, then you too, have to be rested as well." He said, flicking his wand at the empty chair. The once hard and unforgiving wooden chair flew to the corner. Lucius tossed something from his pocket and at the same time, he flicked his wand.

In place of the chair now stood a fluffy, white sofa, slowly springing to its full size before their very eyes.

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy." She whispered, still confused at the small show of gratitude.

"I am not doing that for you." He spat. "I am doing that for him," he said, turning to leaving her and Harry alone.

I knew you weren't doing it for me. I'm evidently beneath you...

"Harry?" she said, raising her teary eyes at him. To her side, Snape was barely alive. Out in the larger world, Draco was dying. It seemed that everything around her was falling apart again.

"I-I didn't know." He stammered, nervously. "Look, I'll see what I can do, okay? I don't wish him dead any more than you do, even if he'd been a prick most of his life, he doesn't deserve this." He said, handing her a small bag. "Here, I-I brought you your books."

She took the bag, smiling and turned to the wall. Snape's vitals were seemingly improving. Well, they were better than they were before, more stable. She looked at him, he seemed peaceful, his breathing was deeper and clearer.

Now, he appeared to look like he really was asleep. And because of his comfort and relief, Hermione felt a sense of hope spring forth.

Maybe a restorative potion would work now?

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He continued to practise, alone, in secrecy. He'd even found a room where Potter or Black would
never wander into. Besides, they had never managed to find him in here. The room, currently, was full of martial art books and training equipment. There were magically animated fighting mannequins. Sometimes, he would spend time practising martial arts and other times, duelling.

Now, after the training, he would walk the school grounds with his head raised high and his back straight. A scoff of righteousness permanently etched on his face at his achievements. He dared anyone to attack him, it would be their fight to lose.

It was the Parting feast. Tomorrow they would depart Hogwarts for their last trip home. Embark the train at Hogsmeade, never to return to this pit of inequality and patronism, the monument to the silent ruling of lions.

Unexpectedly, she passed next to him in a hallway, and he didn't even flinch. Snape acted with a cool indifference, acting like he didn't even notice her. But inside, it still hurt. And, along with the rest of the hurt he had endured over the years, he pushed that emotion along with everything else to some forgotten corner of his mind. It was occluded constantly, overcrowded with every insecurity, every positive emotion he could have.

His chest was void, filled with a blackness. He didn't feel remorse or pity. Not for anyone or anything. He felt her turning slightly, glancing at him, but he didn't react. She had bought this on herself with her reluctance to speak out at the many prime opportunities handed to her. Besides, Snape knew that he'd lost her. To be truthful, she'd lost him as well. He was easily the best student, had the highest marks. That was something that even Black or Potter couldn't take away or sully, even if they tried to, they'd never achieve it now.

...A day and a half later he was crouching in the high bushes. There were five more Death Eaters behind him, but they wouldn't help. He ran to the door and straightened up. It was dark and he knew that the wife and her child were at the school play, but he was still home.

His neighbour.

For years he had listened to the cries and screams coming from that house. And for years he had seen them covered in bruises. The young boy had casts and bandages more times than he could count. This man reminded him of his father, so it was a sort of poetic justice to use him in this way. He stepped closer to the door and knocked.

Swearing under his breath. He knocked again. All he could hear was angry heavy steps, the man appeared to be stomping towards the front door. The rims of his vision coloured in red. The door swung open…

...It was two hours to midnight when he walked in to the atrium of this large Manor house. He does not know to whom this Manor belonged, and he didn't care. He was beyond caring at that point.

All he knew was that the atrium was full of people. Soon, he ventured, they might all be his brothers and sisters, a family of sorts, like the type he imagined when he was so much younger. He brought forth the man he had apprehended earlier, but he refrained from touching him. Instead, Severus used his wand.

Stepping in a circle, the man followed, unwilling but unable to resist. Snape had thought long and hard what he would do, and he had it all played out in his head, every single step.

Silence, he didn't feel compelled to speak, so he flicked his wand instead. The man strips from his ragged clothes, his eyes panicked.
Focused on the man. "Does my Lord wish for me to release his vocal cords?"

"Let us hear him," replied the Dark Lord, he flicked his wand.

"What sort of sodding fagots are you? I'm gonna fuck...." Screamed the man in their midst.

"On second thoughts," he looked at Snape. "Shut him up." He flicked his wand and the man's throat constricted. Finally, he was mute, probably indefinitely for the rest of his miserable life, which wouldn't be too long.

Another flick of the wand and the man was suspended in mid-air. His limbs and body were twitching, flopping and writhing like a fish on the hook. He summoned the picture of his father to the front of his mind. Darkness, only darkness was in his heart. Carefully and with ease, he secured the limbs and cast a modified stasis charm. The man hovered a few centimetres off the ground, still twitching uncontrollably.

"This is the incantation from the sex clubs, what is he going to do? Fuck him?" mocked someone from the public but he did not pay attention to their worthless mumblings. They'd see soon enough. They would see and then they would fear...him. Another flick of the wand. The man screamed albeit soundlessly. His mind strayed to Dumbledore, the one who betrayed him. Another flick of his wand.

Peter Pettigrew, another flick. Lupin, three more flicks. Black, five more flicks.

The atrium was deadly silent. In the air, the suspended man's face is a mask of agony. The skin was peeling from his arms and legs in long strips that curled around his wrists and ankles, mimicking bizarre, ruffled, cuffs or a kebab that hadn't been cut properly. He grabbed the man by the hair and stared into his eyes. Digging and searching for the images of what he'd done to his wife and child.

When he found them his gaze lingered. Suddenly, he stepped away, pulling his mind from the man's head, and leaving tears in place of his penetrating gaze. He flicked the wand and the man rose into the air. Snape, set his eyes on the Dark Lord, waiting for the nod of approval.

The Dark Lord tilted his head.

Snape pointed his wand muttering under his breath. "Crucio." Limbs begin twitching, splashing droplets of blood all over. The squishy sound of skinless flesh and the loud cracks of bones echoed mercilessly around this large once pristine atrium.

He let the torment last until he sensed a silent command. Lowering the man.

"He still is conscious, amazing."

"He received the potion prior to our arrival my Lord. He will stay like this until he dies, no matter what I do to him."

"Ingenious. Did you plan anything else?"

"Just one more thing." He stepped toward the man and the skin around the man's organs peel, curling toward his abdomen. 'James Potter.' Collective groans echo around them. He glanced at the Dark Lord and received a nod.

"Avada Kedavra" he whispered. The spell flashed instantaneously and the body fell limp in its bonds. He released it and the flopping mass of flesh and bone thuds on the ground.
He was soaked, not tired as such but in desperate need of a shower.

"You exceeded all expectations, Severus." The Dark Lord smiled. "Lucius, you will accompany him, let him rest and refresh. In an hour, he will be one of you."

While they walked, Death Eaters parted to let them pass. Snape's head was held high, he heard whispers, muttered under their breath "monster". It made him smile. They wouldn't dare touch him now. He had just shown them how ruthlessly brutal he could be, had impressed the Dark Lord.

Now, they, knew.

Darkness, blessed darkness. He was a monster, special kind of one. And he deserved more, far more than this. There was no way that he could ever atone for his crimes. He did deserve all that he was receiving but she didn't.

She shouldn't have been punished.

Because now he was suffering for it. No! That was a big karmic mistake. If she'd lived, lived to be happy in front of his eyes – that would've been true punishment. Her death had been largely pointless, useless. There had been no real reason behind it.

No pain. Right, monsters didn't feel pain.
He’d just killed a man, but he didn’t feel a thing inside, maybe just emptiness. Not one single emotion, whether that was good or bad he wasn’t sure.

He could tell it had perhaps shocked Lucius because he was being led in near silence to where he assumed was a bedroom with an ensuite attached.

Severus knew from personal experience that the nearest was a floor up. Enough time for Lucius to attempt to talk, or console.

And as luck would have it, he caught a glimpse of his reflection and he stared, dumbfounded. So much blood coated him, but still nothing. The emotion was gone, the words and feelings wouldn’t come.

"Gods Severus," Whispered a pale Lucius. He turned his light blue eyes to observe his friend. Apparently and quite noticeably to Severus, Lucius was shaken up under that usually fierce façade. "You know I have nothing against good torture," He shuddered again, struggling to rid it from memory without a pensive to hand. "But that was, Gods."

Awkward silence. Lucius had paled. More so than his usually colourless visage, Severus thought.

"They deserved it," he muttered in response.

"They?" Lucius questioned, picking up on the plural, as expected.

"My father, Albus, Pettigrew, Lupin--" His voice seemed hollow. "]--Black, and Potter. All of them, they deserved it."

Lucius flinched, nodding in agreement. Severus knew it was all he could do because he figured for Lucius to say otherwise might exacerbate his mindset.

"I-I was wanting to ask you," Lucius started, nervously. "You are free to refuse, of course."

"Name it?" Severus muttered. His eyes still hollow and nearly lifeless.

"Would you become my brother?" He asked, an almost timid tone to his request.

"I will, in a matter of hours," Snape replied, coolly. "It was promised."

"No, not like that." Lucius smiled nervously. He quickly procured a silver dagger with an exquisitely ornamental handle from the folds of his robes. "My brother in blood?"
Suddenly quirking a brow, Severus looked at Lucius with a stare of curiosity. He had never been asked to do this before. It was certainly unusual, and quite possibly strange to have even been asked. "Why would you even consider to pollute your blood with mine?" he was at loss, confused but then honoured. Not entirely sure how he should answer the question.

"Nonsense! You are one of most powerful wizards of your age I know, and your power will only grow from here on out." Lucius reasoned. "Merlin's beard, Severus," He intoned. "You just held a man in the air wandlessly while you used your wand on him! If our power is in the blood, I would be the one at gain. Or perhaps, order your blood in litres, like a vampire."

They chuckled. "As it is not, I really want you on my side. And I pray to Salazar that I never to get on your wrong side nor be your foe in our later lives."

"You couldn't Lucius, even if you try." He nodded, a faint appearance of a smile graced his lips but as soon as it had come it had gone from his face.

Lucius wanted to tie himself to power, Snape could easily understand that.

He was honoured, truly. Lucius was his friend, the only one he had. Some would even say a best friend, but the term was always difficult to digest, he had no real things to base that on. Up until recently, specifically starting at Hogwarts, Lucius was all he had.

Without any further uttered word. Severus took the dagger and slashed across his right open palm before returning the dagger to Lucius who mimicked his motion. Simultaneously, they joined hands, slash to slash. The blood dripped from each clenched palm to settle on a thick rug beneath them. Neither one of them uttered a word, but the magic flared around them, shining brightly between their joined hands. Severus could feel it, the bond. It felt accepting, warm and caring.

And he figured that not many would have connected those feelings with Lucius Malfoy of all people, but then again, not many knew Lucius like he did, like he had learned to. Eventually, the light faded and instinctively they unclasped hands to see the identical wounds were sealed.

Lucius smiled. "Look at me, Severus."

"I have my shield, Lucius, no need for you to check."

"What are you going to do when you drop it?.."

"Who says I will? Ever again."

"Severus,...what you did, they are all scared of you now."

"Good." He said, cocking his head to the side. "That was the point of the exercise. You know me better than that."

"I do." He nodded, imperceptibly. "That's why I wonder...how much of what you did was connected with the latest gossip column."

"I do not follow gossips, Lucius," he said, looking askance at his pale, verging on anaemic friend. "I have no use for them."

Lucius seemed largely dubious. "I see. So you do not care that she is marrying Potter?"

The name was said with such derision it almost made him smile. "That is an old news," he rebutted. "If you call that 'the latest' you need to catch up, fast."
Lucius could tell from the response. How else would he know of their engagement? "I am certain that this is fresh, they have published the date."

"Good."

Severus could tell that his friend was perplexed. "Good?" He questioned. His blonde eyebrow quirked, remaining elevated as if hanging by an invisible string.

He nodded in agreement. "We are at war, but thankfully the Daily Prophet is doing a great job by keeping the public masses misinformed." He really did think that. He was more than aware that war was coming. But for Severus, it was more a matter of which side he would choose.

Finally, he made a choice that to Lucius made him breathe an audible sigh of relief. "Lucius, I am going to take a shower." He looked at the room, almost pure black ebony marble. White would be so hard to remove all the blood from, it would be a shame to taint the bathroom.

"It would be rude to show up like this again," he said, lifting his soggy bloodsoaked robes. The stench of iron filled his nostrils. "Would you please clean up my robes of blood?"

"You won't return in these," Lucius stated. "I have your Death Eater robes in here." He motioned to the bedroom and the robes laid on the made bed fit for Severus to wear.

"I'll be done fast," Severus replied.

~S ~ S ~ S ~

Five days. Five days had passed since Narcissa came in this room.

Matron was satisfied with his progress. Less and less he was looking like a living corpse. His skin, still translucent again, pale. Oddly, Matron saw this as progress compared to the parchment yellow of before. Even better was the undeniable fact that Snape was beginning to gain some weight. She had even begun to ponder about incorporating some exercises, to build him muscle strength. Though she had wondered if would still be able to withstand the exertion?

Hermione looked at him. Because his face wasn't so gaunt, she found herself able to study his features in more depth. Why had they ever talked about him as being ugly? He was surely not the epitome of beauty, but when relaxed, his face had an almost magnetic attraction. He was all sharp cheekbones, strong jawline and severe features that had all helped him with solidifying his seemingly stronger personality.

His vital signs were getting better by the day, that had to count for something surely?

And tonight, Hermione was more at peace. Harry had sent her an owl with the news that he had finally managed to persuade a curse-breaker at St. Mungo's to help Draco with his magical malady. The thing is, the War had taken so many lives, no one deserved to die, not anymore. Not even Draco.

She glanced at her notes, books surrounding her as always. Matron was completely against her idea, but she was adamant that she should at least try and help him. Waiting wasn't an option, they had waited for months now. Tonight was the night, tonight she would be putting her idea into practice, to see if it would work as she hoped.

She had carefully studied all the angles, all the possible implications. Sure that her magical skill would suffice.
With a trembling sigh, she made to stand and approached the bed.

"Right. Now, Professor, you may be mad at me for what I am about to do, but this is only for your good." She uttered to her non-responding Professor. "The Malfoys are free from charges, they didn't receive any awards, and they have to pay the hefty fine but they are free. You are free, the tribunal has pronounced you a war hero. And, you've received 'Order of Merlin First Class'. That is something to celebrate? But you can't celebrate it in this state." She sighed.

How would he accept what she was about to do, what she'd done? "Right. Here it goes, all or nothing. Don't fight me now, please."

She reached across and opened his eyes, but the moment she let go, they naturally fell closed. That wouldn't do, she needed him to have his eyes open. But, in order to do so, she'd need a better angle.

"I am so sorry, professor."

Climbing onto the bed, Hermione carefully straddled his thin frame. And once again, she gently opened his eyes with her cleansed fingers, gazing into the closed-off surface. All she could see were two obsidian mirrors staring back at her, empty. She could quite clearly see her reflection in them. She had continued to gaze, muttering…

…Darkness. She was surrounded by darkness.

Blank, his mind was completely blank. She was desperate. But then…a sliver of memory flickers and instinctively, she reached for it…

…He was kneeling. He was not the only one.

She desired to raise her eyes and observe the others, but his eyes were glued to the floor. Emptiness. No, not emptiness – pain. Pain so profound that she felt it as her own. It was so intense, the feeling of being choked. Hermione wondered why would he see pain as emptiness? This pain was more composed of bitterness, loneliness, heartbreak. If she was capable of it, she would have cried.

"These are our new recruits, the ones that satisfied my conditions. Only the most deserving ones will bear my mark, either by blood or by accomplishment. Bear in mind, that those of impure blood, are accomplished more to deserve this honour, and treat them as equals from now on." Pride, he felt pride! "Your hand, Avery!"

A scream broke through the space filled with a murmur. Another then another. A total of eight screams.

"Severus, your hand." Without a seconds notice he raised his hand. Severus raised his head and Hermione very nearly gasped. The man in front of her was good looking, blindingly so, but his eyes were inhuman. Apparently Voldemort, before he died and lost all the humanity from his appearance was a sight to behold.

Stunning. The man's beauty was seductive. He outstretched his left hand, looking in those inhuman eyes. "Your final test, Severus. Your loyalty and allegiance to me."

The man uttered the incantation, his eyes boring deeply into his.

A sharp jab of the wand into flesh. Pain! She felt his muscles tense, she could feel their strength and nimbleness. Teeth ground under the pressure, but he didn't release the sound, kept it inside. The reality of fighting pain dotted his skin in a fine smattering of sweat, it beaded, across his flesh. Then, was the pain, the searing of his skin. His muscles trembled. Was that?
Did she feel an erection forming? Gods, this wasn't good. Quickly realising she needed to break the contact…

Oh, Gods, the pain!!!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

"Why did you wake us up in the middle of the night Poppy?" Harry asked, worried. He and Lucius were making their way to the improvised room. Poppy's face was scared, verging on anxious.

"I told her I oppose, I never even thought she would do it," she lamented, shaking her head.

The three had reached the entrance and froze at what they could see. Harry blinked. Hermione was on the bed, kneeling above Snape.

Oddly, she wasn't actually touching him, unless you counted the fact she was holding his eyes open. Harry thought that Hermione looked frozen, petrified. That didn't fill him with any relief, but then, neither did the sound of beeping and alarms that were echoing through the room. Naturally, Harry had stepped forward to help her, but a firm hand grabbed his shoulder.

Turning to face him, Harry noticed that Malfoy was pale, probably more so than usual but there was something else too. There was a definite anger flaring in his eyes

"You cannot break the contract now, Potter, or you've doomed them both."

"What?" Harry spat, confused.

"That is the reason I see mud…muggleborns as not deserving. They learn something and they just go to apply it, without thought or consideration of the consequences."

"Whatever she is doing," Harry seethed. "That's Hermione you are talking about…"

"Yes, 'the brightest witch of her age', the biggest idiot I had the misfortune to come across. You do not use Legilimency if you are not good at it. You do not attempt Legilimency on the unconscious person, little less if the person is in a coma." His voice was tight with restrained anger "Pray the Gods that she did not condemn them both. Pray the Gods that her foolish antics won't cause any damage to him, or I swear…no prison, no sentence would prevent me to exact my revenge on her."

Harry frowned. "So, what are we to do?" He gulped. This was the Malfoy he knew, dark, cold and deadly. Not an ounce of friendliness.

"We wait. I might have tried to interfere, but your friend is one strong witch. You see, if she managed to establish the contact without her wand, the best option would be to wait." He pointed to the sofa where Hermione's wand was stuck in a book, marking the page.

Malfoy hobbled to the sofa and sat heavily. His eyes angry and worried in equal measure, his posture rigid as he sits next to his ailing best friend.

He sat there, worried and waiting.
Lost! He lost all that day. He gained the world that day. He designated himself for eternal loneliness…except…he wasn’t alone now! A presence. Female presence, but not her. Another female. And she was there, in his memory, with him. In his head. The pain, sure there was a pain but the reaction to it was not his. He is used to pain. Curiosity which was misplaced. And panic, the need to…break the contact. The female is still present, here, drifting in the darkness with him. He can’t see her, she is familiar, but only just. Past lover? No! She is in pain, panicked, afraid of him…nothing new. And yet, she is so concerned for him, she holds him in high regard. But Merlin, her mind…it is in shambles, a mess! And it produces thoughts. Conscious! Alive! The female is alive! So he is alive then too. Not hell then, just his mind, that is comforting and aggravating. No walls! The female mind is panicked and in pain. But how… Assaulted! He is assaulted! Violated! She is in his mind!

‘Out! Get the fuck out of my head!’ screams his mind and he pushes hard, he pushes her out. Alone! He is alone and alive. But why? And how? Who is she? Why is her mind so disorganised, she is knowledgeable too. Who. Is. She?

Harry and Malfoy jumped when Hermione rolled to the floor with a loud thud. For past five or six hours they could do nothing but watch. Hermione was frozen in that bizarre position, shaking good part of the time. Snape was moaning (!) occasionally or hissing. Harry thought it was disturbing, but then the whole situation was disturbing. He should have asked Hermione what was she planning, press her more. He so much gets used to following her instruction, never, not once he thought that at one point she will need his help. Malfoy was like a statue. Mute. Angry. Worried. He was watching them with unbroken attention. Now he kneeled next to Hermione

“Put her on the sofa. Let me see what happened.” That snapped him from his trance

“Why is she crying?”

“I have no idea Potter, your friend was crazy enough to do what she did. You are familiar with the saying about playing with fire…are you not?”

He nodded, dumbly, placing Hermione on the bed. Malfoy was still kneeling, he opened her eyes, same way Hermione was doing to Snape and gaze into them. Look on Malfoy’s face was pure disgust like he was touching something absolutely vile, he wished he could punch him. Poppy was on the door, she checks on Snape’s vitals and waits patiently. Finally, Malfoy raised his eyes to them, releasing Hermione hastily

“She was just stuck in memory, Calming Drouth will suffice.” Without the word, Poppy moved to
follow his advice

“Why is she crying like this?”

“It was not a pleasant memory, Potter.”

“Why is she holding her hand? The scar from Bellatrix!”

“Is on her right hand, she is holding her left hand.” Malfoy raise with a hiss and huff

“Then why?” he grabbed him by the sleeve

“Because, Potter, this” Malfoy hissed, tugging on his left sleeve and exposing paled Dark Mark “did not come without the price and it wasn’t walk in the park. Now release me, I want to see if she caused any damage. Start praying.”

He released him and Malfoy hobbled to Snape’s bed. Harry sat next to Hermione, cradling her in his arms and rocking her gently. She was his chosen sister, his only family and he didn’t pay attention to her at all. He was watching as Malfoy’s shoulders slumped in relaxation

“You are in luck, Potter, your friend even more so.”

“How is he?” asked Poppy worriedly

“He will be fine. I cannot claim for sure, but I do believe that Miss Grainger’s stunt even helped his condition. He seems more conscious than I’d expect.”

“I apologize, I will remove Miss Granger from his vicinity and resolve her of her care for him. Merlin knows, after this, she has no arguments to contrary.”

“You will do no such thing Poppy,” Sighed Malfoy “In all her folly, she did manage unthinkable, she somehow managed to establish a connection. Unfortunately, she is his best hope to recover.”

“How? That is…”

“Rare indeed. As to how I have no idea. Only brave and crazy, Poppy…”

“You should know it.” Chuckled Poppy, and Malfoy smiled at her. Harry was stunned, were they just joking like old friends? Hermione stirred and opened her eyes

“Harry? What happened?” she frowned then her eyes grew wide “Professor! Is he woken up?” she pushed him and placed her feet on the ground, then noticed Malfoy and jumped at him. Malfoy lost his balance and managed to keep them both on their feet by some miracle. Harry grabbed Hermione by shoulders, to stabilise her as much as to keep her away from Malfoy. She grabbed Malfoy’s hand, clutching at it

“Why? Why so much pain? You call yourself his friend, how could you allow him to live with that? To go through that?”

“Unhand me you idiotic little chit!” hissed Malfoy “I was the one who kept him alive if you are looking for someone to blame, turn your head to your friend. A walking, talking monument to all that pain.” He tugged his hand from Hermione’s clutches and walked out with as much dignity as his injured leg allowed him “Poppy, keep me notified, please.”

“I will Lucius, give my best to Narcissa and Draco.”
“Poppy?”

“He was my patient even before Severus. You may not like him Mr Potter, but he is one of my children same as you three.” She huffed and walked away

“Harry, I feel dizzy.” Weakly said Hermione and he returned her to the sofa “What was he talking about? Why do I have to look at you?”

“We have to talk.” Harry sighed

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“Wait, let me see if I get this right.” Hermione sighed, she couldn’t believe what Harry was saying in past hour or so “Snape was a best friend and in love with your mum. Your father, Sirius, Remus and the Rat bullied him through his entire schooling period. Snape revealed prophecy that prompted Voldemort to kill your mum, so he made a deal with Dumbledore to save her, but the deal failed, we all know why.”

“Yes.”

“So, Snape wanted to die, but Dumbledore tricked him into staying alive and help you stay alive.”

“Yup, that sums it up.”

“That can’t be all.” She mumbled, what she saw “Oh, Harry, you can’t… you do not have an even faintest idea how much he was hurt. That amount of pain was…it is like you are petrified inside. Like you lost all ability to feel! And what I’ve seen…”

“In his head?”

“No, his body.” Tears brimmed at her eyes and spilt

“Ok, Hermione, that is not just creepy but also unsettling.” Harry shuddered “I don’t know how you even can….”

“You don’t understand, Harry.” She lowered her voice to a whisper “He is full of scars. But, ok, yes, some of them are from curses and magically healed, but… Most of them are… His back,” she choked “like someone used them to put out cigarettes on them. He has scars like this.” She pulled her sleeve pointing at small scar below her elbow “You get a scar like this when you cut yourself on a glass, deep. He has scars that you would get if you have an open fracture. And they are all healed in a Muggle way, and the doctor was not so good at that! They had to be from before he started Hogwarts.”

They both looked at the man on the bed, sleeping peacefully. Her eyes couldn’t stop producing tears

“Is that, what you didn’t want other to see?” whispered Harry and she nodded, his shoulders fell “Good. I was afraid that you..you know…”

“Oh, I’ve seen him naked, but there is nothing interesting about Snape having an erection. I mean, it is not a news material, imagine the title ‘The man got horny – surprise!’ because that never happens.” She rolls her eyes

“Hermione!!”

“What, it is easy to solve, there is a spell…”
“There is a spell?!”

“Shure.”

“And you know it?”

“Well, Poppy taught me after she found out what I was doing…”

“What were you doing?!!” Harry’s eyes bulged and she frowned

“I was using this spell ” she hissed and pointed wand at his crotch releasing the gust of icy cold air on him

“Blimey Hermione!” Harry jumped “That is…vile”

“Hence the spell Poppy taught me. And if you keep on cutting me in the middle of the sentence I just might teach Ginny how it goes.”

“Point taken. Hermione, you look tired, will you sleep a bit, I’ll stay with you and him.”

“Harry, how can you hate him after all you know? What I want to say, you know only what you learned by accident, what he gave you and what Sirius and Remus told you. And the latter is not some reliable source in light of this new information. You told us at the final battle that he was Dumbledore’s man and for me, that was enough. But, what they didn’t tell us? How much we actually don’t know?”

“I don’t know, I hated him….blamed him for so long, I can’t change my mind about not liking him. I respect him. I am not like you.”

“I hated him too, remember? I set his robes on fire in the first year.”

“No, you never really hated him. And you respected him even when you were against him. For you, it is easy to accept all this, for rest of us, not so much. Ron will never be able to forgive him for George’s ear…”

“Should I then never forgive Sheamus? He hit me with a curse during the Final Battle, by mistake.”

“That is different…”

“How? It is not. Never mind, I am tired and I need a rest.”

“Yes you do, girl. Potter, go home, I’ll watch over them.” That was Poppy.

She wanted to talk to Poppy, to ask her so many questions, but her eyes were heavy and she drifted into a sleep.
A/N: Dear readers, I know I was until now posting daily. Well, in next 10 - 15 days I am forced to post every 2 or 3 days. I am on business trip and not every place I’m visiting have good (or if at all) internet. So, I’ll post when I have conditions. When I return to my home, I’ll resume with daily updates. ^-^

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Darkness stirs. Alive. But how? And why? What happen? Who won? And who has him? His motionless body. His mind was assaulted so maybe Dark Lord won. No, no! His walls are down, he has no protection and no strength to raise them. His walls are down, all of them. So not hell, just his mind. Oh, Merlin! Not his mind. Hell is preferable to that! Darkness stirs again…No! No! No! Not another memory!

The room is full of people. Four months after he received his mark, and his reputation is now built. Whenever he walks, they make a room for him. Monster! Dark Lord’s monster. Whispers follow him as he walks, shoulder to shoulder with Lucius. Lucius has a spring in his step. What did his friend, his brother, planning, what game he plays now? Bellatrix is courting Dark Lord, Rodolphus does not look happy. Dark Lord notice them, he looks…relieved

“Ah, Lucius, Severus! Walk with me. I have some good news for you, Severus.”

Lily! His stomach flips for a second, maybe they managed to kill Potter! Hope rises like a tide before he stops on it. He is not that lucky. His face is impassive as the emptiness settles in his stomach and his chest.

“My Lord” they intone unanimously and follow him

“Severus you are so versatile talented, this decision didn’t come easily to me.” Starts Dark Lord and he begins to worry “You are bored in raids, and I can’t blame you. After much deliberation, I decided that the best way is to follow your natural talents.”

“My Lord?” he is confused which is unfamiliar feeling to him

“I arranged a Mastery Apprenticeship for you. You will travel tomorrow, and learn under one of the best Potion Masters in the world.”

“My Lord!” he is…not happy, he does not feel happiness anymore, honoured, confused, worried “Does my Lord wish to send me away? Did I not served you well?”

“You did Severus, more than well. So well that I desire to reward you. This is my gift to you.”

“Thank you, my Lord, I will do my best not to disappoint.”

He glances at Lucius who is grinning. His face is calm, but he knows Lucius well enough to read
him. He knew, hence the spring in his step. Lucius offered him the opportunity, but he refused. Mastery is costly and he does not have that money.

He could cry. For all the bad that joining Death Eaters brought in his life, he would never have his Mastery if he didn’t join them. And that hurts. Darkness caresses him, a gentle flutter against his face. Is he really crying? A female voice, tender, soft, whispering but he still can’t recognize the words. Not Lily! He knows now. So who? Medi-witch? Bellatrix – no, not her, she does not possess a tender bone in her body. Narcissa maybe? Darkness shifts again.

He is 21, almost 22 now. He stands on the doorstep of his home. When he opens a door big black bird swoops over his head and into the house, he follows. He should be still on the road but one letter from Lucius brought him back home early. Pregnant... not bothering to shrug his travel cloak he takes a parchment and scribbles two notes. Glancing at huge raven looking at him dispassionately, this bird is a first living thing that evokes any type of emotion in him, for a long time.

“Can you find a Dark Lord, Hades?” bird looks at him with reproach and looks almost insulted “Fine. Give him this. Then, find Lucius and give him this.” He transfigures note into a feather and tucks it in bird’s wing.

He regained at least some peace in the year of his absence, it felt nice to be far away from London, far away from her. Lucius letters kept him informed, he knew to what he is coming back. All too soon his mark burned, he frowns and summons his robes and mask...

...Another unfamiliar Manor. It does not matter, not to him. He is among first that arrive. Narcissa greets him and he is glad to see her face ‘She shouldn’t be here.’ Taking her by the hand, engaged in a small talk he leads her to the chair and offers her a seat, kneeling next to her on one knee. Covertly he presses a phial into her palm

“Hide it.”

“Thank you.” She whispers. her eyes are grateful and mild.

He raises and continues to linger next to her, scanning the room. Dark Lord enters, followed by still smitten Bellatrix and gloomy looking Rudolphus.

“Severus, welcome back!”

“My Lord.” He bows

“I am most satisfied with the report of your progress. And impressed with your bird, smart animal, did not take a liking of Bella.”

“My Lord?”

“It does not matter. You return in good time. I have plans for you.” Dark Lord bids him to follow his slow walk and he obeyed “I need a messenger, someone Dumbledore won’t hex at the sight. Someone he thinks he can...save.” Words are slipped like slow dripping poison “I need someone I can trust. And, through, I do trust my people in the inner circle, Dumbledore wouldn’t. you on the other hand... What is the matter, Severus?”

“I am the last person Dumbledore would want to save my Lord.”

“Ah, but he will, from me. He is ever the dreamer. Manipulative but naïve in s many ways. You see, for him is inconceivable that I would accept you, and he will try to sway you back under his wing.”
“My Lord?”

“By giving you a menial task, to carry a simple message, he will be convinced that you still struggle for my attention. Build the connection, let him sway you.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“I want you to brew me a potion, and fast, as fast as you can. I already gave the instruction to Lucius. Use his resources for the potion.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“That would be all for now.” Dark Lord dismisses him and he returns to Narcissa and Lucius.

“Severus! I was thrilled to hear of your return. You must come by for dinner and tell us all about your travels!”

“Are you sure you want my stories or my gifts?”

“When did you hear a Malfoy refusing a gift.”

“The Lord gave me instructions…”

“Then is settled, you will come tonight and be my guest until you finish your task. And, Narcissa will have company when I am on the raids.”

“You would leave me in the hands of another man!” Narcissa has appalled look on her face but gleam in her eye

“Not another man, Cissy, but in the hands of Severus.”

Bitterness. Resentment. Still, after so many years, he should have guessed it then. He is not that powerful. He has some talents but not the power they saw in him. If he did, she would still be alive. He would be dead. Blissfully so, relieved from the torment of his own mind. Removed, he was removed. Put to the side and used. Wrong choices. So many of them. Stop! Stop!! Stop it!!! Voice again. Soft, tender, worried. For him? Why?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat on the sofa and rubs her eyes. What an odd dream. She must be suffering from the consequences of her attempt to wake him up. Not that she succeeded. And they were all mad at her. But, nobody was doing anything and she can’t let him die. Not because he is her professor, not because he is a hero, but because he made it. After that day, he was still breathing. And so many other weren’t.

What did Harry tell her? He can’t forgive him, not only because of mutual animosity but because of Dumbledore. Harry lost his faith in Dumbledore after he seen Snape’s memories. But, Dumbledore was always plotting and manipulating, that was nothing new. Or maybe it was, for Harry at least.

In the end, nothing mattered. The Light, the Dark, the Greater Good. Nothing mattered. They won the war on an account of selfish desires. Snape wanted revenge. Narcissa wanted her son safe. Malfoy…errr…Draco wanted out. Neville wanted revenge. Almost all kills that came from the side of Light were fueled by some sort of revenge or protection. Not a single grand idea won this war. And why this was started, also because of the small petty needs of common people.
No, he can’t die. No one should die because of megalomaniac needs for power and respect. Voldemort’s, Dumbledore’s, or anyone else. She stands up and walks to the bed. He is still peaceful, sleeping.

“You have to wake up, professor. You have the rest of your life to enjoy, really enjoy. Please, wake up!”

She feels dizzy, stumbling she goes back to the sofa and lie down again.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

They are sitting around the table in the Malfoy Manor, Lucius is laughing, which is a rare sight indeed.

“And you left him like that?”

“I did.” He replies though he is not laughing, not anymore

“Then how did he managed to remove it?”

“I have no idea, but his skin looked rather raw.”

“Oh, you are devious my friend.”

“Oh, you two.” Sigh Narcissa “Tell me, Severus, how many broken hearts you left behind.”

“I was there to study, when I was not brewing I was in the library. If librarian fell for my charms I can hardly help it, he was, if you must know, very old wizard.”

“We have to find you a woman, Severus. Some nice witch to settle down. You are in the right age after all.”

“I need to do something first, Cissa. But, I thank you for thinking of me.”

“Nonsense, Severus, after brewing this for me…you have our eternal gratitude.”

“You should have told me earlier. I do not understand why Lucius couldn’t brew it.”

“I tried…” Lucius looks uncomfortable “…and failed, four times.”

“You do know what this potion do? If you take it, that is it, one chance. Full proof chance, but you won’t be able to have any more kids.”

“It is better than not having kids at all.” Sigh Narcissa

“I told you Cissa, I would love to have an heir, but not at the price of your life.”

“Now my life, the life of our child won’t be in danger. Severus, we owe you a debt of life, our child’s life. Now, if you will excuse me, I think I’m going to lie down.”

“Severus…” Lucius turns to him as soon as Narcissa leaves, he waves his hand

“Not another word, Lucius.” Lucius gazing at him for a long time before he nodded “You have the instruction for the potion?”

“I do.”
“What is it?”

“What is it?”

“Draught of Despair” he nods, he knows of that potion. He feels excited, another challenge. A
breath of life in his stale existence. Lucius gave him an odd glance. They continue to sit in the
companionable silence.

Draco. Did he survive? It would be unfair if he didn’t. They traded everything for that one child.
Peace. That was the only time when he was in peace. The female. She is still there. She is and she
isn’t. In his mind. Like a small rock in a shoe, uncomfortable nudging at him. He is…annoyed.
“Hades, can you find Hogwarts and deliver this?” he asks the bird, Hades ruffle his feathers, insulted at his question “Fine, then give this to Dumbledore, no one else. He has to be alone. Wait for his reply.”

The bird flies away, and he goes to the laboratory. This potion is demanding, but he thrives on challenge. Cutting, crushing, stirring...a flaw. There is a way to make this potion better, more effective. Should he do it? Maybe if he makes two versions, one original and one his. Yes, that is what he will do. Just couple more hours today and then he can return to the book he was reading. Peace. Among the potions and written knowledge, he found his peace. He tests his walls. They are strong but behind them, there is too much pain, there is guilt...he fortifies them. He has no time for that kind of nonsense.

Hades returns. He reads the note and finishes up quickly. He does not try to change his robes. There is no point in impressing the old man. Tossing a handful of floo he calls the address. It is a forest clearing, and only torn, half destroyed cottage, but it has a fireplace. Good enough for him. He finds a rickety chair and sits on it. It is not like he is in hurry to meet with the old man, he can wait. Wind swirls and Dumbledore apparates near the thorn cottage wall. He does not rise from the chair.

“That was an unusual request, Mr Snape.”

“Master.” He corrects dryly

“What was that.”

“It is Master Snape, Headmaster.”

“Ah yes, I remember, I read about it in the Prophet. You took your Mastery. What can I do for you, Master Snape? Is there any reason for secrecy?”

“You can’t do anything for me. However, I do have a task.” He stands, hands the letter and sits back “I am but a messenger.”

Dumbledore looks confused. He opens the letter and reads. He raises his head and looking at him

“Are you privy to the content of this letter.”

“No.” and that is the truth, even if the letter was open he didn’t read it, it is not his concern

“Did you join him?”
“What do you think Headmaster?”

“I am hoping that maybe there is still hope for you.”

“Hope is for fools and idiots. I’m building my own path.”

“You chose the wrong path, Mr Snape.”

“I chose the only path given to me, Headmaster. One where I am not Imperioed to take an oath, threatened or bullied, one where no one turns its head from me.”

“So much resentment Mr Snape, it is sad.” Dumbledore looked sad at his word almost wounded

“The truth Headmaster is never pretty, but I do not turn my head from it.”

“What is it that you are going to do?”

“Wait for your reply and take it to him.” He watches as Dumbledore sighs. Acting, it all just an act. He doesn’t care about him. Correction, Dumbledore couldn’t care less about him. Why? Dumbledore scribbles a note and hands it to him

“I do hope that you will reconsider your position Master Snape.” He says and vanishes in a swirl of air.

Hypocrite. Old goat. That’s what it was! He did fear that Dark Lord could use his skills. He chuckles. It is a hollow sound. ‘Your loss old man, you can have your werewolves and your bullies, you lost me.’

Lies! All lies! They both used him. And he let them, like the fool he is. Always an idiot. This is close, too close. He doesn’t want to remember. Not anymore. Not ever. Walls he has to raise them. He has to. He has to raise his wall, he has to get rid of that unwanted presence in his mind. Floating sensation. Panic. What is going on? Something warm wraps around his senses. The same voice is cooing to him. Why he can’t hear the words? Who. The fuck. Is. She? Peaches. Peaches and citrus. What is going on?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“I know you are angry at me and you have every right to be, I did just want to help.” Her voice is thin and small but she still argues her case with very angry Matron “I promise, I won’t do anything foolish this time. You can stand and watch.”

“Hmh” huffs Matron

“What I propose is a Muggle method. It will help him. Maybe not to wake up but when he wakes up. I swear, no magic, save from one small charm. You can perform it.”

“Miss Granger…”

“Use any connection you have in Muggle hospitals, make an enquiry. Don’t just cut me out, please. It will help.”

“Very well Miss Granger, give me a few minutes. I will check our request before I make my decision.”

Matron leaves and she is breathing a breath of relief. She knows she is right about this. In her plan,
there is no uncertainty. You cannot go wrong with what she is proposing. She glances at him. He is looking better, much better. He gained some weight and does not remind her of living corpse. His complexion is still pale, skin almost translucent, but that is more like him. The dark circles under his eyes are gone. She can’t remember if she ever saw him without them. Cheeks are not hallowed anymore and more of her old professor returns by each day. She takes that as a good sign. Matron returns and she holds her breath.

“It appears that this time your idea has some merits, Miss Granger. I do believe that you will use decent and necessary measures. You may transfigure…”

“Yes! Yes! I will. Thank you, Matron!”

“It is alright, child, I know you want to help. Just no stuns. You can use one on the end of the hall.” Matron huffs once more and turns.

She is happy. Swiftly she transfigures sheet into shorts and levitates his body, casting a disillusioning charm. She transports him to the end of the hall and enters a huge bathroom with a basin. Basin is waist high. She lowers him down and taps the pipes to fill it with warm water. She will have to ask Matron what potions she can use in the water and find some books on the subject, that was not something she researched so far.

Levitating hi into the water she casts a floating charm and then anchoring one. She watches almost fascinated as his hair fan around him like a black seaweed, reminding her of the Muggle saints, just in different colour. Casting another charm to create water’s resistance against his body she tosses her wand on the edge of the basin. She walks around him and sighs taking one of his palms into hers

“Now, professor, I know you would be against this. And I do apologize, but imagine how nice it will be when you have a use of your muscles when you wake up. Surely, you would prefer that over being immobile. And there is nothing wrong with you, you know?”

She laces her fingers with his and gently pushes his palm up until he reaches its limit, then slowly returns it to normal position. His hand is like a claw against hers. Even if matron claims that he is almost returned to his state before he was bitten she doesn’t like it. He is still abysmally thin. His rib care is a sharp arch over the too pulled back stomach. She can see contours of muscles but they are thin and crut. She remembers a flexing of his back and strength of his muscles.

“I think that you were into sports of sorts. Magic can’t repair deep tissue laxness. It can but only up to an extent. Nothing can repair muscle density and flexibility like physical exercise. I don’t know why wizards dismiss Muggle medicine, sure it is not perfect, but some of it is quite useful and advanced.”

She pushes his whole hand against the water, up and back. She repeats it for ten times before she switches side and repeats exercises.

“We will start slow, we don’t want for you to get muscle pains.” She walks to his feet and takes one into her arms rolling it gently, then the other. “I dream about you. Ever since I tried to wake you up. Most bizarre dreams. Do you think those are not dreams but memories? Did I pick up some of your memories? They don’t allow me to read more books on the Mind magic.” She sighs “So I don’t know what is going on. Gods professor, those dreams are horrible, I sincerely hope that they are not your memories.”

She takes one of his legs and pushes it up and towards his chest, then the other. Finally, she summons her wand and dispels some of the charms and pushing him to the edge of the basin. She casts a spell again
“I modified a sticking charm, I use it when I do sit ups. Well, can’t do situps by yourself but I will push you up for now. I bet that you hate it, me talking this much, but I need to talk to you in the hope you will wake up if nothing to yell at me.”

She walks to his back and lowers until his head is resting on her shoulder, she encircles his torso with her hands. He is too thin. She walks straight until he is in a sitting position and then back. His skin is warm and unusually dry for someone submerged in water. When she is done she steps back and summons one cosmetic bag.

“I hope you won’t be too much mad at me, I asked my mother to buy me something for you. It is a Muggle product, but it isn't bad, it might even help you. Your hair is not half bad, but it greases quite fast. Some say stress can cause that. Merlin knows you were under too much stress, more than it is healthy by far. This might help, to reduce the greasiness, citrus will prevent that, the peach will help with volume.”

She was his hair with the shampoo and applies the conditioner. When she is done she gets out of the water and levitates him up. She pauses to release water from the basin and takes him back to his room. Lowers him gently to the bed, returning the shorts to the original state.

“I’m tired. You must be tired too, even if you are in a coma. They say that people in a coma can hear you, I hope you can hear me. Rest now, professor.”

She yawns and goes to lay on the couch. She is fast asleep.
“….professor”

The words have shape. He hears them! The voice is still familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Professor! Someone of his colleges? But no, they would call him by his name or title. Ex student? Possibly, he did teach for most of his life. Maybe it is an honorary title, some unknown medi-witch. But no! The voice is familiar, he just can’t place it to the face. Then again, no one ever spoke to him in such gentle tones. That may be misleading. He must wake up! Whichever side won, he still needs to run and hid. He is either traitor or murderer. Darkness shifts, she is still there with him. Not another memory! Salazar, he really hates his brain!

“Lucius will you stop pacing, you making me nervous.” He grumbles, in reality, he is nervous, a bit excited. He does not own a family of his own, and he does care for Lucius and Narcissa deeply, even if he hides.

“Why are you nervous? Is there a reason, even after the potion?” jumps Lucius, his eyes darting from Severus to the door and back

“Sit down!” he growls “There is nothing wrong with the potion. Everything will be fine. Your pacing is what annoys me.”

“We should have to try and find out the gender…” mumbles Lucius, still pacing

“Does it matter?”

“No…” Lucius sounds reluctant.

Medi-witch opens the door of the room and drops the sound charm. They are both next to her in a blink of the eye.

“You can go inside, Mr Malfoy.” He steps back but Lucius grabs him by the sleeve

“We are going together.”

“That is…” starts a medi-witch

“It is not necessary…” he tries

“Move away woman, before I remove you.” Lucius’s voice holds a note of threat, he shoves a woman and pulls him into the room.

Narcissa is on the bed, hair is a mess, she has tired face brightened by a glorious smile. He never saw Narcissa like that, not caring how she looks. She looks at the small screaming bundle in her
shaky arms than in Lucius

“Would you like to hold your son?” she asks in hoarse strained and tired voice, Lucius freezes then runs to the bed

“Son? We have a boy?” he sounds stunned more than excited, and when Narcissa hands him the bundle he looks petrified, holding the baby like it might explode any moment now. He feels like he is intruding, so he clears his throat

“Congratulations Narcissa, Lucius. I’ll leave you…”

“Oh, no you won’t!” declare Narcissa “Shall we ask him now?” Lucius nods and he frowns, asking him what? Malfoy’s and Black’s have a long line of intertwined godfather relations, that is not something you break just like that, so it can’t be it. In any way, he is already part of the family, even if no one beside Lucius knows. Narcissa smiles at him

“You know that the next head of the Black family will be kid’s godfather. It should be Sirius,” he flinches “but with him being disowned, it will be Regulus.” He is relieved, Regulus is a decent sort of guy “What you don’t know, this is old custom, not vastly practised, but we want it... Would you do us an honour of being child’s Guardian?”

“A what?”

“In rich families, when parents parish, the child goes to his godfather. Too often, the child ends up dead, soon. Guardians are ones chosen by parents, someone who parents trust, to keep their child alive if something happens to them. You made his life possible, would you pledge to keep him alive if anything happens to us?” Narcissa’s eyes are pleading, Lucius nods, serious

“I…” the voice is trapped in his throat “I’d be honoured.”

Lucius walks to him and gives him the baby. He takes it, reluctant. His heart starts to beat fast when he looks in boy’s dark blue eyes and dark hair

“Narcissa, Lucius… I... I apologize. The baby... I must have messed up the potion somehow.” Lucius stops breathing, Narcissa’s eyes tear up, she asks almost panicked

“What is wrong with the baby?”

“His eyes and hair, they are not as it supposed to be, I keyed potion on Malfoy traits…” Lucius’s shoulders drop, he starts breathing again, Narcissa giggles. He is confused.

“You do not know much about babies?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“All babies have darker hair and dark blue eyes, it will change over time.” He relaxes. Looking at the sleepy face of the baby he is confused with a number of feelings, their depth. This baby is dear to him even if he sees it for the first time ‘Don’t worry little one, as long as I am alive I won’t let anything bad happen to you.’

Failed, he failed again. He didn’t manage to protect Draco either. He allowed him to take the mark. He stood aside letting that crazy bitch drip poison into the boy’s ears. Did Draco survive at all? Something warm tickling his face. Gentle touch, almonds and honey, caressing his face. Is he crying? No. Go away! Leave! Leave me alone!
“...professor...”

Get out of my head! Get out from wherever you are! I don't want you near me! I do not want any witnesses...Darkness stirs again, the silver of memory shimmers. No, Merlin!, not another one...

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione wakes up, blinking. Dreams, those are not dreams, not in her head. Somehow she can see his dreams, his memories. She can feel his distress. Walking to the bed, she sits down on a chair and gently wipes his tears.

“That was so sweet professor. You must care for Ferret...erm...Draco very much. He is alive and better. Don’t you worry about him.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The breath is burning his throat. Every muscle screams in pain as he runs down the hill. He is scared like he never was before. It was a month since he was discovered spying on Dumbledore, that didn’t please the Dark Lord and he still suffered from remnants of his displeasure. He despises himself. But the moment he heard that Dark Lord intends to target Lily...and not just that, he refused to spare her. He pleaded for her life and he was refused. Punished. He couldn’t care less about the Potter or that brat. He didn’t even know that they had a child. He put all his hopes at Dumbledore now, the man he despised.

Until that moment today, his life was rather simple. He established himself in certain circles brewing hard and often illegal potions. He spends his time in further learning and playing with Draco. He was still building his reputation, being still called Dark Lord’s Monster behind his back. Every now and then Dark Lord would ask for his ‘entertainment services’, not in raids but to punish Death Eaters who displeased him.

But now, now he sold his soul, he berated those who showed him nothing but respect to save her. He vaguely wonders, who would punish him if they find out what he’s done? He was a traitor, a murderer, there was no nice, no other way to say it. Through, this did bring him in the place Dark Lord wanted him to be, it got him teaching position in the school. Something he alone wasn’t so thrilled about, he never saw himself as a teacher, nor he wanted to become one.

Apparating to his home he curls up on the tattered sofa. His lungs constricted. His eyes burning. His throat clenched. The pain he feels is unbearable but he does not have the strength to push it away, fear preventing him to use his occlumency as he did until now. He will notify Dark Lord of his appointment tomorrow, but he isn’t sure if he would be punished or not, he got the post of Potion’s professor, not Dark Arts like he was instructed and not right away he would be called when the position is open. Tomorrow. For now, he has to deal with the pain that smouldering him the from inside.

To the touch on his shoulder, he jerks, eyes wide, has he discovered already? Lucius standing above him, varied

“I couldn’t get any sooner.” He clears his throat “He was planning an attack on Potters. You are excluded from those plans. He does not trust you when Potters are concerned.”

He nods, still unable to speak, struggles to raise his walls but they are weak. Whindwhirl of emotions choking him.

“I can’t tell you anything, no one will. Be careful what you do my brother, he is not discarded you
yet, and still, you are high up the ranks. In the way, I think he believes that you will be stronger when
he removes your only weakness. I am sorry.” Lucius hands him the phial “Calming Draught, one of
yours, untampered. He will call you tomorrow, you have appeared as nothing happen and that you
succumb to the moment of weakness. Do what you have to do, but don’t let yourself get killed.”

He nods his thanks and Lucius leaves. He was not just the spy, he was a double spy. How he
managed to become so complicated in the blink of the eye?

No, no, no! He doesn’t want to remember anymore. Let me die! I want to rest! I can’t take it
anymore!

“…calm…not…fault…professor…brave…please…pain…professor…”

Warm tears fall on his hand. Female is crying. Is she tries to crunch his bones? Maybe he is a
prisoner and they finally got what they were looking for? But her voice is calming, worried. I don’t
want you in my head. You have no right! He tries to push the part of her that is in his mind, but he
can’t. Get out! Get out!! Get out!!! He has to wake up, wake up and run. He has to hide. Hide from
this female, from the world. Hide and then die, properly this time.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She is holding his hand and shaking it like that is going to wake him up. Tears streak down her face
and she can’t stop them. It is too much. Too much pain. She can’t take it anymore. How is he
holding on? How could he live with that most of his life? Why she can’t stop dreaming?

He always looked so calm, so detached. He is a mess inside. He is breathing fast and shallow, tears
trickling from his eyes, the sound he makes is a whale, like a howling dog would make. She doesn’t
know how to help, how to take away the pain. But it is not just his pain, it is hers as well.

“Professor, calm down. Please, calm down. It is just a dream, a bad memory. It was not your fault,
you couldn’t know. Please, Professor. You are our hero. You are so brave and you accomplished so
much. Please, please, I can’t take it anymore. The pain is too much. You are not like me, you did
everything you could to save them, you risked your life to save them. Please, wake up, professor,
wake up!”
A/N: I don’t have a good net here, but I needed some distraction from very stressful days of travel and various mishaps. I swear this field is jinxed just like Hogwarts DADA post, let’s hope I’ll survive it undamaged :D
Now, this chapter ends in the middle of Sev’s dream, and that’s why it is a bit shorter. Next one will be longer and hopefully bit revealing toward well Hermione. Maybe even Snape too, if I don’t over tweak it again >.<

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

He is kneeling on the marble floor. Hard stone press painfully on his kneecaps, in a way, this physical pain is welcomed. He spent most of the last night trying to calm himself down, rebuilding his walls, pushing the pain and fear away. Calming Draught that Lucius brought helped him, but only just. This morning he sent a note to Dark Lord, which brought him to this moment. His ears twitch, straining to hear every sound, while he's waiting for Dark Lord to pay attention to him. Sure, many enjoy to see him in this position, there were not many times that he had to kneel in front of the Dark Lord.

“Albus summoned you last night, Severus.” This is the statement but he replies anyway

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And you meet with him?”

“As you requested, my Lord.”

“This is the first time he called you since you were caught spying.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“What did he want?”

“A few things, my Lord.” He gulped and glanced around the room. "Mostly all of them are connected to the...” he paused.

"Follow me, Severus. We need to discuss this in private.”

He get up from the floor. His knees unstable and inflexible, they hurt and barely support his weight. Severus followed with minimal limp, back straight, fast as he can. Luckily, the Dark Lord never walked fast. He won’t give them or him satisfaction to see him weak. They are in the library now. The Dark Lord is in front of the window, back turned to him. He keeled again. This part of the library is covered with a thick rug, but his aching knees do not recognise that as a benefit, they still hurt like hell.

“What did he wanted from you now?”
“First, to know why did I eavesdrop.” Dark Lord nods so he continues “I gave him the same answer as last time, my Lord. That I wanted to see how the interview looks like so I that I can prepare myself when he gives me the chance.”

“Did he believed you?”

“Yes and no, my Lord. He does not believe that I honestly want to be a teacher or that I am suited to be one. He did, however, promised me a chance,” now comes the hard part “but, next year, when my old Head of House retires.”

Dark Lord turns to him, eyes glaring. He walks and stops just a breath away.

“Potions. Not Defence against Dark Arts?”

“Yes, my Lord. No, my Lord. He told me that I cannot hope to obtain the post of DADA professor, not now and not in the future.”

Dark Lord takes his left hand and slides the sleeve, exposing the marked skin. His thumb presses on the skull. Mark is heating up until his entire arm feels like it is burning but he does not even flinch. The pain is substantial but it is not like cruciatus, it does not hit the nerve endings, it travels through his veins, scorching his blood.

“In a year’s time?” the Dark Lord is not pleased, and the pain intensifies, his muscles tremble from effort not to give in to it.

“Yes, my Lord. I… I think he does not want me as a teacher at all, but close to himself. He wants to use me against you or to get to you. He wants me to prove my worth to him… He asked me how close I am to you, my Lord.”

“Why?”

“He… wants me spy on you for him.”

Dark Lord released his hand and the pain stopped immediately. Dark Lord laughed, it is a hollow, dark sound and it scared him.

“Does he knows I already marked you?”

“No, my Lord. I did not disclose that information to him, I feared that he would not reconsider me for the post if he knew.”

“Good, that is good news.” Dark Lord is pleased with him, he can tell “Rise, Severus. We can use this. You will contact Albus in a few days, and tell him that I marked you, make it look like you are doing that on your own, without my knowledge. Tell him I decided to mark you when I heard about the possibility of your employment. You can tell him that I placed you directly in my inner circle. I suspect that he will be willing to have my spy, my trusted servant, close. You may even get your job faster that way.”

“Yes, my Lord. My Lord…” he is afraid to tell him the next part, and he let his fear to be known, Dark Lord motioned him to continue “He demanded a proof of my… usefulness. Information on attacks…”

“And he will get them.”

“My Lord?”
“We have a bunch of initiates for lower ranks, we will stage the attack and give them a test.”

Severus cringed inwardly, those were innocent lives he gambled with so casually.

“He also…offered me to teach or improve my Legilimency.”

“Oh, that is rich, he desires to know what's in my head, but he does not offer you protection from me. If he is not so annoying he would be entertaining. The man should have been Slytherin. You will learn Legilimency with him, of course, and you will practise your Occlumency with me. After all, we do not want Albus to know what I know, won't we?”

“No, my Lord.”

Darkness stirs. Scared. He can sense the next memory rolling on. There is nothing in his mind that is remotely happy from that point on. I do not want to remember. Leave me be! Let me die already! The female’s mind is worried. She actively looking for a way out. Maybe if he follows…darkness shimmers…

“Severus.” The Dark Lord sounded annoyed “I require you…entertaining skills…again, tonight.”

Severus bowed his head respectfully. He is not adverse to those type of calls anymore. He feel almost perverse pleasure in punishing his ‘brothers and sisters’ for failure to find Potters. The Dark Lord summoned him for those purposes alone at least two to three times a month, he does not mind. Dark Lord humed.

“I think you are going to enjoy this one in particular.”

“My Lord?”

“I want you to punish Lestrange’s”

“Which ones?” he asked, praying to hear the names he wish to hear.

“Rodolphus and Bellatrix. They failed me in a way they should not.”

“I see. How severe, my Lord?”

“Make it impressionable, long-lasting. However, I do want them alive.”

That is nothing new. Dark Lord punishes but he does not spill pure wizarding blood, through the way he uses him as a tool, sometimes death would be more humane. Merlin, Bella and Rolph in his hands. Oh, revenge is so sweet. They are really something, they can’t even stand him, any half-blood for that matter. Oh, he knows just the thing. He knows how to hurt them, without even causing the pain. His lips are tugged slightly at the thought.

“May I ask my Lord a personal question?”

“Severus?”

“Does my Lord has any plans concerning Bellatrix Lestrange? Does my Lord desires…” he paused, this is a tricky part and it can bring him Dark Lord’s wrath if he is not careful, but there is no other way of asking it “…to bed her in the future?”

“I could have you punished just for asking that question” hissed Voldemort.

“I know my Lord, and I humbly beg for your forgiveness of my rudeness, but…maybe it is the best if
I show you why I was so bold.” He kneeled in front of the Dark Lord and pushed his vision to the front of his mind. Severus feel the intrusion, rough and hurting but he did not flinch or blink, pushing the images, just in the way Dark Lord taught him. After a while, Voldemort pulled back from his mind, equally painfully. He is used to it by now, with all the talk there is no finesse in Voldemort’s technique, it is crude but effective.

“Marvelous! You, Severus, are truly talented when it comes to ingenuity in torture. I will punish you, up front, for the parts I detest in your idea, but I will still allow it. You are truly a gem among my ranks. I do want to make this public event, will you still be able to execute it in front of the audience?”

“Yes, my Lord. I will need potions aid…”

“Whatever you need, Severus. Be at the Manor this evening, you have two hours to make necessary arrangements.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“To you, I will be merciful, no one will witness your punishment.”

“Thank you, my Lord” he still kneel. That is a good thing, Severus braced himself.

“You are welcome, Severus.” Voldemort raised his wand. “Crucio.”
He stands in the middle of the atrium, the room is full and all eyes are on him. Severus smirked internally, even if his face stayed impassive. By the gleam in their eyes, he knows, they are hoping that he is the one punished this evening. The punishments he administers are not public, and only select few are allowed to witness them. Idly, he wondered what did they do to deserve this—him, and to be punished so publicly. The Dark Lord knows his plans, so this is a special kind of ‘public branding’.

The stain that will never wash off.

He does not care, one way or the other. In fact, he feel satisfaction and nausea in equal measures. This is not just their punishment, it is a masochistic, in a way, or sadistic. He can’t decide, but it is definitely turned towards him too. He deserved it, after all, he was the one to inform Voldemort about the prophecy. From that perspective, suffering is not only reserved for those who fail to find Potters, he deserved it too for putting her-Potters in that position. Not that does not suffer… Every time news float in his direction he is petrified, every time he is excluded from the plans about Potters… The not knowing is the worst kind of torture.

There is one St Andrew’s cross to his left and chair that resembles Muggle gynaecology table to his right. The medical table with wheels, covered with white cloth is behind his back. He know that crowds are curious, most of them never have seen these contraptions. But, he paid his price to have them there. The Dark Lord entered and nodded in his direction, Severus bowed his head, letting his hair to cover most of his face.

Soon after, six Death Eaters came in encircling Bellatrix and Rodolphus. They walk with their heads raised, the gleam of disgust on their faces when their eyes fell on him. He will enjoy this one. Severus liked the detail—their escort, it is an additional humiliation, a sign of distrust. Death Eaters lead them to him and move, positioning behind their back. Severus allowed lips tug in short menacing smile, before he flicked his wand—first at Rodolphus, then at Bellatrix.

Now Rodolphus is secured on the cross, facing him. Bellatrix is on the chair, strapped.

Severus took his time, he meticulously paid attention to each detail of his plan. Casting another spell at Rodolphus to fixing his head in a desired position, and Langlock to render him speechless, and finally one to muffle any sound Rodolphus might make. Walking purposely slowly Severus approached the table and pushed it near Rodolphus, he removed the cloth.
Rodolphus' eyes widened, it is obvious that items on the table scare him. After all, Rodolphus never saw them before.

Severus picked up one and lifted it.

“Do you know what this is?” It is an unfair question, Rodolphus has no way of knowing. Not even giving time to Rodolphus to answer, he continued. “No? I guess not. This is a Muggle item, they use it in healing when they perform eye operations. Can you guess what it does? No? It prevents eye to close or blink. I will use these on you...I. Do. Not. Wish. For. You. To. Miss. A. Thing. of what is about to happen.”

His voice sounds, even to his own ears, sickeningly soft and silky, calm. Severus placed one then the other device to Rodolphus eyes, knowing that it is not painful, but it is highly unpleasant. After all, it was used on him once, when he was still in Muggle school and refused to have his eye pressure measured.

He pushed the table to the Bellatrix, there is only one vial with a potion left on it. And he can see that she is scared out of her mind. _After all, he is generous when it comes to poisons, potions in general. He picked up the vial and dangled it in front of her face, then he raised it in a mock cheer and down it. Her body relaxed visibly, he smirked at her.

“I do pride myself in being able to, perform, without an aid- but in your case... I do find a little bit of aid necessary.”

Bellatrix cursed at him, still afraid but also angry not knowing what he will do. He can feel her attempt to perform wandless Legilimency and failing at it.

Severus flicked his wand and both Rodolphus' and Bellatrix' robes are banished, as well as anything they might have beneath.

“Do you want me to tell you what is going to happen? No? My, my, both of you suddenly suffer from acute lack of curiosity”, He mocked and the crowd started to chuckle. “I am going to tell you, anyway. I will make you, Bellatrix- scream. I will make you beg me to allow you to- orgasm.” Her eyes widened “ And, you will beg me to fuck you. Only and only then, I will grant you your wish. I will give you, probably the best orgasm of your life. And your husband is going to- watch.”

“Never!” She tried to spit at him but he moved, raising one eyebrow.

“No? We’ll see. I promise you, Bella,“ Her name slid like poison from his lips curled in disgust. “You will beg me and I will fuck you, and you will love it. And all that in front of, ah, not just your husband, but in front of everyone gathered here.” He leaned to her ear, whispering loud enough to still be heard by all present. “In front of the Dark Lord himself. What do you think, will he be willing to- touch you- after me?”

“You are dead, Snape! Mark my words!” she yelled at him.

“There will be no retaliation for his actions.” Voldemort’s voice raised over their heads. “This is official punishment, approved by me.” His voice is threatening and Bellatrix gulped, glaring daggers at Severus.

He walked to her right, dragging his hand over her body. Severus leaned, closing his lips around one of her nipples, other he teased by his hand. He lifted his eyes to Rodolphus, he is screaming, with a look of horror and disgust on his face. Severus can feel that Bellatrix is trying to resist, but he also know, she has no chance. When her nipple hardened enough his hand deserted it and glided
down to her folds to tease her clitoris. Severus admitted to himself, Bellatrix did put a valiant effort to thwart his effort, but he is patient and sure of his knowledge. But most of all, he knows her.

Finally, the streak of curses and insults is more and more interrupted by a choked moan. Only then, Severus abandoned her breasts. In good time too, he feel like he is going to vomit, silently praising the potions bitter taste that lingered.

Moving around, he positioned himself between her legs. Unlocking the leg holders on the table, he pushed them as wide apart as he could. That must be uncomfortable, it limited her movements so much that she is absolutely dependent on his actions. Casting a silent barrier spell over his hands he pushed two fingers in her snatch. She is already soaked and he looked her in the eyes before turning to Rodolphus with a smirk.

Soon, the streak of insults turned into a soft gasps and moans. He parted his fingers slightly and curled them, and after a few tries he found out at that she reacted the best to fast, hard thrusts.

Bellatrix is red in face, panting and moaning.

Rodolphus’ face is a mask of anger, he glared at his wife - unable to close his eyes or look away.

When her muscles started to tighten, Severus stopped. A whimper of protest torn from Bellatrix’ throat.

“Curse on you, Snape.” She hissed.

“Do you wish something, Bella? No? Oh, well…”

He trusted his fingers into her once again. The action was repeated six or seven times more, and each time Bella cursed at him, bit her lips, but she did not beg. Even after her whole body started to shake. He stopped again, leaving her just on the edge.

“Willyoufuckmealready?” Bellatrix hissed is angrily but all to quitely for his purposes.

“What was that?”

“Fuck me already.” She moaned, voice still too quiet.

“I am afraid I didn’t hear you.”

“In Merlin’s name, you Monster. Fuck me already!!!” Bellatrix hissed when his fingers feathered over her clitoris.

“Hmh, that sounded a lot like an order to me…” Severus clucked his tongue, plunging his fingers in her again, continuing to tease her and leaving her jet again on the edge.

“Salazar!” Bellatrix cursed. “Snape, stop playing around…”

“Oh, I can do this whole night.”

“NO! Merlin! Please, just please…”

“Please…what?”

“Let me come.” She shrieked and he raised his eyebrow “Please, fuck me!”

In the background, Rodolphus attempted to shake his head at her, but his wife ignored him.
“Happy to oblige, madam.” He smirked, removing his robe.

His body is heavily glamoured but no one will pay attention. The potion did his task, and he is sporting quite impressive erection, the other potion he had before coming here took care of other problems, rendering him temporarily sterile. She, however, didn’t need to know that. Positioning the tip just at her entrance, he teased her clitoris with the thumb lightly.

“Are you sure you want this?”

“YES!!! JUST…FUCK…ME! Please…” Bellatrix choked a sob.

He pushed inside and she let out a long moan. Setting a languid rhythm he kept her on the edge. Severus leaned over her and whispered in her ear.

“Imagine, Bella, you may even stay pregnant tonight. Well, if that happens- I can brew you a potion, free of charge.”

“Damn you, Snape.”

“And that is not even the worst. I do not think that either Dark Lord or your own husband would want to touch you, after me.”

Her eyes widened, she turned her head to face her husband’ disgusted glare. He speeded up in that moment, angling his hips and hitting the right spot. She tightened, then shrieked, thrashing, her muscles rippling around him. Milking him. Her muscles undulated long after he was completely spent.

Stepping away, he dressed without glancing at her or Rodolphus and turned to Dark Lord with light bow.

“My, Lord.”

“This was truly entertaining, Severus. You are free to go.”

He bowed once again and walked out, fully aware that he left a room full of pureblood Mugglephobic wizards and witches to detangle them from purely Muggle contraptions. He has to go home and- wash himself by submerging in acid.

Sick. He still feels physically sick. Even if it was his idea, he hates the fact that he touched Bellatrix. And yet he is satisfied. Small personal discomfort can’t compare with the damage it caused. He is not bothered with it. The bitch deserved it, and some. He feels pleasure. Panic! Panic? Why would he feel… It is not him! The female is panicking, she is trying to get out of his mind, tugging like a butterfly caught in a spider web. Suits her right, if she wanted to assault his mind, she deserved to suffer the consequences of her action. He is. He still does.
A/N: The continuation of the previous chapter. This is another short chapter. Next one is going to be emotional roller-coaster so treat this one as short intermezzo ;)

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Hermione sat from lying position and gasped for air. That was…she dug her face in the hands, crying. That was horrid. She never wanted to see her professor engaged in…such…stuf. That. Was. Not. Sex. Not by her account. She shuddered, crying loudly, almost hysterically. She does not want this, this insight.

The man on the bed stirred and she is raising her head. Panicked. No, no, no! Don’t dream! Not anymore! Not ever again! She runs towards him but she cannot touch him. Pacing seems like a good option at the moment, so she paces, sobbing, glaring at her professor.

He moved again and she let small yelp before running from the room to Matron's office, shaking.

“You were right! I made a mistake! I admit I was wrong! Reverse it, please!”

“Calm yourself child and tell me what is going on?” Matron sounds stern but not mad

She flops on the chair shaking, still flustered

“I can’t take it anymore…all that pain…too many…intimate…moments…the pain…I can’t take it!”

“What are you babbling about?” Matron is worried now

“I have those dreams..”

“Do you wish for me to administer dreamless sleep to you?”

“Those are NOT my dreams! They are professor’s memories. I can’t take it anymore” her crying renews with vigour

“Oh, dear.” Matron stands up and hands her Calming Draught “Just two small sips.”

Later that day, Harry entered the room. She is sitting on the sofa, hugging her knees, rocking lightly, staring at the man in the bed.

“Hermione…?” Harry sounds worried. She jumps from the sofa and runs in his embrace, feeling safe and secure, he hugs her tightly “What is wrong?”
“I see them…” she whispers, her voice is eerily “His memories, like in a Pensieve but different, more intense. It is horrible… Too much pain… Everything…” she shudders, tightening her embrace, Harry's calmness is her anchor at the moment “You have no idea, Harry, what he did for your mum. To what extent he went to protect her.”

“Do you think you could tell me?” Harry asks, half-reluctant, half-hopeful

She shakes her head. She could never ever tell what she saw. She can’t even think about last memory little less talk about it. Harry pulls them to sit. What struck her more was not the act itself, but his emotions behind, disgust, self-punishment. The images of the last memory dance in front of her eyes, even if she does not want them to, and she curls up. They are brutal, raw, terrifying...yet, oddly seductive. She is confused. She does not feel bad about what he did to Bellatrix, and that pains her. She is not that kind of person, she cares. She mourns every single death, from either side… Except…she does not. She hopes that Dolohov is dead. She is not saddened by Bellatrix’s death. She can’t force herself to mourn Fenrir. So, how she can be a good person then?

“I am a bad person, Harry.” She moans, tears that just dried start falling again

“Why would you say that?” Harry is panicked, worried

“He knew what he had to do and he just did it. No remorse. No false morality. He just did it. Me…I am a hypocrite!”

“No, you are not. It is ok to feel bad…”

“But I don’t!” she nearly screamed “I want too, but I just can’t. Not for Dolohov, I hope he died. Not for Bellatrix – I am glad that she is dead.”

“Why would that make you a hypocrite?”

“If I am sorry for every lost life, even Goyle’s, then why not them?”

“Dolohov nearly killed you. That crazy bitch tortured you. I am glad she is dead, in fact, I am sorry that I didn’t kill her. Do you know how hard it was to listen you scream? Why would you even mourn them?”

“You don’t think I am a bad person?”

“No, I do not! Do you think I am a bad person because I killed Voldemort and I am not sorry about it one bit?”

“That is different?”

“How is it different? Life is life. You are not bad.”

“He tortured her. Before your mum was killed, and I don’t feel bad about knowing that, I am glad that he did. What that makes me?” she shuddered

“A person.”

She nods and takes one shuddery breath.

“Hermione, do you think you could tell me, not now but one day…what he did for my mum?”

“No. I shouldn’t even know. It is not something he shares voluntarily. I don’t think he can help it to
remember...Oh, Gods! He is going to kill me!"

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Harry is worried, very worried.

“Harry, can you stay with me? I... I need to rest, and to feel safe. Can you just stay, for a little while, please?”

“Of course.” He nods and she curls up next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder.

This is not Hermione he is used to. She was always one that had strength and brains, the one with the plan. The one that kept them going when they lost their will or courage or hope. This scared lost Hermione was someone he didn’t know. She is breathing evenly and he hopes that she fell asleep, that is why he nearly jumped when he hears her quiet voice.

“Did you managed to see Ron?”

“We talked. It is not what it used to be but at least we are on the speaking terms again. I think that Ginny had a lot to say to him before he relented.” He sighs, he hates Ron at that moment “I am sorry but he is still unreasonable…”

“It is fine. I do not think he loves me, that he ever love me.”

“He is, he does, it is just Ron, you know how he can get.” She sighs

“No, he never did. I think...I was just...there. He needs a mother, not a girlfriend, and...I don’t think I am ready to be another Molly.”

“Don’t talk like that Hermione.”

“Knowing what I know now,” he noticed that she glanced at the man on the bed “knowing that, I can tell you – he didn’t and he doesn't. And...maybe true love is horrible but...I won’t settle for anything less.”

“And who knows how the true love looks like?”

“I do.” Her eyes drifted, if only for a second, to the bed “I do.” She reaffirmed next sound she made was a soft snore.

Harry had to wonder what did she know, what Snape did to shake her convictions, change her mind? This aimless, insecure, sad Hermione was making him sad. Malfoy turned on the door.

“I talked with Poppy.”

“And?”

“And I do not know where even to begin. The only three people I know who would be able to help…”

“If they are in Azkaban…” Harry cut him off and Malfoy glared at him.

“Two of them are permanently indisposed, the third one…” he glanced at the bed and limped to it, leaning heavily on the walking stick.

“Voldemort, Dumbledore and Snape? That is all?”
“First two were the masters, third one their star pupil.”

“She says she can see his memories. She is so lost, shaken up. What did she could see to shook her up so much?”

“I imagine so. Being a Death Eater was no walk in the park, Mr Potter. Many of us did not enjoy what we did, well, at least not for long. Those who did are dead now, most of them anyway.” Malfoy took one Snape’s hand and continued “But unlike all of us, that had one master, being on side of Light or not, he had two. And I can only imagine how hard must have been to walk on that tight rope over the inconceivably deep chasm. Whatever she saw, Mr Potter, can’t be happy or good.”

“But you know?”

“I have no idea what Dumbledore made him do. I know to some extent what Dark Lord demanded of him.” Nodded Malfoy sadly not lifting his sad eyes from Snape

“So, what are we going to do?” He asked, lost, he needed Hermione to help him, but now he was the one to help her and he didn’t know how.

“Wait and hope, Mr Potter.” Bitterly replied Malfoy.
He was cheated. Used. Lied to. Lies, all lies! Dumbledore first and the biggest of all lies in his life. He sold his soul to save her and it was all for nought, Dumbledore let her die. They are coming for him, any day, any moment now. he will end up Kissed or in Azkaban at best. It doesn’t matter anymore. Nothing matters.

Muggle alcohol is not strong as wizarding one, but he is doing his best to drown his sorrow, to switch off his brain, to numb up the pain. From the moment Lucius sent the owl with the news, how much time has passed? A day, five,… he doesn’t know and doesn’t care. This pub as closest to his home, it is a dump, a dingy wooden shack. Ironically, this was the favourite place of his father. ‘Like father, like son, I guess’ his brain supplies and he downs another glass. Sharp sting burns his throat. Not enough, still not enough.

Dead. The word is stuck in his mind, like gramophone needle caught in the scratch on the vinyl record, annoying, painful, caught in the infinite loop. Three days! Three days passed. Why is he still free? Why is he still alive? Ah, yes! He went for a drink and didn’t manage to sober up, or stop drinking ever since…and he is still not drunk enough. There is a huge block of ice lodged in his chest.

He takes another swing from the glass, it is a plain water glass, the tall one, given to him upon his request. He rubs his hands against his face, the skin is dry as a parchment. Oh, how he wishes he could cry, but he can’t. His throat is constricted, his eyes dry. The chaos is raging in his head. But his heart, his soul is frozen. He is stuck in the limbo between crushing sorrow and absolute numbness. Alcohol does not help. His mind is sharp as ever, the only thing affected is his sense of balance. Maybe even his speech, but he didn’t utter a word since he orders the first bottle, three days ago. No, alcohol does not help.

He raises his head, blinks, then blinks again, shaking his head. ‘Maybe it does work after all.’ He blinks again. No, he is still there. In front of him is Dumbledore, unfitting to this gloomy surrounding in the sky blue robes, heavy with embroidery. He just looks surreal. Not fitting at all in this dark, smoke filled pub. This temple of misery and decay, Albus’s apparition is too cheerful. Maybe alcohol still doesn’t work. Mabe Albus is really here, came for him. Maybe they sent Albus to drag him out to Aurors? What are they afraid of? That he would resist? Like he wouldn’t come peacefully, willingly. O maybe he is hallucination after all.

He leans back and the chair cracks loudly and drags a long breath of smoke from the cigarette, forgotten until that moment in the ashtray, and narrows his eyes. At least he is hoping that he did manage to narrow his eyes.
“You know, those will kill you.” Says Albus

“Good” he slurs, ok, speech is definitely affected “Where are they?”

“Who?”

“Aurors. You came to arrest me.” He smirks, or at least attempt to “The prized jewel in their collection, I’m sure. Dark Lord’s Monster.” His speech is not just slurry, it reverted to the drivel of the Manchester slums. Not that he cares. “I will follow you peacefully after I finish this.”

“You won’t be arrested, Severus. You won’t go to Azkaban.”

“So, instant Kiss then?”

“You won’t be charged. Prosecuted – yes, but not charged. Everything is taken care off, the trial is just a public formality. We, do not punish or imprison our allies.”

That is wrong. Everything inside him rebels against it. He deserves punishment. He deserves it.

Taking another smoke he leans forward, unsteadily. He tries to rest his elbows on his knees, but fails and surges forward. He manages to regain his balance and succeeds on the second attempt. It is opposite from dignified or threatening but he doesn't care.

“I lied to you.”

“About?”

“I was marked, even the first time we spoke in that cottage, I was marked.” He barks a laugh “In fact, I was marked, two days after my graduation from Hogwarts. Admitted to the Inner Circle from the start, someone put a good word for me to the Dark Lord. He found me talented and useful, he valued my skills – whatever they may be.” He pauses ‘Should I reveal this much?’ “He paid for my Mastery. I lied to you.”

“It was given that you would conceal at least something.” States Albus calmly

“Do you have any idea what I have done to earn that honour? What it takes for half-blood to enters the Inner Circle? Here, let me show you.”

He stands up, makes a step and sways, steadies himself and walks to Albus in few meandering steps before reaching for Albus’s face. He stares directly into the man’s eyes

“Look” slurs, pushing the memory of the last task. He is not sure if Albus is watching it or not, but he gives him enough time..he hopes. Time is a blur at the moment.

Finally, he steps back. Staggers. Lean on the rickety table and sits back in the chair that cracks, heavily. He lights another cigarette and takes another swing from the glass, emptying it.

“Do you still want to save me?” his voice is full of malice, challenging

“What you did does not change the fact that you are an ally. I knew what would be required from you.” Albus is calm “You are an ally, important one at that, and as such, you won’t be imprisoned or Kissed.”

He watches the man, unblinking, once Albus told him that he disgusts him. Now, he is disgusted with Albus. Well, if the old man is unwilling to let the law deal with him, he will have to deal with life on his own. Albus’s blue robes hurt his eyes
“You don’t belong.”

“Belong, where?”

“Here. In those robes. At least I look like a very drunken priest.”

“I am disillusioned, Severus.”

“Indeed.” He smirks “So, I look like a crazy drunken priest, talking to myself.” He takes another swing from the glass and frowns, it is still empty, why?

“You told me, you will follow after you finish that.” Reminds him, Albus

“What’s the point if there are no Aurors outside?”

“You do want to hear what I have to say next.”

He really doesn’t but it does not matter. Nothing Albus tells him going to change the facts. He stands, walks in what appears to be opposite of a straight line to the bar and leaves a handful of Galleons on it.

“That won’t do, you left Galleons.” Hums Albus and exchanges gold with paper money before bartender notices. He shrugs and staggers to the door, bartender calls him when he is already at the exit.

“Snape, this is too much! Oi,…”

“Open me a tab.”

“With two years of advance? And that is if you continue drinking like now!”

He just shrugs and waves. Swearing after he tripped over the threshold. Albus caught him and mumbled

“This isn’t going to be pretty.”

Before he managed to process what those words mean, Albus apparated them. He lands on all four, vomiting.

“Yes.” Hum Albus and vanishes the mess with a flick of the wand “Apparating in an inebriated state is not the most pleasant experience.”

He struggled to stand up, and after few attempts, he manages. He glares at Albus, Merlin, he hopes he really manage to glare at the man. Albus hands him the vial with words

“Sober up.”

“Why would I want to?”

“Because you want to be sober for what I have to tell you.” With shrug, he takes the vial and gulped the potion. It might be poison for all he cares.

“Sweet Salazar! This is vile…” he coughs and leans on the wall, after a couple of minutes the potion works “And?”

“Give the potion time to work.”
“She is dead…” this is somewhere between statement and question

“I am afraid so…” Albus continues to talk but he does not listen anymore.

True. It was true. Now, it is real. He glides down the wall, curling up. Sobs broke from his chest. Tears finally streak down his face.

The pain filled him up. Lung stopping, insides freezing pain. He gasps for air. Acidic, sour tastes fill his mouth. He is choking. It is for the best, he will be at peace at least. What is going on?! He is shifted to the side. Slim legs lean on his back, the slender but strong arm holding his chest. He dangles over that arm. The another small hand holds his forehead. The stench fills his nose. The body behind his is shaking from sobs. Tears fall on his shoulder. The tender voice is broken from crying, shaken, worried.

“Easy professor. I’ve got you. Please, try to relax, professor. I am taking care of you. You are safe.”

‘I doubt that.’ Supplies his brain. The familiar spell is uttered and his body is shifted again. Did I just throw up? Air is still in short supply and he gasps. ‘Did I finally wake up?’ he opens his eyes. Everything is dark, not pitch black but gloomy like the early evening, foggy. Maybe he isn’t?

A sudden yelp of surprise, directly in his ear. That hurts! A small cry and happy squeal mixed in one sound, loud against his eardrum. The female is still there, in his mind, he can feel her, flustered and unimaginable sad, pained. Sobs echo again. They are in his ears, in his head. His body flops against the hard surface of the bed. What is going on?

“Professor!! Don’t, … don’t close your eyes. I’ll be right back! I’m just going to call Matron.”

Is she friend or foe? If she is a friend, maybe she can help him to escape. Matron? So, hospital. Don’t close your eyes? He is awake as it appears.
Chapter Notes

A/N: Second part of the chapter. And after this...the real fun starts ;)

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She sat from her sleeping position, swinging legs on the floor. Gasping for air. She can't take it anymore. Too. Much. Pain. She has to find the way and break this, whatever this was. ‘This’ shouldn’t be happening at all! Hermione bowed her head, while tears rolling down her face and sobs shook her body. She has no strength to bear his pain, she can barely hold her own pain in check. This wasn't supposed to happen, she was to enter his mind, wake him up, and that was it. What happened that made this mess possible? She shivers. The room feels like it’s ice cold. She isn’t even sure if she is crying for him or herself.

The gasping sound from the bed sets her to motion, fast followed by retching sound. No, no, no! He is going to choke!

She runs to the bed! She didn’t touch him, using only magic on him for past four days, ever since that dream. But now, she does not think. She pushed him to the side, climbing the bed. His back is bony against her thighs. She encircled his chest with one hand and holds his head with other. She can't stop crying or shivering. Now, to add to her misery, she is scared, he never vomited before. He is fed with potions supplements, his stomach contains the only acid. But why does he doing this now? is he sick, or is this just reaction? Feeling that much pain, that hopelessness, the moment you die inside and still stay alive on the outside…even she want’s to vomit.

She feels convulsions that shake his thin frame, making him twitch next to her. She uses her body as a shelter, a safeguard for him. Tears run with renewed strength. She wonders if his survival was an actual curse for him. Yet she is selfish in her desire, no!, her need for him to survive and get well. Now, more than ever she must go through it must see that he is where she thinks he should be – alive and happy, for once in his life. She is determined to see him in life without so much pain, even if it's killing her. Which is what could happen as soon he gets well enough to hex her from the face of the earth.

Maybe he can hear her, the Muggle magazine said that coma patients can hear you talk to them. If that is true she must make him understand that he is not alone. That he is safe and taken care of.

“Easy professor. I’ve got you. Please, try to relax, professor. I am taking care of you. You are safe.”

He stopped emptying the content of his stomach and she vanished the mess, casting one refreshing spell on him. Wandless magic! Since when she could use it? Sure, she knew the basic, even managed minor spells, but this was too advanced for her abilities. Her wand was on the sofa, and she had hands full of her professor, so how could she just wish away… Her line of thought stopped abruptly when a man in her arms start gasping for air. It was a good thing she was holding him in sitting position, what did her mother do when she had bronchitis and trouble with breathing? Ah, yes! She started to vigorously rub his back, looking at his face from the side.
Odd, she didn’t think of him as unattractive like before. He was not a poster boy for good looking that was for sure, but he wasn’t…ugly. Thinking about his personality, about the strength of his magic, softer features could carry that much strength. She could read the tiniest twitch of his muscles now, once her professor was an enigma to her. What was more confusing than anything, she was stunned with the fact how much human he was. He was a rather intimidating man, but she was not afraid of him anymore, at least not as much or in a way she was before.

With the amount of pain he appeared to carry around, she was really shocked that he was not suicidal. Or maybe he was? Keeping him alive would prove challenging, once he is awake. Finding a reason to linger and prevent him from offing himself would be insanely hard, but she will figure out something. She must!

He convulsed, took one gasping breath and his eyes popped open. Not quite lucid, but alive. Gods!!! She jumped back with a squeal, tears start running down her cheeks again. She felt like a huge boulder just rolled off her chest and dissipated into a thin air. He fell down with a soft thump, of course, she let him go when she moved back, pressing her hands over her mouth.

“Professor!! Don’t, … don’t close your eyes. I’ll be right back! I’m just going to call Matron.”

She runs to Poppy’s office, sliding in and almost falling over the table, sending a pile of papers flying all over the floor.

“Merlin girl, this is a hospital, do try not to run around like a headless chicken!” huffed Matron angrily

“He’s awake!” she choked and slid into the chair, suddenly boneless, her muscles giving out. She folded her arms on the table and leaned her head on them, breathing like she just runs a marathon. Matron left her, moving hastily out of the office. So many feelings crashed on her at once. Happiness, overwhelming happiness. Fear. Elation. She felt suddenly so tired…the next moment the surge of energy forced her to stand up. ‘Should I go to the room? Better not, better not bother Matron now.’ she started to pace back and forth. Her hands shaking uncontrollably.

Gods! He’s awake. Who is going to take care of him?

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Rushed steps approached, a hand touched his forehead and opened his eyes. Familiar voice filled his ears

“You gave us quite a scare, young man.”

Poppy. So, he is still in Hogwarts. What happened? Who won? He wanted to see her but darkness lightened only slightly. He tried to speak but his throat gave out, not releasing any sound. Is he blind? Mute? That didn’t sit well with him, blind and mute meant that he was defenceless, at the mercy of others. He tried to summon his magic but it was weak.

“Do not strain yourself, it is quite normal what you experiencing right now.” Poppy’s voice continued to drone, sharp with a tingle of motherly tenderness, he is used to it “Your eyesight is probably blurry at best, it will return to you, there is nothing wrong with your eyes.” Relief washed over him, so there was still hope for him “Speaking will be a bit difficult to return to normal. We had to regrow a good part of your vocal cords, I am afraid that your voice won’t ever be the same, but you are fully capable of speaking. It might be a bit painful at the beginning, I can give you something to relieve the pain. But my advice is, don’t try t speak just yet.”
Why would his vocal cords were damaged so much? He shivered, wanting to recoil and failing at the attempt. The bloody snake! He hoped that someone did destroy the fricking monster. Then again, he was still unsure who won.

“You did it, my boy!” Poppy’s hands cupped his cheeks, she lands a soft kiss on his brow “Harry beat him and told us all how much you helped. Rest now. Getting out of the coma can be tiring.”

The hands moved away he wants to argue, to say that it is nonsense if he was in a coma the rest is the last thing he needs. But he does feel tired, exhausted like he didn’t sleep for days. He attempts a tiny nod and succeeded. He tries to lift his hand but fails. His muscles are not completely useless but they lack the strength he needs. Well, for now, he can rest, gather his strength, after all, he will need it – for running and hiding. The bitter potion is poured down his throat, Dreamless Sleep mixed with Calming Draught, he brewed them, he can tell. Good, at least Poppy does not try to poison him. She knows that he prefers potion he made. That gives him a small dose of comfort.

Female is flustered and he is grateful for the potions now, he wouldn’t be able to fell asleep with her so flustered in his head. That is another thing, one that he will try to figure out when he is awake again…

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Matron return and she run to her, grabbing her hand nearly tackling the woman down. She wants to ask so many questions at once and they came out as jumbled streak of words

“Right, he is how?”

Matron chuckles and hands her a vial

“Take a sip, just one, this is much stronger than what you used to. He is a fine child, I gave him something to sleep.”

“But, he just wake up!” she finally found the meaning of words, she gulps one sip ‘Ugh, bitter.’

“Getting out of the coma is a shock to the system, he needs his rest. There is a dreamless sleep in that, so neither of you should have dreams. You both need rest.”

“Poppy, who is going to take care of him now?” she asks, suddenly scared

“You. I do not have enough help around here, and he will still need constant care. Now, even more so.”

“He won’t accept me. He will kill me.”

“Well, he won’t have a chance but to accept you. And as far as killing goes, he needs to regain his strength first.” That didn’t sound promising to her “You will have a difficult task, child. I have never met the more difficult patient in my life.”

Matron hugs her shoulders gently, she is grateful, the floor and the walls sway for some reason. Matron leads her to the room and helps her to ease on the sofa.

“Rest now, girl. I will notify Mr Potter and Mr Malfoy that he is awake.” She nods. She has million question but the room starts to spin.
A/N: I know that I’m home, but I am buried under the tons of work, to describe precisely - I feel like I’m under the attack of at least two dozen angry bludgers - so, I will do my best to post a chapter every two - three days, but I can’t promise you more until 20th this month.

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The chair is hard and uncomfortable, it bites the skin like it is made of metal, not wood. The moment he sat on it chains shackled his hands and feet. He hates it. The rows of faces staring at him. An endless streak of questions and accusations, he gives his answers automatically. ‘I can’t believe I let myself be talked into this.’ His mind is still numb. He is numb.

“Mr Snape, plenty of convicts before you implicated you as one of Voldemort’s closest men. What do you have to say to that?”

“I had to be.” It is true on so many levels

“So you do admit being a Death Eater of your own free will?”

“It is rather hard to hide.” ‘If I tick them off enough, maybe they will still grant me oblivion.’

“Severus did what I asked him to do. If you are sent somewhere it is rather hard to be there by chance. He was in a unique position to be placed near Voldemort due to his connections. And he provided valuable information.” Albus rose from one of the seats “Everything that he did, he did with my blessing.”

“The raids, the tortures, poisons…”

“Yes. We were in the war, we had our man in enemy's camp, working as one of them. What do you think, how long he could stay there, or alive if he refused? As I gave you the documentation you could see that all said by others, was already there. We didn’t hide anything.”

“We were missing the details.” Groused one woman

“And how details change things?”

“They are…”

“Not pleasant, I assure you I know..” smiled Albus mildly “but they were necessary. We didn’t have pure blood kid volunteers to his position, they either joined resistance or fled the country.” He gave a pointed look to the woman, Severus was almost amused by her squirm “I used Severus, he had opportunity and connections, but he is half-blood, some sacrifices had to be made, compromises accepted, for the Greater Good.”
Greater good, he scoffed internally, there was no greater or smaller good, just power games. They continued to bicker, and he sat there, almost forgotten. Observer. Like it was someone else and not his destiny, his skin on the line. Do I care at all?

... Lucius is sprawled lazily in a big wing back chair, his blond hair is a mess and a stark contrast to Burgundy brocade. He raises a glass

“For freedom, Severus”

“For freedom” he raises his glass. Odd sort of emptiness settled inside him, he is calm, maybe too calm.

“What happened in the trial? I wanted to come but I am prohibited, what a robust and incorrect term, from the courtroom.”

“Dumbledore lied for me.”

“You don’t say!” Lucius is half-lifted in his seat “Old goat really did that?”

“Mhm. But I’m starting to believe that I would be better off in Azkaban.”

“Don’t say that. You wouldn’t enjoy Bella as your next door neighbour.”

“I wouldn’t, then again, Dementors wouldn’t find me as much of a meal anyway. And I’d prefer them to screaming idiotic children anytime. Can you imagine me as a teacher?”

“No, I can’t say that I do. What will you teach?”

“Potions. Albus won’t let me near Dark Arts. He believes that Dark Lord will return…”

“Well, at least you will be where he wanted you in the first place.”

“Indeed.” He smirks

A blond toddler runs into the room and to his arms, he picks him up and toddler clings to his robes, rubbing his soft hair next to his cheek.

“Sevus, pay” baby looks at him with its silver blue eyes and for a split second something in his chest constricts painfully

“What would you like to play, Draco?” he asks, Malfoy’s are probably the only people who know that he is capable to speak so softly and affectionately

“Cook!”

“Lucius, you have to teach your child that making potions and cooking are two different things.”

“You teach him. I’ll have to be the boogeyman soon enough. This way he will have at least one male role model he wouldn’t hate.” he grinns “So, club tonight?”

“Aren’t you the father of this baby in my arms, Lucius?”

“His mother told me so.” Grins Lucius

“Narcissa is going to hex your bollox off, and I won’t defend you.”
“She is fine with it, as long as I follow the rules – watch, don’t touch.”

“I’m in no mood for the club.”

“Nonsense! You have a reputation to uphold. Especially if the Old Goat is right.”

Baby in his arms slapped its little hand on his cheek and he looked at him, frowning. Baby giggled and grabbed his nose

“Sevus, cook.”

“Fine.” He sighed, getting up “Let’s cook up a remedy for your daddy’s bollox.”

“Bollox!” repeated baby and Lucius sputtered the drink

“Severus, please, don’t teach him that.”

“C’mon Draco, let’s widen your vocabulary.” He cooed to the baby walking out of the room, escorted with Lucius’s threats.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

For a man with severe limp, Lucius sure was fast. Harry is huffing jogging to keep up with Malfoy. They barged into Poppy’s office with a loud bang of the door. Matron jumped started

“Well I really…everyone is running today. This is a hospital, at least try to uphold a modicum of good manners.” She scolds them

“Yes, yes. Can I see him?”

“You can, but he is sleeping. I gave him Sleeping and Calming Draught. To her as well, Mr Potter. It was an exciting day.”

“How is he?”

“Awake. And that should be enough for now.”

“Does he know?”

“I don’t know how much he knows Lucius!” Poppy’s voice is sharp with a tingle of threat “And you will not tell him or let him speak for now. His throat is still healing.”

“Can Hermione go home now?” he asks full of hope

“No, Mr Potter, for more reasons than one. First of them would be – she is not here as my aid, she is a patient.”

“But…she is crying all the time. I don’t think it is good for her to be so much around him, she develops an unhealthy obsession.”

“She is precisely where she should be. Or do you claim to know my job better than me?”

“No.” he gulps

“Right you are. Now, you two can wait, quietly in the hallway. I’ll call you when they wake up, it won’t be long now.”
They walk to the hallway and sit in silence, either have the will to speak. Lucius looks like he meditates, so he took out his textbook and started to read. Two hours later Poppy shows up.

“Mr Potter, Hermione is in my office. You may tell him the good news Lucius, but not the bad ones, not yet.” Matron huffs at them and walks away.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

His head is fuzzy he opens his eye and blinks. A familiar ceiling greets him and he frowns. Footsteps, he holds his breath. Poppy’s voice.

“You have visitors. He waits for you in my office, hurries now dear, quietly, this is hospital after all.”

The second set of footsteps, much lighter fades as the person leaves the room. He tries to turn his head be he can’t. What is going on? His heart starts to race and beeping sound rings through the room.

“Easy now, Severus. Your throat is still on the mend, I placed the charm to fixate your neck muscles. I’ll release it now if I hear even a peep from you…” he gives a minuscule nod. “You have a visitor too, young men.”

Poppy comes into his vision, she is a bit blurry, edges are not so sharp but at least his eyes work. He is relieved. She places a few pillows beneath his head, lifting him slightly. He still has trouble with turning his head or moving his muscles, he looks at Poppy almost panicked.

“Your muscles are weak, but not dysfunctional, it will just take time for you to men properly. Don’t you worry, boy, you have excellent care. The young lady that takes care of you is quite dedicated to helping you. Try not to give her grief, too much.”

He smiles at Poppy. Footsteps again. Heavy, dragging, with a cling of the cane.

“I’ll leave you two alone.” Poppy smiles, she removes one strand of his hair from his face, gently and leaves his view range.

Heavy footsteps with cane approach. Who is it? Will they take him to Azkaban now, or will they wait until he is better? Blond hair drifts into his line of sight, and his eyes widen. Lucius! Looking ragged and tormented, but alive. He breathes a hissing whoosh of air. The feeling of joy wash over him. Lucius sits on the bed, so he could see him. Takes one of his hands and grips it tightly, his eyes are happy and sad at the same time.

“Draco and Narcissa send their love.” He whispers “I am so happy that you are alive, brother.”

He closes his eyes, they are alive. The air is thick and sticky as if it is made of dough. One warm tear slides to the side of his face, and he is unable to stop it. Cold, slim hand caught it and stopped tears almost painfully slow tickle

“Will you, for once in your life, think of yourself instead of the others?” even though the words are meant to sound harsh, Lucius’s voice is cracked, he looks at him. Lucius’s blue eyes are watery “We are a couple of old fools, my friend. But at least we are alive and free. So, you may very well stop planning your escape. I wager that this is the safest place for you War Hero.”

War hero, that doesn’t sound right. He killed Albus. He let kids be tortured. Surely someone is after his skin.

“You were having a quite a nap my friend, almost 6 months. You were charged and freed, once
again. Received Order of Merlin First Class to boot. You always wanted one, if I remember correctly. The bane of your existence survived and defended you, fiercely I might add.”

Potter is alive, now that is a news. How? He looks at Lucius.

“Don’t ask me how. He won’t talk about it. However, he did paint you a hero, still, sings the praises in your name to the press. Little Mud…Muggle born, it is so hard to be politically correct these days, and Whislet jumped on the band wagon too, even George Weasley. He bragged how you cut his ear to save his life.” Lucius chuckles “You are…one…lucky…tosser, my friend.”

He tries to tighten his hand around Lucius’s, but his strength is almost non-existent. He looks at the man’s eyes trying to silently communicate his content and happiness.

“I know, my friend, I know.” Sighs Lucius and lifts his gaze somewhere above his head. They stay in silence. There is plenty to talk about but for now, he is at peace. Lucius, Narcissa and Draco are alive, and at the moment that is all that matters.
He looked at Lucius’s face. ‘He looks like he’s been to hell and back. What is he hiding?’ He weakly clenched his hand to get Lucius’s attention. Blue eyes looked him. Without his Legilimency he was unable to use anything but the naked openness of his face and unguarded thoughts. He hated it, resented his weakness. But it is a tool, so he exploits it. The Sad smile lingered on his friend’s lips.

“There is so much I should tell you, so much you should know. But Poppy threatened me not to tell you anything without her permission.” Lucius sighed apologetically

That is not right, since when Lucius is arid of Poppy? Of anyone? What is going on? If he received an Order, if Lucius is here, it means they both are free. So, why Lucius can’t speak? What are they hiding? Panic! Something is wrong. Very wrong!

“I know you well enough to know what you are thinking my friend. Times had changed, and I cannot afford to slip up, not at the moment at least.” Sly smile lingered on thin lips, no one was ever able to direct the way Lucius Malfoy thought or in what he believed “My freedom depends on good word and will of Potter,” the name was said in whisper with enough poison to kill, he sympathised with that “and Poppy’s in a good measure. I need to protect my family Severus, all that is left of my family, now more than ever.”

He opened his mouth, taking a breath. He will ask the questions, Poppy’s orders be damned. He will not tolerate this ignorance. He needs to be prepared for what is coming next.

“Don’t talk. Do not damage the repair they’ve done,” warns him Lucius but he ignores him

“Talk.” ‘Merlin, that hurts!’ his eyes filled with tears, unfocusing and fuzzing the picture that wasn’t clear, to begin with. It felt like someone stuck a searing hot poker in his throat. A cough shook him. Poppy’s steps

“What did I tell you?” her sharp voice rang even before she came to his view, still coughing, fighting the waves of nauseating pain he glared at her “You are the worst patient I ever was known, Severus. What he wants Lucius?”

“He wants to know, Poppy. And I can’t blame him.”

“You really can’t give yourself a break, can’t you, you mule. Fine, tell him! And you…one more word out of your mouth, no matter what you hear…” she left the threat to linger in the air. He knew that Poppy was good on her word, but he is beyond care at the moment, he looked at Lucius. His friend sighed.

“I don’t know how much you remember…” he shook his head, nothing after the bite “and I don’t have that much time to tell you in detail. Short story…no one knows how you managed to survive.
But I went to retrieve your body, and that is part of the reason I am, shall we call it free? I’m under house arrest. Good news is Narcissa was not been charged, and she was even commended for helping Potter. Draco, he was tried, but Potter and Granger watched for him, he is charged for the insane amount of pro bono working hours. When he started feeling better…that is.”

He looked at his friend, slightly panicked

“Draco was weak after the mark was scorched.” Lucius tapped at his left forearm, rolled the sleeve and showed his arm to him. The skin where the mark was looked like someone burned it, scar tissue was an ugly replacement for the mark “Yours is not like this, it looks like someone branded you, but it kept its shape. Being almost dead helped you. Your magic too, I guess. It was…unpleasant…experience, he started to drain us during his fight with Potter.” Lucius sighed “Some died, many ended up in St. Mungo's or like squibs. Draco was weak, but he recuperated well enough, thank Merlin, his magic was not damaged too much. But on his way home for the trials, someone cursed him, and we waited a long time for help.”

He frowned, he knew exactly what that meant bloody hypocrites, all of them. Anger rose in him like the tide.

“Once again, Potter, Granger and Poppy intervened. He is much better now. still, in bed, Narcissa won’t move from his side. She is spoiling the boy too much. He will destroy Malfoy name,” sighed Lucius theatrically and he smiled “what’s left of it anyway. They gave us a hefty fine, too. Sadly for them, they don’t have a clue that they didn’t even make a dent in my wallet.” They both snickered. “I can come to visit you if I’m with escort…” Lucius paused in his monologue

‘Here it comes. What could be that bad?’ he thought. Plenty. He couldn’t even begin to phantom all the possibilities.

“Well, the Manor is full of Aurors on daily basis. They are trying to find and take all the Dark artefacts and books. I left them to play around. We moved to the East Wing, Narcissa is planning thorough redecorating once all this is over. Potter is the one escorting me here.”

‘Ah, well not so bad just annoying as hell.’

“He comes here with me for two reasons. First, he doesn’t trust my safety with anyone else. There are still plenty of those who would want a Malfoy skin rug in front of their fireplace.” He always loved the way Lucius phrased information, giving him more than surroundings could read “and he comes to visit Granger.”

His eyes widened, what happened? If she was testifying, she was fine, then why would Potter visit her here, in hospital wing

“He…placed her here to guard you.” Long pause. His brain tried to process the information. No, no, no! They didn’t place him under the protection of prissy little know-it-all with the broom handle up her ass. They did not “She is a faithful watch-dog. I have to give her that. She defended you, even from me.” Lucius chuckled “Which is good, I think, there is plenty of those who want a Snape rug as well. Even more of those who want nag you or apologize or just hero worship you. Being here is one of few safe places you could be.”

‘What are you hiding Lucius?’ his eyes glued to the man, he twitched his hand, nudging Lucius to keep talking. Lucius phrasing became more and more cautious and that worried him

“At least she is useful for something, idiotic chit that she is. She refuses to budge from you, even sleep in this room.” Another pause. No, no, no! The worried, gentle voice…it can’t be her! Please,
Salazar, don’t let it be her. The female presence in his mind… it can’t be! They must have brought a healer from St. Mungo’s, they wouldn’t allow a child to… no! He is panicking now, enraged, looking at Lucius, searching for answers. His head is splitting from pain.

“I am afraid so, my friend. The girl disobeyed Poppy, she tried to wake you up from coma… I don’t know what she did, or even if her meddling affected you to wake up. We couldn’t do anything until you wake up. As soon as Poppy gives her blessing, I would like, with your permission, of course, to see…” he nods, as vigorously as he can.

“Not until he’s better.” Poppy’s voice, he turns his head to the direction of the sound, pain is substantial but he would gladly suffer twice as much to get his answers “Severus, you are too weak.” Tries Poppy but stops and…”Oh, very well, be careful Lucius, do not cause any damage.”

Lucius nods and looks at him

“May I?”

He stares in the man's eyes. He feels a slight pressure of the wand at his temple and Lucius is in his head. It is not too gentle presence, but Lucius is not skilled as Dumbledore was or as he is. Lucius was a student of his father. He does not remember much, mostly the memory of the branding ceremony lingers in his mind and the constant presence of unfocused and flustered mind. Lucius pulls back

“Glad to say you are undamaged, but the part of… well, she is sort of stuck in your mind, my friend. If I am to help you I need to know more…” Lucius's voice is tender but he can hear underlying roar of anger. He looked at him and grins slowly ‘Give her hell.’ It must have shown on his face. Lucius lurches from his seat and disappears from his view, followed by Poppy’s footsteps.

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Harry walked into Poppy’s office. Hermione is there, pacing. She runs to him and clings around his neck. Laughing and sobbing at once. He pulls her to the small cot placed near the wall. He is worried for her, saddened that she is suffering. He does not know how to help her or even if it's possible.

“He’s awake!” she says “Oh, Harry, he died, he is so dead…”

He is utterly confused. Emotions clash on Hermione’s face almost violently. Happiness, sadness, despair, joy,… They are so jumbled, so diametrically different. They contort her features.

“What are you talking about, Hermione? He is alive and awake. Malfoy is with him right now and Poppy too. If something happened, they would let us know.”

“No. No. I know he’s alive. But he is also dead.”

“You are confusing me, not to mention scaring the daylights out of me, Hermione.”

“I saw him, the day, the days after your mother… Oh, I’m so sorry Harry!”

He waves his head, whatever she wants to tell him it better be in the open, she nods and takes a shuddery breath

“He loved her so much, you can’t even begin to understand how much. I’m not even sure I can, and I saw it! Felt it. He died. His soul died with her.” She starts to sob “And, oh you won’t believe… but even after he woke up,…” she starts to cry and he holds her. She cries for a long time and he feels helpless to console her, he is unable to do so “I still see them… his memories… even after…. Poppy
gave us…the Dreamless Sleep…but those are not…dreams…Harry…Memories are…unaffected…by potion…I still see them!”

She resumes her crying and he is just holding her. He hates to see her like this, broken. He let his mind be clear, just rocking her and waiting for her sobs to stop.

Suddenly, the door bangs. He flinches, Hermione issues a small startled yelp. Lucius is advancing towards them, anger latched on his face. He looks menacing, murderous. Wand in his hand pointed toward Hermione. He raises his wand but Lucius pays him no attention, he limps with determination toward her.

“Mr Potter, let him.” He hears Poppy

Lucius, grabs Hermione by the chin, points his wand and say “Legilimens” he stares in her eyes for a long time, and then he blinks. She slouches on the cot, tears rolling, pressing hands to her temples. He knows that pain. Lucius’s voice is pure hatred


“What…nothing.” Sobs Hermione “I combined mind healing, there is so little on it, I combined it with Legilimens and some Muggle psychiatric techniques I read about…”

“You idiot! You are no Mind Healer. You are no Legilimens. And you are not Muggle whatever you just said. You are just meddling brat. What did you wish for?”

“I…I don’t understand.”

“I bet you don’t. When you were pulling from his mind, what did you wanted?”

“To stop…” she cries “…to take away his pain.”

“I should kill you!” spats Malfoy and turns around marching out of the room. Poppy shakes her head and follows him. He hugs her again, she is crying loudly now, clutching his robes.

Suddenly, a huge pressure fills the air. Magic. Wild, angry, crushes the air around them. Majority of patients in the ward starts to cry out of moan. The soundless “NO” vibrates through the magical wave.
The moment magical wave dissipated she jumped to her feet, ready to bolt, Harry's hand around her
waist stopped her. He was holding her in what seemed like a vice-like grip.

"Harry I have to…"

"Hermione are you insane? He is with Malfoy and Poppy. And this…whatever this was, was a
reaction to what Malfoy told him. I wager you are the last person he wants to see at the moment.”

Since when Harry became the voice of reason? But, this was something so much more than just him
wanting or not, she needed to. She fought so hard for him to wake up, and she needed to see him.
Now more than ever. Everything rested on his survival, and she knew how fragile that notion was. If
he dies, not by his injuries, if he dies even by his own hand, everything will fall apart. The earth will
open to swallow them all. Is he dies – they lost anyway. How can she explain that to Harry?
Instinctively, she knows that he wouldn’t understand.

Still struggling she turned to look at him

"You don’t understand…"

"Then explain it to me, make me understand…”

"I can’t. It is…I just…I have to make him see…understand.” She suddenly went very still. ‘What if
he rejects her help? What if he demands that she is not near him?’ fear, cold, insides crunching fear
gripped her “Harry, what if he demands that I was removed from his vicinity?"

"Then someone else will take care of him, Poppy will see to it that it is someone trustworthy.”

“No, Harry, no! I have to, it has to be me! I have to save him.”

“Save him from what Hermione? The war is over. We need to go on forward with our lives.”

“You just don’t…And I don’t know how…” she paused, it was true – Harry didn’t understand and
she had no way to make him see “I need to be with him.” She pleaded, desperate.

“And why is that Mud…Miss Granger?” cold voice startled them both “Haven't you done enough?”

“I woke him up.” She spun in Harry’s still tight grip and hissed at Malfoy

“Maybe, and maybe not. What you did is Azkaban worthy.” She flinched “You assaulted him. You
invaded his mind without permission. Some would call it a rape.” She felt his words on a physical
level, each of them like a punch in a gut or slap across her face “And I will lend all my aid for
whichever vengeance he seeks against your act.”
She flinched. No, she did not do that to him! Did she? She wasn’t planning on…she just wanted to help, can’t they see that? It was never her intention to…for things to get this messy. But, his reaction, Malfoy told him what’s happened…so he knows…he knows how to…

“Can...Do you…Can you tell me how to..What happened?” she couldn’t phrase her thoughts, all jumbled and confused. She knows what she wants just the coherency to voice it is missing

“I do, up to the point…But tell me, Miss know-it-all why would I share my knowledge with you?”

“I just want to…undo it.” She was shocked at his reply

“There is no way to undo things, Miss Granger, once they are done, no matter how you try, they always stay with you. No, I won’t share what I know. Potter, I wish to go home.”

“Why are you like this Malfoy? Did you forget…you are threatening her…” Harry was as eloquent as ever when he was upset, she nearly smiled

“No, Potter, I do not suffer from lapses in my memory. But, I did warn you, no prison will keep me from revenge.”

“What is he to you anyway?” hissed Harry

“More than she is to you. He is my brother.”

“He is not Malfoy!”

“No, he is Prince, and it would do you well to remember that small detail. He is my brother recognized by magic. And Malfoys always take care of their family.” She felt so small. Malfoy was leaning heavily on the cane, the pain was almost visible on his face. And jet, he looked so imposing, threatening. He didn’t look weak or broken in that moment. He turned to Poppy “I would like to take him home, Poppy.”

“Not until I am sure that this is not temporary. Not for a week or two at least. And, Lucius, not without her.” Matron’s voice was calm

“No!”

“Poppy you can’t”

A growl.

It all fused in one sound. Malfoy tossed her glance full of hatred. She can’t…she can’t go back there….to that house….not…ever…again!

“I can.” Stated Poppy “You girl ignored my warning, you made quite a mess, now you lost your right to voice your disagreement. If he decides to go, you will go with him, for more reasons than one. But let this be your lesson. Lucius…”

“Very well, if that is the price, I am willing to pay it. When the time comes, if she is still breathing by then. “

“Now, now, there will be no killing in my hospital and of my charges Lucius.”

“Pitty.” Pure loathing on his face. Why this man hates her so much, she never did anything to him…well not from the start at least.
Malfoy nodded and walked away. Harry gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek with whispered:
“Don’t worry, we’ll figure out something.” And run to catch up with Malfoy. She looked at Poppy
“Don’t look at me like that girl. It is your mess.”

“Do you know…what…”

“Lucius explained to me, as much as he could. Once Severus is strong enough, he might have a
better grasp of what happened. Sit.” Poppy sighed and she glided to the chair, her legs giving out
‘This does not sound good’ “You combined more than one spell, girl. Mind magic is difficult as it is
without risk you took. For now, we do not know how to…undo…what you did.”

“And he is not happy, I could tell.”

“The Hogsmeade could tell,” clipped Matron tersely “I gave him a Calming Draught. That was one
hell of a display of wild magic.”

“You mean…”

“Well, it wasn’t intentional.” The matron looked at her with reproach “You speak as if you do not
know about whom you are talking. Now, go and take a rest. When he is calm enough I believe it is
time for his exercises.”

She nodded and walked to the room, each step more difficult than the previous one. She came to the
entrance and peeked inside. He was lying on the bed, eyes closed, breathing regular and flat. He is
sleeping, or at least she hopes that he is, suddenly afraid to face him.

She creeps on her toes to the sofa and sits in it. Observing him. Good intentions, she had best
intentions in the world, and here she was now. But, wasn’t that the worst thing in the world? Good
intentions. They are in half-demolished school because of the Greater Good. She watched her friends
die, so many died, because of the greater good.

So many deaths, she sniffled feeling tears flooding her eyes again, he is still alive. And it is
imperative that he stays alive. No one will ever die again, not for the greater good, not on her watch.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Merlin, why is he still alive? The fatal strike came from the most unexpected place. He knew he was
predisposed to die that day, but not from the hand of the Dark Lord, that came as a surprise. But
what is one miscalculation in a lifetime of wrong choices and mistakes? Luckily, his task was
completed. Now, now only he had got well enough to do what he planned to do if he survived by
chance.

He can sense her sneaking into the room, quiet. She is scared enough, he can tell. Good. She should
be scared, witless. No one, no one had the right to do what she did to him. He forced himself to stay
calm, pretending to sleep.

If things were different, he would know how to use what she did. It was, in fact, a brilliant piece of
magic and he would be impressed… but, under the circumstances, he was just outraged. She could
easily use this to her leisure, or at least to communicate…he would know how, but damned he will
be if he reveals to her. It was more than enough that she had access to his memories. Unguarded
memories. The ones even he didn’t want to revisit or remember.

Lucius told him that he will arrange his transfer to the Manor, Poppy persisted that she must follow.
He nearly growls. Fine! If he must suffer her presence, she will suffer his, and some. Of all
dunderheads he had to teach…but she wasn’t one, she is smart. So smart and so stupid. Ignorant little swot. Oh, she is in for a ride of her life, one lesson she won’t forget.

He feels memories pushing up and he willed them back down again. No, he does not want to remember. He may not be able to control what he dreams about, but he can control when he’s awake.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

After half an hour or so he opened his eyes and she raises from her seat. Her limbs are numb, heavy, unwilling to bend. She wills them to move. Each breath hurts her lungs like the air is full of needles. Her throat is constricted. She reaches the spot where she knows he can see her, but his eyes are fixed to the ceiling, away from her. She takes a deep breath

“I am glad…” she croaks, clears her throat, voices small and scared “that you are awake, professor. I was so worried about you.”

He directs his eyes at her, silent, but he does not need the words, she can read despise, anger even hatred in his eyes and it hurts. It hurts her on the level she is not ready to admit. No, she won’t apologize for wanting him to be awaken and healthy and happy. She sticks her chin out returning his gaze, even if all she wants to do is run and hide

“And, I am sorry for what happened. Not sorry that I tried to help, just for...well...byproduct of it. Believe me, professor, I had no desire to be in that situation. No more than you do, I’m sure of it. And, once we fix this you are in your full right to Obliviate all the things I’ve seen. Gods, I hope you will!” maybe she shouldn’t say that, but it broke out of her “I’ll try to…see…I don’t sleep as much when you do. So that is a way, for now. I do try my best not to…well, you know. But I won’t apologize for wanting to make you better, healthy again”

His eyes are scorching her now. She shivers. Gods, how much he hates her! Another gulp of air, it seems that the room is deprived of the oxygen.

“I know that you are mad at me. Nothing can be done about that. But I won’t back down. You have to get well. Now, I know that you weren’t aware, but…” his eyes narrow at her “it is time to work on your muscle tone. Matron gave me special permission. I will transfigure your cover into trunks and we will use disillusion on you until we reach the bathroom. I am sorry, but for now, you will have to endure me…doing the work for you.”

His eyes widened as she cast the spell. Oh, Gods, he really is going to kill her!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

What is she doing?!! He wasn’t sure if he was shocked or angry while he watched the sheets twist and shrink, wrapping around his body in a plain white swimming trunks. He was warned in advance that she is in charge for his treatment, but he assumed that she was to give him potions...certainly not…this.

Briefly wondered if he should count his blessings for not be able to raise his head properly and see. One thing he was sure of, he was not keen on anybody, anybody seeing him this much undressed, little less… her. He growled at her and she shrieked, stepping away.

He felt a spell cast one, then the other and his body levitated. He floated to the bathroom, she was behind him. ‘This is not happening!’ He closed his eyes when she left him to levitate while she set the basin to fill.

“Give me just a second, professor.” She whispered. He could hear the rustling of material. What is she doing? He growled once again. If he speaks, Poppy will kill him, but death was surely preferable to this. Being levitated and handled like an invalid!

She lowered him to the water and he hissed, suddenly realising that sheets won’t cover much while wet.

“Don’t worry, professor, I charmed the sheets to act like muggle swimming trunks, they won’t become transparent. Ummm…..sorry about the first time.” She sounded uncertain, scared and he grunted closing his eyes. Is there any more humiliation he has to suffer today? His rage turning to sheer desperation caused by his inability to move.

He felt the floating and anchoring charms being cast on him. Well, the water felt nice, warm, shooting. At least one thing he can enjoy since he woken up. And he counted his blessings too soon, apparently. Water around him thicken. She entered his view range and he turned to give her a death stare. Mistake! One of the epic proportions! What is she thinking!

He was faced with very, rubberly looking, not transparent but an unmistakably plain white lace bra. Large B, maybe small C. With a grunt he tried to submerge his head but the floating charm prevented him. What is wrong with his brain? He growled again, his eyes looking for her face. She was chatting. Of course, she was. He was stuck with Hermione bloody Granger, she does not know how to shut the fuck up!

“I am sorry, professor, but for some reason transformation of my garments isn’t as easy. I tried it once, it went terribly wrong. I’ll ask Harry to bring me my bathing suit or buy me one. There was really no need for one before today, you see? You may keep your eyes closed if…”
‘I don’t see. Of course, I’ll keep my eyes closed you moron. It is not like I want to look at you, I was sick looking at you while I was teaching you’

She laced her fingers with his and his eyes popped open ‘What is she doing?’

“This is an exercise for your hands so that the wrist’s don’t lose their flexibility. We started with ten on each hand, but you are up to fifty now. Just relax, professor and let me work your muscles.”

‘Unhand me you twat!’ he growled at her, he would sell his soul, what was left of it anyway, to speak right now and shred her to the tiniest of bits

“I understand that you don’t like me professor, but someone has to do it and no one even bothered to learn exercises, they are Muggle. But, Poppy approved and she monitored your condition, and she says it is good for you.” She kept pushing his hand and talked

‘Merlin, can’t she just shut up?’

He could feel his muscles contract and stretch. It was nice to feel their usefulness, especially given the circumstances. He would be even grateful to her if she didn’t do the unforgivable. Anything good she might have done for him was trumped by what she’s done. It. Was. Unforgivable. And. She. Is. Going. To. Pay!

She moved and took his other hand. She was explaining to him the mechanics behind an exercise like he was a moron. His rage grew. Then she walked closer to him, bending his hand, pushing it against the dense water. He could feel resistance and his muscles working. He could also feel her small soft hand, pressed against his biceps and extensor muscles. He growled again, annoyed, angry, helpless.

She sighed

“I understand, professor, but I have to do this. You want your muscle tone back, at least enough to be able to do this on your own.” She finished with his right hand and moved to his left. He stared at the chipped ceiling. Disgruntled. When she was obviously finished with his hands she walked around to his feet.

He hissed at her, giving her the stare when she dragged her hand almost from his hip to his tibia, squeezing lightly on occasion. She jumped at the hiss and looked at him

“I’m sorry. I forgot… I just…I was just checking…” he continued to stare her down, if that is the only thing he could do at the moment, then he is using it “…to see the progress, you know. It is not like I want to…Oh, Gods, I…that’s not what I meant. But… you know, you are…professor…and…right.” She studded, if he wasn’t relishing the fact that she did indeed sound like a common dunderhead, he would smirk. At least both of them were in hell.

Her face was crimson. She bit her tongue and grabbed his ankle, placing one hand below his knee, pushing his leg until his thigh was resting on his ribs. She did give him a proper workout, he had to admit that. What he can’t condone is her touching him! She switched to the other leg. After twenty or so pushes, he hissed painfully, as his muscle cramped.

“I’m sorry, professor. This happens from time to time on this leg. This will hurt a bit but it will pass fast.”

‘I know you, idiot, torn ligaments never heal properly when mended with magic. Salazar kill me! What is she doing?’ he growled at her loudly, if looks could kill he’d Avada her on the spot!
At the moment he could only watch as she hooked his foot on her abdomen, keeping his leg in half bent position and working circles around the cramped muscle. His toes nested between he breasts, as her heat warmed the sole of his foot. ‘Well, thank Merlin for small favours.’ He would bang his head against the surface if he could. Feeling sorry that they are not on the ground, in that case, he could bang his head until he knocks himself out. After a while, she released his leg.

“I don’t think it is smart to continue exercise with this leg now,” she told him conversationally, he remained silent

‘Damn right it is not! What now!’ she was pushing him towards the basin’s edge. Suddenly, his feet were glued to the edge wall of basin ‘What is she doing? Where is she?’ even if his head, his voice sounded dangerously menacing. She was nowhere in his sight and he growled again, this was not good.

He nearly yelled when he felt her arms encircling his chest, his head fell on her shoulder and he jerked, back of his head hitting her jaw.

“Ouch! Stay still, professor, please. There is no other way for you to do your sit-up’s.” she grumbled. He jerked again, feeble as it was at least he was fighting. His back muscles tight. He felt the front of her body pressing against his back. Oh! Poppy’s orders be damned!

“Release me!” he growled at her. His throat burned, pain radiating from his vocal cords. She squealed and pulled back letting him flop against the water surface. Footsteps! Shit!

“What did I tell you Severus Snape?” sharp voice of Poppy “Miss Granger! You will need proper dressing for your exercises in the future dear. What happened?”

“I know Poppy, I already apologized to Professor, I’ll ask Harry to help me with that. It seems that professor doesn't want to do his sit-up’s, Madam.” She sighed, defeated.

“He will do them. Continue, I’ll watch.” Poppy’s voice “And, you mule, keep your tongue and let the girl help you. I'll watch!”

He hissed and closed his eyes as she returns to embrace him. Pushing him with her body to sitting position and back. After twenty-five sit-up’s she released him.

“Well, we’re done, professor.” ‘Thank Merlin!’ “Would you like me to wash your hair? You seem to like it while you were in a coma.”

‘And how would you know?’ he shook his head.

“Right then. Just let me dress up and I’ll return you to your bed.”

“Well, I’ll leave you two then. Not another word Severus, or I’ll use your spell on you.” Threatened Poppy.

She was quiet, blessedly so. He felt her levitating him up and drying him, then she cast a spell and levitated him back to the bed where she transfigured his trunks into the sheet once again.

“I am tired, professor, would you mind if I rest a bit?”

‘Why would I care.’

He grunted and he hears her retreating to the sofa. His muscles are pleasantly tired too. He would be really grateful for that if that did not include her touching him. No one, no one touched him without
his permission for years. And he certainly didn’t want hands of his student on his person. So tired, even with all that rage. His eyes blinked closed and he drifted to sleep, realising her words only too late when shimmer of memory invaded his darkness.

Merlin, no! What now?

Chapter End Notes

FrancineHibiscus can you please PM me on FFN? (I still didn't figure out how to that) I have a huge favour to ask you *blush*
Chapter Notes

A/N: I know this is close to my previous post but...I received an email that notified me that tomorrow I won’t have time to breathe, at all, little less post ...so Monday chapter is up now, I hope you don’t mind :)

Special thanks to FrancineHibiscus for helping me with this chapter with her advice. Thank you, my dear :*:3

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This was not the club, not in the classical sense of the way, it was more of a perpetual ongoing party house. Lucius had a grin of a cat who just ate the canary. He felt bored as he always was when he visited... well, his travelling cloak was leaning just so to one side, where the book, still heavy even after he shrunk it was.

“You have to live a little, Severus.”

“I’m wondering how you are still alive.” he grumbled but without malice in his voice, he had nagging suspicion that Lucius was alive on a count of his presence in this place.

“We have to find you a girl!” exclaimed Lucius

“No, thank you.”

“A bloke then?” Lucius raise one eyebrow at him

“A book and a glass of wine, if you are in a wish-granting mood, Lucius.” He drawled. They entered a huge living room and he eyed his spot, a comfortable high back chair near the fireplace, his usual spot.

“Sometimes I wonder why do you even bother to come here.”

“You drag me here.” he would spend his nights engrossed in a book with a glass of wine while Lucius prowled the rooms and chatted. They didn’t even manage to hand their cloaks when tanned girl almost runs towards them.

“Thank Merlin! Can you help me with the situation?”

“What is the matter, Rose?” Rose was owner's girl, tame little thing always elegant and measured, her flustered behaviour set the alarm bells in his head

“We have a pair of newcomers, and it is odd situation but I was blocked...and...can one of you sirs just check what is going on? Please!?” there was a note of desperation in her voice.

“Calm yourself down, Rose.” Lucius gently patted girls hand “Where is Oktavian?”
“I haven’t seen him since we opened our door. The guy had a password but there is something odd about him, and he just…” her voice broke down. Lucius gave him a look above girl’s head.

“You and Rose go and look for Oktavian, I’ll see what is going on.” He unclasped his cloak and tossed it to the nearest settee, rolling up his sleeves.

“They are in the Red Room.” Called Rose behind his back. He circled down the corridor and to the fourth door on the left. Nothing out of the ordinary caught his eye, usual crowds gathered there, whispering around corners, which was not so unusual since it was still early evening. At the far end of the room, there was a girl tied to a frame. No one was near her, now that was odd.

He grabbed the man with the mask by the sleeve.

“What is going on?”

“Severus, didn’t see you in ages!” smiled the man “Oh, new couple. Bit of weirdoes and in this crowd it says a lot. Poor creature, she is there at least an hour and no one approached her. I would, but you know, that is not my thing.”

“Hmh. Thank you.”

“Glad to be of assistance” smiled the man and walked away. He approached the girl carefully, scanning the crowds, no unfamiliar faces. He lingered near the girl enough still, no one approached him. He paced to the girl, she was trembling. She had an elegant chignon and big doe brown eyes, and nothing much else. She was maybe a year or two younger than him.

“What’s your name, little girl?”

“Marianne, sir.” She whispered, her voice trembling even more than she did

“What did you do to be left here, Marianne?”

“Nothing, sir. He promised me he will show me around. Sir.” She raised her eyes to his for a split second and lowered them again

“Where is your Master, girl?”

“He…he is not, sir. I met him couple weeks ago in the Wand, sir.” Her voice was hanging by the threads, he swore under his breath. Raising her chin with the middle finger he gazes into her eyes. What was she doing in that dump?

“Let’s get you out of this.” He was the wrong person to deal with this. Try as he may, his dead eyes and cold voice were not something that could calm terrified girl.

“What is going on, Severus?” boomed a strong voice of Octavian, the owner of this house. Tension left his shoulders, Lucius was much more adapted to the situation.

“You should have better security, Octavian. You have a red flag running around your premises.”

“Really, who?” Octavian was a large man but usually gentle one, his anger, however, could be intimidating for the most.

“I still don’t know, but I’m sure he will be once we find him. He brought a girl, not his, tied her up and just left her. Lucius, hold her, she’s up for at least an hour.”

Lucius was whispering something to the girl’s ear, while he unclasped the binds. Rose was next to
them, holding the robe, Lucius used it to wrap the girl. She was crying, shaking, too weak to stand on her own. He took the girl in his arms and carried her to one of the private rooms. She didn’t need the ogling crowds that gathered around.

His peaceful evening with a book just had an unsuspecting and most unsatisfying left turn. He’s annoyed. Lucius went to bring them all the drinks while girl tried to explain how she managed to find herself in that situation. She was from Beauxbatons Academy of Magic and apparently new to England and to this world. She clung to his sleeve like a leach. He suppressed the growl.

They barely managed to calm the girl down, when she started to shake again. The noise was coming from the direction of the Red Room. He glared at Lucius and Octavian.

“Rose, stay with her.” He hissed and walked towards the room followed by two other men. Dark haired man, with slick hair glued to his head, was causing ruckus

“Who untied the girl?” he demanded

“I did.” He drawled almost too quiet, crowds stepped away “Are you her Master?”

The guy looked at him with spite and he raised an eyebrow, allowing menacing smile to twitch corners of his lips

“You had no right! She came with me.” The man demanded


“No, she came here with me. I’m protecting her.” Severus’s eyebrow risen even higher, he narrowed his eyes at the newcomer and the man looked like he is ready to bolt, eyeing at Severus then behind his back at Lucius and Octavian. “Why did you free her?” asked newcomer.

“Why did you leave her?” his voice vibrated dangerously and the newcomer stepped away, man’s eyes darted to his left hand

“I know you. Do you want her? You can have her, she’s not mine anyway.”

“I believe you have your red flag, Octavian. My advice, keep the girl, toss him out.” He clenched his fist and walked away wishing he could de-stress just a bit using this wanker as a target practice. Lucius followed him at his heel

“Your reputation precedes you.”

“Oh, jolly.” He groused “All I wanted was a book and a glass of wine, Lucius.”

“You are repeating yourself, Severus.”

“Until it sinks in, Lucius. But, I guess it is a lost cause on you.” He glanced at the blonde who just grinned. Rose managed to calm the girl down.

“You are safe, he will be escorted from the premises.” He told the girl “In a few minutes you can go out and find someone more suiting for you.”

“Thank you, sir.” She whispered “Ummm, sir…” he looked at her, she had a deep blush “I did come here for a reason. Could you…”

“I am not what you need, little girl.”
“But you do know how to wield a flogger?”

“Is that why you were tied up?”

“No, he told me he will show me around, find someone to use the flogger on me…I was reluctant to allow him…sir”

“Why?”

“He used a whip on me, sir. It took a lot of dittany to close the gash, sir. I am not…I do not like the blood and skin breaks. I have my limits, sir.” Her voice was quiet. He nodded, at least she knew that much, too bad she was not so good at choosing partners. “Could,… could you do it?”

“Why? Are you that desperate to get back on that frame?” he saw Lucius making a minuscule motion, glaring at him, but staying quiet. Octavian was whispering something with Rose in one of the corners

“No, sir. But I do want the experience, and I am afraid…that if I don’t do it tonight, I won’t have the strength to do it at all, sir. And…I feel safe next to you, sir.” Lucius chuckled and he cut him with the glare. All he wanted were the book and the wine, but girls doe-like eyes looked at him with trust. His chest constricted for a second.

“Fine. But, rest first. At least an hour. I won’t have you tied up so soon again.”

“Go on, Marianne, go with Rose.” Octavian’s voice was gentle, Rose took the girl “We will ‘adopt her’ until we find her a proper Master.” He declared “It will be a pleasure to see you in action again Severus, for too long you just ignored the scene.” The man smiled

“I’d like to tie that wanker to a frame and show him how to use a whip properly, to peel someone’s skin.” He growled “I’ll be in my usual spot. Reading.” He glared pointedly at Lucius and walked away…

…Two hours later he was standing once again next to the rack. Same girl tied to it. But this time she wasn’t scared. He measured the heaviness and the balance of the leather in his hand.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Call yellow for toning it down and red for stop.”

“Yes, sir.”

He flicked his wrist, the leather thwacked against her skin lightly, licking it. It was just a short bite, not painful, more of a stingy. He waited few seconds. She grunted at the back of her throat and pushed back to him as much as ties allowed. He grinned and flicked his wrist again, hitting her lower, catching her butcheeks and top of her thighs with strips. Her back arched. Not waiting he flicked again, her back this time, she moaned. ‘I’ve got your number, little girl.’ He kept his flicks light, moving them around, increasing strength only on her back. Her moans were hoarse and louder as the time progressed. But then they became more subdued, lost. He frowned ‘Oh, no you won’t.’ he flicked his wrist sharply, hitting her inner thigh, she yelled opening her drowsy eyes. Next flick was again on her back and she moaned again, loudly. Fine perspiration coated her skin. He narrowed his eyes, after ten or fifteen more flicks he stepped against her, pressing his chest against her back. He pushed the handle of the flogger inside her, pressing her clitoris with his thumb. She went rigid next to him then started to shake with a guttural cry, and after a while went limp, sagging
in her binds.

“Rose.” He called. He had no will to release her or give her aftercare, Rose will see to that. Walking away he glanced at her back, the skin was red but it did not break, it won’t even bruise. He smirked, walking towards his corner.

“It was a pleasure to see you in action again, my friend.”

“All I wanted was the book and the wine, Lucius.” He retorts, finally reaching the high back chair.

His eyes flew open. Merlin, why that and why now? It wasn’t a bad memory, it wasn’t a locked memory. It was a forgotten memory at best. It happened few weeks before his first year as a teacher at Hogwarts. So why… he tries to move. This can’t be happening…Salazar, kill me!
Hermione sat on her bed, deep crimson flush coloured her cheeks. Ok, that was…well…and he hadn’t had such dreams, well ever, if she discards the one with Bellatrix. But this was so fundamentally different, and yet it wasn’t. Can that be even pleasurable? She frowns. That girl surely sounded like she enjoyed it. Then why wasn’t he… ‘Ok, Hermione stop! You will not go to ponder on professor Snape’s sex life.’ It was disturbing as it is that she had insight into it.

But that girl sure did sound happy. Reminding her of her poor experience. She didn’t sound like that, and Ron wasn’t trying to beat her up with anything. It made her think about what or if she missed something at all. She sighs. It would be nice to find someone who could make her sound like that. She frowns, how much she changed her perception of what love is? Is it his influence or did she just came in terms with…? She shakes her head, no she won’t think about it, it is too soon and too painful.

Frustrated groan startled her. She snapped her head at his direction and jumped from the bed.

“Oh, oh sorry, professor, I will just….” She was frozen in the motion. His eyes bore into her, burning

“Out.” He choked out

“But, professor, if you let me cast…”

“O. U. T.”

“Fine. I just…I can’t move professor.” she is quite literally frozen “But you know, it is quite normal and nothing to be…”

“Poppy.” He croaked, tears rolling from his blazing eyes “Out!”

Suddenly she was flying through the air, landing near the room entrance. Poppy nearly stepped on her. Her bum and arms hurt like hell as she landed on them with an oumpf.

“What is going on? Oh dear me, I was afraid of this. Get up girl, go now, make yourself a tea, I need to have a little chat with Severus.” Poppy helped her get up

She hears Poppy grumble as she walks away. She is utterly confused. He used his magic on her, to throw her out. But why? It is not like she didn’t help him before, and she would use the spell Poppy taught her. She sighs, maybe Harry can give her advice. She whipped her wand and shimmering glob appeared, well it is something, after the battle, she was unable to summon her Patronus at all

“Harry, I need your advice, can you come? Please. Professor didn’t allow me to use the spell on him. Please, Harry, I have no one to ask.” She sent the globe to Harry and fixed her eyes on the door.
'That girl sure did sound satisfied. Too much, I know too much!' she whimpered but refused to close her eyes. Shivering. ‘No, Hermione, you will not ponder on Professor’s sex life.’

It was almost painful to remember how much he was devoid of any feelings whatsoever. She started to pace than sad, suddenly realising...she wasn’t crying anymore! The sense of doom was gone. Pain, her own pain was still there, but she wasn’t feeling so hopeless anymore. There was the tiniest bit of light on the end of the tunnel. She frowned, come what may – she will keep him alive...or at least she will try until he is strong enough to kill her.

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Poppy approached him grumbling

“No one ever listens to me.” She poured the potion down his throat and flicked the wand to his groins, his shoulders slacked “I gave you something to preserve those poor vocal cords, you are so deterrent to shred once again. It won’t lift the pain, but it will help a bit. We need to talk Severus Snape” he cringed at her tone of voice, feeling like he is once again small boy being goodheartedly berated by her for ending up in the infirmary too often

“Thank you.” He whispered it didn’t hurt that much if he whispered

“Why didn’t you let the girl help you?”

“She IS my student.” He hissed ‘Does she even understand what is she asking or what happened? She must have given the charm she used…’

“She was your student, now she is your nurse. I thought her that spell for a reason, or do you think you were resolved from normal physical function wishlist in a coma?”

“That is not..” he blinked, ‘WHAT?’ Poppy cut him

“And what do you think, who took care of you? Who bathed you? Who was holding you when you had post-cruciatus tremors?”

“Do not tell me it was...her.” He couldn’t hide the horror in his voice. Wasn’t it enough that girl invaded his privacy, his inner thoughts? He was violated, it sure felt like he was in more ways than one ‘Merlin!’ he felt terror gripping his guts ‘She bathed me!’ that would require...and he was...‘No, no, no! I refuse to accept that!’ his mind reeled while his insides worked on highly ingenious somersaults ‘She. Did. Not!’

“She is in charge of you, Severus. Like it or not, I have a full hospital of wounded. St. Mungo’s is overpopulated, I am at maximum capacity and there is only one me.” Poppy was merciless, he was sure by now she could see horror on his face clearly, his face muscles felt contorted but he was unable to school them into calm mask

“So you dumped me on Granger?” he growled

“I ‘dumped’ you, as you put it, on the only person I could trust, who had only your wellbeing on her mind, even before hers. You need constant care, Severus, and I do not have that time on my hands. The girl cares for you, I do not know why but she does. And you won’t give her grief for it.” He grunted “I won’t have it, be it here or in the Manor...You won’t refuse her help anymore. I cannot run to you every time she tries to help you. Did I made myself clear?” her voice is sharp and cuts like the knife
“Fine, but…”

“But nothing. I thought her the spell. Surely you prefer it to what she used to use on you.”

“What. Did. She. Used. On. Me?” he can feel the static of magic crackling

“Ice cold air.” Said Poppy matter-of-factly

“WHAT?!!! ” he raised on his elbows a few centimetres before flopping back down on the bed, his mind is racing. While he was in a coma, thinking he died, few times he felt like his insides are freezing…was it her? Every time?

“Now, now. You can’t blame her, she didn’t know any better and you scared the girl, she didn’t know what to do.”

“She could have called you.” He grumbled feeling murderous

“She didn’t want to cause you the embracement.” Chuckled Poppy and he harrumphed, now he had permission to speak but not the will fearing that Poppy really might hex him if he voices his mind “It may please you to know, that you are better…equipped…than the youngest Weasley male.” Poppy continued to chuckle, he groaned, his head started to throb

“It does not…please…me. This is punishment? Isn’t it? They had no other way to punish me so they inflicted Granger on me? Surely, the Kiss is a more humane way to deal with perpetrators.” He glared at Poppy, if he could he would clench his head

“Now, now, I’m not telling you this to embrace you.”

“Then why do you telling me this?”

“To let you know that the damage is already done. Let the girl take care of you because I sure as hell don’t have that much time. Now I must leave you before Potter drags Lucius again. I won’t tolerate duelling in my hospital.”

“Potter? What he has with anything. I thought she is with the youngest Weasley.”

“Honestly Severus? No, Miss Granger is not with youngest Weasley, he couldn’t forgive her that she went along with Harry’s plan and came here to guard and take care of you. So, you should show her at least bit of gratitude.”

“I’d be more grateful if she stayed with him and leave me be. I still don’t see…”

“You don’t? She and Harry are much like yourself and Lucius. That much I can tell you.” Poppy rose from her seat “And Severus…I do not make empty threats. Langlock.” She flicked her wand at him

“Mmmmmmm mmm mmmm, mmmmmmmmm!”

“It is on your head, you should have been silent. Now, you will be.” Huffed Poppy at him and walked out of the room

“Mmmm-mm!” ‘Damn that woman!’

His throat is burning. His head is splitting. And now he is jinxed speechless. Merlin! Granger! He will teach her not to meddle… He just wants to die. And how is this even possible? He wasn’t been
able to…not for years…not since the day she died. But it would be just like him. To lock away his emotions. To lock himself so deep that he rendered himself impotent. Without his walls to bury himself behind…well. What does that matter, it is not like he is interested in other women. How long will I have to suffer? Why they just don’t let me die? Surely, I outlived my usefulness.
XXVII

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know, again short time between posts, but I just received very annoying news from my work and needed to de-stress myself.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Hermione sighed, so much has changed in just ten days. After the initial shock and extremely bumpy start, they settled into some sort of routine. She would read, quietly, in her corner he would stare at the ceiling or sleep. She offered to read to him but he growled at her she offered to charm a book of his choice to hover above him, he hissed at her. And that was that - she never mentioned it again.

He would dutifully take his medicines. He would grunt, and hiss and flinch at her touch during daily exercise, his muscles tight instead of relaxed. He flung her two times out of the basin…once against the wall…until Poppy intervened, but after that, she resumed to wash his hair while he growled like a muzzled rabid dog.

Poppy began to introduce the food to him, so she had to learn few more spells. He certainly didn’t like that. And he certainly didn’t like to be fed, for Merlin’s sakes – he nearly bit her! After that, Poppy was sitting through his meals while she would sit in Poppy’s office. And that bothers her!

Before he opened his eyes, no matter the procedure Poppy wouldn’t throw her out of the room. Now…well now was ‘Leave us, girl’ with Poppy or ‘Out with you.’ With Malfoy way too often. How was she supposed to look after him if they wouldn’t let her near him half of the time? If they kept her in the dark. She feels excluded, rejected…hurt by their actions. It was junior school, first year at Hogwarts, before Harry and Ron, all over again.

‘Face it, Hermione, you were never big on friends.’ She sighs. She does have friends now…Harry, Ron, Ginny, Neville even Luna…All the Weasley’s. Pain hits her and she curls up, pulls into herself, wrapping her arms around her, gripping tight, it is unbearable and she might fall apart, explode if there is nothing to hold her. But, she has no one besides herself. She can’t think of Weasley family yet, broken…incomplete.

Luckily, the sharing of the memories stopped. She is not sure if it’s stopped for good or is he managed to rein it. He certainly is not in a sharing mood, even for information such as that. And she is prohibited to read the books on Mind Magic. Well, she is certain that there are no more sex dreams on his part, she was not forced to use the incantation on him, thanks Merlin for small favours.

She takes a sip of tea and sighs again. Later today Harry will come, with Malfoy no doubt. And if it all goes well today…in a couple of days, they will move to the Manor. She shakes her head violently. No! She does not want to go there. She does not want to set foot in that place ever again. Fear travels up her spine in a slow icy wave. But, she must. She has to grip her teeth and go there…or let someone else take care of him. No! That is impossible! The Malfoy’s won’t harm him, she is aware of that, she saw enough to know that much, but Manor is crawling with Aurors. She does not trust them. So many still hate him. He is the hero! Wizengamot freed him. Ministry rewarded him.
People did not forget or forgive him, at least majority didn’t. And no one, no one understands how much his life is important. Poppy returns.

“Go on girl, and be ready for him to bite.” Matron chuckles, her eyes widened “Oh, no, not like that, girl. But he can talk now. Don’t take to the heart what he says.”

“Right. I think, by now, I’m used to it.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that. He is twice as grouchy when he’s sick.” There is a warning in Poppy’s voice. She nodded and walks slowly towards the room, stifling the jealousy. Why is she jealous at Matron? She has no right to be. But Matron knows him so well, he respects Poppy, she can tell. And he hates her, she can tell that too. Why? She never did anything to deserve his hate or despise.

She enters the room. In a way, she feels honoured. His magic holds the door of the room, only Poppy, Malfoy and her are allowed, everyone else stays outside. And that is the strangest thing. He can’t use his magic, well not properly. Poppy says it will pass. His magic is at the moment wild, unpredictable like he is, and still, it is not damaging, it seems that his magic follows his unspoken wishes. He does not want visitors, so no one may enter the room. He does not agree with her being near him, so she finds herself flying through the air, not harmed but rejected.

“How are you feeling, Professor?” He turns his head from her, silent. She sighs again. “Very well. But now you can speak, so if you need anything just ask.”

“Disappear from my vicinity.” He growled quietly through clenched teeth, painful words ‘Right, don’t take it by heart.’ Poppy warned her

“You know I can’t do that. But anything else…” she gives him time but it seems that their conversation is exhausted itself “Right, I’ll be here reading.” She sits on the sofa and takes the book.

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“Really, Severus, you are going to spoil him rotten.” Narcissa’s voice is light, with slight chuckle “He has his own bed and he should be sleeping in there, not in your arms.”

“We played and he just fell asleep.”

“That is not a reason to let him sleep in your arms.”

“I know, but I won’t be able to see him as much after tomorrow.”

“Suit yourself.” She gives up “Will you be going to the club tonight?”

“I don’t know, it is up to Lucius.” She sighs heavily, he turns to her, peeling his eyes from the window “He is faithful, Cissa.”

“I know. I know that he is. You both are.” She smiles “And I am grateful for your role in it.”

“He loves you, he wouldn’t cheat on you, it does not matter if I’m there or not.”

“I know, but then he would be forced to do so, expected. You provide him with ample excuse.”

“I will never understand…”

“It is what it is. We were brought up not to question the way of our society just to follow them. I have to go, you just place him in the cradle when you get tired.”
He nods and looks at the toddler in his arms. He shifts him so that baby’s head in on his shoulder. Toddler sighs deeply but doesn’t wake up. He resumes his gazing through the window, at the meticulous lawn and flower beds. He presses his cheek at the baby’s downy soft blond hair, hugging him tightly.

It hurts, his heart quivers in pain. It almost takes him by surprise, he is so used to lock down all emotions that this one startles him. This baby in his arms, he does care deeply for it, but it is a reminder. A painful reminder of what he lost, what he will never have. What he might have if he wasn’t so foolish.

His eyelids feel like they are full of needles. He doesn't like children so why would he regret not having one? He wouldn’t even know how to be a parent, not like he had upstanding role-models growing up. No, the world is better of with dying out of the Snape line.

Soft hands are on his face, gently brushing below his eyes. Is he crying? Salazar!

“Don’t think like that, Professor. You are still young, you can still have kids. I think it was sweet, even if it’s Draco, the way you held him…you know?”

He opens his eyes to meet the soft brown ones, gentle and caring, worried, sad. She has no right! This is private, too private. No one is privy to this part of him, so why does she thinks she has to right to know or say anything?

“Unhand me you pest.” He hisses at her

She removes her hands, backing up a little. Brown eyes are hurt now.

“I am sorry, Professor. I was just…right…sorry.”

Brown eyes brim with tears, she moves from his line of sight. He hears her take one shrubery breath but there is no sniffling or sobbing, he takes it as a sign that she calmed herself down. Her mind is not so flustered now, but it still is unfocused, all over the place.

Merlin, no wonder he didn’t even suspect her, he would imagine that her mind is organised, almost as meticulous as his. Poppy told him that she made notes of what she’s done, but they didn’t manage to figure out much. He is not surprised, he is used to reading her essays, riddled with cross-references and packed with information useful and not so useful. She was always so anal and wide in her work. But he needs to be better, his magic has to mend before he would be able to solve the puzzle, to undo what she’s done. To kick her out of his brain and remove himself from her presence. For now, she is still there, he can feel her almost painfully like a needle stuck in his root canal.

“Out with you.” Lucius, shuffling of the feet and small steps walking away ‘At least she does not argue anymore.’ For the first few days, he was sick and tired of their bickering, arguing about their ownership of him like two dogs over the bone. What right did she have? Like she has a claim on him!

Lucius comes to his view and he smiles.

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The moment little mudblood whore left the room Severus smiles at him. It is a sad smile, and he is sure that his friend is unaware of that fact. He would not reveal that much, not on purpose, and that tells him how weak his friend is. He stifles the hiss of pain, sitting on his customary edge of the bed.

“Poppy told me she finally lifted her jinx.”
“My jinx, Lucius. The bloody woman used my jinx on me.” Severus’s voice is changed, gravely, bit deeper than it was but still holds a good quality

“Yes, the woman is formidable and fearless.” He chuckles “Narcissa and Draco send their love.”

“And you be sure to…”

“They know. They are excited to greet you. Not so happy about your guard dog.” He is not happy to accommodate her in his home, but he would turn the earth and the sky for Severus. The man who not only gave him his son but saved his son’s life, at the risk of its own. Severus groans and he can sympathise. “Poppy is adamant, either she comes with you or you stay here.”

“Thank you,” Severus whispered

“Don’t worry, we will find the way to…dispose…of her.”

“I do not think that world would be so forgiving if we relieve it of the member of Golden Trio, and no less than Gryffindor Princess.” He nearly chuckled at the lamenting sound in his friend’s voice

“That bad?”

“Regrettably so.”

“Show me, don’t strain your throat, show me.” He leans and gazes in Severus’s eyes. Severus nods and locks his gaze with his, pushing images of their first time in the basin and up to now. He can sense the struggle to keep at bay unwanted information, and he is trying to push them away but they float in sight, even for a second. He feels sad, this is the mind that even Albus and Dark Lord couldn’t break, and now it is so open and vulnerable.

He pulls back, he saw more than his friend maybe intended. For one part he is glad for other…he is not happy. But maybe, just maybe the little mudblood can be useful to him. And a bit of entertainment wouldn’t hurt.

“Merlin!” he voices

“At this point, I am regretting ever waking up. It almost makes me want to be in the hands of Dark Lord again.”

“Don’t say that. But this can be…of use, Severus.”

“She is guarded by Poppy,” Severus growls

“She is now,…but she won’t be…at the Manor.” He inches his head slightly

“She is not to be…damaged.”

“And who mentioned anything about damaging her? The hair of her head won’t be missing.” He smiles and Severus grins at him. It is a slow and so familiar grin. Oh, this is going to be fun! “Just hold on for few more days. I am going now, we don’t want to set off Poppy.”

“Give them my love Lucius.”

“I will.”

He stands and bites down the hiss, again. Pain radiates with every step he takes. Taking a deep steadying breath, he straightens his back and walks to Poppy’s office. The mudblood and Potter are
there, he gazes at Potter but address her

“Granger, I did consent to you to accompany him. Make no mistake in my good nature, there is none. I do not want you in my home. You will carry that sofa with you, I do not desire that you soil any of my furniture. You will be confined to the room you’ll share with Severus and only that ensuite. You will have access to the pool but only accompanied by a house-elf. I do not wish to catch you roaming around my home at any moment.”

“Mr Malfoy, you do not have to worry. I do not wish to be in your home any more than you want me there.” She narrows her eyes at him

“If any of my servants is set free, even by accident, you…will…pay…for…it. Dearly. Did I made myself clear?”

“Now, wait a minute Malfoy…” Harry is on his feet. He turns his eyes on the boy again, he loathes the fact that he does owe to the boy. He did, after all, saved his son’s life.

“It is fine Harry.” She places her arm on Potter’s “It wouldn’t be any different no matter what Mr Malfoy said. I will have right to go into the hallway and talk to Harry, that is if Professor does not change his mind and allow Harry to the room?”

“Only to talk to Potter.” He hisses and turns, walking away

“That is all I need. Thank you, Mr Malfoy.”

He does not acknowledge that he heard her. Potter is arguing with her now, but he did set the stage. This will be fun! Still, he refuses to lose his friend, and Severus has no will to live, not now. Severus needs a challenge, something to focus on, and the little mudblood dirt is a good distraction. He has no qualms to toss her in the cage of a wild beast. After all, that beast is his brother.
His footsteps echo dully against the stone floor, the castle is eerily like this, deserted. He hates it. Every step, every stone, every chatty portrait, every one of the numerous statues. He. Hates. It. The feeling of discomfort creeps down his back. ‘Get a grip of yourself. For the name of Merlin!, you were standing in the same room with the most ruthless, dangerous people in whole Europe! What a room full of your ex-professor going to do?’

He climbs the stairs, feeling like he’s done something wrong, expecting with dread the scolding that is due. Albeit, he never went to that room to be scolded by things he’s done, ending up there usually meant that he was scolded for things others did to him. That does not improve his mood. He stands in front of the Gargoyle and murmurs the password. Stairs appear and he climbs them, coming to the door he knocks.

He wants to leave. Turn around and walk away, but then, walking away is not an option. The only thing standing between him and Azkaban is this job and the promise he gave to the Dumbledore.

The door flings open and Dumbledore stands to greet him

“Severus, right on time.”

“As requested.” He nods, it is probably a bit colder than he should greet the man but he can’t muster the strength or will for something like that

“Come on, come along, we have a meeting to attend to. There is nothing to worry about. Most of them are excited to have fresh blood among these old walls.” Dumbledore sounds almost jovial

“Toffee before we go?” the man offers and he shakes his head...

...He was never in this room before. The Large table in the middle, chairs around it. Towards the fireplace comfortable sofa and few two-seaters or armchairs. On the opposite wall, a cabinet set to serve coffee, tea, sweet and salty nibbles. Many of his old professors are in that room, just a few unfamiliar faces. He feels small once again, why? ‘My intellect matches their own, my skill is as good as theirs.’

“Merlin, Albus, is this your surprise!?” the stern voice of Minerva McGonagall causes the chatter in the room to a stop immediately

“Yes, my dear girl.” Chuckles Albus
“Dear me,” squeaky voice of Flitwick comes from his left, unseen “when you told us you have a perfect candidate I didn’t even imagine!”

“As you know, we are in a short supply of upstanding Slytherin’s.” Albus sounds pleased with himself “I did manage to secure for us one of the youngest Potion Master recognized by the Guild. And one of the best students Hogwarts ever seen.”

He has the desire to strike Albus on the spot. The nerve of the man.

“Potions Master? But I thought that you are looking for a DADA teacher. Mr Snape certainly had an aptitude for it, and as a spy, surely…” Minerva is confused, by bemused faces he can tell that the Old Goat never shared his plan with the rest of the staff

“Ah, my dear but we do want to hold on to young Severus for longer than a year, do we? This summer Slughorn handed me his resignation, a request to a pension if you like. So we stayed short of Potions teacher and Head of House.”

“Albus, isn’t that a bit too much for a lad?” this made him wary, he looked sharply at Albus

“Nonsense, Minerva, if anyone can handle it, it is Severus.”

“Handle what?” his voice is even, bordering or bored drawl

“I thought I mention it to you, Severus. Or at least some of your friends might.”

He shakes his head, no, Lucius never uttered a word to him about anything. What does the Albus play?

“Oh, well the cat is out of the bag now, anyway. You will be the new Head of House for Slytherin.” He gawks at Albus, is he lost his bloody mind? He is the last person capable to handle the house full of kids! He nods and strolls to the cabinet to help himself with a strong cup of tea. “Minerva, Pomona and Filius will help you to get introduced to your Head’s duties and your teaching duties.”

“Thank you, Headmaster.” He replies and turns to the mentioned staff “Thank you, professors.”

“Albus, you are positively getting forgetful. Come, Severus, join us. We are all colleagues here, so first names basis. If Albus wasn’t so keen on surprising us all, I could have already helped you with instructions. He tossed you in a bit of a fire now.”

“Thank you, Minerva. I much appreciate your help.” ‘He didn’t want to surprise you, he wanted to put me in my place.’ He thinks bitterly and joins Minerva and Pomona...

...He walks down the hall. Some students chatter in front of him, but older students do not even attempt to move. Many of them were in school with him. Whispers follow him like a tail that drags forever in his wake, he can hear everything from “What’s he doing here?” to “Traitor.”

A headache is forming behind his temples and he didn’t even have one class. After last night’s sorting ceremony and his introduction as a member of staff and Head of House, Slytherin kept him on his toes almost the whole night. From crying first years to spiteful seventh-years. He enters the classroom and walks to his office. Unlike for many professors, his rooms are not joined to the classroom but wedged in the middle of the Slytherin Common room and his classroom joined with each by the long corridor.

First two classes go well, first and second years are easy. But, next class is with advanced NEWT students, four Slytherin, two Gryffindor, One Hufflepuff and four Ravenclaw. They enter the
classroom looking at him with spite like he does not belong there. He starts the class with reading their names.

“Today we will start with establishing what you know and learned thus far.”

“Why?” Hufflepuff

“Professor Slughorn never…” Ravenclaw

“Did I gave any of you permission to talk?” he snaps, his voice cold and stern “Let us establish some base rules. You are not to speak unless addressed to or given the permission. You are to follow my instructions to the letter. And given that this is elective subject for the sixth year, you are to demonstrate ample amount of knowledge of the subject without preparations. Did. I. Made. Myself. Clear?” Silence and rows of bemused faces. This is going to be long year…

Hermione pulled the cover over her and curled up. Another dream/memory. She is not sure if this one was so bad. She would think it wasn’t but the underlying feeling of emptiness and rejection, pain caused by that rejection, feeling of being trapped and forced made it difficult.

Poppy walks into the room, so she is pretending to be still asleep. The chair is dragged on the floor.

“How are you feeling this morning, Severus?”

“Alive.” there is so much bitterness in his voice

“Life is not a curse, do try not to sound so bitter.” She admonishes him gently

“Are you sure about that Poppy?”

“Oh, shush. You tied my hand's boy, tied them so well that I had to keep quiet and watch as they slander you for years. Don’t you think it is time to start living?”

“It is too late for me and you know it.” His voice is now broken “I lived for years on borrowed time.”

“And yet…”

“Yet you inflict this burden on me once more, enhanced it with encumbrance of…” he bits his words at the sound of Poppy clearing her throat

“The girl fought for you tooth and nail. She did what I wanted and what I was unable to do. I am grateful for that at least.”

“And if they convinced me? Sentenced me for a kiss? How grateful would you be then, Poppy? Do you know what would happen to little miss perfect if they Kissed me while she is stuck in my head? Or do you develop a knack for having a coma patient in your hospital?”

“Careful now Severus, one might get the impression that you care.” Chuckles Poppy

“I don’t. I am past caring for years. What I do not appreciate is forcing yet another crime on me. Using me as suds to wash away their own guilt.”

“Then rest assured, Miss Granger didn’t use you in that capacity. Her failed attempt came after you were awarded with the Order.”

“Is that supposed to make me grateful? She…violated me…more profoundly than either Albus or
Dark Lord ever did.”

“Now, now. The girl had the best intentions at her mind.”

“Yes, my life is pawed and riddled with best intentions of others, lucky me.” He hisses “A true wellwisher might take into consideration what I would want for myself. Don’t you think?”

“And what that might be?”

“Whatever it is…it is taken from me now. at least for the time being.” He dampens, bitterly

“Then, I am glad that Miss Granger did make a judgement error in her abilities.” Reply Poppy harshly “Now, today we are moving you to the Manor,…”

She stopped listening. ‘What does that mean…why is Poppy glad that I made a mistake? What…oh, no!” she gasps. Sudden realisation forces her to curl up like a punch in the guts. She is taken aback by the way he talks with Matron, it sounds like a petulant child talking to a parent. That certainly explains Poppy’s dedication to seeing him better and healthy, she always thought it went beyond professional care for the patient. She sits in bed, rubbing her eyes.

“Good morning Poppy. Good morning Professor. Professor…”

“Not another word Miss Granger, or I’ll have you skinned alive.” he hisses at her and she snaps her mouth closed

“Well, I’ll take my leave now. Get up, girl, get ready. You’ll be moved to the Manor soon, Lucius and Potter will be here in an hour.” Poppy walks out and she jumps, running to catch the Matron. But Poppy can’t be found

She returns to the room and looks at disgruntled man on the bed

“Can I do anything for you, Professor?”

“You’ve done quite enough.” He growls and she turns to pack her things

“Would you mind if I go to the toilet, to freshen up a bit?”

“Do me a favour while you are there, Miss Granger. Do. Not. Return.”

“Sorry, professor. I'll be back in a jiffy.” She walks to the bathroom to wash her teeth and wash her face. Their conversation still playing in her head. Is she glad she is stuck in his head now? she expected him to be difficult, wanting to desert England or wizarding world… She never expected him to be…like that… What is she to do now? how is she to convince him to live? Quite literally… She always thought that he would be unwilling to resume his life fully, not to discard it completely… Not that she does not understand from where is all that coming, she truly does…but he cannot die.

When she returns to the room, Poppy is there again. The young St. Mungo’s nurse runs in the room

“He’s back Matron!”

“Who’s back?” the wand is in her hand before she realises it

“Remove that thing from your hand child, it is that blasted bird.” Huffs Poppy

“Bird.”
“Huge black bird. I can’t make it go away.”

“Raven?” she asks, his head snapped in her direction

“I’d say so.” Grumbles Poppy, before her professor had a chance to react, she cries

“Hades!”

“I beg your pardon?” she hears Poppy but she is already on the run, she opens a window where large raven is preached. The bird flies in and soars toward the makeshift walls of the Snape’s private room. She follows it.

“Can you explain this?” grumbles Poppy, and she is not sure if the question is directed to her or to the professor, but she answers anyway

“It is professor’s bird, Poppy. Look.”

The raven is preached on the bed, above Snape’s head, it squawks loudly and pecks on the strand of his hair before starts to cackle quietly.

“It took you bloody long.” Grumbles Snape to the bird and the raven gives him one condemning glare “Well it did.”

The bird and the professor have identical look in their eyes, and she nearly laughs.

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Harry watched as six Auror’s surrounded the stretch with Snape and large black bird. They are followed by Lucius and grim looking Hermione. He turns to Poppy

“Do you really think she will be fine there?”

“She will.” Matron is firm

“You know what happened to her there?”

“I do. And I think it is good for her.”

“But leaving her, in there, with…them?”

“They won’t harm her.”

“Can you guarantee that? We are talking about Malfoy’s after all.” He is not sure this is a good idea, but it seems that his power as Saviour of the World did not stretch to Poppy or Malfoy’s for that matter. He was certain Snape didn’t see him like that.

“If you shelter her now, Mr Potter, she won’t overcome her fears, never. She is a bright young girl, she does not deserve to be choked by fear. Besides, Severus will protect her if she lands herself in a danger.”

“Poppy, I am not sure if you understood correctly, but the biggest danger IS Snape.”

“Oh, poppycock, she can handle him. I bet you she can handle all of them. You do not do her justice Potter, I’m disappointed in you.” Huffs Poppy turns and walks into her office. He is - uncertain.
Hermione fought the feeling of nausea that followed the apparating, she was more than proficient at it but still…it wasn’t pleasant feeling. This apparition was difficult, complicated and she would be mind-blown in normal conditions, but these were not normal conditions. They apparated, all of them, a total of ten people and one bird in a side-along. Snape refused to separate from the bird, she and Malfoy refused to separate with Snape and Harry didn’t want to let her alone.

She would really be in awe if they weren’t standing at the gates of Malfoy Manor. She scolded her features into a neutral mask. A shiver runs through her when they passed the wards.

Hades screech loudly and soared into the sky to be greeted with a soft hoot of an Eagle Owl. Part of conversation drifted to her.

“I should have never allow you to name my Owl.” Grumbled Malfoy, walking by the floating stretch

“The name is fitting.”

“Mephistopheles? Honestly Severus, sometimes I wonder…”

“Only sometimes?”

The talk faded away. She would be more than a little curious, but she just didn’t have enough brain to process the information. With each step, her heart beat a little bit faster, until it reached the point where all sounds were muffled by the sound of blood, rushing in her ears. Even if she was desperately trying to keep her breathing normal, it still sounded in her head too loud and sort of echoey. The edges of her vision blurred.

She didn’t notice that Harry was talking to her until he took her hand, making her twitch and look at him sharply. He was still talking but she didn’t hear him at all. She just waved her head and squeezed his hand. He nodded, and they continued walking holding hands.

The moment they reached Manor she had a bone-crushing grip on Harry’s hand. He tried to return the squeeze and reassure her but it was pointless. She bit her lip hard enough to feel the coppery taste in her mouth. Closing her eyes for a second she crossed the threshold of the manor, cold marble greeted her with nauseating familiarity. ‘Don’t go into a drawing room, don’t go into the drawing room.’

Much to her relief they turned left toward the opposite wing of the manor. Her breathing got quieter and whoosh of blood started to subside a bit. Malfoy floated to her vision but she still couldn’t hear
him. The first words she could make sense of were Harry’s words.

“… so you may tell her that later Malfoy, for now, I need to talk to her.”

“That is harsh not to mention rude, Potter” Malfoy’s voice “Why don’t you just drop the ‘politeness’ altogether and say what’s on your mind.”

“Fine. I don’t trust you Malfoy, not with her. If she is in any way…”

“Mr Potter, I did extend my invitation for Miss Granger to my house, not willingly but still. And for that, if nothing else, it is my obligation to see that Miss Granger is settled nicely in my home. I do not want her here but under the circumstances…I can guarantee you, as Lord and Master of the Malfoy family, not a single hair would be harmed of Miss Granger’s head. Is this to your satisfaction?”

“For now,” grumbled Harry

“Come now Potter, are you that daft to think I’d be crazy enough to harm one of the Golden Trio when it’s public knowledge that she is here?”

“Public knowledge?”

“Ah, I guess you didn’t manage to see today’s Daily Prophet. Miss Skeeter wrote a lovely if slightly insulting article.” Malfoy grinned and she felt like all the colour was lost from her face ‘I bet I know how lovely and how insulting article really is’

“Great, now I have to deal with that blasted woman again.” Mumbled Harry “Don’t worry, Hermione, I’ll sort out that situation. You just focus on getting Snape better”

She nodded. They reached the middle of the long, shadowed corridor on the second floor, and stopped in front the fifth door on the right. Malfoy charmed the stretch and opened the door. Snape, Hades, Malfoy and she passed, everyone else stayed outside.

She was confused. Room was spacious, in bright earthy colours. Huge bed dominated the room, fitted with burgundy coloured, soft linens. The dark cherry wood bed wasn’t four poser, but rather had short bed posts with ends that portrayed each of the four elements. The colour of linens complemented the pearl white colour of walls. Next to the bed was a silver stand for Hades, which he adopted instantly. Opposite to the entrance door was a row of the huge wall to wall windows, with transparent Pearl white drapes and much heavier burgundy over-drapes. Next to the wall was empty space and in there she places her sofa and her trunk. Across the bed was a large fireplace with fire merrily burning and warming the room. In the corner of that same wall was the door.

Malfoy carefully floated Snape to the bed and took care that he is covered and comfortable before turning to her.

“My promise to the Potter stay, you won’t be harmed, Miss Granger. It also stays what I told you, you are off limits outside this room unless it is a pool. Now, this is your en-suite.” He beckoned her to follow him, leading her to the large bathroom with a glass shower booth and huge claw legs tub. The bathroom was in beige and soft brown tones. “Your house-elf is Misty.” He continued returning them to the room “She is to give you your meals, she is familiar with Severus’s diet, she is also to take you to the pool and back by appearing you to and from the place. I do. Not. Wish. To. See. You. Anywhere. In. The. House.”

“Mr Malfoy, I am here to help professor get better, not to enjoy the sight of the Manor. Once was
more than enough.” She bit back wishing for Malfoy to vanish from the room. To her relief, he did just that, with slight tilt of the head he walked to Snape with words

“I’ll be here in the afternoon, rest now my friend. If you wish for any book from the library just ask Misty.” Snape just nodded and Malfoy walked out of the room.

She sighed a relief and plopped on the sofa, trying to get the firm grasp on her outer appearance, not to show any sign of weakness. Finally, raising her head she looked at the professor who was lying in the bed. The Stark contrast of milky white and black against dark red, she shivered. It reminded her too much of that night in the Shrieking Shack.

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All that shuffling tired him, too much. He felt at peace and anxious at the same time. This place was more home to him than any other. It also bore so many dark memories from a previous couple of years.

There were many surprises, first of all, this wing. He presumed they placed them so far away from the family wing because of her. He missed his old room, his books and familiarity of the heavy oak furniture. This room was similar but it missed so many details. The second surprise was the linens, Lucius knew he preferred plain white ones. Sensing the plot in his friend's actions he stayed quiet.

He will have to convince Lucius to give the girl at least a bit of manoeuvring space, to walk out of the room when they are talking. The little menace already was privy to more than he was willing to share with anyone.

She was the other puzzling thing that day, one which he could not overlook or understand. She moonwalked to the manor, clutching Potter’s hand like a life-line. She ignored Lucius when he tried to engage her in the conversation, something which was so atypical for her. She was quiet, and as much as that suited him more than her constant chattering, it worried him. He couldn’t figure it out what was going on with her. Not that he cared for her wellbeing, but she was attending to him. And, like it or not, he was rather dependent on her. Why was she acting like that?

He glanced at her. She was rummaging through her trunk, shifting things from it in the, too small looking, belt purse. He guessed there was more than one charm cast on that purse because no way that book of that size could fit in the purse without extension charm. But he could sense none. She finally settled with a book on her sofa. She nearly jumped when he called loudly

“Misty!” an elf, dressed in clean white Malfoy pillowcase popped in, she looked at him with respect and joy

“What Misty can do for Master Snape, sir?”

“Can you bring some food? I skipped my breakfast.”

“Right away Master Snape.” Squeaked elf and disappeared, just so that it could appear a few moments later with tray and deliciously smelling porridge, a bit watery but that is what Poppy was feeding him these days

She was on her feet, taking the tray from elf’s hands. Misty backed away like she had run into Fluffy.

“Thank you, Misty.” Hermione smiled politely to the elf “Would you want me to feed you Professor or Misty?” she asked, rubbing the salt to already bleeding wound and he waited ‘Any second now’.
“Misty can Master Snape. Maybe better Misty do it, not to dirty Master Snape with this muddy blood.” Misty almost forcibly took the tray back from Hermione who looked bemused.

“It is fine Misty after all, Miss Granger is here in the capacity of my personal house-elf.” He noticed her back go stiff

“Poor Master Snape does not deserve to be punished like that.” He agreed with elf completely “Misty will talk to Master Malfoy and see if Manor can spare proper elf. If Master Snape uses muddy blood for an elf, he insults the honour of all elves.” Misty gave one reproachful glance to Hermione who paled in response

“Do not worry Misty, Miss Granger is assigned to me from the hospital, and she will be returning to the hospital once I am declared healthy.” He purred to the elf

“Even a rent-an-elf is too good for the muddy blood.” Grumbled Misty “Master call Misty if he needs any help.” With that, she disappeared

With a sigh she took her wand, balancing the food tray in another hand, and cast a few spells on him, lifting him in sitting position, leaning on the piled up cushions. She approached the bed and sat on its edge, placing a tray on his lap. When she raised her eyes to his, he could see hurt in them

“You know, Professor, I don’t expect you to be nice but a bit of respect wouldn’t hurt.”

“Respect is earned, Miss Granger.” His voice was flat

“Still…” she trailed off, there was no fight in her and that worried him the last thing he needed is to be watched by the depressed person.

“I would like to eat and rest Miss Granger.” He hissed at her “This year if possible.”

She sighed, and took a spoonful of porridge, blowing at it

“I’d prefer if you don’t do that. I am confident that Misty had no intentions of burning my throat. I’d like to eat not gauge at food. Thank you”

She glared at him, but her eyes were still hurt. She shoved the spoon to him and he took the mouthful, hating the situation he was in more and more by the second. She was quiet, feeding him like the baby. He. Hated. It. Wishing to inflict at least the part of discomfort he felt on her he suddenly spoke

“Now, when Poppy is unavailable, I’d like to set some ground rules, Miss Granger.” She nodded “But first of all, I would like to know…why didn’t you call for Poppy when needed and instead tried to solve my problems using blatant, misplaced magic on me?”

“I already apologized for the mistake Professor.” She sounded tired

“Oh, I am not talking about a failed attempt at Legilimency, Miss Granger.” She looked at him confused and he grinned menacingly “I am talking about your usage of Ice Cold Air spell on my erection.”

“That.” She whispered, turning from pale white to scarlet in a manner of seconds “Well you see, … it was… just… I didn’t want to put you on the spot, and … I was afraid … that you would be mad at me… you know…for allowing anyone to see…well you know…you…in that state, I mean.”

“What state? Oh, come on, Miss Granger, surely if you can…assist…I am certain that you can speak
of the said...state, without problems.” He enjoyed watching her stumble and fumble over her words. Her eyes roamed the wall above his head and scarlet deepened

“Well, …it wasn’t like I knew...how you would react...so...and I didn’t know...how... you know?”

“I am quite certain that I do not know. But I am curious why?” he lowered his voice to a silky purr

“Well, right...I waited, you know? Waited to...you know...go away?”

“What to go away?”

“Well,...you know.” She emphasized ‘you know’ with a nod of her head, turning almost sour cherry red in her face

“I am sure that I do not.” She just gaped at him ‘So you have no problem with lifting my covers but you have problems to speak to me about that!’ he thought angrily “Say. It. Miss. Granger.”

“Your...e...erection...sir.” She mumbled quietly. If her face was redder he could bake an egg and sizzled the bacon on it. He widened his grin, he would sell what is left of his soul to be able to staple his fingers together, place them in front of his face and lean towards her. That would scare the daylights out of her, but he had to satisfy himself with words. ‘Well Albus was right, words are the true source of magic, lucky for me, they can cut mightier than the sword as well.’ She raised her chin but her eyes were above his head still “I did wait, sir, really did. To pass on its own, you know...but I don’t know...how long it could stay...and I didn’t know the spell...but now I do!”

“So, to sum it up, Miss Granger. You first waited, then you decided to cripple me with an inappropriate spell?”

“Not to...cripple...you sir. Just to help.” She whispered

“I should be grateful, I suppose, that you didn’t come up with anything more...creative...” he purred the word creative watching her fridged uncomfortably “as a solution.”

“Oh no, sir! I would never...not without permission, sir!...NO!!! That’s not what I meant! I mean...I would not...Oh, Gods...” she whined and he suppressed the laughter, she was in the spot. There was no real answer to that statement, she could either admit that she would or negate and insult him and knowing her he knew she wanted neither of those. He allowed her to struggle for a while then yawned

“I’d like to rest now, Miss Granger.”

He watched as her face clashed in a confusion, it took her few seconds to switch to the current topic, she took the tray, careful not to graze him with the touch and placed it on her sofa. She pulled the dark curtains on and flicked her want to return him to lying position. She was using wordless magic, the burgundy covers paled into comparison to her face. He closed his eyes satisfied.
Ten days since she arrived at the Manor, Hermione was ready to pull her hair out. If someone asked her what was the most difficult to endure, she wouldn’t have the answer, maybe for the first time in her life. The only thing that was positive in whole this experience was Hades, he seemed to like her.

Professor was a source of constant stress. After that conversation he remained quiet, ever actually setting the ground rules, mainly just barking demands. She really did feel like his personal house-elf. No, lower than…he was always so polite and respectful towards Misty. That sole fact forced her head to spin in different directions at once.

Oh, it was nothing he was doing now that made her task nearly impossible, it was that bloody conversation! She was mortified! It was one thing to do all those things and compartmentalise, separate them in her head in neat little boxes, properly labelled. But now she had to still attend him, touch him, faced with his indifferent attitude. She had to do a daily round of exercises, suddenly painfully aware of the intimacy they shared. The more she tried to avoid the contact, the more he was relaxed, especially during sit-ups. she would try to distance herself and he would allow his head to lean heavily on her shoulder. She was trying to minimise the contact by pushing him up with her hands more than her body, he would lean his entire weight on her. The man was heavy! and some for someone who still looked like a barely more than living corpse. She would ask the permission to check his muscle tone, and he would just grunt in approval, but she tried to do it quickly and proficiently without too much touching. It seemed to her that all she did for him demanded of her to touch him.

His strength in the hands returned slowly, he could now partially feed himself, with her lingering by his side, ready to take over when his strength gave out. His legs were another matter, still unusable. Oh, he wasn’t paralysed, just his legs were too weak for anything much. She was grateful for Misty and her help with changing the linens on regular basis.

That elf was another troubling element. Misty made it extremely hard for her to like her or be polite to her. Grumbling insults, fussing over professor, making her feel incompetent. Snape would talk to the elf, in that purring voice of his.

That voice…it was criminal to allow him to have it. It was weapon worth of Azkaban. It could be sharp and cold, like a steel of the blade. And it could be…sinful…like silken scarf draped over gravel, sending an unpleasant army of ants in a slow march down her back.

Luckily, with her he was quiet. With her. With Malfoy, he was so much talkative that she was stunned. With Mrs Malfoy as well. Narcissa ignored her, save from first formal greeting, same as Lucius. But their talks, her father referred to that kind of conversations as “male hunting stories”, she had just one opinion about that…To. Much. Information! Waaaaaay too much. At first, she would excuse herself to take a quick shower. But, after a while it became ludicrous. Her hair started to
resemble dandelion from too many drying spells.

That day she opted to stay in the room and read, trying to ignore their conversation. Not that it worked, the tone of voice they used could only be described as a sonorous whisper, every word floating in her direction. Finally, she snapped

“Could you… just… not talk about… that? Or at least grant me to exit the room?” conversation came to the halt and both men looked at her.

“Perhaps another shower, Miss Granger?” offered Lucius

“Mr Malfoy I know that Muggles have said ‘Cleanliness is next to Godliness’ but in all honesty, in my case, it starts to border on the disorder. If I can go out to the hallway it would be perfectly fine.” She huffed, annoyed, she would rather take the stroll through the manor, drank tea in the drawing room than suffer more of their conversations. Snape looked at Malfoy, one brow waved but not raised, Lucius glanced at him

“Fine. You may stand in the hallway, next to the room’s door. But do not venture any further Miss Granger.” His voice had dangerous tilt

“Hallway, next to the door is just fine. Thank you.” She picked up her book, jar with bluebell-flame and marched out in dark hallway, sighing in relief when the door clicked closed behind her.

She sat on the floor and set the jar next to her, opening the book. Blessed silence and solitude. She was going bonkers all cooped up in that room with Snape. His presence was constant, even in her dreams. Through, not too disturbing. His memories mostly revolved around the endless sea of faces, crying first-year’s, asking for medical potions, first love heartbreaks, domestic problems. What stopped her was his attitude, his willingness to listen to all the problems, give the advice or assist as best as he could. She never presumed that Slytherin’s had so many problems and his unyielding support. In a way, she could understand now why he was so protective of them. Knowing this, she felt that way too, now it appeared to her that his memories bombarded him chronologically and she was dreading the moment when they would show her. It also struck her that they were selective, almost like the snippets, just broken parts preserved separately from the whole picture.

Lost in thoughts she didn’t even notice that she is staring in the same sentence for more than twenty minutes. Sudden clicking noise snapped her from her thoughts. Door opposite to her opened and Narcissa Malfoy appeared on them. She set the book next to the jar and stood up.

“Good day Mrs Malfoy. Ummm, your husband gave me permission to stay here while he is talking to the professor.” The woman just nodded and turned to walk away then glanced at her

“Miss Granger, do you wear that type of clothing all the time?”

“Umm, yes, nowadays.”

“Dreadful.” Narcissa just turned and walked away, making her feel small and insignificant. She sighed. She was wearing the sweatshirt and sweatpants and trainers, they were comfortable and easy to move around in them.

She didn’t even manage to sit properly when the door clicked again, jumping on her feet again. Draco! Great, what else? Draco gave her one look full of contempt

“What are you doing here Granger?”

“Waiting for your father and professor the finish their conversation.”
“Don’t you have anywhere else to be?”

“No. What’s that to you anyway, it’s not like I’m bothering you.” She huffed. Draco was unpleasant as always, but the familiar enemy was almost comforting, sparking her natural defence against him. Draco looked thin, pale and still quite sickly.

“Your existence is bothering me.” He sneered

“Then just go wherever you were going, and you won’t be bothered with my presence.”

“Don’t you be rude towards me, in my own home, Bucktooth”

“Just walk away Feretface, or I’ll re-introduce you to my fist.” She growled.

“As if you would survive something like that.” He sneered and entered the room where Snape and Lucius were talking.

That was enough! She was sick and tired of those people. That was more than enough! She stomped her foot like it’s going to reaffirm her thoughts.

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It was dinner time when Draco and Lucius left his room. He was worried about Draco, the boy was pale, sickly and withdrawn. It wasn’t just the sickness and the curse, something was bothering him and whatever it was he wouldn’t tell in front of his father. He invited the boy to come and keep him company while Lucius was working. With a little luck, he’ll manage to toss out Granger.

Speaking of Granger, she slipped quietly into the room and called the elf. After usual politeness and Misty’s insults, food was delivered. She sat next to him, letting him enjoy the usage of his strength, what little that he had. It was frustrating to will himself to still the shaking of his hands just enough so he could take few spoons by himself before she would have to take over.

After the dinner she turned her back to him, looking through the window at the garden.

“Miss Granger, I’d like to discuss some things with Draco, without you present tomorrow.”

“I am outside when Malfoy’s are here anyway.”

“Alone with Draco.” He emphasized, talking slowly like she is mentally challenged or two years old.

“You know I can’t leave this room, and at this point…Even the stroll through the Manor would be welcomed, believe me.” She sounded grumpy, terse, her voice dry

“I may persuade the Lucius, Manor is truly lovely…”

“No thank you, I still have a vivid memory of my last visit here.”

“When were you in the Manor?” he frowned, that was news even for him

“Like you don’t know.” She hissed

“No. I. Do. Not. Know.” The anger stirred in his chest, it was so difficult to control it now, without his walls

“Oh, no! You don’t get to drag me into another of your tricky insulting conversations. If you don’t know, then it should stay that way.” He blinked ‘What the hell is wrong with her? She does not get
to be angry, that is MY prerogative.’

“Not where you want to be, then, eh? Well, well, little miss perfect don’t like when she tastes her own medicine.”

“I don’t, but I’ll muddle through. And so are you, willing or not.” She turned to him, eyes narrowed and angry ‘Now we’re talking.’

“The chit with a hero complex, a glorious saviour who must save every single one that crosses her path. Regardless of their own wishes.”

“You just don’t get it! Don’t you! You are totally clueless!” she almost screamed at him “You have to live and you will. You’ll live and be happy!”

“Miss Granger…” he growled at her

“No! You don’t get to tell me ‘Miss Granger’ in that tone. You have no clue…not a single one! I watched so many died on that field, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to save them, on either side. Then you survived against all odds! Even I…I left you there…in that…blood…as dead. I just turned and left. Never gave it a thought until you were brought back – alive. So no, your wishes don’t hold merit. I don’t care about them! No way anyone else going to die on my watch.” Her ferocity was explosive and so sudden, it made the room crackle with magic

“Even if that is against my wishes” he hissed, who does she thinks she is…. she stomped to the bed and leaned over him, pinning his wrists where they were on the bed, flashing her eyes at him, hissing in his face

“Especially, if it’s against your wishes.”

“I will have my way, even if that means that I will have to strangle you with my bare hands” he growled at her

“Good! Then you could work with me instead of against me.” He narrowed his eyes at her and she mirrored his expression “Because, frankly, now…you are more than incapable to carry that threat or even of yourself.” He barked a dry laugh and scoffed at her “If hating me will move you in the right direction, then go ahead, hate me. See if I care. You are a tool.” She hissed at his face and released him walking briskly to her sofa

“So I see that you took a page from Albus’s book or Dark Lord’s for that matter.”

“I don’t care! The end justifies the means, isn’t that Slytherin motto?”

“I believe that was Machiavelli” he dampened, cold anger nesting in his chest

“And here I thought he is Slytherin's role model.” She was at the bathroom door, slamming them loudly behind her.

He blinked at the door and wedged deep canal between his brows. Little stuck-up bitch. Oh, she is going to pay. And now, when her fight was back…’Let’s the games begin.’ He thought darkly.
A/N: I apologize for not posting in past two days, I went on vacation on Thursday and couldn’t force myself to sit behind keyboard until today. I hope you will like this chapter.

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

She slammed the bathroom door as hard as she could and leaned on them, shaking, fighting to breathe normally. She pressed one hand against her chest, like the motion itself going to preserve her heart from leaping out, it was doing pretty good job of tearing out of her chest. He heart was beating in the frantic beat, bruising her palm. She glided down the door, strength giving out. ‘What was I thinking?’ instead of beating her head at the door, he could hear that and she is not keen on giving him this victory, she mashed her forehead against her bended knees. ‘Am I that insane?’ her hands were shaking badly.

With difficulty, she pushed herself off the floor and set the water in the shower running, quickly filling the bathroom with steam. Two things that were leftovers from war, almost painfully hot baths and always finishing her meal while still hot, nearly burning her mouth. She stepped under the shower.

‘Did I just yelled at Severus Snape? Did I just challenge Severus Snape? What was I thinking?’ apparently she wasn’t or she wouldn’t do something so stupid ‘Gods! I’m turning into Ron!’ she nearly whispered loudly at that thought.

With a low growl she gets rid of the wet clothes, forgetting to take it off before stepping into the shower was just cementing proof that she did indeed go bonkers. Once divested, hot water hit her body with a pleasant sting, her skin turning red almost instantly. She was still shaking, feeling a chill running bone deep.

She just challenged Snape, invited him to hate her! For Merlin’s name, she screamed in his face! Oh, she is going to die! Slow, painful death. At his hand, for sure. That man managed to outlived Voldemort and Dumbledore! He lied and played both of these two powerful wizards. What she saw in her dreams...his power could easily match theirs, combined! She was sure of it. And she just challenged him!!!

Why was she so set on waking him up? He was much more manageable while he was in a coma. Shure, she had to flick her wand once and awhile at the...phyton. Embracing, but much preferable to the viper tongue of his. Ugh, that man, he could force her to lose her temper like no one other.

Shampooing her hair she tried really hard to bring her breathing in control. There was no use if she passes out in the bathroom, under the running water. That blasted elf was capable of letting her drown, probably would be happy too. Misty made Kreacher in his worst day looking like a
friendliest elf in the world. She couldn’t believe it, but she really, really disliked that elf. And that made the situation even worse.

Stepping out of the shower, she growls again, annoyed with herself. Charming a towel rack she placed all her wet clothes to dry with slow drying spell. Looking at what she brought with her, panties, oversized shirt with the logo of Bulgarian Quidditch team and a pair of fuzzy socks. Ok, that is her comfort clothing, and shirt did fall nearly to her knees, but still, not an appropriate clothing to parade in front of her professor. In front any male for that matter.

Steeling herself for what he might say she cast a drying spell on her hair that whizzed around her head. Grumbling ‘Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!’ she urged on her tresses, wincing from pain until she managed to braid them into a thick single braid.

Taking last of the steadying breaths, she marched into the room and to her sofa, transfiguring the cushion into a fluffy pillow and blanket into the comforter. Doing her best to ignore one sarcastic brow waved high on the professor’s forehead.

“Do you think it is appropriate to be dressed like that Miss Granger?”

‘No!’ “It is appropriate for the night. I want to be comfortable when I sleep.” She replied dryly, not turning back, hoping with all her might that she isn’t blushing

“It is just my luck then,” he continued with a low voice, spitting out the word ‘luck’ like it was a rotten piece of food in his mouth “that I’m stuck with a ‘nurse’ who has a hero complex and survivor’s guilt all at once?”

Her back straightened. Survivor's guilt, how she didn’t think of that? Sure she knew something was wrong with her, but no medi-witch gave her diagnosis. Then again wizarding world did recognize crazy only when you are completely bonkers, everything else was pushed under the rug and not talked about. What was more surprising, was that he not only knew about it but recognized the symptoms. And they even eluded her.

“It would seem so, professor.” She replies sharply and casts a monitoring spell, bit more sensitive than the one in the hospital, it will alarm her if anything is off “Good night, professor.” She turns off the light and forces her brain to stop thinking. Maybe it is just paranoia but his Legilimency skills are famous, almost innate and she doesn’t want to give him ammunition.

It was the middle of the night when an alarm from monitoring spell set on, beeping loudly. She jumps from her sleeping place, feeling dizzy, and casts low light. He is shaking, his teeth chattering.

“Ough!” she whines, and rushes to his bed, he hadn’t had post-cruciatus tremors in a while. Was the argument that triggered them? And then it hits her, she can’t toss herself over him now, not dressed like this and not while he is awake. And he is awake, his hands clutching the comforter and his eyes staring at the ceiling.

She grabbed his legs and pulled them together, pressing them to the bed with one of her legs. She pushed his arms against his torso and pressed them with her elbows, locking her hands on his chest. She is partially lying, partially kneeling on him, but it is good lock-down and he can’t hurt himself or fell from the bed.

“Get off me you wretch.” He hisses chattering with his teeth, she does not answer but does not waken her lock on him. But it is hard to hold him like this. And her stubborn exercises paid off, he is much stronger, she needs to put much more strength into holding him down, which worries her. How she’s going to control him in time to come?
The tremors weaken and she breathes a sigh of relief, her own muscles are shaking from the endeavour to hold him. There are still some aftershocks, but they are mild, still, she holds him tightly.

“You may let go now, Miss Granger, unless...you are trying to tell me something.” His eyes are still foggy from pain but they have a back glow of malice in them now

“I’m trying to prevent you from self-harm, professor. Noting more.”

“Are you sure?” he lowers his eyes from her face to her body, and she blushed fiercely. The shirt has a wide neckline that in this position fell fully to her front, hiding virtually nothing from his view. Her kneeling position revealed her panties, they are plain white cotton, but not the sight she was aiming for him to see nonetheless.

“Quite.” She growls, tremors are still there and she won’t let go even if it kills her “Now if you are reasonable about this as you usually are about anything else, or Merlin forbid gentlemen enough, you wouldn’t comment. And you would take this situation for what it is.”

“And what is it, pray tell.”

“A nurse helping a patient.” She huffs and he raises an eyebrow again, at this point she is a step away to charm it off his face

“I was not familiar with fact that nurses should parade semi-naked and throw themselves at their patients.” He draws “I should consider myself lucky you didn’t decide to lie on me.”

Her face started to burn, now she is sure she is blushing. Even her ears are burning. He rolls his eyes “I see. And when that lucky occurrence took place?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, professor”

“Come now, Miss Granger, don’t take me for a fool.” He lowered his voice to that damn pure again “I think I should be informed if and when a young woman decides to use me as a mattress.”

“Holding you to prevent you from falling off the bed or harm yourself is something I hardly classify calling ‘using you as mattress’, professor.”

“Is that your knick Miss Granger? Or is it that you want to get my affection by any means available?” his voice lowered for a note, those blasted ants travel down her back and up her scalp, she could just kill him “I must inform you that I am not interested.”

“In getting better. I know that, but it still is not your choice.” She feigns that she does not understand him, but her blush gives her away, she could cry

“You never were a good liar Miss Granger.” He purrs “Still I’m not into swotty little girls.”

She bit her tongue not to blurt out that she has a really good grip of understanding of what he’s into. And her face is getting hotter. Gods, she hates this! Finally, she releasing him. Sliding off the bed she hisses

“Good night, professor .”

“Sweet dreams, Miss Granger.” His voice is all silk and sugar and she suppresses the need to send a rather strong stinging hex at his direction. She lies in her bed, light is once again turned off and the room is dark. She listens to sounds, and soon small even puffs of breath come from his bed. He is
sleeping. She is still awake, fighting the tears. How can she help him? Everything she does he twists and turns, making it like she is doing it go get to...him. And she does not! She does not want to touch him. She does not want to be so intimately familiar with him. She saw too much of him, way more than she ever wanted. Can’t he understand how uncomfortable all this is for her?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: It is not my custom but I have the question for you now. Should I stick to the original plan and continue with Snape’s memories?

If I do it it will cover his POV from book 1 to book 7, in their shared dreams of course. I’d appreciate hearing if you would like to read something like that. Thank you.
XXXII

Chapter Notes

A/N: I will address all your comments in separate Author’s note chapter a bit later today, thank you for giving me your insight at the story :)

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Schooling his breathing to mimic sleep he lied awake. He hates his situation. The feeling of light tremors still shaking his limbs, he is on the verge of crying. In fact, he would cry if he wasn't stuck in the same room with her. Why did they keep him alive? What good is he alive anyway if he can’t even brew anymore. It is questionable how long before he is completely useless. The damage he suffered over years, concentrated and somehow magnified now. Maybe it is one of the consequences of the bite.

And he survived… again! How many times…how many wars he has to go through to die? And why are people always dead set on keeping him alive? Dumbledore chained him with his promise, with an oath to fulfil his duty. Hermione…well he could see where she was coming from. After all, he knew all too well the demons she was fighting. He battled them for years. And he expected more understanding from her, especially from her. But it appears that they were coming from vastly different places. While all he wanted is to die, to stop living through the eternal torment of life without Lily. Hermione seemed to be a determined to live, and not just to live but to save anything and anyone on her path.

Well. He was fine with that, as long as he is not anywhere near her path.

But if he juts her just the right way, if he forces her to release him and turn her back on him…then he could fade away as he planned. Salazar, he has to find the way to force her out of his head. Maybe he should just ask her to show him her notes. From what Lucius told him, she combined two completely different types of mind magic, ones that are not to be mixed up, ever.

He resists the need to move or stir, the last thing he needs is that blasted alarm to sound off again. His magic is still out of the grasp of his control, and he is trying his best not to lash out, nor really certain how his magic would react. It wouldn’t boot well if he flattens this part of the Manor. Though, that would solve his problem, efficiently.

He frowns, slowly clenching and unclenching his fists. He is still weak as a kitten, and his legs are still good as useless. He needs proper exercise if he wants to regain the capacity to move. There is no apparent damage. He has the feeling in his back and in his legs. If nothing, he is more sensitive than he was before. He can still feel her weight, pressing on his thighs with force, the heat of her leg across his. The spots her arms and hands touched still burn. Is that some kind of allergic reaction to her?

The narrow view of her almost nude body, that was offered through the neckline of her shirt, danced briefly in front of his eyes. No, that’s not it! He…he was not interested in women or men for the
longest of times. Two decades! But then again, he thought that he was impotent for two decades, so this is also a moot point.

He has to regain his strength, he has to get his walls up again, he has to get the grip of himself. This loss of control was...troublesome. And if Lucius even get's the whiff of his reanimated...virility...he is in trouble indeed. Lucius will drag him to the clubs again, Narcissa will start hunting for the suitable wife again. Sometimes he wondered if they were his friends at all. But, beggars can’t be choosers, and they were the only friends, the only family he had.

The dawn was starting to colour the sky when he finally fell asleep.

*He’s sitting at the High Table, so many years and he still hates that table. He feels exposed. Quirrell is next to him, yapping his ear off with his stuttering, annoying him endlessly. The first years coming in lead by Minerva and he hopes with all his might that Draco will know better than to show his affections. The parents were lenient, but he spoiled the child. Well, at least he’ll have one student that will not try to kill him.*

*Over the years he developed a paranoid and somewhat delusional notion that students were out there to get him. To part him from his life or at least his limbs. Between those who were incapable of boiling water little less brewing a potion and those brilliant but dangerous, like Weasley twins...he truly and honestly started to believe that students are there to get him. And even if he still harboured the idea of dying, death by exploding cauldron was not on his agenda.*

*He knows that Potter is among the beginners but he refuses to look for him, Merlin knows that Albus went to extremes to describe the boy to him. He wonders why is he putting up with Old Goat? The old man is annoying and calculated as ever, even more so now.*

*They call the name and he looks at the boy. Sharp pain cuts him. A dagger twisted in his guts. Quirrell still stutters in his ear, but he does not hear him. Her eyes, her beautiful eyes on James's face. The dagger in his guts twists again. He dislikes the kid instantly. He will keep the kid alive, it is the sole reason he is still alive after all, but to feel any kind of affection towards the boy...Albus kept talking about part of the kid's mother, part of Lily living in the kid. But all he sees is her betrayal, her cold demeanour towards him, all the hurt she caused. And the biggest, most painful blow, her eyes on the face of his enemy. His chest constricts painfully.*

He wakes up again, dawn broken through the darkness. Why is he still alive? The pain, same pain from the memory still lingers in his chest. He is quiet but he feels heat burns its way from his eyes down the side of his face.

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She sits on the sofa and turns her head to look at him. He still breathes softly, sleeping. She does not understand, how he could live. No wonder he hated Harry so much. It is a wonder that he saved Harry’s life so many times. She is not sure if she would be able to if she were in his spot.

His head turns slightly towards the window. She slides from the sofa and approaches the bed. He is still sleeping. She sits on the bed next to him and gently wipes his tears.

“Oh, professor. I know, somehow I do understand you. I don’t know how you could survive through all of that,...but now you have a chance. A real chance to live. To love some lucky witch who will love you back. I just need to keep you alive long enough for you to figure it out on your own. You are powerful and smart, you are a hero. There is nothing but happiness in front of you now. can’t you see that?” she keeps her voice soft, under the breath, not to wake him up “You made a mistake but you did everything right. You kept Harry, us alive. you fought for every life that you could spare.
You didn’t back down, gave up, you didn’t turn your back on anyone. Not like me.” She directs her eyes through the window into the distance “There was the moment in the battle when I just gave up. When I stopped fighting for the others. Stopped caring for the others and just…just fought to survive. I was ready to hide rather than die, just to stay alive. What would people think when they would know that?”

She stifles a sob and pulls back, slides to the floor and back to her sofa. Biting her lip to prevent crying out loud. She is a fraud. In the end, for her, only her own life mattered. Her crime is…so much bigger than he could ever be. He was selfless one and she was petty, thinking only of herself. She turned her back on him, left him there dead – but not dead. She betrayed everything she believed in, it made her question if her beliefs were what she really is, or were they just elaborate lie. Deceit to her and to the others. So, she has to keep him alive, even being here, in the Manor, surrounded with hatred and disdain, it is her punishment. Atonement for her silent crime. If she lets him die, she would commit another crime, by allowing one true and good soul to perish.

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He hears her getting up and closes his eyes, his breath is still even, maybe she didn’t notice that he’s awake. She sits on the bed, next to him and wipes his tears. She is touching him again! Suppressing the need to wince from her touch he hopes that she will just walk away. It is humiliating enough, even if he were alone, but to have a witness and that witness to be her…it is beyond mortifying.

Her breath is near his face, he can feel its moist and warmth. Is she caressing his face? How dare she?! She started to talk, her voice is soft and broken, as broken as her mind is. Her mind, shivering at the corner of his brain.

“Oh, professor. I know, somehow I do understand you.”

‘You understand nothing know-it-all.’

“I don’t know how you could survive through all of that,…but now you have a chance. A real chance to live. To love some lucky witch who will love you back.”

‘Sweet Merlin, she could go hand in hand with Narcissa, they both are out to get me .’

“I just need to keep you alive long enough for you to figure it out on your own. You are powerful and smart, you are a hero. There is nothing but happiness in front of you now. Can’t you see that?”

‘There is nothing in front of me you blubbery idiot. And if you stop saving yourself by saving me you could see that too. Smartest witch of her age my eye. The smartest pain in the…’

“You made a mistake but you did everything right. You kept Harry, us alive.”

‘If nothing I never went against my own word.’

“You fought for every life that you could spare.”

‘What do you know about that, little idiotic child. You don’t know left from right.’

“You didn’t back down, gave up, you didn’t turn your back on anyone. Not like me.”

‘WHAT?’

“There was the moment in the battle when I just gave up. When I stopped fighting for the others. Stopped caring for the others and just…just fought to survive. I was ready to hide rather than die, just
to stay alive. What would people think when they would know that?”

‘That you did the same thing everyone else did on that field, you moron. Well, almost everyone, few of them were crazy enough to believe, sadly all on Dark Lord’s side.’

The bed bends, she is back on her sofa, sniffling quietly. Why the hell does she crying? Stupid child. Dunderheads, the bane of his life. And, yet she wasn’t one of them. Annoying, attention-hungry, swotty, prissy, but smart enough for him never to call her dunderhead to her face or privately. She was the thorn in his backside but at least smart enough never to give him a headache like the rest of her year with few exceptions. He is truly disappointed to see her turning into one of the dunderheads now.
XXXIII

Chapter Notes

A/N: I’m sorry for late post and reply people, my friend and I had tickets for Carl Orff’s opera in the nearby city and decided to spend the day in that city, I just returned home :) Thank you all for your comments, all of them, they are all invaluable to me.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actually speech
I think that this chapter does not contain anything disturbing but in future I’ll place a warning in each chapter, to alert all to possible disturbing content.

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She was feeling…well, Harry and Ron would call it antsy. Angry. Uneasy in her own head. Her nightmares returned. She was not proficient in Occlumency or Legilimency by no means, but until now she at least managed to block them. That was the whole point of learning Occlumency in the first place, to block bad memories and nightmares. Legilimency, she thought it might be useful to know. The nightmares made her cranky and unfriendly to others. And for someone self-thought, she had a really fair understanding of both.

Six. He’s progressing nicely. He manages to take six spoons of porridge before losing his strength today. Given that he was at four just a few days before, she was satisfied. But, what will she do when he’s back on his feet? When he regains enough strength to put his magic under control and dispel the connection. Poppy won’t have an excuse to keep her here, and he doesn’t want her here. Malfoy’s won’t manage to stop him if he is really set on killing himself. And if she is not there...he might succeed. No! She almost shook her head, she won’t permit it. The more she learned about him, the more she saw of his memories, she understood why he didn’t want to live. She really did. In his place – she wouldn’t either.

But, to live or to die wasn’t his decision. She needed him alive. If she forces him to live, then she’ll manage to amend herself just a bit. She would be able to tell that she saved at least one person that is not herself. He was glaring at her, silent and dark, gloomy almost as much as she was.

She moved to her sofa and finished her breakfast, placing all dishes on one tray and stacking the trays she called

„Misty.‘‘ The elf appeared and she rolled her eyes, she was really not in the mood for elf’s grumbling. „You may take them away.‘‘

„Did professor finished his meal?“

„I wouldn’t call you otherwise.‘‘ She rolled her eyes again
„I don’t trust Muddy Blood.“ Hissed elf, she leans towards Misty

„And I don’t trust you, so we’re equal. And if you call me Muddy blood once more, I can guarantee you that I will find a way to trick you into taking some clothes and free you. Malfoy can dance on his eyelashes for all I care.“

„Misty will carry the message to the Master.“ Hissed elf

„Good, give him my regards, while you’re at it. Now, you are not needed here anymore. “

Elf grumbled but vanished. She straightens up to meet almost amused black gaze

„That is quite a turn from your school days Miss Granger. “

„And you, return to your pointed ignoring of me.“ She snapped at Snape. Gods! She was really antsy today. Her attitude and narrowed eyes would usually force the boys into submission. Snape appeared untouched by her demeanour.

„As a matter of fact, I was wanting to talk to you. “

„Well, I’m not so keen to talk to you. “

„Nightmares, eh?“

„What do you know?“

„Ah, nothing, lucky guess. But I do want to talk to you about your notes. “

„What notes?“ was she supposed to do something and forget about it? Her brain runs a fast check up on things she had to do while she was here.

„Lucius told me that you made notes before your little escapade to unknown. “

„Poppy has them. Why do you need them anyway?“

„I’d prefer to get rid of you from my head and from my vicinity. As fast as possible. “ The nerve of him! He was polite! He was actually polite! How can someone be so polite and offensive at the same time is beyond her.

„Well, Poppy has them. And I can’t help you, I am banned from all mind magic books by the Poppy and Malfoy. “

„You may be, are you sure that rule applies to me?“

„Don’t you think they figured out that you will try to ’get rid of me’ as you put it before you are properly healed?“ she smirked at him

„Well, then, we just have to be creative about it then, now, won’t we?“

„There is no we in that – I won’t help you. You are on your own with that. “

„Too bad that you limited yourself to only this one thing. I’d be much more inclined to feel grateful if you’d transplanted that ’you are on your own’ policy to my person in general and simply be gone. “

„Well, at least we are sharing something. I do not want to have the first-row ticket to your memories. You do not want me near. At least we agree on something!“
„Oh, I’d say that we agree to disagree on everything.“ His voice was a pure annoyance and that irked her. She was saving him, for Merlin’s sake! Fine! He can be as cranky as he wants, she doesn’t care, as long as he is alive it is all that matters to her anyway. Lucius entered the room.

„Mr Potter is waiting for you, Miss Granger.“

She turned on her heel and left without the word.

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Harry looked Hermione warily, she marched out of the room nearly slamming the door. She is antsy again, he hated it. Antsy Hermione equalled bossy Hermione, and he had no desire to argue or be scolded. She did look bit tired, but better than she did in months. She gained some weight over past ten days, and he could tell, he was visiting her daily after all.

„Are you alright Hermione? Are they treating you badly?“

„No better and no worse than yesterday.“

„I finally managed to do damage control about that blasted article.“ He hoped that good news will lift her mood a little

„God, I hope that blasted woman ended up in Azkaban.“ She grumbled and he blinked, that did not sound like Hermione

„Well, no...“

„Too bad.“

„What’s wrong Hermione?“

„It’s Snape, he’s just annoying.“

„What did he do?“

„What can he do? He barely can lift a spoon. He does not want me to take care of him.“

„Well, that was rather expected, wasn’t it? I mean, it’s Snape we’re talking about.“

„He doesn’t want to live.“ She snapped „And he is...well...as nasty as ever. He want’s me to give up."

„I want you to give up, come with me to Grimmauld place, he has Malfoy’s to take care of him.“

„No! I know you don’t understand Harry, and I have no way to explain, but...if I walk away, he will kill himself.“

„I know, but Hermione do you hear yourself? You can’t babysit him forever.“

„I will if I must. Who is he anyway to determine if he is worthy of my help?“

„Ummm, ...well, ...“ Harry stirred uncomfortably, she didn’t sound reasonable to him and he just couldn’t figure out what was wrong with her.

„Did you bring it?“ she asked
„Oh, yes, I almost forgot.” He handed her mp3 player „You know it won’t work here?“

„It will, I’m using it for years. I charmed it in the fifth year.“

„Hermione, that’s...“

„Illegal, I know. I’m not very proud of it, but do you know how it looked like to share the room with Parvati and Lavender? I’d never do any reading if I didn’t have it. Do you know, how annoying it was to listen all the time about boys and beauty spells? Not to mention the sixth year and Lavender’s talks about her and Ron...“

„I understand.“ He mumbled, he could understand her desire to block that particular chatter. However, he could not understand why she was acting like this. She took the player and placed it in the bag around her hips. He frowned

„Hermione is that ...the bag,...the one you...?“

„Yes. I transfigured a bit, it is much more practical like this.“

„What do you have in it?“

„Oh, you know, all I’d need.“

„You are aware that you are in-house, surrounded by dozens of Auror’s on the daily basis and that you won’t end up in the forest?“

„Oh, I know. I just feel better having it with me.“

„You didn’t wear it in the hospital“ he narrowed his eyes mulling if she really felt that much endangered in this house

„I did, at the beginning, Poppy was on my neck until I handed the bag to her. She returned it to me when we were moving here.“

„Oh.“ He wasn’t sure what to say, that sounded bad to him. ’Maybe Poppy is right, maybe Hermione really does have some serious problem.’ No matter how many times Poppy told him, he somehow refused to believe...until now.

The door clicked and Draco entered the hallway. He hadn’t seen Draco since the last day of trials. He nearly winced, Draco was looking dreadfully. His attitude wasn’t changed

„Potter, Bucktooth...“

„Malfoy“

„Ferret-face.“

Draco narrowed his eyes at Hermione who was looking at him with challenging pose, the boy glanced at him, frowned and walked away.

„Coward. “

„Is he giving you the trouble.“

„Nothing I can handle. At least he is familiar evil.“
„Hey, do you want to hear the gossip I’ve heard? It’ a juicy one...“ he grinned, hoping that if he switches to more normal topic Hermione would somehow shift to her normal self.

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The door nearly slammed at her back, and he chuckled watching a mixture of feelings, ranging from indignation, disbelief to pure puzzlement, colliding on Lucius’s face.

„What got her knickers in the twist?“

„Oh nothing, the fun times are just at the beginning.“

„Care to elaborate on that?“

„No."

„Do you know that she threatened my elf?“

„I was present."

„Does she know that she can’t free my elf? Only I can."

„I am not sure what she knows, but with her and elves...you never know what to expect. Maybe she will force you to wear S.P.E.W. badge.“ He snickered enjoying in Lucius’s obvious confusion

„S...what? On the second thought, I don’t want to know."

„Wize decision my friend.“ Looking at Lucius’s face he frowned, it wouldn’t boot well if his friend makes a wrong move and actually harm the girl „Lucius, what are you planning?“

„What? Planning about what?“

„Do you think it is smart...“

„Oh, you mean the girl?“ his friend’s smile was all too wide „Because of the elf? Well, nothing, I didn’t lose Misty after all, and given that she can’t set her free...“

„Lucius?“

„Severus."

„Don’t you ’Severus’ me, entire wizarding world knows that she is here.“ He growled

„I am well aware of that fact. I had an idea of toying with the girl, but as far as I can see you are doing the bang up job on your own."

„This...is all her, I did nothing."

„If I don’t know you I wouldn’t question that statement. Fine, keep your secrets. Can you at least tell me what was that super secret thing you talked with my son?“

„No“

„But, you do know what is bothering him?“

„I do.“
„And you won’t tell me?“
„No, it’s not mine to tell.“
„Hmmm...“ Lucius seemed troubled „You are spoiling that boy too much.“
„And you are pressuring him too much.“
„He’s Malfoy, he should be the best in everything, he has to carry the family name once when I’m gone.“
„He should learn to pick his battles and choose for himself, not blindly follow your instructions. That is not the way to prepare him...“
„I did that...“
„So, are you planning on dying from dragon pox in perceivable time then?“
„That, my friend, was low. Even for you.“ Huffed Lucius and turned to stare through the window. He remained silent, giving his friend time to mull on his words.
The silence stretched for too long, and even if he would usually welcome it, now he wanted to get some answers, he needed to form the strategy. If he is to get rid of the little nuisance, he has to break the connection, make the excuses of others go away.

„Lucius, do you have the girls notes?“

„No, Poppy has them, I already told you that."

„You did not try to retrieve them since?“

„No. I’m in no hurry...“

„And here I was sure you want Miss Granger out of your Manor almost as much as I do. “ He has to press all the buttons, one will give in „Very well, in that case, I’ll need some books. “

„I told you before, the library is at your disposal. Misty will provide you with what you need. “

„Do you have titles The mind obscured, Medical maladies 12 to 14 and Dabbling to unknown?“ he asked schooling his voice to sound neutral

„You know I do. Honestly, Severus, you know books in my library better than I do. “ He was suddenly on alert, Lucius sounded too smug „And I am sorry to inform you but those books are not permitted in this room. You see, for the little menace that shares your quarters those books are off limits. “

„Do you honestly think I asked those books for her?“

„Oh, I know you didn’t. But...you are in no condition to prevent her from taking and using those books. No, I am sorry my friend, but those books won’t enter this room. However, you are welcome to use them in the library...once you are able to do so without her assistance. “

‘You slick bastard.’ He nearly growled at Lucius but also at the fact that the menacing brat was correct. „So, by punishing her, you are effectively punishing me? Are you sure you want Miss Granger out of here?“

„Honestly?“ Lucius turned to him, one blond eyebrow arched high „No, at the moment I find her extremely useful where she is. Annoying. Completely unwelcomed. Uncivilised. Eyesore.
“But...useful.”

“Oh?” he didn’t like this one bit

“Severus, we know each other for the good part of our lives. I’d say that I know you better than anyone else. Do you honestly think I’m one of your dunderheads you could twirl around your pinky to your heart’s content?”

“No, I was hoping that you and I have the same goal.”

“We do, in general. But at the moment, I find it fascinating that I did manage to find the common goal with little m...Muggle-born. And, as long as you have a toy to chew on, I am fine with her being here.” he narrowed his eyes at Lucius, this time he came too close „Do not worry my friend, as I told you I know you all too well.”

“I am seriously starting to doubt that.” He hissed

“Oh, but I do! I knew, even back then that you will turn your back on him and betray him. The moment he refused your plea to save that girl you were pining for, the one you still can’t let go, I knew he lost you then. I don’t know what Albus did to tie you to himself so profoundly, but knowing Albus...that man could have been one hell of a Slytherin if he put his mind to it. I should have been smart and tag along. Blame it on my impeccable upbringing.” Lucius leaned on the cane heavily and winced “And sometimes I think that you are worse than those idiots at the Ministry.”

“Sit down before you fall down, and I am forced to call Miss Granger to lift you off the ground.” he decided to ignore the stab in the favour of worrying about Lucius’s condition that seemed rather bad

“You wouldn’t!” groused Lucius hobbling to sit on the edge of the bed

“Oh, I would. Why should I be the only one to suffer?”

“You are in a sharing mood I see.” Chuckled Lucius, shaking his head „How kind of you.”

“Yes. Lucius, if you truly know me well as you claim...don’t you ever...” he growled. He cared for this man, he was his family, blood bound, closer than an actual brother would be...but at the moment he wanted badly to damage Lucius. Ever since Lucius mentioned Lily, he felt like someone set an angry and homicidal bludger to pound on his abdomen. And he was hoping to avoid this particular source, but...if that is what it takes...he is already in pain, he might as well be done with that too. Lucius stood up.

“I think I’m going to retreat and rest a little.” Pain was visible on Lucius's face

“Did you saw a healer about that?”

“I did, and this is as good as it gets. At least I’m still alive.” Lucius sighed „I’d hate if I left Narcissa and Draco to clean up my mess.”

He nodded. „Go, rest. And please, can you leave her out for a while longer, ask Potter come and see me.”

Lucius lifted a brow but didn’t say a word... with slow limping steps, even with the aid of the cane, he walked to the door. Steadied himself, took a big breath and opened the door with determination. He shook his head, his friends condition was worrying him and he was unable to help.

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Harry felt marginally more positive. Hermione was sitting on the floor across him, legs crossed. She covered her mouth with both hands, but her raised cheeks crinkled the lines below her eyes, indicating that she was smiling.

„Ooooh, this is so good. Are you sure that it is true?“

„Well it’s a rumour... but George swears he heard her say so. “

The door opened and they looked up. Lucius stepped out of the room and glanced at them with a sour look on his face.

„This is not a playground Potter, Granger. Do try to show at least a trace of civil and proper behaviour. “ He drawled

„Well, if you did gave us a suite instead of the room, we wouldn’t have this problem now, wouldn’t we?“ hissed Hermione jumping to her feet „If you weren’t so keen on making me uncomfortable to stay here, you would maybe think things better.“

Harry gawked at her, was she insane? She was poking a sleeping dragon, no, a highly venomous snake, with a stick. On purpose. He knew that she did not have too many interactions with Malfoy, in fact, the man ignored her for the most of the time, much to his relief. That actually mad Harry believe that Malfoy truly meant what he said, Hermione was fed and she was unharmed. Annoyed, but he wasn’t sure how much of that was Malfoy’s, how much Snape and how much her.

„If I allow you to talk with Potter in the lounge or garden preferably, would that be suitable? At least that would spare the rest of us the sight of your face. “ HisSED Malfoy back

„No thank you, I am fine with the hallway. “ She stated stubbornly

„Suit yourself Miss Granger, less furniture for me to burn after I get rid of your presence. “ Malfoy walked away dragging his steps more than Harry seen him before, he stopped at the door nearby and turned „Potter, Severus want’s to talk to you alone, you may enter the room. And you girl...may continue to display bad manners in the hallway at least for a little while. “ With that Malfoy entered the room.

„Why are they all roaming around this part of the house anyway? Didn’t they live in another wing? “

„You don’t know?“ he asked and she shook her head „They tearing down the other wing, as soon as we finish, they scheduled the demolition. They will re-build one great part of the Manor. This wing will be the only one left untouched. “

„Why?“

„I don’t know. Well, I better go inside before he changes his mind. I am not sure if I feel happy or scared. “

„Just don’t let him get under your skin. He’s still the same insulting snark as he was. “

„Thanks for the heads-up. Well, here we go...“ he sent one nervous smile to Hermione and opened the door. His heart was beating in his throat. He stepped in the bright room, almost stunned with the sight of Snape’s still weak form on the bed. Hermione always told him how Snape is advancing nicely, but to him, the man still looked too thin and too weak, deadly pale.

„Ummm, good day professor. “
„Potter! Well, stop the presses! That is a rather drastic change of tune, Potter.“ Snape’s voice was as he remembered it from his school days, he felt almost relaxed, this was a familiar ground

„I do not understand...“

„Of course you don’t.“ Sarcastic drawl „Stop with pretended politeness Potter, and call me as you always did Snape what was else, ah yes!, git, big bat or greasy git.“

„The last one..“

„Ah, yes,“ Snape cut him again „that must have been Weasley. The two of you were connected with umbilical cord, sometimes was hard to separate which one of you did or say what.“

„Yes, well, this is all nice, professor. But I did change my mind about you, at least a bit.“

„I supposed to thank you, I guess, for insisting that my trial is closed for public and for making everyone present to take a Vow of secrecy.“

„It was least I could do, sir. After all you did for me and for us.“

„I’m sure I do not know what you are referring to, unless you don’t talk about the fact that I was reason your mother is dead.“

„I don’t blame you, sir, not anymore. You did not named my mother, you didn’t even know she was pregnant. Voldemort is the one to blame, and I already took my revenge on him“

„How...mature...of you Potter. Now, drop the act. I have few questions for you.“

„Mhm“

„First. When was that little menace you call your friend in the Manor?“

„Hermione? I thought you knew!“

„If I knew Potter, I wouldn’t be asking you now, would I?“

„Why asking me?“ suddenly he was wary, what was going on here? „Why not asking Malfoy?“

„Which one?“ ‘Is Snape, goating me?’

„Take your pick, they were all there. If that is all...“

„I see that you kept all the lovely habits you had in school Potter, I’m still waiting for an answer to my question.“

„Honestly, sir, why asking me.“

„If I want, half-truths and missing information I’ll ask Lucius. I know you will tell me the truth.“

„Thank you, professor.“ Harry felt split in two, for one part he felt proud for other worried

„Do not thank me, Potter. You are foolish enough to tell the truth, if for no other reason than to help your friend. I find that appalling, but welcomed habit at the moment. Do go on...“

„Ermnn, yes. It was near the war’s end, we were captured by the Snatchers and brought to the Manor.“ He wondered how much he should tell, the full truth, no sugar coating was the best „That is
the reason I testified on Draco’s behalf. I can swear that he recognized me, but still he claimed that he
does not know me. Hermione made a mess of my face with hexes. But her glamour fell fast, and
Bellatrix found the sword in our possession... They sent me and Ron down in the dungeon, but
Bellatrix kept Hermione upstairs. We could hear her scream, it was horrible, sir. I know she Crucioed
her, and cut her, she has a scar on her throat. Dobby helped us. We managed to escape taking bunch
of wand’s with us...“

„Mhm.“ Mumbled Snape, he had face of a man lost in thought

„Professor, how...“

„If...you ask me how I am, potter, I’ll find the way to hex you.“

„Yes,“ Harry gulped at the so familiar tone half-expecting deduction of points „, erm, no. „, Snape
rolled his eyes „I was wondering...how is Hermione?“

„And why would you ask me off all people, pray tell?“

„Well, she’s always says 'fine’, but I don’t think she’s fine, and you spend most of the day with
her...“

„So I must know. Why would I pay attention to her at all?“

„Well, I wager it’s in your best interest if you do so, professor.“

Snape looked at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowed. Finally man’s features relaxed

„Very well, Potter. Quid pro quo, shall we say it then?“
A/N: I will need rest after this vacation, it seems that everyone wants to socialize and spend time with me, while I only want to linger in-house, rest and write.

Anyway, I’ll have to switch to posting every other day, most of the written chapters need at least bit of tinkering and I am participating in the Christmas Fic Exchange 2017 (I took a pairing that I never wrote before, it will take some serious time in research and giving a thought to the idea), so my time will be divided between two stories.

Oh, almost forgot (bad, bad me!!!). This is my first story to get 100+ Kudos, I want to thank all of you for liking and supporting this story <3 :*

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

Warning: Bad mouthing in this chapter

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This was better than asking for a favour, favours could be called upon, this way no one owed the other anything, he preferred that. Potter gawked at him

„Squid what?“

He growled and rolled his eyes, the boy was as stupid as ever. „Quid...pro...quo, Potter. Latin, meaning a favour for a favour.“

„What favour? I didn’t ask you for a favour, professor.“

„Ah, Potter, but you did. You want to know what is going on with your friend. I want to be liberated from your friend’s presence...“ he let the rest slide, hoping that Potter’s thick head could at least grasp the concept if not the whole idea

„So...what would I have to do?“ Potter narrowed his eyes „Don’t get me wrong, professor, I do want her out of here. I don’t think that being next to you is good for her.“

„Well, well, miracles do happen! Finally, something I can agree with great Harry Potter. The Truly historical moment, I’m sure.“

„You also think it is bad for her to be next to you?“ Potter’s mouth went agape

„No, Potter, I think it is bad for me, but let us not dwell on details. The main goal is the same.“ He sighed, dunderheads „Do we have an agreement, Potter?“
„What will I have to do?“ repeated Potter, inclining his head to the side, studying him with a piercing gaze. Well, it appears that the kid is not completely dumb after all.

„Nothing illegal or endangering to anyone, I assure you.‘ ‘Let us see if he bites the bait.’

„Fine...“ Potter sounded a little bit unsure but he was satisfied with the answer nevertheless.

„Now then...you want to know...“ oh, this was fun, he was dragging the words like he can’t remember what Potter wanted

„What is wrong with Hermione?“ Potter did sound a bit annoyed and at the same time worried „She is not 'fine'“

„Of course she is not fine.‘ He approved „She has a very bad case of PTSD and she...“ the boy looked like he just started talking on Gobbledygook „she feels guilty for staying alive while other died on the day of final battle.“

„She told you that?“

„No, Potter, don’t be daft.‘

„Then how do you know about her having PTDT and feeling guilty...“

„P.T.S.D., Potter. PT for post-traumatic. S for stress. D for a disorder. Do I have to spell everything for you? Are you at all familiar with the term?“

„Ummm no, is it dangerous?“

„It can be.“

„Will she...will she...“ maybe bite did influence his brain, if he thought that siding with Potter could be a good idea, he sighed

„No, she won’t. In some cases suicide is viable option to worry about, in her case...she is not dangerous for herself. She found her addiction quite fast I’d say.“

„Addiction?“

„Yes, Potter, addiction. And said addiction would very much like to get rid of her.“

„You mean you?“

„Well, colour me surprised! Yes. I mean I.“ He suppressed the sigh of resignation

„So what would be mine part?“

„Do you have a way of getting Miss Granger’s notes from Poppy?“ he nearly held his breath, through the chance was slim to none. Harry inched his head to the side

„I thought that you said nothing illegal or that will endanger anyone? I can only steal them, which is illegal. And if Poppy catches me, that would seriously endanger me.“

„I suspected as much.“

„Then why asking me?“
There was a small window of opportunity, Mr Potter, due to your hero reputation. ’Or that you are stupid enough just to go along with the plan. Which would have been preferable."

"Ah, well, no, it does not work on Poppy."

"I see. In that case, just continue to persuade her that I am a bad company, sadly, that would have to do. For now." It was a long shot, after all, ut Potter might still prove useful. After all little menace was his best friend. Mulling on how to end this conversation short, praying that the Boy Wonder would not mention or ask any of the questions he was afraid he might ask, he fell silent. Potter shifted uncomfortably from one leg to the other. ’And, here it goes.’ he thought bitterly

"Professor, may I ask..."

"Get on with it, Potter."

"How come that you know so much of what is wrong with Hermione and Poppy did not?"

"And why, pray tell, you think that Poppy does not know?" he blinked, surprised, he was not expecting this question. "She may not know the name, but she guessed quite accurately." He yawned purposely hoping that the kid will get a drift and leave him be. This demanded from him to devise new tactic.

"Right, I guess you are correct, sir. Well, I’ll take my leave. Thank you once again for all and I’m sorry, for all." Potter mumbled walking to the door, looking highly uncomfortable and confused.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She was pacing up and down in front of the door, half expecting for Harry to bolt through the door, throwing hexes. Biting painfully hard at the bottom lip, she is unsure what would she do in that situation. Professor was sick and defenceless, but Harry is her best friend.

Time ticks away and no shouting, no hexes, nothing happened. She resumed her pacing, doubling her worry. What are they talking about? Not knowing is the worse. She could use one of the extendable ears she has in her purse, but in the hallway, someone would notice. But she must know! What if it’s something bad? What if it’s about...her? What could professor tell Harry? Worse, what Harry could tell professor? ’Don’t be paranoid Hermione, Harry would not betray you.’ Just...she isn’t sure what she would consider as betrayal these days.

Her face twisted. Well, there will be no exercises for next few days. That is just as well. But she might see that they do at least some of them outside the water. She would have to talk to him about it. It was doable, he was wearing the soft pyjama bottoms here, though, Matron insisted on not allowing him to wear any top, so he was still forced to be naked waist up. That was fine with her, it made her job of assessing how good he progressed easily.

The door opened and thoroughly confused Harry stepped into the hallway.

"Harry? Are you ok? What did he do to you?"

"Huh?" Harry blinked at her. "Oh, nothing. You are right, he is snarky as always, it seems that he is not big on accepting gratitude."

"Then why are you looking like that?"

"Like what?"
„Like he asked you to re-take all potions exams from the first year until now.“

„Oh, that. I...I lost my nerve...I just, couldn’t...Hermione, he looks like a death itself, you told me he’s progressing nicely.“

„Well, he does.“ She felt relieved, Harry wasn’t traumatized „Last week he couldn’t take more than four spoons on his own, today he took six. From time to time he manages to lift himself a little off the bed. That is progress considering that he did nothing but lie for past half of the year, and he had a curse eating him away. He is not ready to run a marathon, but all in all...he is fairing nicely.“

„I think you should look up again for the meaning of the word nicely.“ Grumbled Harry scratching his nose and she giggled, hugging him tightly, it is nice to know that some things don’t change. Harry returned the embrace

„Well, it is better for me to get going, I stayed much longer than I told them. See you tomorrow Hermione.“

„Right. See you, Harry, give my love to Ginny.“

„Will do.“ Harry waved his hand and walked down the corridor. She smiled and entered the room. Snape looked lost in thought, slightly confused. She takes her book and starts to read, curling up. After a few minutes, she shifted, then again after few more minutes. Not even one position was comfortable or helpful.

„Will you stop with that blasted fidgeting and take the bloody pain potion?“ he snapped „I am fairly certain that you have it.“

„As a matter of fact I do, but it is for you.“ She growled

„And given that I do not need it, I wager that we could survive without it until this evening, Poppy can bring more, so can Lucius.“

„I won’t ask anything from that man.“ She raised her chin, but he was right she could send a message to Matron and ask for more. Leaning over the handrest she dug through her trunk until she found a vial with a potion and gulped it, grimacing at the taste. He rolled his eyes. She curled up again tucking the comforter around her. „How did you know that I need pain potion, professor?“

„I was head of house for as almost as long you are alive.“ Drawled Snape, rolling his eyes again. Anger flared inside her like that answer was self-explanatory.

„I still don’t see...“

„You told me that we won’t have pool exercises for few days, correct?“

„Yes.“

„You are testy and moody. And now you were idiotically stubborn not to take the pain medicine. I can assure you that my brain functions are not damaged. I know how to add two and two together.“ He drawled and she growled low in her throat

„It is not polite to...and anyhow I never told you...it is not your business...“ she sputtered. Why was she so angry at him, he didn’t do anything for her to be that mad. But the sole fact that he figured out why she was in pain made her blush „Ron and Harry...“

„You may not notice this, but I am not Potter or, Merlin forbid, Weasley. Now, if you do not mind,
let the potion work and **stop fidgeting**, it’s annoying."

„Fine.“ She hissed. This was so embarrassing. How did he figure it out? Ron and Harry never noticed or knew, they would just call her antsy and mood and stir clear until she would stop hissing at them. Never making the connection. Were they paying attention to her at all? That thought hurt. Tears started to run down her cheeks and she sniffled.

„Oh, for the love of...“ growled Snape, sounding annoyed, bored and almost desperate at the same time „I am trapped with hormonal snivelling child! Misty!!!“ he called so loud that she twitched, elf appeared

„Master Snape called?“

„I did. Can you, please, bring two large pieces of chocolate cake and a mug of hot chocolate to my nurse?“ elf glared at Hermione „Just bring them, Misty."

„Misty will bring, for the Master Snape."

„Thank you."

She snapped her head at him. Did he just thank the elf? She was sure he didn’t know how to pronounce those words. Elf popped again with asked food and shoved it in her hands.

„You should thank Master Snape.“ Seared elf at her and vanished

„Do not thank me, just chew on that and... Stop. With. Bawling. And. Annoying. Me.“ He hissed. So she is a little emotional, that is no reason for him to be annoyed. She glared at him but attacked the cake without even giving him a glance.
XXXVI

Chapter Notes

A/N: I had nightmarish experience with this chapter, overnight my laptop decided to merge two files - the story for Christmas Fic Exchange 2017 and this chapter (I blame it on the cat, he is genuine gremlin that likes to walk over the keyboard). It took me most of the day to untangle the mess and I managed to delete almost half of what I wrote in the other story and this chapter.

I hope I managed to wrap it up nicely, but I’m still mourning parts that were great and now lost forever :(

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He slipped through the door, not know too many of the staff members and certainly not students. Anything the shortcut to the third floor, using general mayhem as coverage. There is only one person who could release the Troll. How many times he told Albus that there is something fishy about new DADA and ex Muggle Studies professor.

Of course, the old man wouldn’t even give his warning a decency of listening to them till the end, cutting him off, rudely. He often wondered why Old Goat saved him at all? Not like he valued his advice, he did hold him on a very short leash but not restrictive one for sure.

Cutting around the corner he dashed up the stairs, jumping on the platform moments before staircase changed position. He slipped into the room. The beast, no matter how magnificent, that Hagrid so lovingly called Fluffy snarled at him. One head was snapping its jaws, the other licked its snout like he is particularly juicy snack and the third... Quirrell showed up on the door

„Well, well, not so passed out now, are you?“ he hissed at the man

At that same moment, third head soured and grabbed him by the leg. Quirrell runs out and he had to fight the dog off. Casting hex after hex until the beast released him and pulled back, long enough for him to crawl out of the room. The leg is killing him and lends no support whatsoever. He cast a diagnostic spell and growled, grounding his molars against searing pain. Casts few fast healing spells and still dragging his leg slips down the stairs and into the passage to rejoin other members of the staff.

He knew, he just knew that the idiot was after stone! He warned Dumbledore. And now he was forced to drag the remainder of old man’s idiocy to the remaining of his days. Voices approach and he takes one long breath before standing to find them. Minerva and Quirrell.
„Severus, what happened.“

„Exactly what I tried to warn all of you about. Did you find the Troll?“

„No, we are still looking, but students are safe...“ Minerva’s speech was cut by a shrill scream, they hurried in the direction of the sound. When they managed to open the door, jammed with rubble, Troll was on the ground, the bane of his life and its idiot sidekick standing. annoying little girl from their class was sniffing under the half broken sink. He glared at Potter 'Idioti child, same as his father, he just has to play hero.' He let Minerva taking care of her own and inspects the Troll, no ropes, no chains, no wounds, he didn’t escape he was let out.

Well, this was just another miserable Halloween. All he wanted for tonight was to get drunk till oblivion takes him. He was handling all other days, but this one was his breaking point, year after year. For ten miserably long years.

Returning to his quarters, he checked on his House first, students were excited but not scared. They buzzed about tonight’s going on’s like a swarm of hornets. He left them to talk out their fear and retreated to his room. Summoning the bottle of firewhiskey he poured a lot in himself and bit onto the wound. Burning pain made him hiss...

Hermione jumped from her sofa with a cry. Her own muscle was painfully cramped. What an idiot she was, wasn’t it enough that she had to witness his misery? Now she shared his pain. Lovely.

With the corner of her eye, she noticed that he tried to sit down in his bed and flopped down helplessly.

„I’m sorry for waking you up, professor. It was just a bad dream.“ Her own voice sounded rough and scratchy

„I am well aware of that.“ He grumbled from the bed, sounding annoyed. Was he annoyed that she waked him up or because he couldn’t get up? Probably both.

„Do you need anything, professor?“

„Yes! Stop being so flustered!“ he growled at her, from her seat he was just shimmering trace of silver within the dark mass, she did, however, saw his face in her mind. She was on a verge of tears now, not sure if she’s going to start cry from frustration or sadness first.

„Well, I’m sorry if my nightmare...“

„It is my memory, you menace, and like it is not enough that you are privy to memories I have no inclination sharing with anyone, your constant state of being flustered, robes me from what I little time I can muster to rest. Stop, whining about my life.“ He sounded annoyed

„I am not...flustered.“

„You are an awful liar.“

„How do you know how I feel ?“

„Because that is one radio broadcast I cannot switch off. Sadly, delivered directly to my cranium. And if that is not enough, you try to advertise your feelings quite loudly.“

„How? I didn’t say a word to you!“ she jumped and hissed, the muscle was still cramped, she whisked her wand and soft glowing lights forced both of them to wince. She hopped to his bed and
sat on the edge, looking at his grimaced face. 'I can't believe he’s...oh, the light.’ She scooted up and raised her arm, creating a shadow. There is no point in arguing with him after all, he was right. She hated that he was right, but that didn’t change the fact that she was flustered and sad and terrified every time after she witnessed some of his memories. 'Gods, doesn’t he have just one nice memory?’

He blinked couple of times in the shade she created with her hand, before gazing at her

„What do you want now?“ he asked. He must be mad at her for seeing what she saw.

„I already apologized for what is going on, professor. This was not my intention. And you are free to obliterate all the memories I saw once we sort this out. In fact, I implore you to do so.“ She shivered

„No, Miss Granger.“ His voice was low, she looked at him with surprise „I won’t Obliviate you. You are so dead set on stopping me... so, I will leave you with the knowledge. My gift to you.“

She blinked at him and covered her mouth with both hands. This was not what she....she is certain that he will Obliviate her. So much pain, she does not want to remember. How will she be able to live with even knowing what he’s been through? Oh, he is so cruel.

She glares at him, but his eyes are lost, tightly, crinkling the corners of his eyes. He does not look menacing, or spiteful....he looks tired. She sighs, it’s late, they are both tired.

„Rest now, professor.“ She whispers and turns down the lights. She hops to her bed, bloody cramp is still there.

„Professor...“

„Talking is opposite of resting.“ He grumbles

„I know, I was just wondering...“

„Out with it, Miss Granger, I would like to rest at least a little bit.“

„Is it a leg, the one that cramps often during exercises?“

„I was told that you are labelled as ’the brightest witch of your age’, you tell me.“

„But, that was permanent injury then, professor!“

„Thank you for stating the obvious.“ He dampens „Miss Granger I must congratulate you, you managed the impossible. Yo made me feel annoyed beyond words and bored to tears. Now, if you finished...“

„Just one more thing, professor. Well, two actually...“

„Do try to go all out, Miss Granger.“

„Well, as you know...you know...I can’t go to the pool, but tomorrow we could do some exercises in the room if you are up to it.“

„Fine. And the other?“ he rushed her

„You don’t happen to have the cramp now, don’t you?“

„No, Miss Granger I do not. If that is all.“
„It is, good night, professor."

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He sighs inwardly, hoping beyond hope that he will rest at least a bit this night. He hates that memory and feels grateful to the force that sends a cramp into her leg. Grateful, that she did not witness the rest of that night. The first moment when he actually tried and failed. He was drunk enough that night, drunk enough to say 'Screw them all' and try to alleviate the pain. Unsuccessfully, as it turned out. He spent the rest of the night in the hospital, Poppy hovering over him, Bloody Baron glaring at him from the corner of the room. Tomorrow Albus pretended he doesn't know what happened. He just relieved him of his duties during upcoming holidays and gave him the task of shadowing Potter. He still regretted that he failed that night and all the others.

„Professor...“ quiet voice from the corner of the room, he growls

„What is it now?“

„Were you serious when you told me...you don’t want to Obliviate the memories...?“

„Deadly serious, Miss Granger, and getting more serious about it by the minute. “

„But, why?“

If he could just walk to her and make her shut up, make her stop talking, make her leave him be. She dances on his last nerve.

„Miss Granger, as you could see, I am already damaged enough by the escapades of your merry little band of miscreants, and I do not desire to add to it by you inflicting an injury on my person tomorrow. Go. To. Sleep. And, stop pester me. “

„Al...Alright. Good night."

„I'll believe it when I see it. “ He retorts thusly, can’t she just leave him be?

Time slips away and finally, he hears her calm deep breathing. She finally fell asleep. Blissful solitude. He tries to do the classical meditation breathing and mind clearing exercises. But abandons them after some time, forced to face grim reality...after so many years of maintaining his walls, after so many unwanted memories, he has no ability shut them down now. His memories are like a flood that break through the dam. And now he’s afraid to fell asleep again, asleep and remember. Let her see. No! He has to find the way, a way to rest without sleeping. He has to start using his magic again, but he is weak. So first, he must regain his strength.

Yes, that's it. First – regaining strength. Second – getting hold of his magic and getting rid of her presence in his head. Third – get rid of her permanently.

Stupid little chit. If she has a half of the brain she claims to have, she would get the message. Then again, it's not the message she wants so she won't process it, she will probably obsess over it and try to find the way to circumvent it. After all, she doesn't care about him, she only seeks salvation for herself. Well, he is done with being a bloody saviour and pariah martyr. They can all go and screw themselves! He is waiting for this for seventeen bloody years! He ponders on idea what will happen if he kills himself while the connection is still active? Would it save sever it? Would it affect her somehow? Would it kill her and left him alive? Neither sounds good.

He didn’t even notice when sleep sneaks up on him and submerge him in absolute darkness.
Chapter Notes

A/N: I managed to fix two chapters today, they sort of going together, this one is her
POV, next one is his, so tomorrow you may expect another one :)

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She had the feeling that both of them started to breathe a bit easier when Poppy finally left. The
woman was a force of nature and she didn’t take no for an answer if it was about her patients.
Looking at things Poppy left her, she sighed ‘Well, I got myself in this mess.’. He looked like an
angry porcupine. Poppy gave them both scolding because the bags under his eyes returned. She
prescribed more rigorous regime for him, limiting the magic use around him to a minimum, she could
only move him around by magic. Misty got a new diet for him, even the grumpy elf was subdued in
Poppy’s presence, twisting the hem of the pristine pillowcase and keeping her eyes down. She never
saw Misty acting like that, not even with Snape and Malfoy.

„Well, better get going with this, Malfoy...ermmm...Malfoy senior will come to visit you later today.“
„That is Lord Malfoy or Mr Malfoy for you, Granger.“ He replied sharply
„What is that you told me? ’Respect is earned.’“ She retorts, climbing on the bed and kneeling next
to him. „Now be still and let me put this on you.“
„Do I have an option?“ he asked bitterly
„Stop talking.“ She frowned. She can’t place the gaze over the wound if he keeps talking and she
doesn't want to be in his bed, well, not in this way anyhow. She takes a swat of the ointment and
when she touches his skin he flinches
„That is opposite of ’standing still’“ she grumbled
„I do not appreciate being...touched“ he spoke like each word pained him profoundly
„Well, I’m not so keen on touching you, but there is no way around it unless you want me to call
Matron again, then we can be yelled at again.“
„Fine, just get it done already.“ He growled

She touches his skin again and spreads the ointment over the wound. Scarred, lumpy flesh doesn't
feel like skin at all. But the surrounding skin is soft and warm, too warm. Worried she places one of
her hands to his forehead and he flinches again with an angry look on his face.
"You feel a bit too warm, I'm checking if you are running a fever."

"I do not!"

"And I should take your word on it?" she replied with narrowed eyes, but inside her head, she is screaming 'Are you insane, stop provoking him!' but she can't. She is so angry these days, oscillating from moments of pure despair to moments of pure undiluted rage. The hardest was when she felt both of those in the same time, like today. And this was not connected to her current state, it was more...just more.

"As a matter of fact, you should." He replies with one brow curled in indignation, "This is my normal temperature."

"Alright. Now, still, until I place this on you." She dangled a gaze in front of his eyes

"Did you do that before?"

"I've read the books." She replies, and he rolled his eyes with a pinched face, but he is quiet so she proceeded. Placing the material on the wound and using a Muggle medical tape to seal the gaze on the place. She notices that his hair is greasy, but he refused to allow her to bathe him and forced her to use magic on him, but until recently they at least used pool daily. For past three days, it was only magic. Finally, she manages to fix the gaze correctly and she pulls back. "I will prepare the floor and transfer you to the sanitized surface." She informs him and crawls out of the bed.

Taking one of the blankets she places it on the floor and enlarges it so he would fit on it head to toe. She transfigures it into a spongy material she knew it is good for floor exercises, they used it at the fitness centre her parents took her once. She yanks his covers and he growls. Ignoring his protests she levitates him to the makeshift practice area.

'Harry was right, he still looks like death.' His muscle tone was returning but at the snail's pace. The contour of his ribs still plainly visible like distressing 3D image, plunging sharply to his abdomen, still too thin and plastered flat to his spine. He reminds her of the pictures of hunger in Africa or imprisonment camp victims from WWII she saw on the telly once. His arms are in much better shape, filling with muscles nicely, through his wrists still jutting sharply against thin forearms. How didn't she noticed this before? She was so focused on progress that she blocked out the whole picture completely. She positions herself at his feet.

"We will start with your legs." She informs him before taking one foot in her arms. She bends his leg and pushes it toward his chest. His leg is heavy, much heavier than in the pool. He's awfully heavy for such thin man. After twenty pushes, they are both covered with sweat. She wedges his foot to her abdomen and faces his angry glare. "Try pushing against me."

"Granger..."

"Do you honestly think you could harm me? If you think you are able to - then do it." 'Are you insane!!!!' she waits but the pressure is minimal. Large droplets of sweat soaking his skin and hair, his face is flushed with pale pink from exertion and his chest strain. "Take a break and try again." She instructs him.

He glares at her and she lowers her eyes to his foot. She does not need to see his silent judgement, it is almost palatable and it stings. She never before notices that he has long, elegant feet with high arch and delicately defined toes. The skin on his feet is soft like he was spending insane amounts of time doing nothing but pedicure and walking on clouds. She is jealous of that. After few more minutes of miniscule pressure, she nods and lets his leg gently to the ground. They repeat the process with
another leg, and this time she is careful, checking the muscles for a sign of cramps.

His hips are still in good shape, he can bend his leg high without complaining or effort. She knows girls who would sell their soul to be this...bendy. She takes the glass of water and lifts him so she could give him to drink. He is still silent but greedily gulps the water.

„Now your arms...“ she frowns, she obviously didn’t think this through, he rolls his eyes

„May I suggest that you combine the exercises for abdomen with arms?“ his tone is dry, sarcastic

„H...how?“ she has no idea how to proceed from here, in the pool, she would push his back up, but she can’t lie beneath him now...she wouldn't be able to push him. And he would be mad if she tries. He rolled his eyes again and frowned

„You...sit... on my thighs and lock your hands with mine, so you can pull me up. It should stimulate more than one group of muscles.“ If there is a vocabulary with words like acerbic, sarcastic, caustic his picture must be standing under the explanation.

„Right.“ ’Not awkward at all.’ She kneels next to his thighs and straddles them careful not to touch him, keeping herself in the upward position she hooks her hands grabbing his forearms. The weak pressure told her that he at least tried to do the same. She pulls him slowly up, and she sees his muscles strain, at least he's doing all he can to assist her.

First one was a success, she lowered him back slowly and he still strains his muscles to sustain him and eased his way back. Two. Three. She is surprised, this is going much better than she anticipated. Her muscles are shaking slightly, he is heavy, and she uses much of her strength to pull him up and lower him down. Four. He’s up and now he’s descending slowly. Suddenly, his strength gave up, and entire his weight is in her hands. She loses her balance and they both fall on the soft surface. She with a surprised yelp, he with a grunt. His heavy exhale gushes against her face.

In that precise moment, the door opens ’Of course, what else.’ She thinks disgruntled. She tries to lift up fast, but their hands are entangled and one of her arms is trapped under his. ’How that happened?’

„Oh, I apologize, should I return later?“ Lucius sounds amused. She finally managed to free herself and rolled to sit next to Snape, glaring at Malfoy who looks like a cat which just swallowed the canary, before he turns to exit but shifts so he could face them again „May I suggest...“

„You may not.“ Growlers Snape but Lucius ignores him, fixing her with starre

„...it would be much easier if you have no clothes on...and...use the bed. Unless this is some new kink, in which case I’d like to watch.“

She feels her face going hot, she is at the brink of tears, this is so humiliating. And the nerve of the man, such...insinuations. but, when she opens her mouth what comes out of them surprises even her, is her brain even connected to them today?

„If you think this is amusing, feel free to join.“

„Well, how...advanced and liberal are we! No, thank you, I do prefer to watch.“ She is angry again ‘Gods, is sarcasm something they teach in Slytherin dorm?’ she opens her mouth then close them fast, maybe it is smarter not to say anything at all. At least today.

„Lucius.“ Growlers Snape „Do return later.“
„Fine, fine.“ Reply Lucius in the silky tone and she glares at him. If she could send just one hex, just one at his direction. But she can’t, she is his guest and she can’t attack her host. Her face is hot as a furnace. Malfoy leaves the room, but she still glares at the door.

„Granger!“ his voice snaps her out of her stupor „Shall we continue?“

„Yes, yes.“ She resumes her position, as before but her muscles are tired.

„May I suggest that you try and, I don’t know, follow my instructions this time? I was convinced that this...torture has as an end goal to help me and not render me inoperative completely. “

„Fine.“ She growls at him and sits on his tighs, linking her hands with his. She uses her body as a lever to pull him up and lowers him down. He is right, it is much easier this way. Nonetheless, she feels his legs under her but, flexing meekly as they move, brushing against her more intimate parts. He is trying to stiffen his muscles and take at least some of his body weight, but at this point, it is a strain for him. He is sweating profoundly, breathing heavily and loudly with occasional hiss or grunt.

There is nothing menacing about his behaviour but she is...soooooooooo...not comfortable with the situation. It feels wrong. Too intimate, even if it shouldn’t. He is focused on exercises, she doubt’s he sees her at all. For him, she is just one of the contraptions to utilise while practising. But she feels him more keenly, and blames him for it, for giving this proposition, even if she isn’t sure how differently to pull this off.

Fifteen. ‘Finally!’

„I’m glad you share your enthusiasm, but could you just return me to bed now?‘ he drawls and she looks at him. He is soaked with sweat. ‘Oh great! He’s going to kill me now for sure.’ Whines her brain ‘I can’t do it! I can’t! I must...’

„Well, actually, professor...“ she starts to stutter.
XXXVIII

Chapter Notes

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‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
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„Well, actually, professor...“ she starts to stutter „...we need to remove all that sweat and...“ he wants to kill her if he could just vaporise her on the spot. And she’s still talking „...ble but honestly, there are only two options.‟

„There is a third option Granger, shut up and just put me back to bed!“

„You are soaked with sweat, you need to take a bath.“ She argues like he doesn’t know that, he is doing his best to suppress the shivers, the room is warm but the sweat is getting cooled and he is on the floor

„Use. The. Magic!“ he growls

„No! Matron forbade it.„ She doesn't look like she’s enjoying this, he is certain that she dreads the whole situation more than he does, but Merlin she is stubborn enough to go through it. No! He won’t allow it! There is not a single chance that he will accept this, not willingly.

„Misty!!!“ he yells and the elf pops in

„What dirty mouth Missy doing to professor?“ Misty hissed at her and Hermione got red in the face, glaring at the elf. Hermione’s threat forced Misty to stop calling her Muddy Blood but she started calling her ’dirty mouth’, Hermione took that as a compliment and counted as a victory. Nothing else changed between elf and her, they were still antagonistic towards each other.

„Well, you called her, now explain.“ Hermione hisses at him

„Misty, can you put me to bed?“ he turns to elf, she is an ally, always been, taking care of him whenever he was in the house

„Professor is sweaty and dirty and cold. Professor needs a warm bath.“ States Misty and he glares at her ’Now she found to side with Hermione. Maybe if I point out...’

„Misty, are you tell me that you agree that my nurse should bathe me?“

„Missy dirty mouth is going to touch professor. Shame on you!“ elf turns to Hermione and he grins at her

„Fine if you think you can bathe him, without magic, be my guest.‟
“Misty can’t, not without magic. Maybe this time, you should be a rent-an-elf, and help professor.”
Grumbles elf, Hermione plaster a huge victorious grin on her face and he growls ‘No, no, no, this is going all wrong! Merlin, they are ganging up on me!’

“I refuse! You won’t put your hands on me!”

“Professor, you can only choose tub or a sponge bath. It is nothing really, I...

“Not another word, Granger! You are NOT touching me! You are NOT undressing me. And, you are most definitely do NOT bathing me!” he struggles to get up and manages almost to sit before he falls down with a soft thump.

“Misty is sorry professor. Misty will set new sheets, soft and warm.” Elf popped out of the room

He growls. This is the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate punishment. This is worse than death. He does not deserve this! He does deserve death for his crimes, but he suffered enough! More than enough!

“Misty filled the tub with water. Rent-an-elf better wash professors hair.” Grumbled Misty and vanished again

“I am really, really sorry professor...” Granger sounds apologetic.

‘Oh, no you won’t! If I have to suffer through humiliation so will you’ he feels helpless and enraged. She lifts him with magic and flats him to the bathroom. The tub is full of water, he nearly sighed in relief, thick foam covers the water surface.

“Right,” she starts and his ears strain, almost painfully, this start doesn’t sound good „I’m sorry professor...but I have to remove...”

“NO! No. You. Do. Not.” Is she insane he has to stop her somehow, by any means

“But...”

“Granger are you so desperate for male company that you are willing...”

“Now professor, that is not fair...”

“Will you STOP calling me that.” He feels panic rising. This is like his worst nightmare coming to life.

“Like what?” she blinks at him, confused, for now, he’s grateful that her brain is not at its usual sharpness

“Professor.” He hisses „It may be your...quirk...but I will not tolerate it.”

“Right. But you are...were my professor. How should I call you?”

“You may use any of charming nicknames you christen me with during your years at Hogwarts.”

“Right, then Snape it is. Still, I have to...”

“NO!!!!” he yells. His throat hurts now, hurts enough that his eyes water

“Pro...ummm...yes, sorry. Snape, Gods this feels odd. Um, I have to remove...”
"Granger!" he coughs

"Fine, would it be acceptable for you if I put you in the water with pyjama bottoms and then remove them?" she asks, with almost desperate note in her voice

"Fine." He grumbled through clenched teeth. This is better, marginally, but still better than to let her disrobe him completely. She lowers him in the water and he sighs 'This is the bliss...' water is warm and shooting. He closes his eyes. Hands...**hands**!!!

"What. Are. You. Doing?" he growls, her hands are under the water, she is in a flimsy tank top with thin straps "What. Are. You. Wearing?"

"Oh, I'm removing the pyjama bottoms and I removed my shirt, it has sleeves."

"Will you stop touching me?!" he growls

"How else I'm going to bathe you?"

"I. Don't. Care!" he gets a fit of a cough again and to his dismay, she uses it to pull his bottoms off. He hears the wet splash when they hit the tills. Merlin! He is naked, in the bathroom, and chit is taking the flannel! !"I told you not to touch me!" he starts coughing again. Fine, growling and hissing, no more yelling.

She starts with his hands and he relaxes a little bit. Oh, this feels nice. For a brief time he allows himself to enjoy the feeling of scrubbing, it warms his skin. Resting his head on the edge of the tub he closes his eyes. She washed his shoulders and the back of the neck. She washed his hair, rubbing something in it that smelled like orange flowers. He could...purr...yes, he could get used to this. She switched to his feet. This is a bliss! Slow rubbing almost put him to sleep...almost. She switched to his back, making him lean to one of her hands while she rubbed his back. She gently pushed him back and started to scrub his chest. He is relaxed now.

She can’t see anything, her hands disappeared under the thick layer of foam, but he is content as long as nothing can be seen. Ok, maybe he could get used to this from time to time. His eyes flew open and wide

"What are you think you are doing?" he hisses, this is rather rude and violent jolt from the bliss he was in

"Ummm....washing you." She blushes...

The door klick and he can hear Lucius calling

"Severus is everything alright? Oh...oh...Miss Granger, I do believe I advised you to remove the clothes, it does make things rather simpler." His voice is silky and full of concealed laughter.

"You, remove your hands!" he growls ,"Lucius...OUT!"

"Really Severus, you didn’t mind me watching before." Draws Lucius. He still can’t see him, but she is dark red in her face and looks like the rabbit caught in headlights. He can feel her hands twitch on his lower abdomen but she does not remove them. Now, he can either use Lucius to embarrass her enough to remove her hands and suffer through Lucius’s jokes for an unforeseen amount of time. Or, he could toss out Lucius and continue to argue with her. He liked his chances better with her.

"Lucius...**OUT!!!**"
„Fine, fine. I’m going. You two are such a bore.‘ The last word was dragged down but the doors clicked again. She relaxed, nearly leaning on him.

„Granger! I am not a bloody table. Remove your hands at once!“

„But prof...“ she started and he narrowed his eyes at her „sorry, Snape...ummm...yes...I didn’t finish the washing."

„And you won’t!“ he hissed, the throat was killing him at this point. Fine, he can talk, yelling is still off limits...obviously.

„But...“


„Fine. Let me finish with your legs then first.“ She huffed, insulted and moved scrubbing his thighs, with more force than necessary. ‘Why is she so mad, little hussy! Oh, we are going to do this my way.’

„Is this your idea of punishment or are you just insulted that you are prohibited to molest me?“ he lowered his voice in a purr, she halted her movements

„What?!“ her question was somewhere between shrill scream and outrage

„I’m just asking for further references.“

„I don’t understand...“

„Why...are...you...trying...to...peel...my...skin?“ he used the skill he honed as a teacher, the one that made most of the students cry

„I....I....sorry“ she mumbled and continued to wash him, red in the face with angry expression but she hid her eyes from him. ‘Victory.’ The smug thought flooded his mind.

The said victory was short-lived. Even if she was avoiding intimate areas, her hands brush the flannel against some more sensitive parts, like insides of his thighs or lower part of his abdomen. He gritted his teeth, thanking Merlin, Salazar and all others that he was in the water. He is sweating again! Finally, she removed his hands and glared at him

„Misty!“ she called and elf popped in „Can I ask you to watch professor? He wants to finish his bathing alone. And, please tell me if he fails.“ At the last words, she sent him one glance full of warning and determination

„Misty will.“ Nodded elf and Granger vanished from his sight, he let out one long breath. Was he holding it?

His hands felt as if they are made of led, but he willed them to move. With an annoyance, anger and not a small amount of panic he discovered that he is semi-hard. Sure, his body was healing, and many of its functions returned to what they were before. Before stress and war and constant abuse by lack of sleep or meals with the added bonus of occasional punishment wrecked it. Through, some of the functions could stay dormant by his account, like this one in particular. Misty was standing on the cabinet, watching him like an odd bald hawk. With painful slowness he managed to finish the task, thinking about most disgusting sights he could muster.

‘My brain is cruel, cruel device.’ He decided. Fine, his organ was once again flaccid but the image,
no matter that it was manufactured by his brain, was etched behind his eyelids, a rather passionate encounter of Dumbledore and Filch. He shivered and elf disappeared. 'Damn it!' the door clicked.

„I have to take you out of the water and dry you before you can dress up again.“ He heard her voice before she appeared in his line of sight.

„No."

„Oh, stop acting like a child, Snape.“ She hissed ‘Why is she so annoyed? She has no right to...’ he twitched when a towel flapped over the tub. She lifted him out of the water, towel keeping his crotch covered, and left him to levitate while she wiped most of his body with another towel. Allowing the one over his crotch to soak up the water. She pulled new and clean pyjama bottoms on him and finally, levitate him to bed.

„How do you feel?“

„Annoyed.“ He grumbles

„I didn’t ask in general.“ She snapped at him „Are you tired or should I sent Misty to call your friend?“

That was the question. He did feel tired, exhausted, even if he didn’t do almost anything.

„I will sleep a bit first.“

„Very well.“ she sat on her sofa and took a book to read. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. He really was tired.
Chapter Notes

From this chapter, the focus will shift more to Snape, there is still Hermione’s POV but story demands that spotlight is back to him.

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She sighs and closes the book. Things got, well, not better but sort of fell into the routine with an addition. They added a session of exercises for the afternoon or evening in the room and resumed pool exercises two days prior. She leans against the wall and relishes the silence of the hallway. How long are they here? 20 days, maybe 25...she is sure it wasn’t this difficult to share a room before. And she shared a room with Padma and Lavender! What changed? Not that it matters, even if she was offered her own room, she wouldn’t accept it.

He is advancing nicely. Better than nicely, considering they don’t use magic at all. She is not sure what is in the potions Matron gives him every morning, but they do work wonders apparently. He is still far from the fully functional usage of his limbs, but yesterday he managed to sit and hold the position for good 10 seconds, that is huge.

More annoying and nerve wrecking is...well...more than one thing, actually. First one would be Malfoy Senior. Oh! That man! Ever since that day, not only she but Snape as well were on the other end of Malfoy’s jokes and snide remarks. He keeps giving her small winks, insulting tips and annoyingly long measuring glances. He teased Snape about her, he provokes him until Snape is ready to bite. And he safely leaves leaving her to deal with sharp-tongued, acerbic Snape ready to kill with just a few words. she did manage to build up at least partial resistance to his remarks, mostly by using her mp3 player as a buffer to ignore him. Of course, that does not improve his mood but at least preserves her nerves.

Second is much trickier. All that talk about inappropriate relation they most definitely do not have to spin her head in the wrong direction. Calling him Snape instead the professor didn’t help either. It made...everything...more personal. She is sure if this was Harry she would still feel the same under the circumstances. Well, probably not the same, Harry wouldn’t try to insinuate with nasty remarks, but, still... She started to notice him more, his appearance. It is necessary, after all, she is taking care of him, as a nurse. But she started to look him more as a man and less as a...well, she never considered him before, beyond the mass of black robes, like he was bodiless and lifeless. Now she knows, not just that he did, in fact, had a life beyond school walls, but also that he does have the body. And it was not just occasional realisation, lost soon after it came. It was constant nowadays. She was acutely aware of the fact that he is a person, a man, human. ’Nonsense, he was always human.’ She grumbles in her head. Question is, why didn’t she saw that before. Why now?
Of course, the third thing was the cause of his mood-swings and loads of arguments, which she won, sort of. For five days now, mornings would start with the very particular area of the covers, tented, and she would have to use a spell on him. She doesn't know who of them found that situation more embarrassing. He certainly saw it as a reason to be unpleasant and angry, but she can't figure out why. It was nothing unusual, she read in her parent's medical book that it is a normal occurrence for grown men. If it's normal, why is he so mad about? Maybe because she is his ex-student? Yes, that must be it.

The door clicked and Draco is in the hallway. He smirks at her and she jumps to her feet. Draco is looking much better, she didn’t see him for days. He is still a prat 'I guess, no help there.'

„Bucktooth.“
„Ferret-face“
„In the hallway again?“
„Your father is in the room.“
„Yes, I know. I figured that by now you wouldn’t mind...entertaining...them both.“
„I am here to help Professor Snape recover. Your father will have to look for the nurse elsewhere.“ She replied dryly, ignoring the jab
„Well if you think they are too old for you...“
„Really Draco?“ she faking aloofness „Do you honestly think you could...entertain...a muggle-born? It might just be more of a bite than you could chew.‟
„We can try out and see.„ Draco is not so easy to shake off, she rolled her eyes
„Thank you, I do have better taste than that, you I mean.‟
„Yeah, that’s why you couldn't keep even Weasley.‟

That hurts, that really hurts. Ron is a bleeding wound in her heart. She is mad now, still, tears prickle her eyes. She blinks to push them away and narrows her eyes at him
„At least I have a spine.‟
„Do you, now?‟
„More than you have.‟ “Two can play that game.’ She thinks with malice, knowledge is the power.
„Meaning.‟ Hissing Draco, he’s leaning towards her threateningly, she slides the tip of her want to her hand and smiles sweetly
„At least I had the guts to go for the guy I want and lose him. You on the other hand...are a coward, afraid to tell...‟ she lets the end of the sentence hang in the air „Like you see, I know things too.‟
„You little...‟
„What, you are going to hex me in the house full of Aurors, or run and tell daddy. Oh, wait, you can’t. Chicken!‟
„You have no right to talk about things you have no knowledge about.‟ He backed away but he’s
still hissing at her.

„Oh, I know enough. But more importantly, I had the balls, where is your’s?“ she is challenging him.

„I’ll get you for this, Granger.“ Draco threatens and walks into the room.

Victory! It is a small one, and she does not see Draco as a worthy adversary, but at least she got him good. A hurt for a hurt. Gods! What is wrong with her? She is around these people way too much, she started to think like them. No! She will not be like that...mean and spiteful...and hurtful. She will be better than them! She is better than them. She will apologize to Draco on his way out.

„Miss Granger, do you possess any other attire?“ the cold voice of Mr Malfoy snapped her out of her musings, she nearly jumps. Bloody hell! Are all of them going to try and walk over her today? Narcissa is looking at her from above, the woman is good half a head and higher, her cold eyes look at her with severe disapproval

„I do.“ She replied, politely but cold „They are also Muggle.“

„As far as I know Muggles do have more decent and elegant clothing for females, Miss Granger.“

„They do, but this is comfortable...“ she wants to explain to this woman that this is most comfortable clothes she could wear, but Narcissa cuts her off

„The woman, Miss Granger should always be elegant, and decent, walking around in underwear will not get you a good husband. Not even a decent lover.“

Is she mocking her? „It is a good thing then, that I’m not on the hunt for a husband or a lover.“ She replied dryly „This is good enough for exercising with the professor and taking care of him.“

„Such behaviour! Poor Severus...“

„Professor Snape is everything but poor!“ she snaps „But if you like it, chuck it out on my blood status.“

„Miss Granger;“ Narcissa rise one eyebrow at her eyes shift just for a second „I could care less about your blood status. I am merely pointing out some of the finer aspects and expectations of our society. But of course, you are, as Muggle-born, uneducated in our ways. Such a shame.“ She shakes her head, slowly, almost royally and walks away while Hermione still tries to push answer through throat jammed with air.

To hell with them all, bathroom seems like a viable and quite cosy option. The audacity of that woman, to tell her that she does not know how to dress up! To tell her that she walks in the underwear!!! When it is clearly a sportswear! She should learn if she doesn’t know!

With force she opens the door and enters the room, barely registering that conversation came to a sudden halt, or Snape’s face brightened with a genuine and quite wide smile. She marches to the sofa and takes one blanket, walking towards the bathroom.

„What are you going to do in the bathroom, Granger?“ calls Draco snidely, giving one eyebrow wiggly glance to his father

„Look for your balls or your spine, Malfoy. Good chance though, I won’t find them.“ She hisses before entering the bathroom with a slam. She briefly registers confused face of Lucius, dark look in Snape’s eyes and stunned face of Draco.
Shuffling angrily around the bathroom she takes a blanket and folds it before casting a cushioning charm. She refuses to put down the cover and sit on the toilet seat. She placed the blanket near the door and leans against the wall, tills are warm there, from the fireplace. She takes her book and flares at empty shower booth when she notices that voices are drifting under the door to her. Her ears twitch and perk up. Lucius

„...what are you saying?“

„She’s just mean and spiteful, that’s what I’m saying.“ Draco

„Draco...“ Snape’s voice, she is surprised it is soft and calm, caring „maybe you should talk to your father, think about it.“

„Why should I, he never listens anyway.“ Draco sounds like he’s going to go into tantrum any second „He so much like the sound of his voice that he doesn't need anyone else to say anything.“

„I am still in the room, Draco. At least wait for me to get out if you want to slander me to my best friend.“

„Do you even hear yourself?!“ Draco’s voice risen in an octave „Severus is not your best friend, he is your brother!“ You took him to the family even before I was born! I have one sane relative, that actually wants to talk to me and you negate it!“

'Brother? Didn’t Malfoy said something like that to Harry...brothers by blood and magic sealed it...’ sh never paid much attention to what Malfoy said, maybe that’s why they insisted on bringing Snape here?

„Draco, times were different and we explained to you why we hid the truth. It does not matter, names and titles mean nothing, we know what we are, and you know what I am to you.“ Snape’s voice is still gentle ‘How is he capable to produce that sound? And to Draco!’ she feels jealousy, he should be talking like that to her, she’s the one trying to save him, not Draco. Draco is just a prat.

„Well, the Snake-face is dead now! And you can say it, openly! O are you still so blind father, so blind that you can’t force yourself to let the world know that you mixed your blood with a half-blood?“

'Ouch, that’s harsh. Deserved but harsh. Why is he so angry at his father anyhow?’

„I won’t stand here, being slandered by my own flesh and blood.“ Malfoy sounds outraged but also hurt, can he even feel hurt „Severus, I’ll come back later. Hopefully, you can talk some senses into the boy...“

„I am not the boy!“

„YES, you are. “ Hisses Malfoy „And as long I am the Lord of the house you will obey.“ The door slams and she hears almost a cry, a sniffle

„Draco, come here.“ Snape’s voice sounds sooooo, she is jealous of Draco, of the way Snape talks to him. snape sound so...well...almost parenting to the prat „Did you talked to your mother?“ silence „And what Cissa say?“

„She will support me, but she won’t break the news to the father, she thinks that is my responsibility.‘

„And she is right. Your father loves you Draco, he won’t deny you...“ the voices are lost in a buzz
and she realises that one of them, probably Draco cast a Muffliato. ‘What just happened?’
XL

Chapter Notes

I have to stress one thing from this chapter on, my understanding of ‘POV’ is that we see things from subjective perspective, and not all the facts, so please...keep that in mind :)

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Knock on the door stopped the conversation. Draco stands up and gives him one meek, unsure smile, guilt is still etched on the boys face. He can’t convince Draco that he understands and does not hold against him his behaviour during boy’s sixth year. First time around they were young, but this young. This war, damaged all the youth, creating an army of neuroethics, an army that bore the title of „hero“ or „traitor“, an army that will be the pillar of this society for years to come. That was a scary thought. 'Has wizarding world finally facing its decline, falling apart from the inside?’ he wonders.

Lucius’s head pokes through the door and Draco stiffens his shoulders and squares his face, hard look in his eyes. Lucius walks into the room. Draco turns to him

„I’ll see you later, Severus.“ And walks out.

As the boy passes his father Lucius has a tight face and stares at Draco, the boy returns the gaze. It is painful to watch, as it was for years. He laments the misfortune of Granger being his jailor. If it was any other of his students, Draco could benefit from the company, but Granger was a thorn in the boy's foot. For years Lucius dangled her success to berate the boy, to point out his shortcomings. That was the Malfoy way for generations, you were either the best or the best was used as a bludger that constantly smacked your head. While Draco was still young, he hoped that Lucius will see the error of his ways, but Lucius was blind to his mistakes, resulting in a love-hate relationship he now had with a boy.

Lucius sighs and sits on the edge of the bed. He looks worn out and his limp is more pronounced. They are quiet, and he gives the man a space to start talking in his own time. Lucius never does anything without reason, but his reasons are questionable at times.

„I don’t know what to do with him.“ Lucius’s voice is quiet, sad and pained. Usually composed Lucius now looks as if he is ready to cry
„How about giving the boy some space, letting him find his own way?“ he asks carefully, these are dangerous waters

„I am grooming him to be the head of Malfoy family once I’m gone. I do not plan on dying but I won’t live forever. He has to carry on the family name.“

„Presently, that name doesn’t bear much prestige.“ He quips it’s not smart to poke at that particular wound but Lucius can be so stubborn at times, and he would hate to go before he tries to fix their relationship. Lucius and Draco both, need his support now.

„That is precisely why I need him to be at the top.“

„Maybe he would be if you ease up? Let’s face it Lucius, our ways...we had three wars in past 100 years. Every 30 years or so we have one lunatic or another trying to colour the world. Maybe it is time for us to pull back and let the young ones take over.“

„They have no respect for old ways, for traditions. We would be overrun by Muggle technology and their prejudice.“ Lucius sounds outraged

„No one ever managed to stop the progress.“ He sighs, he would hate to see the open-minded society like wizarding was to decline. Lucius hums

„Progress may come, but not in my time. Our ways...“

„Our ways can be preserved, honoured and still society can advance. You know that as well as I.“

„And where would we be, where would we fit in that new advanced world?“ ‘Ah, here we are.’ the real reason pokes its ugly head.

„We pull back. We let the young ones save it, make their own mistakes. You, your family will have its place in that new world. You have Draco to rise and carry the Malfoy name, Malfoy legacy.“

„And you, my friend?“

„I am tired, Lucius, tired of wars and plots, mind games and politics. I want to perish into nothingness.“

„Who would carry on your legacy? How the future would remember you?“

„Oh, I have quite a legacy, to be called ‘traitor’ by both the side of Light and the Dark is quite an achievement.“ He jokes and attempts to smile but he knows that all he managed is to curve his lips in a sour grimace „I betrayed both. I was not loyal to anyone but myself for so long that I forgot how important is to pick a side.“

„You are the most loyal person I know. You are loyal to those you love,“ he snorts, he is not capable of love, or hate, for that matter „don’t give me that! You were next to us when all others abandoned us!“

„You are family.“ At least this truth is simple, Lucius falls silent again, his pale face turns to the window. Silence stretches between them once again

„Is it bothering you?“ asks Lucius, voice barely above whisper

„What?“
„That I call you my friend? That I did not publicise your connection to my family name?“

„Lucius, how long, how well, do we know each other?“

„Too long, too well.“

„Then you answer me.“

„Quite right.“ Pale smile and at least a bit of light return to his friends face, silence once again stretches before Lucius speaks again „Do you think he will talk to me about it?“

„He might if you stop behaving like his wishes does not matter.“

„I won’t allow...“

„And how would you know that he would disgrace family name? You do not know what he wants. You assume the worse and fight blindly. He is your son, your only son, are you really ready to lose him?“

„Quite right.“ Lucius nods and stands up „Well, I’ll just call...“

„Lucius...not today.“ His friend just nods, knocks on the bathroom door and when she peeks out murmur 'Have a pleasant day.' and hobbles out. She disappears again, to gather her things most probably. He sighed.

He needs his solitude. He needs his mobility as well, especially in the moments like this, when he feels desperately angry and powerless. Wasn’t it enough that he had to suffer her company, her tantrums and mood-swings, she had no right to take it out on Malfoys! She had no right to create more drama. Merlin knows this family had enough of their own problems, especially Draco.

Wasn’t it enough that he had to go through all embarrassing moments with her as a witness. He couldn’t put his finger on what annoyed him more, he was finally ready to put the life behind and that he got saddled with 'miss prissy’ or that his body decided to seemingly 'embraced life’. Of course, with all the touching and skin and parading in those skin tight clothes, she didn’t help at all....or rather she helped but not in a way he appreciated. She was annoying, prissy, smug, know-it-all, a child with a major chip on her shoulder...but Merlin – he wasn’t blind or disjointed from the senses...now. Without his walls, if nothing, he was more attuned to every single stimulus he encounters. It was as if he spent last 17 years numb and now those years decided to elicit payback with interest.

She walks through the room and curls up on her sofa. He doesn't understand why Lucius insist on calling that sofa in the first place. It is an atrocious white piece with four huge fluffy pillows. Uncomfortable to sit on it, you could either lean your back and have your legs stick out or sit so you could place your feet on the ground and have good 5-10 cm of air before you could lean on. The only person who could find this thing fitting might be Hagrid. It was a wedding gift from some distant relative, and for years they joked that they have to find someone they don’t like and give it away.

'Well, it seems that Lucius did find someone he doesn't like to get rid of the atrocity.'

“That was rude to your hosts and uncalled for, Granger.” he chastised her

“How would you know if it was uncalled?” she replied tersely

“You have no right to meddle in their affairs.”
“It is stupid, he should find his balls and tell his parents that he loves the girl. We are in 21 century in Merlin’s name! Gods, arranged marriage!” she foams

“You miss ‘dirty mouth’ do not have to get married like that, so stay out of other people's affairs!” if he could get up he would strangle her, or shake her until that brain of hers starts working

Misty pops up and offers her a book. She takes a book and frowns, then lowers the book on the trunk she uses as a side table and starts pacing angrily, mumbling in her chin. She is irritating!

„Granger, sit down and be put.‘‘ He growls. She glares at him but sits down. 'Why is she angry, after what she did today...she has no right to be angry.' The book is obviously from Malfoy library or Misty wouldn’t deliver it, she should be grateful that they allowed her to use their books. „What. Is. The. Problem. Now?’’

„Look what that woman sent me to read!“ she hisses and reads the title „Young ladies guide to etiquette“ „And?“

„And? You ask 'and'!!!“ she’s acting like someone set her knickers on fire, brat „Who does she thinks she is? I know how to behave properly!“

„Do you?“ he is really mad now, she wasn’t satisfied with making a bad situation worse between Lucius and Draco, she is angry at Narcissa for wanting to help. He thinks that Narcissa is more than generous, given that book is part of her heirloom.

„I do, thank you very much.“ She’s insulted

„You do not exhibit that knowledge or is it neglected for the enjoyment of your surroundings?“ „I do not...how dare you?!“ „How... you little...“ „I what? You are self-centred, dour, unpleasant, ungrateful prat.“ „Be careful, Miss Granger, your etiquette starting to show off.“ He hisses. Now he has to struggle with his anger and his magic that tries to give in to his anger „Did you even read the book?“ „I just got it.“ She nearly yells now, throwing her hands around

„Before.‘‘ He speaks slowly „Did...you...read...the..book...before?“ „No, they don’t have it in Hogwarts library. And why would I? I know how to behave,...“ „So, ...you are familiar with each and every protocol of wizarding high society?“ „No,” she eyes the book if nothing Hermione never managed to resist a chance to learn something new “not like I’m going to need it.“ she replies with high pitched voice but eyes the book again, she’s wavering

„You will if you plan to attend to at least one Ministry event.“ „I don’t need Mrs Malfoy to teach me! I will tell her...“ „You will do no such thing. “ He starts to lose battle
„How can you be like that? How can you live with yourself? I’m busting myself to help you, to keep you alive."

„Yes...feel free to walk away.‘‘ all the bitterness and resentment he feels about that particular act of poured into that sentence, but she is in a world of her own and doesn’t hear

„How can you be mean to me but nice to that prat?! You are not my teacher anymore, you can’t tell me what to do. I will have a conversation with Mrs Malfoy...“

„No, you won’t! You’ve done quite a lot for one day!“

„Done what? If Draco can be a prat so can I.‘‘

„You are doing a stunning job at proving that.‘‘ He dampens and she glares

„He is just...“ she’s shivering holding her wand, not pointing at him but she is in a fighting stand

„THAT IS ENOUGH!!! “

She stops talking and just blinks at him, he can feel magic rippling through the air. Hades is screeching loudly. They really should place them in the other wing of the Manor, Malfoy’s are trying to tear it down anyway, if he flattens it he would do them the favour, not disservice.

The door open with a bang, Lucius, Potter and two Aurors barges into the room. She moved and now stands between him and the door. She is mad at him, and still positioned to fight and protect him. She is completely mental, he needs to get rid of her!
Tinkering ended up with me re-writing good 60% of the chapter, in the end, I hope you’ll like it :)

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„What is going on?“ Malfoy asks and her hand tightens around her wand, his voice sets her on edge
„Hermione, is everything ok?“ Harry sounds worried
„Yes.“ She squeezes through clench throat „You just scared me. Professor...I’m taking care of it.“

She doesn't know what to say. She provoked him, that was some strong magic. It must be nice to have that kind of power, but it is scary to feel it, especially if it's you who are its target.

„Severus?“ asks Malfoy

„It is fine Lucius.“ He replies

‘Gods, how he can sound so composed like nothing happened?’ she wonders silently

She lowers her wand and Harry’s shoulders slack. He turns to Aurors and whispers something to them. She clears her throat

„I am sorry, but professor needs his rest, I need to ask all of you to step out and let him rest. “ She uses the tone Matron often uses in hospital

Lucius glances over her to Snape and with sneer walks out. Harry waves her goodbye, mouths silent ‘Around six’ and disappears behind the door. Aurors are the last to exit, they have looks she doesn't like and her hand grips her wand once again. She can hear them murmur and recognises the words ’no hero’, ’Death Eater’ and ’sympathiser’, she is sure there are more insults but she didn’t manage to hear them. She nearly jumps at the sound of cold sarcastic drawl that rumbles behind her back

„Should Miss Granger inform her close and personal friends Harry Potter and Minister Kingsley of what you said Mr Riggs?“
She turns to find Snape with a familiar look on his face, one she saw too many times in the classroom, with one eyebrow raised and sneer. He is focused on the taller of two Aurors, blond one. Obviously, Snape heard him.

"What kind of hearing that man has?" she thinks with awe

Auror changes his posture, squaring his shoulders but looking insecure. He glances at her then Snape shakes his head and ushers his colleague out of the room. She finally relaxes, as much as it is possible, adrenalin still runs through her system. She glides her wand up her sleeve and turned to Snape, who now glares at her. She sighs

„Right, thank you.“ She nodded but he is silent so she continues „This was rather an eventful day so far. You should rest."

He glares at her for few long moments, then closes his eyes and takes a long breath, releasing it slowly. Meditation exercise for occlumency, she recognises it. She walks to the sofa and curls in one corner, setting the pillow more comfortably and wrapping the comforter around her. The room is not cold, but she needs to feel safe and cocooned like this give her sense of safety, she picked up that habit during her 'camping trip’ in the seventh year. She reaches for her book, but she read that book already and there is a new one, unread, unfamiliar. She is still angry at Mrs Malfoy, but...what if she can learn something. Reluctantly, she takes the new book and opens it. The book is old and she holds it carefully, she starts to read and soon she is completely consumed by it.

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Last moments of peace before the dunderheads start to plague his existence. He can already hear the commotion, reaching his office from the House common room. He still hates Welcoming Dinner, Parting Dinner or any other meal consumed in the Great Hall, but as a member of the staff, he is forced to eat there. In fact, since the last year, Albus insisted on it.

Loud banging forced him to raise his head from the last check of his syllabuses for this year. Minerva barges in, she never waits for his approval. They are...friends...of sorts, as much as it is possible for heads of two rivalling houses, which means that they have a non-aggressive banter with no low blows and no animosity, but they are both competitive. She looks flustered, that is not a good sign

„I need your help, Severus. “ Her voice is breathless and urgent „Albus and I have to receive first-years, but...Potter and the youngest Weasley male are missing. We can’t even determine if they boarded the train, Milly notified us that she did take them to the station."

Fear! The cold hand of fear grips his stomach. Of course, it is Potter and Weasley! He raises from his chair and nodded to Minerva

„I will look for them, and notify you when I find them."

„Thank you, Severus. “

Minerva looks relieved, she stretches her hand but pulls her back, not touching him. He is grateful. For years no one touched him without his explicit permission, Poppy is only one excluded from that rule. He goes in his quarters to grab a cloak. In all honesty, he has no idea where to look.

'Maybe Draco could tell him if he saw the two idiots on the train.’ He thinks 'Merlin! I hope that Lucius didn’t get any ideas. No, he isn’t stupid or rash."

Gathering his things he mulls in his head who could have something against Potter, beside him, the
list is long, too long. The air stops in his lungs and he forces himself to breathe. This summer many salon talks revolved around whispers of new uprise of the Dark Lord. Even if murmurs were unfounded he knew quite a few would jump to grab a slice of cake that was the downfall of Harry bloody Potter. The school owl swooped over his head, tossing a copy of Evening Prophet at his feet. He picks up the paper with the feeling of dread, justifiably so, front page blurs his sight with anger: FLYING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES.

With no need to look for Draco, he strides through the hallways and into the courtyard. The cold trickle of sweat crawls down his spine and his hands shake slightly. Fear turned to relief, relief to anger while he searches the school grounds. Whomping Willow is hurt, angry and damaged. He passes it carefully not to get too close to a damn tree, it is nasty even on its best days, murderous on his worst. One more of Albus’s brilliant ideas to preserve his precious Marauders. That blasted tree sent a good number of students to hospital wing or St. Mungo’s depending on the damage it inflicted on the careless schmucks.

Fear, once again, block his breath as he searches for bodies or clues to where those two idiots are. Tracks lead from the three and he spots drag marks. Finally, he spots them looking through the window into the Great Hall

‘Thank you, Merlin! They are alive and well.’ He thinks, but gratitude turns to old anger when he hears their conversation. Anger fueled with fear still rushing through his veins.

He opens his eyes, gulping air like he was drowning. Fear and anger, he can still feel them, plaguing his system. His hands shake, every muscle quiver from the strength of the feeling. He closes his eyes silently praying that she didn’t notice. Was he that scared at that time?

He longs for the sanctity of his walls, the piece of mind and numbness of the soul they provided. If he is alone he would scream, scream until he had no throat and no voice. Emotions, he is...unaccustomed...to have them. Fear and gutting pain, that was it, for decades. At least now he was feeling something familiar – fear. Fear that he won’t manage to bully her out of his vicinity long enough to stop the pain, once and for all. His muscles were still shivering like he is completely naked on the snow.

„Snape, what’s wrong? Are you alright?“ her quiet voice is worried. No, he can’t open his eyes now, she already knows too much.

Bed bends and shifts. She leans on him and her hands’ ghost over his, she clenched both of his hands in hers.

„Will you cease and desist with all that...touching and leaning and...“ he paused ’LIPS!!! What the fuck is she thinks she is doing?!?!‘

She didn’t move, her hands still clench his, he can feel her lips on his forehead. Then on a dip above the apex of his collarbone, his body went rigid on its own. She moved her lips to his forehead again. ’What is she trying to do?’

„Get off me Granger!“ he protests

„You don’t seem to have a fever, but you are shivering. I’ll put more blanket on you, it’s getting cold.“

She removed herself from him and he felt relief. What is her angle now? Fever? Who checks fever by touching lips to forehead and neck? The weight of another comforter fell over him.
„Here you go. Try to rest, if you need anything I’m reading that book Mrs Malfoy gave me. You were right, it’s interesting.“ She speaks lightly her voice is no more worried.

Maybe she decided to change her tactics to throw him off balance and off tracks? He peaks through slit eyes and eyelashes at her, she is lost in her reading. This must be some new trick of hers.

‘Blast you to pits of hell, Lucius.’ He growls in his head imagining the ways he’ll elicit his payback on Lucius. She must have gotten the idea from all his pestering and jabs. Was that man working against him or to help him? Maybe she had an idea to persuade him to change his mind utilising more...natural charms. The ones that were given to her by nature more than magic. If she thinks that she could seduce him into changing his mind, she has another thing coming.

‘Blast it! It is hot now. What is she trying to do? Cook him alive?’ he sighs, he knows much more pleasant ways to go. He eyes her warily again, but she pays no attention to him and he relaxes just a bit.

Later that afternoon she stood up, checked on him, thankfully without touching and walked to the door. He watched her with trepidation as she stood there, lost in thought with a deep frown on her face.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She approached the door, it was nearly six o’clock and Harry will be waiting for her. She will have to explain a lot today. But the door was cracked open and she could hear Harry talking to Draco

„If you knew, you shouldn’t tell her Potter.“

„I didn’t know it’s a truth, Malfoy, it was just a stupid gossip.“

„Yeah, trust you to muck up things for everyone“

„Look, I didn’t mean it. I didn’t even think that she would remember it...“

„Of course she would remember, it’s Granger you talk about!“

„If she knew she could make a problem for you, I’m sure she wouldn’t say anything. And you shouldn’t provoke her, you know.“

„What I know is that she did open her big mouth...“

„She has...issues...true, but Hermione isn’t bad, Malfoy.“

„Sure. Just keep your bloody friend’s nose out of other’s people business from now on, Potter.“

„Malfoy, if you just try to talk to her...“

„I may overlook some things for you, you did save my life, Potter, but I will not now or ever be even on remotely polite terms with Granger. Look, just keep her calm, sedate her with charm for all I care, I just don’t want to see Snape hurt because she can’t control herself.“ Growls Malfoy and steps are walking away.

She is stunned. ’How Harry can talk to Malfoy that way, he is the enemy, isn’t he?’
Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long break, return to my work from vacation greeted me with tons of work and shortening of the deadlines. I’ll do my best to post more often, every two to three days, but I can’t promise for sure until I dig myself up from this insane work tempo >.<. I hope that you will accept my apology in form of slightly longer chapter.

I give you a bit of Poppy’s POV in this chapter, and yes, I’m aware that it will be a bit confusing as it should be at this point.

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He is pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, the room is bathed in green light that reaches through the lake. The throbbing in his head is stronger by the minute, but anger keeps him pacing. This is worst than any other ordeal Albus put him through over the years.

It wasn’t enough that he had to conduct an inquiry in his house more than once. It wasn’t enough that he had to humiliate his students, their parents of whom many are...were his acquaintances, people he had to stay in contact and good relation. It wasn’t enough that he had to prevent disaster created by Potter, he is sure that Potter had something with that unfortunate fireworks before Christmas holidays. That his storage was plundered and he had to conduct yet another inquiry among his students, wish as he may pin this on them but Potter and Weasley were in the classroom during the theft.

For months he tried every approach he could think off to figure out who plundered his ingredients, and who brewed that blasted potion. For that, however, he turned to his NEWTS students, but until today they stayed lip-locked. However, someone did brew the Polyjuice Potion and somehow that know-it-all Gryffindor busy-body managed to turn herself into a cat... a CAT ...no less! It took him weeks to brew the antidote. And he got himself scolded from Poppy for laughing his ass off when he saw her. A fitting punishment, indeed, he hopes she learned her lesson.

The only good thing that happened this year was that excuse of a Dueling club, but it was poor satisfaction. Fine, he knows why he can’t get the DADA post, but he wonders if Albus really wants to teach those kids anything? First Quirrell, now Lockhart! Ever since Potter showed up the quality and capability of professors to transfer knowledge on the subject declined dwindled to nothing. The
boy is bound to be hunted and attacked either by former Death Eaters or Dark Lord himself, shouldn’t he get a quality education? But now, the old man went a step too far! Old fart! He will reconsider!

„Well, I might reconsider as well!“ he growls at his reflection in the window and recommence pacing

If Dumbledore puts health and lives of students in the hands of that...imbecile...cretin...good-for-nothing self-in loved-buffoon...he quits. They can ship him to Azkaban, for all he cares they can portkey him directly to the Dementors arms.

He jumps when he hears scratching...he opens the door and grey cat slips in.

„Minerva now is not the time to be playful."

„I am not playful, Severus, I am out of my mind from worry...“ she is in human form again, and her face is stern and worried

„What did Potter do now?“

„How do you know it is Potter?“ he has an edge in her voice

„You have 'the Potter' face, I've seen it enough times to know. Apart from that, it is always Potter if you turn to me."

„Harry and Ron went with Lockhart, they found the entrance to Chamber of Secrets and went there...and that poor Weasley girl...can you talk to Albus? Maybe he will listen to you."

He smirks, either Minerva has a twisted sense of humour or too much faith in his ability to influence the old manipulator. Albus knows how incapable Lockhart is.

„Minerva, I’d love to help you, but I have my doubts that Albus is not quite rational when Lockhart is a concern. I can’t even persuade him to let me brew the antidote for Petrified students! He seriously considering letting Lockhart dealing with that!"

„You can’t be serious!“

„Oh, I am. I went told him today that Mandrake is ripe and ready to be used, he told me that he will notify me if he needs my services. I very much doubt he would listen to me."

„But the boys...“

„They are lost without the girl, I know. We can only hope that they will have more luck than they have brains.“ He sounds bitter

„Severus, must you?“

„What? Must I what, Minerva? Be realistic? I know you love your students, but surely even you know that pair of them are not the sharpest of the bunch."

She sighs and gives one of her sharp looks, but does not press the matter anymore.

„Can you at least brew the potion? Regardless of what he says?“

„And what do you think I’m doing now?“ he sneered at Minerva, she may be the last person who deserves that but she is also the only one nearby „I will use his ‘absence’ if I must, but I won’t allow
for students to be poisoned on top of being Petrified."

"Thank you, Severus. I know that there are no students from your house..."

"We have half-bloods Minerva, more than any other house in the school." He snaps "Students from my house are just obedient enough not to break the rules." He knows that is an obvious lie, they are mischievous as the rest of them, they just happen to be more cunning and they know how to avoid detection.

"As far as I remember, Mr Malfoy was in detention last year..."

"Yes, and I can guarantee you, Mr Malfoy won't make that mistake again" another lie, the boy is bordering on reckless and he will have to teach him this summer, teach him how to be stealth.

"I do not know why are you so loyal to Albus," she is switching the topic again "but I am grateful that we have you in our school. I'll keep you informed, look for my owl or Filch's cat."

She shifts back to her animal form and he lets her out.

Hell of a parting gift, his angry thoughts are sidetracked to more painful ones. Why is he loyal to Albus, indeed? He is not. The old man is someone who he can’t stand, he is trapped, he cannot leave him, chained by the court’s rule, by his own promise, by the constant reminder of his guilt and his crime. Every day, spent in this school is a torture, every moment spent in Old man’s company is a reminder of his wrong decisions, but more so...why did he made them in the first place. This school is his personal hell, and Albus is keen on keeping his memory of Lily alive. Pain constrict his chest. He is frozen, frozen in time.

He blinks steadying his erratic breathing. They marvelled his ability not to break under pressure, what a sham, they don’t know, you cannot break what is already broken, broken beyond repair. That pain, the same pain he felt for years, every time he saw Albus, every time he walked the halls with a ghost of her memory following him every step of the way.

The girl is awake, he can hear her breathing and the crackling of the couch. He closes his eyes and steadies his breathing, pretending to be asleep. Bed bends, she is next to him, her voice is a quiet whisper.

"I am so sorry, for what I’ve done. I didn’t know you made a healing potion for me. I should have but I didn’t, I was just hoping that Poppy made it. But, I guess you made every potion we ever received in the hospital..." she trails off

'Damn straight I did.'

'I have a confession to make, and I hope that one day I’ll be able to tell you this properly...""

'What now?' he would roll his eyes but he resists, movement of the eyelids may betray him

"...,you see, I made the potion. I put up Ron and Harry to cause the havoc in potions class so I could steal the ingredients. I made it in the Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. And I took the wrong hair from Pansy’s robes. But, you see, we had to find out...to gain access to Slytherin and see who is the heir of Salazar Slytherin.”

‘Yes, because he had to be from my house.’ he thinks bitterly

“We were sure, you may laugh at me, if you do laugh at all that is..., but we were sure that Draco Malfoy is the heir...” she chuckles quietly “silly of up, I know.”
‘You have no idea how much. Draco was scared shitless that entire year. Not that you could know that with all his bravado.’

“I am truly sorry about that potion thing.” Her voice fades again

He is fuming, he could address the issue now, scold her for what she’s done. That is a NEWTS level potion, she could have poisoned them all! But if he reacts now he will betray that he is awake. He knows that this admission is good for the girl, it puts the burden off her chest...but, she stole from him and brewed dangerous monitored potion, illegally. He is also impressed. The level of skill she had in her second year was even beyond what he saw in her as a potential.

‘Don’t be an idiot, skilled or not, she broke the rules.’

She did break the rules, she stole and she made the potion, but the way she’s done it impresses him. He would expect plan elaborate like that from his Slytherins but not from bushy-haired little prude like she was then. ‘Well done, Granger.’ He congratulates her silently, and that is the only admiration for her skills she would get from him. Still, the matter remains, he cannot press her about what he heard, so he will have to trick her into a confession when he is ‘awake’ and then level her with the ground for what she’s done.

She leans over him and brushes the hair from his face. ’Again with the touching!’ the anger rises again ’Oh no, Granger, your little tricks won't work on me.’ He growls in his head and pretends to stir in his sleep. She backs away from him and the bed. He can breath easier now. He hates her, hates himself as well, hates that persistent, never-ending pain in his chest, hates the tingling of his skin on the face.

‘You have to hold on, endure just a little bit longer, it will be all over soon.’

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„Did I or did I not told both of you that Severus needs to rest?“ Poppy is angry

„You did Matron, I am so sorry,“ Hermione whispers, her eyes are locked on the floor. Severus is stubbornly silent and looking through the window.

Snow finally came last night, covering the ground and chilling the air. She knows that both of them going to miss this year's Yule Ball, New Year and every other holiday. She narrows her eyes and looks one that the other. Tension between them is palatable, so thick you can cut it with the knife

„Severus, are you giving a hard time to Miss Granger?“

„No more than you’d expect.“ He mumbles still gazing out the window

„And why is that?“

„You bloody well know why and stop pestering me, woman.“ He snaps

„Don’t you raise your voice at me, young man! I am not one of your students and you can’t intimidate me.“

He turns to look at her and her heart sinks, his eyes are full of pain. Miss Granger’s eyes are also full of pain. It is not the pain she can heal, even if she wants she doesn't know how.

Door open and Lucius steps in the room. Severus relaxes, Miss Granger tenses up. But the tension reaches new levels. Lucius looks relaxed, almost too relaxed. She sighs
„Severus, I am expecting from you to allow Miss Granger to do her work, she is here on my insistence to take care of you."

„You had no right to inflict her on me.“ He growls at her „It invade...“

„She is as any other nurse would be."

„She is a pest, not to mention my student : “

„She is not your student.“ She is stern, she has to be. Miss Granger is standing quietly next to her, her eyes still locked on the floor, crimson in the face. Lucius has a little smile at the corner of his lips. She did expect a bit of animosity between Severus and the girl, but this went beyond what she expected. Neither of them was that unreasonable, no matter how uncomfortable situation might be. She glares at Lucius.

„Well, is if that is all...“

„Ummm....“

„Yes, Miss Granger?“

„Sna...ummm...Professor had an outburst of uncontrolled magic the other day and...well...it seems that his memories are connected to his emotional state.“ the girl glances at Severus and he scoffs at her in attempt of silent intimidation, her face tightens but stubborn almost angry look breaks through and she continues more firmly „There were almost no dreams at one point, but now they appear whenever he fells asleep. Also, I am not affected by them like before....ummm...if he is asleep and I’m awake I don’t feel compelled to sleep as well.“

„And how do you feel if he sleeps and dreams and you do not?“

„Ummm, well those are not dreams, Matron. Dreamless Sleep doesn’t work on them, those are memories... As for your question, I feel just the same, maybe a slight discomfort if he is too much upset about something.”

Lucius chuckles quietly, Hermione appears as she didn’t hear but Severus glares at him with an angry dark gaze.

„That is to be expected, Miss Granger. If there is nothing else...Lucius, come, let me look at you while I’m here.“

„Poppy, I have my healer, but if you could provide me...“

„Lucius! Out of my patient's room. You are going to be checked out, no complaining. “

She notices that Severus sent one sneer with the gleam in his eyes to Lucius, she resists shaking her head... Those two, they still act like little boys. They cross the hallway and she observes Lucius’s limp, it is more pronounced now that weather is cold. They enter his study room and she snaps at him

„Lucius Malfoy, what did you do?“

„Me Poppy? Nothing.“ He looks at her half insulted half innocent and she frowns

„Don’t you give me that, I know you.“
„Honestly, I didn’t do a thing, it is all of their makings...“

„You just used the opportunity for your own amusement!“

„Well, it might give the push in the right direction...“

„It did give the push...in the opposite direction. The girl is unbalanced and Severus is still suicidal.“

„He can’t do a thing with little miss prissy at his tail.“

„He can still do plenty. I patched up that boy more times from what he inflicted on himself than anything else. And your attitude does not help!“

„He is free Poppy, finally free, he’ll come around.“

„He is damaged beyond mine or yours ability to repair him.“

„But that impertinent child might?“ he is angry, insulted and she can understand that, but he has to stop amusing himself and start working with her

„You know the answer to that as well as I do.“ She scolds him „Now, why the girl doesn't have permission to walk around the house?“

„Because I don’t want her roaming through my home.“ He sneers

„You know she has to! So, you give her the permission, find the way to make it happen, or...I’ll see to it that you personally give her the grand tour before you tear down half of your home.“

„Do not threaten me, Poppy.“

„I am warning you, Lucius, we had a deal, now...you either work with me or I’ll pull both of them out of here.“ She is unfazed by his threats and angry at him, she should have known, that boy is a too much of a opportunistic prankster to be well behaved in this situation „Miss Granger’s methods are good for him, he recuperates better and faster than I predicted, and it is all thanks to Miss Granger’s methods.“

„Does he now, all I see that he is miserable.“

„He is miserable because he is finally facing his pain. And if you want to see him live through it...you will work with me.“

„I want her out of my home, Poppy. Out of his vicinity...“ he growls „She did unforgivable, she invaded his privacy in a way that is criminal. Every man has a right to his own secrets!“ he snaps and words, bitter and angry pour out off him

„Be that as it may, you know why and what has to be done. Your own personal feelings have no place in the matter.“

His shoulders slack, she knows he will do as he supposed to do, after all, he does care for Severus. She also knows him better than he thinks. This is just jealousy talking, the feeling of being robbed of the closeness he shared with Severus. No, Lucius certainly does not like feeling being replaced.

„Now, let me see it...“ she changes the subject, and turns to examine his injuries.
He was gazing through the window, a pale patch of winter sky looked depressing, but he didn’t mind it, in a way it reflected how he felt...never-ending and bland, but instead of pale grey nothingness he was a white searing pain. Oh, no! It wasn’t physical pain, physically he never felt better, if he exempts the muscle atrophy, but even that was advancing nicely.

No! The hell he was in, surpassed even what he could devise in his most vile of moods. Surviving the war was never in his plans and he acted accordingly, setting his affairs in order, giving away all his possessions...and yet he was alive now. He nearly sneered at the thought, he could end this years ago if he only approached the matter from the right angle, if he didn’t allow Albus to manipulate him so...and the worst of it all, he allowed it. He saw through Old Man’s quips and nips on his soul, he willingly allowed to be constantly reminded, tortured by the never-ending well in the form of Albus, refreshing his memories. If he made a poison, like so many others he made in his life, no one could save him. But, he didn’t. He refused to be cursed with another successful murder, even if the victim would be himself. So he tried in many different ways, and always woke up.

'Maybe that is my true punishment? Life, or rather no escape from life.' That would be too cruel of a punishment, even for a monster like he was.

His recuperation was another form of punishment. His broken mind and weak body robbed him of his magic. Oh, it was still there, just unusable, taunting him, mocking him. Will he ever manage to regain his control of it?

'To what end?' he wonders idly, surely, where he plans to go, he won’t need his magic. The flow of memories will stop. His mind was a bottomless pit of pain. Hidden, sometimes even forgotten, snippets of his life haunted him now, oozing out of every corner of his mind. He hoped that he will end his existence before he has to face them once more. And now he had to control his mind, subdue it into not thinking when Lucius was around. Lucius wasn't that skilled but he didn't want to take any chances. And Granger, she had full access to his most secret memories, lucky for him, she was unskilled and didn’t know how to use the advantage she gained.

Granger was biggest of his trials, a Sphinx positioned between him and what he desired the most,
only he couldn’t get past her. He was usually highly adept at solving puzzles but this one was particularly tricky. He didn’t count on being blocked by so many obstacles. If she just didn’t have to play a bloody hero, he would found the way to crawl out of her clutches and conjure his magic...it wouldn’t be painless but it was a means to the end. Now, however, he was stuck. No matter that she was one entangled in his mind, he was stuck, forced once more to put himself behind for the sake of others.

He will have to find the way and separate himself from her, from Malfoy's, from Poppy, just for a little while, it would be enough. Before that, he has to force Lucius to see the reason and let Draco breathe. The boy was smart and resourceful, stubborn at the times, but he reminded him of his mother more and more with each passing day.

'What am I going to do with Granger?' the thought injected itself rather suddenly. But that was the question. She was a nuisance on more than one front. She refused to have her own quarters, she politely rejected Lucius’s offer to use the entire Manor, she even refused to step out into the hallway more than once a day to talk with Potter. If she took a chain and chained herself to his wrist, it would have been less blatant. It was clear as a sunny day... she refused to move away from him even for a little bit. With his strength, her paranoia grew. Now she was placing monitoring charm on him every night with heightened sensitivity. Every time he would move her eyes were on him.

He could not get rid of her, much to his dismay. She invaded his space rather thoroughly, even in the ways she wasn’t aware of. She was in his head quite literally and figuratively. His awaken senses detected her in a way they should not. Certainly, her entire demeanour helped in that tremendously and thwarted his plans. He had to battle her intentions and surprisingly himself. Rarely in his life, things caught him by surprise like this.

The surprises lined themselves one after another after that horrid moment in the Shack. Him being alive. Him being proclaimed as a bloody hero. His body reacting! Now, that was something he could not foresee. After her death, he died too. For years he was a shell, just a step above Inferi, but at this point his body decided to rebel, showing him that he is not as dead as he thought himself to be. Her flicking that blasted spell at him was now regular morning occurrence. As of lately, even sometimes during the day she had to use it. And if all of it wasn’t humiliating enough, the unlucky occurrence would happen when he awakes from his rest. His memories, should he be happy that at least during the day she wasn’t present to witness them? But, it was even worse, not all...

The sharp sound of knocking rasped through the room snapping him out of his revery and suspending a soft scratching of the quill against the parchment. Her head jolted up. The door open and elegant form of Narcissa slipped into the room. She looked tired but gave him one warm smile.

"Can I have a moment of your time Severus?"

"Of course." He replied and Granger jumped to her feet

"Good day, Mrs Malfoy. I’ll be out of the room in a second..."

"There is no need for that." Replied Narcissa, her tone of voice even "I have nothing to discuss with Severus that cannot be heard."

Granger girl frowned but nodded, he nearly snickered. Narcissa either missed the point or didn’t care about girl’s opinion of her. Granger returned to her corner and barricaded herself with the only defence she could think of, the book. Narcissa glided to the bed and lowered herself on the edge of the bed.

"You look better." She stated simply, voice still even with underline of tenderness
"As oppose to what?" he asked gruffly and Narcissa smiled, this was their private joke

"Shhhh, not in public." She replied with a mocking tone

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Her ears strained, try as she may, but she could not concentrate on the reading, she was listening to the conversation. It was surprisingly mundane, ranging from household management to weather. It appeared that Narcissa was just bored and sought a conversation company.

She turned the page and paper rustled loudly. They didn’t pay attention to her. The conversation was stirred to Draco, by Snape no less, which surprised her given that she was in the room.

"Did you talked to him?" he asked

"I did. But I will tell you the same thing I told him – I won’t talk to Lucius about it." Narcissa sounded a bit defensive

"Nor you should. I was thinking that he needs support, not a messenger."

"Even if he does, he won’t find one in me." Narcissa’s voice was harsh now, "Lucius isn’t unreasonable, they should learn how to communicate. More than that, Draco has to learn to stand on his own."

"I support your attitude, Cissa, but don’t forget..."

"You think I can? That I would ever be able to forget, Severus?"

"No, of course not."

"It was a nightmare with no escape, and though I did what I could to protect him, protect all of us...there was no escape. And because of that, he needs to learn or it will bring him to his knees. He is not just Malfoy, he is Black as well."

"Is he the next in the inheritance line?"

"Yes, along with Potter and Lupin." Replied Narcissa, to her the woman didn’t sound bitter or hateful when mentioning the names, not like her husband, softer than her son.

"Goblins will have a fun time dealing with that bunch." Chuckled Snape and she nearly raised her head.

The jolt of jealousy travelled through her. He was so relaxed, so affectionate with Narcissa, not to mention polite. He was always so cross when he talked to her, so callous. It hurt. Now, more so than before while she was his student, now when she knew what she suspected before, that he, in fact, can be affirmative, caring and gentle to some.

Narcissa laughed quietly, "Luckily, not one of us will be there to see that."

"Oh, I’d love to see that, even as a ghost."

"You are incorrigible, Severus." Narcissa laughed, "But, let's get to the matters in more foreseeable future."

"And that would be."
„Annual event at Malfoy Manor.“ She replied smoothly and Hermione focused her attention on the conversation even more than before.

„Ah.“ Snape didn’t sound surprised or thrillers for that matter „I am afraid, this year I will be indisposed.“ He drawled.

„That minor detail didn’t escape me...“ Narcissa’s smooth tones had a tingle in them that set her on alert, the woman had a plan, one that Snape won’t like it.

„I don’t want them parading in and out the room, Cissa. Don’t force me to...“

„To what?“ Even if she didn’t see, she could easily imagine Narcissa’s brow travelling up only based on the tone of her voice „Miss Granger.“ She jumped, this was unexpected, and peeked over the edge of the book „This concerns you as well, so you may stop pretending to read and join the conversation.“

„Mrs Malfoy, I am here strictly as professor’s nurse...“

„Come now, Miss Granger, if you can call him Snape in the face, you certainly can in front of me.“ Woman’s voice was amused but cold, she gaped „Miss Granger, do not assume, ever, that I am not informed what is going on in my own home. If...we put that aside...I see that you made the good use of the book I sent you...yet...did not adopt what you read.“

„Mrs Malfoy...“ she started but Snape cut her off

„Granger!“ his tone almost as dark as his eyes, Narcissa raised one hand in the air to stop him, not moving eyes from her.

„...I am grateful for the book, it is, indeed, interesting read, especially for someone in my position. But the simple fact is, I need to be easily mobile to assist pro...ummm...Snape. This Muggle attire, however inappropriate is highly functional to that end.“

„I see, well, can I inquire if you plan to be in that...attire...even during Malfoy Annual Yule Ball?“

„As I told you, I have no plans of leaving Snape’s side.“

„Wish as he may, some guests will come to greet him.“

„In that case, I will dress accordingly.“ She replied, not less insulted but at least not inraged like she was before

„Thank you, Miss Granger.“ Narcissa tilted her head slightly „May I ask how did you like the book?“

„Oh, I loved it!“ she slipped in the pattern she always had when discussing the book or any bit of knowledge „It explains so many things! They should hold curses in Hogwarts for Muggle-borns.“

„I’m glad you agree, Miss Granger.“ Smiled Narcissa pleasantly, her face brightened making her beautiful and vibrant „If you have any questions, I will be more than happy to answer them.“

„As a matter of fact, I have. Several.“ She took a stack of parchments and Snape groaned

„Severus!“ dragged Narcissa with amusement „Miss Granger, would you like to join me for a cup of tea in my salon while I answer at least some of your questions.“

She was torn, this was her chance to ask for additional, referenced books, but she doesn't want to
leave Snape alone. She glanced at him, fidgeting on her spot and Narcissa sighed

„In the name of Merlin, Miss Granger, he won’t run away. He would if he can but..“ she pointed her hand at glaring Snape „Very well. Misty!“ called and the elf popped up „Bring Draco, now.“

Moments later, Misty re-appeared with baffled Draco next to her

„Mother, is everything alright?“ he asked, she was confused again, Draco sounded worried and affectionate, he approached his mother in haste

„I am fine, Draco. Miss Granger agreed to keep me company for a cup of tea, would you be a dear and keep Severus a company, if he needs anything Misty will take care of it.“

„Certainly mother.“

„Thank you, Draco. Come, Miss Granger, if you would follow me...“

She nodded to the Snape and Draco, clutching her parchments, and followed Narcissa. Her emotions in disarray, the state of high paranoia being the dominant one. 'What are they planning now?'
My tinkering turned out to be problematic at best, every time I “fix” the chapter I add more words, I do hope that you are not bothered with increased length of chapters :)

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

Warning: Angst..I feel compelled to WARN you all. I know many of you like Hermione starting to fight back, but she is not yet balanced, and I guess that many of you won’t like her this way. So, I’ll leave this warning until she is ‘out of the woods’ so you may skip these chapters if it’s not your cup of tea.

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The door closed behind two women leaving him and Draco utterly confused. ’What just happened? What is she planning now?’ He looked at Draco, what he felt was clearly written on the boy’s face.

„Close your mouth, Draco, it is unbecoming of you.“ He drawled, Draco turned to gaze at him, still baffled

„Did mother just said she is going to drink tea with Bucktooth?“

„Please Draco, Miss Granger or Granger. Do try not to behave like you had no upbringing whatsoever.“ He corrects the boy automatically, the years of being professor enabling him to do so even if his mind still swirls with questions ’What is she planning?’

„That is not fair!“ whines Draco „She calls me Ferret-face."

„Do you feel compelled to stoop to that level?“ he mocked ’What is she going to tell her?’ his mind, however, slipping slowly but persistently to panic ’She knows so much about me, more than I am willing to be shared.’

„No, you are correct, I apologize.” Whispers Draco, lowering his head

„Did you talk to your father?“

„No, not yet. I did talk to her, she floo-called me this morning.“ Smiles Draco, fondness sipping into his voice, and dives into a detail transcription of their conversation, but he listens with only quarter of attention.

His thoughts are with two females that left the room. Another unsettling thought injected itself ’Narcissa is not the only one who can reveal privileged data.’
In a way he is glad that Narissa decided to take the girl under her wing, Grange’s lack of proper behaviour is tiring and annoying. One would think that the person who reads that much would at least try to educate itself. But, the rub is, she couldn’t know, no one ever tried to properly integrate Muggle-borns to wizarding society...they would just shove them in and let them swim or sink. This smug, uncaring attitude is a part of why purebloods have negative feelings towards Muggle-borns. Muggle-borns and half-bloods raised in strictly Muggle world are not prepared to face the wizarding world properly, and it is not their fault that no one tried to teach them. Sure he is aware that wizarding world is almost as good as frozen in times, they didn’t even pick the good era to be stuck in...but, outsiders, Muggle-borns more so than half-bloods, coming from more technologically advanced and interpersonal relations relaxed society just couldn’t fit right in. From the purely wizarding point of view, their behaviour equalled like one would enter the poshest restaurant he can find and start eating soup with a fork.

“Are you listening to me?” snapped Draco

“To my misfortune I do, what I do not hear is you finding the solution.” He scolds Draco in hope to jolt him into action „You are misleading that poor girl.“

„I do not! I never hid anything from her. She knows I love her, she is also aware of my situation.” Pouts Draco and once again starts the story about the girl, he returned to his thoughts.

The girl needed someone. Normally, the mother-in-law to be would school the girl, or father-in-law if the situation is reversed. He took care and implemented obligatory weekly gatherings in Slytherin common room to teach the half-bloods to a wizarding ways. He was sure that Molly would teach the girl once she gets to the right age, but Weasley’s were nothing if not odd and unconventional. Even the Lovegood girl had proper if absurdly crazy, upbringing. The decision to follow the rules was individual, but lack of knowledge was problematic, it created a deep chasm of misunderstanding.

He sighs, how many times he argued with Albus to implement a course for Muggle-borns and half-bloods, with no result. Yes, Cissa would definitely be useful for the girl, if they do not kill each other, that is.

„Severus, you are not listening to me...“

„I apologize Draco.“ He breathed out „Your mother just jogged my memory about something.“

„And what would that be?“

„Oh, just the topic I often argued about with Dumbledore. To no result, I might add.“

The door flung open and they stopped talking, Granger girl burst in, red in the face, with a deep frown. She didn’t pay attention to them, but approached her trunk and dug through it taking three bundles before warding her trunk again and rushing out of the room. Draco looked at him

„What do you think this was all about?“

„Do I look like I am with them?“

„No, but...you share the room with her...what she could take from there?“

„Any number of things.“

„I don’t like this.“ Draco shoved his hands in the pockets and balled them into fists, he looks nervous

„What are you afraid off Draco?“
„That they talk about me.“ His voice quivered slightly

„Not to burst your bubble, but...“ he coughs a laugh "...Granger followed your mother armed with parchment, which would inform any careful observer that she has questions.“

„Questions about what?“

„Your mother sent a book to Granger few days before, a book about etiquette.“

Draco’s eyes grew wide and scared, glancing around like the boy is looking for the means to escape, he had to laugh.

„Relax Draco, I believe that Narcissa just got tired from the lack of proper behaviour Miss Granger exhibits. It means nothing.“

„Can you be sure of it?“

„I can. Your mother maybe does not desire to be an intermediary between you and your father, but I am certain that she does not want to cause Lucius having a heart attack.“

„Yes, she handed that duty to me.“ Mumbled Draco

„You are exaggerating. Your father will accept you desire and get you out of your obligation once you tell him, it is not like the girl is not from the family he wouldn’t approve off.“

„I don’t know...“

„And you won’t until you try. You have two options here, either to keep your mouth shut and go with your father’s original plan...or...to confront your father and tell him bout Greengrass girl. It is entirely up to you which path you will choose.“

„Yes...“ Draco trailed off, he gave him space, finally, after several minutes of silence Draco lifted eyes to meet his „I would appreciate if you have any advice...“

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Hermione returned to the room an hour later. She was carrying her parchments, three bundled up dressing robes Harry packed in her trunk, the only dressing robes she had for formal occasions and Mrs Malfoy’s promise that she will send Misty with books for further reading.

It felt nice to learn again. Even if she was nervous about the tea, and even if Ms Malfoy was far from pleasant, she finally understood – the woman was just like that. Narcissa Malfoy was straightforward in the way she expressed her thoughts, economical. She understood one more thing, the woman detested proper form of addressing but she employed it anyway, when necessary. After a polite but bitter argument, they decided which of her three robes she will wear during the event. Mrs Malfoy also insisted that she learns proper addressing and memorise the two tomes with titles and social standing of every member of wizarding society, and to combine the two when someone enters a room to greet Snape.

The fact that she had to argue against dragging the tailored form Triffitt and Tatting to make her better fitting robes was irritating. She did not appreciate the critique of her choices of the model and line of robes, but she also couldn’t deny that the woman was always dressed to the perfection.

Snape was quiet and distant, so she reminds him that he should rest and resume her reading with renewed zeal. Soon as his breathing stilled to even soft puffs she lowered her book and gaze through
the window. In general, Narissa was lip-locked to any questions concerning Snape... the only thing that she revealed was connected to her medical treatment of the professor, revealing that he was practising some sort of Muggle fighting sport. That was not much to go on, there were many fighting sports she heard off, probably much more she never heard off, and he could practice any of them.

What struck her as odd, was how Muggle that was. He carried himself and acted like he was pureblood, until the sixth year they didn’t even know that he is half-blood, so why Muggle fighting sport. It is not like all of Death Eaters did it, if Malfoy was into something like that surely his wife would know more. No, that must have been pure Snape. It made her wonder what else was just his?

Narcissa did reveal one more thing, but that certainly must have been slip of a tongue, and she congratulated herself on the way she managed to get even those tidbits of information form woman. Her mind drifted to that part of the conversation...

... "Miss Granger, for every woman, it is important to know how to behave properly. It isn’t even simply a matter of finding a correct suitor, or husband for that matter. Let’s be honest, you do not have to marry ever in life... but... the life if awfully lonely if you do not have at least an occasional lover."

„And why would I need to seek a lover among males...“

„Do you honestly believe that women are less judgemental?“ Narcissa raised an eyebrow

„No, of course not.“ She stuttered „But...no, that is not what I wanted to say!“

„So, you are not interested in women? You know, the wizarding world is not prejudicial of same-gender love as Muggle world is."

„I know, and no, I’m not. What I wanted to say...why would I look at men who put emphasis on women’s behaviour?"

„In a wizarding world, that pool is rather small, and not pleasant so socialize yourself with. Well, not if you want to succeed."

„I...“

„Miss Granger, even half-bloods are educated in that direction, take Severus for example,“ said Narissa softly and her heart drummed a bit faster, but she is quiet „he is all about proper behaviour and etiquette, and yet he finds pureblood women boring."

„He is in love with Harry’s mum."

„Is he? Interesting. True, he does have a soft spot for Muggle-borns. But that is just an example."

...Narcissa kept on and on about the importance of proper etiquette. She rolled her stiff neck. The back is killing her from the arrow straight position Narcissa forced her in while sitting. She could use a hot bath. Placing a monitoring spell on Snape she ventures to the bathroom and fills the tub. Groaning when hot water caresses her sore muscles. She usually opts for a quick shower, the bathtub is reserved for him, and that is odd though. She feels like she is invading his private space. But hot water is shooting and lulls her into doziness.

The sharp sound of alarm springs he out of her pleasant stupor, glancing at the second part of monitoring charm she breathes little easier. Steps out of the water with the pang of regret and nuisance, does he had to the that now? she das such nice rest. Wrapping a towel around her body she grabs the want and opens the door, flicking the wand in his direction with the muttered spell.
„Granger!“ he yells, his voice surprised and angry „Are you have a habit snapping spells at people randomly?“

„No.“

„Odd, I am certain that you just stepped from the bathroom and flicked the spell on me, blindly I might add.“

„It wasn’t blind,“ she sigh „I modified the charm, I saw what is wrong and what spell I need to use.“

„It is...reassuring to know...even if you messed with magic once more, unauthorised. For further references...I am quite capable of...solving that problem...on my own.“

„Not while I’m in the room!“ she cries in alert

„Ah, but you were not in the room.“ His snide remark is hurtful but that does not make it less true, she was not in the room

„Right. I’ll remember that.“ She huffed and turned to get back to the bathroom and hot water

„Granger...“

„What now?!“

„Everything Narissa tried to teach you still didn’t sink in, I presume.“ His voice is flat but cutting

„As a matter of fact, it did. Why would you even...“

„The towel...“ he remarks dryly.

With mortified squealed she run into the bathroom, wishing to smash huge mirror above the sink, it told all too well how she presented herself in front of him. The bloody towel slipped, revealing the tips of her breasts and a small portion of the dark areolas.
He paces restlessly back and forth, aware that his words do not have an impact on the Old man, but still, he must try to reason with him. He is angry, hurt but most of all scared, terrified even.

„You are placing not just Potter or the staff but the students of this school in grave danger Albus.„

„Nonsense Severus, Remus Lupin is not a danger to anyone.„

„I beg to differ, or did you forget... but if we disregard the most obvious threat he presents, are you willing to place in the school the only person who would be willing to let Black in?“

„He won’t try to let him in the school if nothing the biggest threat to Black is Remus Lupin, they were his friends after all.“

„Lupin is spineless, a weak fool was and is. Black will convince him and then what will happen? Are you so desperate to endanger the boy’s life?“

„Remus will protect Potter, I assure you.„

„Unless Potter decides to actively seek Lupin during a full moon, and the boy is not above doing so, moreover he is most likely to do it. Who will protect the boy then?“

„You will!“ Albus is calm, voice almost disinterested, the anger and fear boil in his gut

„Ah, no! I am not approaching that beast, not even for Potter! Never again.„

„Severus...“

„You can’t Impiro me into obedience this time Albus.“ He growls „I won’t participate...“

„You are not doing that for me Severus never did, but you will...for her.“

„Not. Even. For. Her.“ He hisses, but the searing dagger twists painfully in his chest, and he knows
he is losing the battle, hating himself almost as much as Albus, or Dark Lord or Black and Potter.

„I am not asking you to follow Potter or Remus, just to brew...“

„Ah. And if I refuse?“

„Then the danger will be real, and entirely your fault...“ Albus replied sharply

He ground his molars until his jaw started to hurt, feeling as if he is trapped with no escape engulfs him. He can refuse, but what good that will bring? And Albus is perfectly capable to put all the blame not on the Werewolf but on him. His throat is almost painfully clenched but he manages to reply just the same

„Fine. But do not tell me that I was right when things happen the way I predicted.“ He swirls on the heel and walks toward the door, Albus calls after him

„Thank you, Severus. “

„You don’t twist man’s arm just so you could thank him, Albus.“ His voice is cold, he doesn’t turn to see the man just walks out.

Darkness. What is going on? Is he in a coma again? He can’t wake up! Panic grabs him when silver of memory penetrates the darkness...’ No, please, Merlin, not that... ’

He does not drink, no more than glass or two of wine, not since that night, a shudder running down his spine at the memory. He usually does not touch the hard liquor, but now... an almost empty bottle of Ogden’s is in front of him. He gazes at the dying fire numbly. What is the point of his existence? Why he has to live through the dull days, month after month, year after year? Haunted by nightmares, plagued with guilt, reminded of his loss, his guilt constantly. To do the bidding of the Old man who is more than willing to disregard safety so blatantly. If Albus is willing to cast away the boy’s life...he does not have to suffer anymore...

Like in a dream, calm for the first time in who knows how many times, he stands up and walks to the bathroom. He fills the tub with water. Return to the room, stepping on the way next to his private Potions cabinet and taking a small vial. He pours the content of the vial in glass and adds Ogden’s over it. He downs the content of the glass and returns to the bathroom, disrobing. He folds his attire neatly, avoiding to glance at the mirror, refusing to see his reflection. Feeling slightly dizzy he submerges himself in a water and sighs when velvety warmth engulfs him. With another sigh, he leans his head on the edge of a tub, closes his eyes and waits.

When he opens his eyes, bitter taste of disappointment fills him. White, chipped ceiling of the Hogwarts hospital wing staring back at him. Merlin, he failed...again.

He feels her. She is panicked, saddened, almost terrified. Her mind flutters like a caged bird, frantically. He can hear her crying but the feeling of the touch is missing. She is not near him. Maybe he is again in the coma, maybe he won’t have to do anything to succeed this time? The darkness stirs again...this time pictures change in rapid succession, ... painful and incomplete

...He is sitting at the table, along with all other professors at the Welcoming feast, glaring at Lupin seated at the far end. His mind filled with memories of his encounter with Lupin...

...He walks down the corridor followed by covered giggles. The anger and shame choking him, not a thing changed since the days they were in school. To undermine his authority in such manner, to ridicule him in such way...he opens the door with a bang and barges into Albus’s office
„Keep your pet muzzled Albus. Keep him muzzled or choose...“ he hisses threateningly

„That was a harmless joke, Severus...“

„Joke! You call that a...joke?“ his voice vibrates with anger „I am warning you Old man, keep your pet muzzled or else...“

„Severus...“ Albus had a cold warning note in his voice

„Do not try to manipulate me, Albus. It won’t work. Not this time.“ He spats and storms before Albus has a chance to recover from shock...

...As the full moon approaches he is getting restless, observing the beast more carefully. He was afraid and unsure. He hates Lupin every day just a little bit more...

...Black was in school and the Old man is still blind, still refuses to hear the reason. Well, if Albus does not care for the boy's life, then so be it. At least then, he will be free as well...

...On top of brewing a demanding potion, he has to replace Lupin in his class prior and day after the full moon! The audacity of Albus has no bounds. It won’t be fruitful, but at least some will understand...he changes the lesson plans and bombards the lass with questions. The sea of inert stupidity that drowns him for years staring blankly at him. And that annoying kid, that insufferable, meddlesome, attention starved idiot gives all dunderheads in her surroundings an excuse, not to learn...why should they...she will stick her hand in the air, she will blurp the answers...is she that much inconsiderate? He know she will know the answer, she does not have to rub the collective noses with her capacity to memorise and recite. He insul...she might be able to learn but she is incapable to think about the bigger picture or the damage she is dealing with her classmates. If no one is willing to put her down by a peg...he will.

He feels her mind, fluttering desperately against his. He can hear her crying but his eyes still refuse to open. Still, she did not approach him. And he is concerned about her if only marginally. If he is in a coma again, they failed and with a remaining connection who knows what might happen...he is not pleased with the prospect of things. Darkness engulfs him once again.

It is still dark, his eyes still won’t pry open, but he can hear muffled voices. One squeaky voice is wailing far away from others, probably Misty in some corner, forgotten. He would expect that Hermione would at least try to calm her down, animosity or not, but he does not hear her. Her mind is upset, almost frantic, but he can’t hear her at all.

’Salazar, she didn’t slip in a coma with me, didn’t she?’

That is unsettling thought. He focuses on the voices he can hear, they sound like an argument. Lucius’s angry hiss

„You had no right to that Poppy:“

„They are both my patients, I had every right!“

„Not without notifying me, or Narcissa.“

„And what would that change?“

„I could have placed Misty to keep an eye on them, alert us on time...“

„You sound like something terrible happened...“
"Her screams woke entire house. She pulled the wand at me and **at my wife**, we had to subdue her...before we even realised she is still sleeping!"

"You were forewarned that this might happen, with or without..."

"I do not...agree...with...M...Miss Granger, but in one she was correct, those are not dreams Poppy. Surely, you must have known that Dreamless Sleep will not stop...what they...share." the last word is spat in bitter tone

He is surprised, is Lucius that much upset because of all this? Does Lucius see the girl as a threat, because he can’t stop her from prying at his memories, the ones he didn’t even share with Lucius? But, dreamless sleep...so he is not in coma...and he is unsure if he is happy about that or not.

"Where is the girl now?" Poppy’s voice is sharp

"In the toilet, with Cissa."

"Why?"

"Would you consider more appropriate if I went with her or Draco? It would be a treat for an eye to watch her bathe...and somehow I was sure that you wouldn’t..." drawls Lucius

"So, the girl is fine?"

"The girl **is not fine**! The girl fired curses at me and my family...Don’t look at me like that, she is awake if that is what you asking."

"Then why I was called?"

"Severus...we can’t wake him up."

Silence and shuffling of feet. Misty still sobs in the background. He feels the spell wash over him.

"Misty.** Poppy calls **Did you followed my instructions to the letter?**"

"Misty did, Matron lady.** Sniffles elf

"He will wake up, I just wanted him to rest more. You all seem incapable of leaving him to have his afternoon rest."

"It may have something to do with fact that he can’t stop his memories." sneered Lucius, he can hear it in his voice **And you, stop snivelling, I’ll deal with you later.**

"Misty is sorry, Master Malfoy sir."

"Yes, yes."

So, no easy way out for him. But this raised another question...more pressing matter...if they won’t help him he is forced to utilise what he can...naimly Granger girl. The door click and footsteps are heard again

"Thank you for your help Mrs Malfoy."

"Nonsense girl, just go and lie down, try to get some rest."

"I will." Her voice is thin and shaky **I am truly sorry Poppy, I...I...don’t**
know...what...happened...I...“ sob's cut through the words

„It’s all right dear, this won’t happen again. Rest now.“

„You are correct, Poppy,“ hisses Lucius ,it won’t.“ There is a hidden threat in his voice

„Why don’t we all go to the parlour and let them rest?“ Cissa sounds tired but composed, the voice of reason.

Shuffling of feet and...the bang of the door, Potter. He sounds alarmed

„What happened? What did you do to her Malfoy.“

„I do not appreciate your tone, Mr Potter.“ Cissa’s voice is now stern „Nor the insinuations. They are both resting now, so let them, if you wish you may join us in the parlour.“

„What are you doing here Potter?“ Lucius is far more annoyed than he probably lets on

„The spell..., it alarmed me that Hermione is in trouble...“

„You placed a tracking spell on my patient?“ Poppy is angry, if he could he would grin if you make Poppy mad at you-you are in serious trouble

„Of course I did, you sent her here.“

„You boy, come along, we have matters to discuss.“

They all exit, and silence once again surrounds him. He is awake but his body does not...

‘Bloody hell! I shook up one component of the potion, but my body is still too weak to shake off the other.’

Soft sniffing reaches him from his right.

„Granger, are you awake?“ his voice sounds scratchy and rough to his own ears, quiet but not weak, that is good.

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She can’t bear to look at him...he is...he looks like he is in a coma again...and she doesn't know what she did wrong? What happened? She just couldn't wake up and help him, wake him up. For her, it was painful to hear his cries without the ability to comfort him.

Her eyes are closed but she is focused on his breathing, it is even and calm. She can’t sleep, moreover, she is afraid to sleep...she couldn't face another memory, not now. His voice scares her but relief washes over her – he is awake and fine.

„Granger, are you awake?“

„I am, do you need something?“

„Keep your voice low, stay where you are and just listen...“ that sounds like her old professor but also like a spy she never truly met, she nods even if he can’t see it, he pauses...

Her throat is constricted. She is happy that he seemed all right, scared because she does not know what happened, upset with what she witnessed. It is all jumbled inside of her, dragging her in every
direction, confusing her. Making her feel helpless and angry.

....If you agree, I would need your assistance...“ he starts and her heart thumps a bit faster.
Chapter Notes

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„My assistance...about what?“ she cuts him off, almost afraid to hear the answer

„Granger,“ she can hear a sigh in his voice and can imagine him sneering „you do not have the desire to relive my memories. And I can assure you, I have no desire to share them, with you or anyone for that matter. If nothing else, last night’s mishap taught us that it would be prudent to...proceed... expeditiously... toward dispelling your blunder, wouldn’t you agree?“

His voice is a low whisper, a bit husky, almost hypnotic. Her heart drums in the irregular beat. Yes, she wants to stop seeing his memories, but what if... but no... they still might let her stay. But what if...

„Granger, are you awake?“

„Yes.“ She breathes out, almost a sigh

„I do expect an answer if I pose a question.“

„Yes, well... I do want to break whatever connection I made... but... how? We have a ban on all the books I used, and we would need even more books to fix the problem... and...“

„And what?“ he sounds annoyed „I am well aware of the ban on books. Also, I happen to know that you are capable of reciting everything you read. My memory is something I am confident in, even without books or your notes. We can recreate whatever you did in the first place...“

„And how that would help?“ she is unsure. They need her notes at least. But he is right, she remembers most of it, what she fears off is not her knowledge but what comes next

„It would be a starting point, Granger. Tell me, how come you were capable to create a spell that you did and still be unaware how to create counterspell? Or are you still a tape recorder with occasional bursts of creativity?“

„It is not that I do not understand why we need my original notes, sir... we need books I didn’t read to create a counterspell.“

„I am aware of that Granger.“

„Then...“
„Did ever occurred to you that I do possess the required knowledge?“

„Ummm...it did, but...“

„But...?“ he asks and she starts to shake, feeling like she showed up in a class without assigned essay. „Can we be sure that either I or you would remember everything, every little detail...if not...we might create...“

„That, Granger, is a calculated risk. One that I am more than willing to undertake.“

„But...“ her voice breaks. While her brain already working toward the recreation of the original spell... her heart sinks low and she feels chill running down her spine.

„Are you not?“

„It is not that...what if we make mistake? What if we return you to coma...and this time I can’t call you back?“

„Granger, I would wake up...sooner or later. I wasn’t unaware of my surroundings I was unable to communicate. “

That forces her to raise. She seats up under the odd angle and narrows her eyes at him. He is facing the ceiling, his eyes closed, to anyone he would appear as if he is sleeping. Reluctantly, she lies down again.

„Oh.“ That is all she manages to produce.

„Granger, will you make up your mind? I do want to know what my options are.“ his voice is a sarcastic drawl „Additionally, I have no inclination to die of old age waiting for your reply.“

„Ummm, yes...I will help, but...after...I have to learn those two almanacs that Mrs Malfoy sent me, before the party...and...“

„Hermione Granger struggles with learning! Well, well, we are all doomed!“

„There is no need for you to be insulting.“ She grumbles „And I have no problem with learning, but the photographs are....outdated... I have a problem connecting the face with the name.“

„You met most of the people from those almanacs at one point in of your life or another.“

„I did, but not their extended families...and....“

„Merlin save me!“ he exclaims and she waits. He seems to be either annoyed or in a deep thought. Finally, he addresses her again „If I...endeavor to...help you...in your learning...would you dedicate a part of your time to our little project?“ each word is careful like he has to speak with the mouth full of glass.

Excitement raises like a tide inside her. To learn from him again, to work on a project with him...isn’t that the biggest acknowledgement she could get?

„Yes!“ but even if her elation is present in first two letters... the fast downfall of the buzz she felt rings clear in the last letter. She curls into a ball, fighting to control her breathing. Sudden thought cut through the happiness ’What if he want’s to get rid of me so he could...kill himself?’

„What is the problem, Granger?“ exasperation is clear in his voice.
“I…” sobs cut through her words, she is shaking now, scared almost panicked

“Granger…Spit. It. Out.”

“I…don’t know…I don’t…understand…I was so afraid and….”

“Granger, snap out of it, and do try to make sense….”

“I don’t understand what is going on….” she hiccups „I was so afraid when I couldn't wake up, and you….”

“Granger, it is a miracle that you are able to walk as it is. If you failed to notice, and you obviously did, we ingested a dose of highly potent Dreamless Sleep. It is also obvious, that you and I have built resistance to a common variety of the same Draught… hence the current situation.”

“But I didn’t…”

“No, for once I cannot blame you.” The tightness in his voice is palatable „Poppy instructed Misty to dose us. If that clarifies…”

“Sir…?”

“Lay off the formalities, Granger.” He hisses at her „Tell me, what books did you use to create original spell?”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He still can’t force his eyes to open, and it is a good thing. More than once during this conversation he had a need to roll them. The girl is…annoying, infuriating, and unquestionably unbalanced. He has to tread with caution if he is to get what he wants from her. The sole idea is dangerous under the best of circumstances, and these are far from even a bare minimum, but... 'Desperate times, desperate measures.'

He wants her out of his head, fast…before she sees... before she decides that she doesn't want to break the connection... Knowing her self-righteous Gryffindor ways... she will decide that... once his memories reach the second rise of a Dark Lord.

„Umm, I used my knowledge of Legilimency, and the books Magical maladies 12 and 14 and Mind healers manual.”

„From which book did you learn about Legilimency?”

„The mind obscured.” She sounds scared to admit. This is surprising, it's an advanced reading. The book can contribute to general knowledge... but rarely anyone managed to learn from the book at the beginner's level. Not to mention...the book was available only in the Restricted section.

„Sneaking into the Restricted section, are we?”

„Ummm, actually no. There was a copy in the Black library, and I asked Sirius…” she pauses and he can’t prevent the low growl

„Of course, the Black didn’t see anything wrong in giving that book to the beginner.”

„Well, he gave me permission to use all the books in the library I find interesting.”

„How…responsible…of him, given that the Black library has more books on Dark Magic than even
Malfoy’s do."

„Really?” she sounds surprised

„Granger, Malfoy’s do have an extensive library with books on ancient magic, but many of those books are not about Dark Magic. “

„How?“

„What makes a spell dark, Granger? Exclude unforgivables. “

„Intent. “

She surprised him, she didn’t dive into an elaborate explanation.

„Correct. Now tell me, if we presume that common slicing spell, used in kitchens and by seamstresses... is used to harm anyone... could it cause harm?“

„Yes, depending on the intent... “ she takes a long breath

’And here we are.’ He thinks bitterly, wondering why he did this to himself. But if he did decide to torture himself with quizzing a student... he could get much worse than Granger, at least she has solid base knowledge.

„Yes... one would have to put much more determination and will. Not to mention magic... but yes, it is possible to use it as an offensive spell if the need arises. “

„Would you call it a Dark Arts variety spell?“

„No. “

„Why? Which spell would you call Dark Arts spell?“

„Ummm... “ she sounds uncertain and he nearly chuckled

„Yes?“

„Sectumsempra. “ her whisper sounds shaky

„Correct. Do you know what separates them, even if both spells are severing spells? “

„The later has the purpose to harm. “

„More than that Miss Granger. Sectumsempra wouldn’t work on bread or cloth, not even on dead meat. The spell activates on the contact with skin, its sole purpose is to harm, injure or... kill.?“

„Why...?“ she whispers

He is unsure what she wants to know, why is he telling her this or why he created the spell. The prior he won’t reveal but the later... it does serve his purpose.

„Why I created such dark and dangerous spell?“

„Yes. “

„Because, contrary to yours and apparently everybody else, popular opinion – I am not the good
person, Granger."

You are wrong!" she cries, and he can hear shuffling.

„Stay on your sofa, Granger.“ He warns but it is too late. His bed bends when she sits on the edge before she thumps down near his legs, her hand grabs his and squeezes „You idiot!“

„You are wrong Snape, you are not a bad person.“ She sounds tired now, hiccuping words through soft sobs

„Remove yourself from me, you insolent child! Now!“ he demands but she squeezes his hand and sniffs

„I can’t... too dizzy...“

He can hear a yawn. ’Bloody hell!!!


His complaints and threats achieve nothing, he can hear and... feel (!)... her shaking with silent sobs. She curls up where she is while maintaining the hold of his hand. He has no strength to pull off his hand. With rising panic, he realises... she fell asleep, which is not surprising but still is infuriating.

The chit is, apparently, bent on torturing him... no, not torturing... on using any means available to talk him out of his intentions. He can push her away, but that would be counterproductive in the light of their recent plans. However, he must find the way to... persuade her... somehow...

His mind is muddy, the potion is wearing off his resolve to stay awake. He fights the urge to fell asleep, especially in this situation. She is a bundle next to his legs, an oversized cat. She still holds his hand. The door clicks and he hears familiar drawl

„Now, isn’t this endearing?“

Lucius will not let him live this down.
Chapter Notes

This is the first part of the very long chapter, so next one will be posted on Friday.

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He was, as per usual, right on his money, too bad he didn’t bet. Lucius went above and beyond with his teasing – him, not her. There weren't too many opportunities to tease her. His jaw clenched, and he relaxed it eyeing Lucius. His friend didn’t notice, focused on the falling snow, turned to blizzard overnight. Lucius kept on talking about his stables with Abraxan' situated in the South of France.

Two days, two days until he would suffer through yet another torture. Two days until Malfoy Annual Yule Ball. This time, there won’t be an escape for him. No quiet reading in the library, no excuse that could lead him away from boring chattering. The girl won’t be of much help…. He stifled a growl. Lucius is still talking about horses.

The girl, the bane of his life, in every sense of the word. In past days he had to push away his annoyance and animosity towards her. He tolerated her endless stream of questions. She is smart, he can give her that, it is not even a compliment, it is a fact. Over the course of one year, she learned how to use her intellect for more than mere regurgitation of stored facts. The spell she devised to help him was…in a lack of better, more fitting description, brilliant. Flawed but brilliant. Given that she did not have at her disposal some of the more obscure books on the matter... it is almost surprising how well she combined six different charms and spells into one.

Of course, if she had broader literature she would know not to use the linking incantation. The question was, what components did she use to create a link? Given that she, obviously, didn’t understand the nature of the incantation... she could create a linking bond to any number of things. Digging through that mess won’t be nice nor pleasant. Begrudgingly, he halted further work on ‘their little project’ and focused on teaching her about the complicated labyrinth of noble family trees. She seemed more balanced when she learned, and he didn’t want her upset when unwanted guests start pestering him. The temptation of letting her go berserk on some of them... was too much. And he knows, there would be more than a few faces she doesn't want to see.

But, even he had to admit that she was useful. With her persistent pushing of exercises, he regained his strength bit by bit. Now, he could eat a whole meal alone, making long breaks at times. His arms started to serve their purpose, which improved his mood, even if he didn't show. His legs were another story, but she did her best to follow his ideas even when they ended not as he planned…

…They are in the pool, finished with the set of exercises she usually forced on him. Today, however, he had one idea he wanted to try.
“Granger, would you be willing to implement one more exercise?”

“I...I don’t know any that you could do at the moment.” She wrinkled her nose and lowered her eyes, blush creeping up her cheeks

“I know one. But, it will demand your active involvement.”

“I’m listening.” She nodded, he was counting on this.

“Leave my feet where they are, get out of the pool and sit on the edge, opposite of me. Find a rope, you will hold the ends of the rope, while I’ll hold the middle. You will pull me until my legs bend at the knees and I am close to the edge as I can be. Then you will loosen the ropes, still holding the edges, and let me push myself to this position once more.”

“Ok, I can do that.” She nodded and jumped out of the water, conjuring a rope from Merlin knows where. She tossed the middle part to him and he caught it, calculating

“I don’t think we would do more than two pushes at first, but...”

“I understand.” She nodded again and started to pull

The things didn’t go as he planned. She couldn’t pull him while she was sitting. Annoyed she stood up and gave another attempt before he could stop her. The end result was...disastrous. She lost her balance and plunged face forward into the water and over him... headbutting his chin, digging her elbow in his solar plexus and kneeing some of more sensitive parts. Even worse, struggling to remove herself from him, she knee’d him once more.

Their practice was over after that. He was still gasping from pain when she screamed for Misty... in his ear, no less. Misty helped her dry him off, grumbling and arguing with Hermione. Blinked them into the room and brought a cold wrap for his groins...

...This was impossible to hide, Narcissa had her laugh when she came for Hermione. The noon tea became a daily occurrence. He was glad to see the girl loosening up and moving around the house. Even if she moved only a few paces to the parlour located in the same corridor. This was still more than she was willing when they came.

Lucius had a laughing fit before he calmed down and started his ode to Abraxans. Of course, this temporary distraction won’t last long, and he dreaded the moment when his friend returns to its teasing.

“Severus, are you listening to me?” Lucius snapped his fingers in front of his nose

“My mind wandered off.” He stated

“Well, if you have...more pleasant thoughts...to entertain you...” drawled Lucius with a grin

“Lucius!” he hissed

The door opened and she walked into the room, they both turned towards the girl. She rolled her eyes

“Mrs Malfoy has guests, she asked me to tell you Malfoy that it is desirable to stay here. I’ll take my book and I’m going to the bathroom.”

“You are more than welcome to stay, Granger. Maybe... help Severus...to...recover...from the
injuries you caused. Kiss, to make it feel better... perhaps?” Dragged Lucius

“Lucius!!!” he growled at his friend, even if she didn’t know, this jab was for him more than for her

“No thank you. But feel free to follow your own advice if you think it will make the difference.” She hissed, red in face before slamming the bathroom door behind her

“Well…” blinked Lucius “still not tame enough to be of any use.”

“Lucius, stop it!” he was now beyond agitated. He couldn’t care less if his friend wanted to tease the girl, as long as he put him out of it. Sadly, he was in the centre of all Lucius’s barbs toward the girl, and that gave her ideas. Ideas he wished she focused on anyone but him.

“Fine, fine.” sighed Lucius “You are no fun, Severus.”

“I do not appreciate mocking, Lucius, not one bit.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” Lucius sounded shocked, with the note of fakeness “And here I am thinking that I am your wing-man.”

"I do not appreciate your attempts to solicit my student on me."

"She is not your student anymore, Severus. And, she is rather an eye-candy, parading around barely dressed. One would think that she is trying to...convey a message..."

"She is not...her attire... it is a Muggle thing..." he struggled to find correct words "I do not think that she understands..."

"There are other Muggle garments, equally suitable for her task of taking care of you comfortably. I am not that ignorant in Muggle clothing, you know. Still, it would do you good to...relax...and indulge a little bit. Even if ti's...her." Lucius emphasized the last word with a look of utter disgust.

“Lucius, continue this way and I will ask Poppy to move us to Spinner’s End.”

“I am afraid...that...won’t be possible, Severus.”

“She is capable of taking care of me there as well as here.”

“I don’t doubt that. But, you see ...I sold your home at Spinner's End.”

“WHAT?!?” he choked on the question, his lungs burned from the sheer power he put into the it ~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“ARE YOU INSANE? HOW…” she could hear him cough “…HOW COULD YOU DO THAT WITHOUT CONSULTING ME?”

She was sitting next to the door, in her usual spot. And this time she didn’t put a sound barrier on purpose, wanting to hear what are they talking about. She supports Snape’s threat wholeheartedly, but Malfoy’s answer throws her off balance.

‘Sold his house. Where would Snape go after he’s healed?’ she thought and kneeled next to the door, peeking through the keyhole.

Snape was half raised on the bed, his hands shaking, his entire body shaking. Lucius was next to the window, looking calm.
“I couldn’t risk your refusal” Lucius stated “It is one of the things I wanted to discuss with you today. Well, maybe later today, but certainly before the party. It wouldn’t go well if you learn from the guests.”

“Learn what?” the note of cold murder rang clear in Snape’s voice. He flopped to the bed with groan and moved one wobbly hand to his crotch with a painful hiss.

‘Owwww, sorry!’ whined her mind ‘I didn’t want to harm you.’

“I handed in the papers and they voted acceptance for the plea.”

“What papers?”

“Your reinstatement into your rightful lordship, of course. Surprisingly enough, the lost documentation presented itself once Dumbledore died. Amazing, don’t you think?”

“What documentation?”

“The one lost for years. Of course, you know…”

“Know. What. Lucius?” growled Snape

“Perhaps you don’t know.” Lucius sounded like he is in the middle of a light conversation instead of facing murderously looking Snape “I started after the first war, you know. But, it appeared that your documentation, the one that proves your lineage, was nowhere. It vanished. Quite a magical trick, given my connections in the Ministry. I didn’t want to tell you, get your hopes…up. After Dumbledore died…well, you know how it was…we had the Ministry, but with the war going on and all... Anyway, after the war ended… well, you know…” Lucius paused for a second or two before continuing “Finally, I submitted my request again and imagine the surprise… they found your papers. Apparently, they were ‘misplaced’ in Albus’s private vault in the Ministry. Funny thing is… many of documents managed to be ‘misplaced’ in the same vault.” Lucius waved his hand with resignation “I re-submitted request for your appointment.”

“In case you forgot Lucius – I don’t exist and my mother got disowned.”

“Oh, I am well aware of that. However, your late grandmother gave me your family lineage tree. Both you and your mother are on it. She also gave me the family chronicles. Again you are both in them. And with the disappearance of your uncle…you are the last of the line. Still, it is not an automatic process.”

“I know that.”

“Well, about month ago I received informal word that your claim passed, so I sold the house in Spinner’s End. Of course, at the time it wasn’t still official, I had to wait three weeks for official notification…”

“You sold my home based on a gossip?”

“On a very, very trustworthy gossip.”

“And, what if your source…”

“Severus…” Lucius clinked his tongue “you are a war hero. Recipient of the Order of Merlin first class. Do you want to tell me you believe that they would dispute your claims?”
"As much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, Lucius, what if your source was wrong?"

“It wasn’t. And now you do not need that dump. I moved all your things here. You own several estates in England, one in Spain and one in France. Additionally, in your possession are three vaults in Gringotts. One with books, one with jewellery and other valuables and one with gold. You are almost as rich as I am. I couldn’t enter the vaults, Goblins are such sticklers for rules. Until you either change your last name or hyphenate…”

“Snape works fine for me.”

“Not anymore. You are last of the line and you have to add or take your family name.”

“They are not my family.”

“I beg to differ, your grandmother was quite adamant…”

“If she loved me… us… so much, she was awfully quiet when she should have spoken…” Snape gritted out, he surprised her with the resentment in his voice

“She could do nothing against your grandfather.”

“And later….?”

“Ah yes. Well, it would be advisable not to reclaim or enter the Harridan Manor. Even if it is traditionally the Prince residence. It appears that curse your grandfather put on the Manor is quite potent. You do not wish to end up stuck in the same house with his ghost.”

“Indeed.”

“Kingsley will bring papers for you to sign and decide on your last name. Now, Your Lordship…”

“Cut it out, Lucius.”

“Even with your half-blood status, you are almost higher in the rank then I am, once you claim your right to the name, Severus. If you were a pureblood, I’d have to kneel in front of you.”

“I would kill you if you attempt that…it is bad enough…”

“And, that is why I did it all behind your back.”

“Lucius…do not expect me to …”

“Oh, I won’t, at least not for a while. But I would advise you to choose Rosebush Manor. It is behind the duck pond, below that tree line.” Lucius pointed in the distance "Your stubborn grandmother refused to sell it to me. I am grateful to her stubbornness now, I’d much rather have you for a neighbour than a new hunting ground.”

“How…generous of you, Lucius.” Snape drawled “If that is all…”

“Not quite…”

“What else?”

“There are some other details, but they are minor… I do, however, think that you could tame the little beast, and… persuade her… to kiss and make it better.” Lucius glanced toward the door and she gasped, scrambling away to her place.
The nerve of that man! To speak that way of her! Like she is...some...some... She had a half mind to go into the room and hex the life out of the Malfoy, instead, she stilled. Nearly jumping when knock came to the door before they slid ajar

“I am leaving him alone, so, you can stop listening.” Amusement ring in Lucius’s voice and glistened in his eyes. He vanished from the cracked door and she could hear him hobble to the exit. She stayed in the bathroom until the door clicked. Only then, she entered the room.
XLVIII

Chapter Notes

I know I told you Friday, but… it seems that tinkering with chapters does calm me a bit. I am still shaken up after the car accident we had on Sunday (no one was hurt, luckily, but I was and am still…flustered). So, if this continues, tomorrow may I may post another chapter.

Anyway, from this chapter on the things will start to progress faster, at least little bit. I can’t say that it will be all sun and roses from now on, it won’t.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

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She walked to the sofa, tossing a passing glance at Snape. He glared through the window and she thought that he looked like the embodiment of the stormy cloud. His face impassive but the deep wedge between his brows told her otherwise. The disapproval rolled around him like a fog, he was emanating it. And that made him vulnerable in her eyes.

She pulled back on the sofa, so she could lean and tucked her feet beneath her, taking a book. She didn’t read it but used it as an excuse, one that gave both of them space to be quiet. Not that he needed an excuse to ignore her if he chose to.

She mulled over the conversation she heard. At first, she thought that now he would have at least some small reason to keep on living. Looking at him, she knew better. It wasn’t a reason, it was another complication. She still couldn’t make a peace with his end goal, she doubted that she ever would… even if things didn’t change. Even if he was still resentful Potions Master, she would care. But he wasn’t. Not anymore. He was so much more. A hero. The one who took on himself to work behind enemy lines and accepted the hatred of his side stoically. Seeing his memories, taught her so much about him, about the person he was. And his harsh words bothered her less and less. They weren’t real, they were a fence, a barrage to keep him safe from hurt.

Now, that was a novelty. Looking at him, she learned something about herself. She spent a night in the bathroom, two nights ago, after she woken up from one of his memories. She cried her eyes out, but… even if she was in school, and the war didn’t happen… she would still cry if she learned this. He dreamt about the night in the Shrieking Shack. What caused her tears… he wasn’t mad at them for knocking him out. He felt overwhelmed with inadequacy, with losing and not belonging. Devastated by the fact that even his students would defend his enemy. Defend the man who was responsible for the death of his love. Responsible, as much as he was. And yet… his enemy retained the love of others, while he continued to be the villain. That gutted her. To see Albus helping Sirius and at the same time put down and punish Snape… reminding him of his crimes and his duties. Fine, Sirius was innocent for that crime, but he wasn’t without guilt.
She cried that night because for the first time she openly hated Dumbledore. She recognised Albus for his faults and not his virtues. She couldn’t find it in her heart to mourn him like she did before. She understood one more thing…something was wrong with her. Poppy confirmed it, a day later, but told her not to worry and that she is getting better. For the first time after the war, she felt balanced, it was nice to learn, to keep her mind occupied. Strangely enough, this room was her safe haven. Malfoy Manor was, indeed, odd place to have a refuge – but she did. Even with Malfoy spitting insults left and right.

Malfoy’s, they were another puzzle she had to solve. Draco was… well, Draco. And in a way that was comforting. Mrs Malfoy had a sharp tongue and sharp personality. She did put her through the harsh drill, a crash course of elite etiquette. But behind all that, she found her time spent with a woman… surprisingly pleasant. Malfoy senior was another story. Mulling on today’s conversation with Snape… she wondered were his words aimed at her or not? She jerked when his words startled her

“Whom do you plan to poison, Granger?”

“No one.” She smiled “May I ask the question?”

“If I say ‘no’ will it stop you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then learn to ask without asking for permission. Rhetorics, however polite is counterproductive.”

“Malfoy...”

“Which one?” he cut her off

“Your friend.”

“That would be Lord Malfoy or Mr Malfoy if you desire to be impolite.”

“Malfoy.” She stated firmly “Respect is earned.’ Your words, Snape.”

“Good.” The ghost of the smirk briefed against his lips “Finally, Granger, you are leaning.”

He surprised her, she expected lengthy tirade, not his approval.

“Why is he saying all those things? Why is he so….” He paused, lost for words

“Words are powerful, Granger. They can be a cure for the soul, powerful magic or a lethal weapon. If one knows how to use them. Lucius does. He often uses them as a weapon and wields them as such.”

“Yes…but they're not directed at me. At least not only at me. He casts them like a net and waits to see who tangled in that net. Am I correct?”

“Ten points to Gryffindor, Granger.”

“Hmh.” She nodded. If Malfoy didn’t aim his words at her directly... it was only the matter of not allowing herself to get tangled up and to reply in kind.

“Snap out of it, Granger.” She raised her head to look at his grim face. “Do you remember the chapter in the book I told you to skip it?”
“Yes…”

“You’ll need it now.” he paused and she could tell that he was struggling to say what he had to say.

“Lucius did something… stupid. And now I will pay for it. And you will as well, by association.”

He paused again and she waited “He restored my place in my mothers family line…”

“The Prince family line?”

“You knew?” he sounded surprised

“In the sixth year.” She nodded “Harry thought it was a nickname you gave yourself even after... but
I found the newspapers with the text on one Eileen Prince.”

“My mother.” He nodded, the line between his eyes deepening “The Prince line is old, noble one.
One might argue it is in the same rank with Malfoys, Blacks, Longbottoms and such…”

“It is so much more! In the first almanach enlists the prince line as one of the first noble families.”

He remained silent. Distant in his thoughts. She studied his features. Wondering when she learned
how to read even the smallest of his ticks and interpret them. Finally, he spoke again, carefully

“The silver lining, in this entire ordeal, is that now we have a means to repel most of the visitors
tomorrow. This can be beneficial to both of us.”

“How?”

“Many of the visitors won’t follow the proper etiquette. Out of habit or pure ignorance, and that is
exploitable. It would be your task to remove them from the room, once they make mistake. No matter
how small mistake is.”

“Would that mean I will address you as Sir or Your Lordship?”

“Don’t be daft, Granger. You will act in the capacity of my…secretary. Which will put you on the
higher ground. You will have to follow protocols and address everyone properly. But… you will
also have no obligation to them for more than that. Your status spiked up.”

“That does not answer my question, Snape.”

“Correct.” He mulled on his answer “I detest you calling me ‘professor’, and as my secretary,
‘Snape’ won’t do either.” He frowned “I presume that the only acceptable solution would be to call
me by my given name.” he didn’t sound happy at that prospect

“Severus?” she ground out his name, her heart beating like crazy. She didn’t feel honoured. Scared
was the more appropriate description. With the permission to call him by his name… something
shifted again. Certain walls erased from existence, and that scared her.

“Yes, Granger.” He breathed out

“Hermione.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If I am to call you by your name, you should do the same.”

His frown deepened even more, but he nodded eventually, begrudgingly. He didn’t like it, no more
than she did.
“Now, on to the lesson…”

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Harry knocked on the door. It wasn’t like her not to wait for him in the corridor. He opened the door and peeked in the room. For an instant, he had a flashback from his school days. Snape asked the question and Hermione speed-fired the answer. It fitted both of them to act that way. He cleared his throat

“Hermione….”

They paused and looked at him. She smiled but turned to Snape.

“Go on, Granger. It is enough for today.”

“Thank you… Severus.” She nodded and walked to the door.

Once they were in the hallway she hugged him.

“Is all good?”

“Yes. Severus is teaching me.” She sounded happy

“You call him ‘Severus’ now?”

“He insisted. It is… complicated…”

“I have time.”

“And I have more important things to discuss with you.” She whispered and pulled him down, to sit on the floor, next to her. He observed her while she thinks how to approach the subject. That made him feel uneasy, she never beat around the bush.

“Hermione, you know you can tell me anything.”

“Did you know that something is wrong with me?” she looked him in the eyes

“I did, Poppy told me that you are unwell, but she didn’t tell me what is wrong.” That wasn’t a lie. He knew what is wrong with her, Snape told him. Poppy only explained that she noticed that Hermione had a problem and that she isn’t the only one. On his persistence, Poppy additionally told him that if she reports the problem they will place her in St. Mungo’s, to the Janus Thinkery award and feed her with potions to make her docile. She explained that that won’t solve Hermione’s problem. Poppy did the only thing she could and placed her where she is useful, far from prying eyes. Until Hermione could work through her problem.

“Yes, I asked her the other day, she didn’t tell me either. But she did tell me that my realisation means I am on my way to recuperation.” She sighed and smiled “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Staying with me. Even if I do have a problem. Which I do, and it is not a small one, either.”

“How do you know?”

“I attacked Malfoys, a few days back, Harry.”
“You did what?”

“I had a nightmare, and I attacked them. In fact, you showed up that morning.”

“Oh, that. They didn’t take that against you…”

“They should have. I… I had another nightmare. We… we're chased by the Snatchers… I heard Malfoy’s voice and… I defended myself. I am not safe for them to be around me. Whatever is wrong with me… it's connected to the war… and I am a danger to them.”

“I don’t think it is such a bad thing.”

“I don’t know.” She mumbled, again lost in thoughts “Harry, do you think I walk around half-naked?”

“I don’t” he replied carefully. He didn’t, but given that he did grow up in a Muggle world helped in that perception

“You don’t, …but, others do?”

“Most of the wizards around here are grown up in pure wizarding surroundings, even aurors. They all wear wizarding robes, all the time. Your outfit is… uncommon for them.” He did hear the whispers from Aurors and elves alike about her choice of clothing, but he ignored them “It is their problem Hermione, not your’s. You shouldn't listen to what they are saying.”

“I don’t know. I think it sends a… wrong message. But I can’t take care of Severus in wizarding robe.”

“If you want I can bring you your jogging suite.” He offered

“Yes, it would be the best.” She agreed quietly “Harry, how did you get used to wearing a dress all the time?”

“Well, for start… it helps if I think of it as a wizarding robe and not as a dress.” He replied with the smile and she giggled. Harry felt like a huge weight fell off his shoulders. She looked different, more like Hermione he knew. She wasn’t what she used to be, but… he will have to talk with Snape. It seemed to him, now, that Hermione being around him wasn’t such a bad thing. He opened his mouth to say something but call came from below

“Potter!”

“Sorry, Hermione, I have to go. It is insane today, tomorrow will be much worse.”

“It’s fine. Stay until the end and come to see me after the party tomorrow… I’ll need it. “ she smiled sheepishly

“Will do.” He called running down the corridor. He felt better than he did for months.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She sat in bed, breathing heavily. It was pitch dark in the room. Like it wasn’t enough that she has to see his memories. Like it wasn’t enough that she had nightmares of her own. Now her mind forced her to realise what she did, while she was sleeping no less!

‘Gods! I kicked him in the groins! Twice!’ whined her mind and she fell back to bed, pressing her hands over her eyes.
It is not like she didn’t see him before. At least, until now she managed to avoid touching him… well… there. A hot blush crept up her cheeks, warming them up. She bit her lip to prevent a whimper. It wasn’t so much that his newly gained title provoked the memory or the feeling of uneasiness. It was much, much more complicated than that.

‘Gods! I kicked Severus Snape in the groins! He will skin me alive when he recovers!’

But even that was not the problem. It didn’t scare her like it used to. She turned to her stomach and pressed her face into the pillow, muffling the groan.
Will you, hens, stop quaking and remove yourselves from my sight?” he growled at three females that wouldn’t stop talking at the same time.

“Severus Snape! Your manners leave much to be desired, and I know that you know better than that.” Narcissa turned to him.

It was around noon when Narcissa marched in the room with the seamstress. She demanded that his new position requires modification of Hermione’s dress robes. Hermione argued and finally gave in but refused to leave the room. Three hours later, they were still in the room. And, they were still arguing. He wasn’t sure if Hermione thought that Narcissa would tone down if he was present. If that was her tactics, she was sorely mistaken. Entire charade turned into a headache – his headache.

He couldn’t escape the sight of transforming modest dress robes into one of Narcissa’s elaborate ideas. The end result was… distractingly disturbing and pleasant for the eye. Or it would be if Hermione didn’t sport a frown to match his own. The dress of choice was in the colour of autumn leaves, shimmering from soft copper and brown to bright red with moss green, discreet, applications. The high neck was a new addition, that went well with the low waistline. Of course, those were dress robes so they didn’t resemble Muggle dress, but this came quite close. Narcissa forced her idea of narrowing the upper part of the robe, leaving it to fall free only from the hips down. Visually, this cut fitted the girl perfectly, making her look taller and more elegant that she was. The upper part wasn’t too tight against the body and soft wrinkles emphasised her figure.

When they finally managed to fix the dress robe seamstress escaped. Unfortunately – he couldn’t. So he had to suffer through another round of arguing and hissing. Narcissa yet again forced her will, subduing the girl’s mane into an elegant and elaborate bun. The effect in the combination with the dress robes was stunning. He diverted his eyes to the window, willing them to stay focused on the snowing sky. Granger was a menace and he had to get rid of her. Thinking that she looks stunning was counterproductive to that.

‘Narcissa managed to make me look good when I let her. She can make a mop to look good when she puts her mind to it.’

“Severus! What do you say?”

“I compliment your skill Cissa. You managed to force Miss Granger into almost ladylike fashion.” He replied, hoping that damper would get him off the hock.
“Nonsense Severus! She is breathtaking and you know it. Now if she can change her look for the sake of keeping your appearances the least you can do…”

“I doubt I’d look good in female dress robes, Cissa.”

“… **The less you can do** is to acknowledge it.” Finished Narcissa ignoring his quip

He growled, glaring daggers at Narcissa. If it was Lucius he would swear this is another of his stings, but with Narcissa, he couldn’t be sure. The woman always placed too much care on public image.

‘Well, let’s get it over with.’ “You look lovely Miss Granger.”

The girl blushed, even if the scoff stayed on her face. She rolled her eyes and frowned

“Hermione, we have to practise **professor** .”

At least he wasn’t the only one unhappy with the entire plight. He doubted that Narcissa knew how much she damaged the entire situation by forcing her will. The true test for the girl would be facing people, annoying her was a wrong move. Unfortunately, no one asked him.

“There is, however, the matter of my appearance.” He added feigning indifference. He detested the fact that he was bare-chested. When they started with exercises on the floor Poppy granted him the luxury of wearing pyjama bottoms. But due to his slow-healing wound Poppy banned all upper body clothing.

“Oh, Poppy brought you a hospital dress. It ties in the back and won’t damage the wound. I took the liberty of transforming it from white to black.” Cried Hermione

The door open and Draco strolled in

“Granger, you look almost human.” He made the face towards the girl and she glared at him sticking her tongue out in reply, Narcissa hissed at both of them

‘Oh jolly, and I am stuck with **that** today.’ He grumbled inwardly

“Miss Granger that was abysmally un-lady-like.”

“My apologies, Mrs Malfoy.”

“Draco Malfoy, I raised you better than that! If that is how you are going to address all the ladies tonight, I’ll to have to confine you to your room.”

“Sorry, mother. I came to tell you that father is yelling at his dresser again, you might want to go there before he blasts it… again.”

“Sweet Salazar!” Narcissa sighed and pulled Draco “Come along dear, we can't let you into the crowds looking like this.”

“What is wrong with how I look?” Draco complained. The door shut closed behind two of them, leaving him and extremely edgy Granger alone.

In the next two hours, Hermione managed to put him in the damned piece of clothing Poppy left. He had to listen to yet another row when she called Misty to help her shave him. Misty managed to set her on edge even further claiming that Hermione would cut his throat if she uses the razor. Hermione threatened that she might dress up Misty by ‘accident’.
By the time clock chimed six he wondered if Hermione would hex the next person that comes through the door. His own mood was grim, and if she was into hexing, he would support her.

When the first knock came they both groaned. She looked at him and he sighed

“Let’s put this behind us… Hermione. Remember your lessons.”

The first visitor was Kingsley. He noticed that Hermione’s shoulders slacked at the sight of a familiar face. He wished he could say that he was glad too to see the Minister.

“Severus, I am so glad to see you!” smiled Kingsley

“Are you?”

“Of course! I brought you the papers and your placket. The Award giving ceremony will wait for an anniversary, of course. Let us deal with the formalities first your Lordship.”

For the next fifteen minutes or so he had to choose his new last name and arrange everything else. That did not improve his mood. On the periphery of his sight, the glimmer of golden red distracted him more than once. That dampened his mood further. Silently, he cursed Narcissa’s stubbornness.

“Well, I won’t hold you up any longer, Severus.” Kingsley finally stood up “We increased the security today. You will have two Aurors in front your door.” Kingsley turned to the girl “You look lovely Miss Granger. Will you honour us with your presence downstairs tonight?”

“Thank you, Mr Minister. I am afraid that my place is next to Severus tonight.”

’Well, well… who would have thought that she can still be polite? Maybe the impending disaster will bypass us tonight.’

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

As the evening progressed she was getting more and more restless, fighting the urge to pull out her wand. Panic rose with every knock at the door. The fact that she felt clumsy and elegant like an elephant in a glass store didn’t help. The effortless elegance of Narcissa and Greengrass girls prompted her to feel like an impostor.

Luckily, Severus was right, and even if many of the visitors glared at her, which set her teeth on the edge, no one was openly rude. They didn’t even complain when she removed them from the room based on a lack of protocol.

She cast a tempus charm, two more hours. Hermione wasn’t sure if she could pretend that long? Almost entire sixth and seventh year of Slytherin’s paraded through the room. Minerva, Sprout and Flitwick came together. Many members of the Wizengamot came to visit, but also some of the faces she was sure should be in Azkaban.

The man who tried to get more than one syllable answers from Severus was one of those. He tossed one sideway glare at her and she quietly slid the wand in her hand, hiding it behind the folds of her dress robes.

“You have a lovely secretary, your Lordship.” Man said and the hair on her neck stand straight.

“Do I? I didn’t notice. She is proficient at what she does.” Her eyes flickered from the visitor to Snape and back. Snape sounded indifferent, but by now she knew him enough to recognise the note of bitterness in his undertones.
“It seems that we needn't win the war after all… Mudblood’s fall in line on their own.”

“It seems to me that you are forgetting on what side of the war I was.”

“You were always slippery bastard Snape, I have no doubts that you had a backup plan. You did make yourself a sweet deal this time. Title of the Lord and the Order of Merlin.”

Gripping her wand she stepped from her corner, shivering

“Excuse me, Sir, I have to ask you to leave the room. You addressed Lord Prince in an unacceptable manner.” She hoped that her voice was polite but stern. This man’s looks reminded her of the final battle little too much.

“And who’s going to force me out, Mudblood? You? Well, maybe you could… persuade me? Perform some of the duties…” the man paced to her, she registered Snape’s sharp, threatening hiss

“Borodin…”

But before she was aware of what is going on, she had her wand pressed at the man’s throat, jabbed against his Adam's apple. The hum in her head muffled the sounds. Man stopped and glanced at Snape

“You still need to train her properly.”

“She has her instructions, Borodin, and she is following them to the letter” she could hear the ice in Snape’s voice “Kindly remove yourself from my room.”

“You never were good at sharing your toys, Snape.” The man clicked his tongue “Shame, such…”

She pressed her wand more, advancing, forcing the man towards the door. She could hear them talking but her actions were out of her control.

“I will remember this, Snape”

“It would do you well to remember what I’m capable off, Borodin.” The threat was clear in Snape’s voice. The man made the move towards Severus. She reacted, casting a silent Petrificus, the man fell down with a loud thud

“A little help here!” she called, she could hear Snape calling her name, but it sounded like he is so very far away.

Aurors burst in the room and one of them took the man…Borodin, from the floor. She could hear the other Auror talking to Snape but the words had no meaning. Blood rushing in her ears muffled them. She could tell that she was gliding towards the floor. Someone caught her before she could hit the ground.

After that, all hell break loose. The magic flared in the air. They placed her on the edge of the Snape’s bed. Someone was talking. Magic flared again, pressuring the room. The door flung open and the Auror, the one that was helping her flew through the air and slammed hard into the hallway wall. The loud sound of alarms snapped her to reality. Everything that was happening came rushing back in front of her eyes. She bit her lip to prevent a cry and grabbed his hand, crushing his fingers with the tightness of her grip. She didn’t care it was him. She needed to feel safe, and he had that power, even in his weakened state.

“Pull yourself together, Hermione. We have another hour and a half to endure.” His voice was strict
“I… I can’t do it anymore.”

“Yes you can, and **you will**. Now, release my hand and…”

She shook her head, tightening the grip to the point it made him wince.

“In a few seconds, half of the Aurors, Potter **and** Lucius will barge in the room. Do you want them to see you holding my hand?” he raised an eyebrow at her and she released his hand instantly.

“What happened?” she whispered and he sighed. Behind her, the door slammed open.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus sighed. Maybe he should have persuaded Misty to let her shave him... with a little luck she would slit his throat and he wouldn’t have to go through all this. At least ten Aurors, Potter, Narcissa, Lucius, Kingsley and Minerva barged in the room.

“What is going on Snape?” boomed Kingsley “Why is one of my Aurors unconscious?”

‘Here we go.’ “He was impolite towards me and my secretary.” He replied dosing his voice with annoyed impatience.

“Impolite?” the question came from few different directions and he stifled the growl.

“Yes, impolite.” He drawled “Do anyone have a problem with that?”
To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

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He resisted the urge to say something which would sound more like his usual self. The need to tread carefully, more than ever before, forced his insides to crumble. Setting a bored, indifferent mask on his face more, he measured his words with care. What came out of his mouth, however, was far from what he wanted to say. In a way, it shocked him too, as well as all present in the room.

‘At least they don’t have advantage I do’ he thought

The row of baffled faces bore into him and Hermione. Her confusion was obvious even before they showed up. He recognized the panic attack when he saw one. Her response was also quite predictable. Anyone else would start shaking or imitating fish out of the water, but she wasn’t anyone. If nothing she could pass as a war veteran, she certainly reacted like one. In the face of imminent danger, her instincts kicked in. Muscle memory and fight-or-flight response taking over. He had no doubts that that was one of the key features, along with her quick and sharp intellect, which kept her alive during the war.

‘Not only her.’ He thought grimly glancing at mouth-gaping Potter

He could throw her under proverbial bus… No, it wasn’t out of his good nature that he was sheltering the girl. Tonight she was his first line of defence, and she did the impeccable job. Her nearly eidetic memory was another asset. The one he was in desperate need off if he didn’t want to end up creating the accidental Horcrux. And that is the last he wants. Not that he knew how to make one. Even his unquenchable thirst for knowledge of Dark Arts wasn’t enough to push him towards opening that door. When it came to messing with order provided by mother nature, that is where he drew the hard line.

Seconds dragged. Hermione looked at him confused and still shaken to the core. He waited to see who will speak first, not bothering to compose the answer. At any rate, his answer would vary depending on who asked the question. The truth was only one out off the table. With that particular information, he has to deal alone. Question it. Dissect it. And finally, when he learns enough, squash it. Distortion was his forte, after all.

“Hermione, what happened?” Potter dared to speak first, earning sharp wince from Lucius

She looked at him, eyes wide and blank. He returned the gaze. Holding his eyes on her he addressed the no one in particular, giving the answer in her name
“Borodin overstepped his boundaries. Hermione did her duty and forced him out. He tried to attack, she knocked him out and called for help. Auror that stayed in the room was… impolite. Tonight Hermione is part of my… household staff… so it falls into my duty to react if I see fit. Which I did.”

“Hermione?” Potter called the girl, she was still looking at him. He had the feeling that she replace attempt to break his fingers with staring at him. Feeling like a gigantic crutch didn't sit well with him. But in a retrospect, it was a step up from being an expendable chess piece.

“Hermione had a slight panic attack, Potter. I doubt she can recall much of the events.”

“Borodin wasn’t on the list of people who could come up here.” Complained Lucius

“He must have slipped through, then.” He retorted, diverting his eyes to Lucius, he will have a conversation with him later. The one Lucius won’t like one bit. Turning his eyes to Kingsley he drawled “Honestly, Minister, one might think that you have some unresolved issues with me or Hermione. I can understand that Auror department is at the moment understaffed... but to place people with such strong opinions in the Manor, not to mention to guard my room… it makes one wonder.”

“What strong opinions?” blurted Potter before Minister had chance to speak

“If an Auror set to guard my door calls me a Death Eater, Potter, it is well within his rights. And it isn’t a complete miss. I do fall under that category. To call Hermione Death Eater sympathiser... not to repeat some of the more colourful names… it speaks in quite the volume about their… opinion. Or desire to be here in the first place. And this isn’t the first time either.”

“Was it the same one?” asked Kingsley with frown

“No.”

“The one you threatened to report to Harry?” Hermione’s voice was shaky, he silently congratulated her on her well-timed response

“When? Why did no one tell me this before? How many of them?” barraged Potter

‘Good luck Minister in training this monkey to do your bidding’ he thought with an amusement

“For now. one more, Potter. If I may suggest Minister.”

“Yes?” Kingsley sounded grim

“If you believe it is imperative to leave someone to guard my door, may I choose among your Aurors?”

“Yes, of course, if you do have in mind someone you can trust, Lord Prince”

“Thank you, Minister. Watkins, Dolan.” He called and they nodded stepping out, he did feel marginally better now. They were both his ex-students, but more importantly from his house.

“I’ll stay.” Offered Potter

“Potter, I don’t think tonight you are here in an official capacity. Do go down and perform all the tricks you are expected to perform. Lucius, for tonight we finished with visitors.”

“I’ll issue the warning and close this…”
“Not so fast Severus, Mr Malfoy.” Minerva’s sharp voice caused both of them to flinch “There are still two of my students wanting to see you, Severus. You and Hermione, and it would do her good to see them too. You can’t deny them that right, I’ll supervise that visit.”

“With all due respect, professor…” Hermione blushed and gulped but slowly turned to face Minerva “…your tone and the manner of addressing…”

“Hush Miss Granger. They may flaunt their titles under other people's noses. Those titles didn’t matter in my classroom, and they still don’t matter to me. My students stay my students as long as I live.”

“Yes, professor.” Hermione bowed her head

“Well, we settled all. Now, I’ll ask all of you to return downstairs.” Smiled Narcissa, her words had a power to move the group out of the room.

“Severus, I’ll return soon.”

“We’ll wait for you, Minerva.” He replied. He had nothing against the woman, in a way he respected her more after the last year. For years they had a sort of rivalling friendship.

When the door closed he turned to Hermione

“How do you feel Gran… Hermione?”

“Glad to be alive.” she burped and recoiled at her own words

“As you should be. War is not for everyone. And if my experience taught me anything… in war, those who survive... may not always be the most deserving… but they are usually the most skilful ones.”

“I…” she nodded, but he could see the inner struggle in her eyes “He did that on purpose, didn’t he?”

“Who did what on purpose?”

“Malfoy.” The name was almost spat out “He let that man up.” That was the statement, not the question

“Hermione, I am inclined to believe that school did injustice to you by not placing you into Slytherin.”

“If that supposed to be the compliment, I don’t see it as one.” She wrinkled her nose at him, frowning

“Too bad.”

The sharp knock on the door stopped their conversation. Minerva marched in followed by Lovegood girl and Longbottom. Hermione jumped from the bed with a happy cry and run to hug her friends. Minerva took Hermione’s place at the edge of the bed, turning her back to their students. Hermione was still trying to squeeze the life out of her friends with her embrace.

Minerva looked at him over the rim of her glasses and he hoped she won’t start apologizing. He wasn’t ready to deal with that. His eyes flickered from Minerva to three of his students and back. He stifled his thoughts from forming. Minerva sighed, looking sad and old.
“My ‘secretary’ deserted me the moment her friends showed up. You should introduce more
discipline among your cubs, Minerva.”

“Probably. They are my, but they are not my cubs anymore. They have grown up too fast.”

“Kids are resilient, Minerva. They bounce back.”

“They are not kids. Some of them never got the chance to be one. We… I failed, not just you but
them as well. We did a terrible injustice to them. We failed them.”

He blinked, lost for words. His brain desperately trying to decipher hidden meaning in her words,
suddenly cautious. Minerva continued after the heavy pause

“I made the same mistakes I made when you were a student, and with the same price to boot.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Minerva. You did your best to protect them. The two are not
comparable…”

“Nonsense. My memory still serves me well. They are the second generation in my lifetime that
stepped from school bench into the war.”

“We were older, Minerva”

“You may lie to yourself, Severus, but you cannot fool me I chose my blindness for far too long.
Well, not anymore. Maybe Albus chose to look at the bigger picture and opportunities, but to what
price? I am to blame for choosing to trust him more than my own eyes.”

He remained silent. He and Albus never see eye to eye. At the same time, Albus was only one
person he could confide in. He nearly hated the man and still, he trust him almost as much as he
trusted Lucius. And yet, not either one of them had his absolute trust. Not either of them knew what
Hermione managed to… no, not learn… it wasn’t out of choice or trust. Still, she had more insight
into him. His eyes flickered to her and Minerva caught on it.

“She is lucky to have you, Severus. Lucky to have you guide her.” Minerva sounded tired and
defeated

“I am not guiding her Minerva, I’m doing my best to get rid of her. I wouldn’t call that lucky”

“She is unwell and lucky to have you, many others like her don’t have that luxury, Severus. On your
worst mood, you are a far better option than to feel left deserted.” Sighed Minerva, repeating “She is
lucky to be here with you.”

‘You would change your tune if you knew how I tried to force her into a run.’ He thought grimly

“Hermione, she is… unique. Not much unlike yourself, Severus. Do me a favour… if you can
muster the strength to do any favours for me after everything… take care of her for me.”

“She has her parents to take care of her.”

“You honestly don’t know?” Minerva obviously knew something he didn’t, he gazed at her “Just
before the start of the seventh year, she used memory charm on her parents. Now, we can’t find
them. To be honest, by now I thought she would obsess about mind magic and looking in how to
reverse what she’s done.”

‘You have no idea.’ So many missing details fell into place. It is not that she just sprung the idea for
what she did to him. She was studying mind magic and tried to save him when her search for reversal charm failed. He was so wrong, all so wrong. Oh, she had survivor's guilt, but not to the extent he thought. She had PTSD, he had no doubts about that. She was literal in her words, he was the only one she could save. She latched on him like a leach. No matter what he or anyone else did or say, she won’t budge.

‘Salazar, save me! I won’t get rid of her – ever!’ he felt almost desperate.

“I put my money on you, Severus.” Minerva's voice reached him “Do not disappoint me.”

Harry went home, finally. She felt tired. She cast a monitoring charm, fussing around his wound. It looked rawer now and that worried her.

“Will you quit that and leave me be?” he snapped at her

“You needn't be so grumpy. And you shouldn’t be so cross, I am glad that they finally see you as a hero you are. And that they care about you.”

“Mhm” he blew a note through his nose and she thought how he mastered the skill that made even the exile of air to sound sarcastic and resentful

“Even Neville stopped being afraid of you.”

“And since that was my life’s goal, I am ecstatic as you can see.” he sounded so… she couldn’t find the word to describe it. “Go to bed Hermione. Rest, or at least let me rest.”

“I need to thank you…”

“What you need, what we both need, is a good night sleep.” He yawned and she decided to listen to him on this one.
Fifteen days after the Annual Malfoy Ball and he was ready to jump out of his skin. Over the course of those days, he quite often contemplated about the merits of Carroll's idea. The idea which notion he found utterly ridiculous all his life. Now, he did wonder if one could drown in the sea of tears?

It all started after the Ball. Contrary to his desires, neither one of them managed to get good night sleep. Not that night, and all the following nights. Hermione’s screams woke them up, and a good part of the rest of the household, that night. Somehow he could understand that. Nightmares were a very close acquaintance of his.

The tears, however, started the morning after the Ball. They woke up with gifts tucked at the foot of his bed and her sofa. He hoped, in vain, that the mountain of multicoloured packages would lift her spirits. They had opposite effect! She opened her gifts one by one, her face sliding down with every box she opened. The end result was tears and sniffling which turned into inconsolable sobs when he asked her to help him with his gifts. That supposed to be a distraction, not.. an invitation to more tears.

He never felt comfortable around tears. If they weren’t a potion ingredient he didn’t know what to do with them. Or how to coerce a person that produced them to stop doing that. For the life of him, he couldn’t discern what in the name of Salazar caused such reaction? It took him two additional days to dig up the reason out of her. The first waterfall invoked the fact that among all those gifts not a single one came from the Weasley’s. It was on a tip of his tongue to use that as a nudge for her to finally leave him be. But he stopped himself afraid of more instead of fewer tears. The second river of tears had more confusing and annoying reason. His own ‘distraction’ technique broth it out. Of all the things she could choose to cry about, not remembering to get him a gift was the most idiotic excuse he could imagine. Even his cold remark that she shouldn’t bother with that because he wouldn’t entertain the notion of getting her anything didn’t help.

That day, after tears came anger, directed at Lucius. She accused Lucius of a deliberate attempt to harm him!? The end result was sound of alarms. His magic flared again after numerous tries to stop them from hissing at each other, ignoring him. Alarms sounded when they pulled their wands. If he could he would strangle her! He did plan to confront Lucius and get to the bottom of Lucius’s stunt, but after that incident, his hands were tied.
From there on, everything went downhill. Hermione flickered between slobbering sopping mess and outburst of anger with painful unpredictability. The only ‘silver lining’ if one could call it that way, her nightmares kept his own memory flow at bay. Holidays dragged out the worst in people, reminding them that they are social lice’s. To his dismay, they found him as an appetising food. He barely managed to get a moment of peace. People who rarely gave him a thought in the day now lingering near his bed, trying to chat. Adding his own annoyance to her instability.

Other than that, his days fell into a routine of sorts. Not a pleasant routine at that.

Every morning would start with her flickering the wand at him. Irritating as that was, at least she didn’t make a big deal of it. More importantly, she never spoke of it which made all that easier to hide it from Lucius. Hiding his… condition during the day… was more challenging. But even on those occasions she would simply flick her want and keep her lips sealed. That suited him well, except… he had no time to analyze the situation properly. Especially if he added the irritating tidbits of information, he had yet to chew on, left to him by Minerva. He tucked those thoughts for more private moments. Lucius wasn’t skilled as he was, but with his own defences down… he didn’t want to risk it. As skilled Occlumens he knew what physical, psychological and emotional demand was. He also knew that he couldn’t fulfil them at the moment. The best solution was to control his thoughts process.

Hermione changed her dressing style after the party, too... well, if not more appropriate, then at least more concealing clothing. But, after situation didn’t change… he was prompt to rethink on the cause. Of course, he was still exposed to a great deal of her skin and her… touching him, twice a day. Once, in the morning hours, during their pool exercises. The second time, during the evening hours bath time. If he could get a bit of free time he could untangle that messy ball of yarn and… well… squash the bug. But, as of lately, free time was in a short supply.

Also, after the party, he came to the conclusion that thinking about his end goal was... not only counterproductive but dangerous as well. Faking that he was on the path to recovery could yield more fruitful results. That brought him at least some peace of mind.

The physical exercises finally started to pay off. Agitated as he was with them, they served their purpose. His arms gradually gained more strength. Even his back and abdominal muscles started to shape up and give him a bit of support. He hoped that his legs will follow soon. After all, they were crucial for his escape from the golden cage.

Combination of the peace of mind and slow gain of physical strength resulted in the most satisfactory way. Around a new year, he managed to perform Nox charm, intentionally. Now, only the question of his missing wand remained. As temperamental as others found his wand to be, it served him well all his life. He was quite accustomed to an inflexible piece of ebony with Dragon-heartstring.

Even his wound finally started to heal. It gave him hope that soon he might start wearing shirts again. The discomfort of being bare-chested had nothing to do with room temperature or season. He felt exposed.

One of the most pleasant, if one could call it that, routines he found to be the work on 'their secret project'. Rarely he had the opportunity to work with someone. Even rare that someone had a brain capacity that didn’t slow him down. That part of the day produced not only stimulated conversations, but they were also a distraction for her. Giving him in return rest from her outbursts. It also pushed his mind in the most unexpected direction. The lack of books on mind magic inspired Hermione to turn to more mundane books. Filling her trunk with Muggle medical books. He almost hoped that when holidays euphoria passes, they will have more time to devote to the research.

Those were normal days, of course. And he wouldn’t be stuck with this particular retrospect if today
was yet another normal day. For him it was. He never treated today differently than any other day. And he didn’t plan to start. Except… he was in the only place… surrounded with the only people… who didn’t treat this day as any other...

The pale light crawled over the horizon, but the room was still enveloped in darkness. She finally settled down after another round of nightmares. She fell asleep, leaving him to contemplate on recent developments. Now, he is doing his best to mentally fortify himself for the things that inevitably will follow.

Narcissa, he sighed, she will insist on cake and gifts. Lucius always gave him books, accompanied with the shared glass of wine or firewhiskey and silent cheer. He would sell his arse for a slow burn of liquor. Unfortunately, Poppy was quite adamant in her ‘No.’

…Late noon brought exactly the thing he dreaded. The door burst open and Draco barged in, followed by his parents. This time, Hermione stayed in the room, grinning. Misty popped in, snapping her fingers, and the bed tray table appeared with a moderately big cake on it.

“Happy birthday my friend!” called Lucius, pointedly avoiding to acknowledge Hermione’s presence in the room

“If you try to hug me, Lucius,…” he growled, his mood along with the small hope he held, spiralling down

“No, no hugging. Who do you think am I?” Lucius made a face at him, one of mock disdain

“I am not above hugging.” Grinned Draco

Narcissa grabbed the bed tray before Draco managed to throw himself over the cake. To his horror, he found himself not only in a tight bear hug from Draco but also lifted to a sitting position.

“Hey Granger, do your duty.”

“I see you yet didn’t start to use your brain, Malfoy.” He heard Hermione biting back. But he felt bed behind him bend, he presumed she was fixing the pillows.

“You should keep your mouth shut and do your work, like every good house help.” Sneered Draco

“For your information, you are doing my job at the moment. And you are doing it wrong at that.” Her voice was matter-at-fact with the hint of snide. He hoped that this won’t jolt Draco to let him flop back.

To his relief, it didn’t. Lucius stepped in and helped Draco to pull him back so he could lean into sitting position. It took him by surprise that neither Lucius nor Narcissa reacted to the hissing match between Hermione and Draco. Either they heard it enough times not to give a meaning to it, or they decided to wait. He released a gush of air when Draco moved away from him and eyed Narcissa warily. She stepped closer and leaned, giving him light peck on a cheek

‘At least she is acting normally.’ He felt relieved

“We won’t tire you too much, Severus.” Narcissa smiled at him “You have visitors scheduled for the afternoon.” He groaned

“Don’t tell me they decided to make a big deal of today.”

“Those who consider you their friend does. It is only Minerva and Potter.”
“Potter?” he could scream, the need to die or run away overwhelmed him

“Well, he is coming to see Miss Granger…”

“Good, so he can see her without pestering me.” He hissed

“Now, now Severus. Should I refresh your memory on how to behave?”

“You could only try and fail, Cissa.”

Narcissa raised an eyebrow at him, Hermione giggled in the background. Lucius handed him a packet that looked like books.

“At any rate…” he drawled “I hope you’ll find these particularly… entertaining.”

He narrowed his eyes at Lucius who had a naïve face. The sole fact that Lucius didn’t insist on him to open the present told him enough. He had nagging suspicion that he will have to open this gift while Hermione wasn’t in the room as well.

“How can I ever repay for your generosity, Lucius?” he intoned glaring daggers at naively looking Lucius

Narcissa placed a soft bundle next to him

“You know what this is.” she smiled tenderly

“There is no need to break the tradition.” He replies in kind. Every year, Narcissa would gift him a set of the finest wizarding robes

“Why indeed.” Grinned Draco, placing a square box of chocolates next to him.

“Thank you, Draco.” He nearly laughed. Draco would traditionally gift him a box of Draco’s favourite chocolates. The boy would munch the chocolates alone, knowing all too well that Severus didn’t have the sweet tooth. It started when Draco was four and it was the only part of today he didn’t mind. This year, however, Draco handed him another box

“Potter helped with this one.” He winked “So, I wouldn’t expect him to bring anything.”

“The greatest gift from Potter would be not to come at all.” He mumbled still annoyed with the fact that he would have to suffer through Potter’s company.

“Well, Severus, we leave you to rest and prepare for this afternoon. Lucius don’t you dare to tier him today.” Narcissa straightens her back “Misty, you can take out the cake, we will need it later today.”

The elf appeared and snapped her fingers. “For Lord Prince, my Mr Snape, Misty made special lunch today. Master Snape’s favourite.” She squeaked

“Thank you, Misty”.

He started to feel like everyone around him conspired against him. Paranoia tightening in a heavy ball above his solar plexus. Once they left, Hermione approached him

“Ummm, happy birthday, Severus.” She placed small bundle next to the other gifts, he blinked in confusion “Do you wished to open your gifts?”

“There is no need, I know exactly what the are.”
“Still.” She smiled and took her’s “I’ll start with mine.” She unwrapped the paper revealing a scrapbook with news clippings that glorified him

‘Nice attempt, Granger, but it won’t work.’ He thought

“I… didn’t know what else to…” she blushed, mumbling while unwrapping Cissa’s gift. “Oh, these are very fine robes!”

‘I know I have full fresser of them.’ Quipped his mind but he remained sombre and silent

“Chocolates? Does Draco know’s you don’t like chocolate?” she wrinkled her nose

“He does. Place them on the nightstand.” He sighed, he had no intention of explaining to her the significance of the gift

“And these look like books.” She picked up Lucius’s gift

“Leave it.” He commanded, but she ignored him

“Oh, these are heavy.”

“I advise you against opening that gift.” He tried again

“Malfoy said these books may entertain you. A little light reading isn’t bad.” She gave him one pointed look and he leaned more comfortably on the pillows. After all, it isn’t his fault that she won’t listen. He might indulge in a bit of amusement, after all.
She unwrapped two rather large tomes, one covered in black and the other in red leather. He smirked. She opened the first book. The black leather had only golden tribal on it. The first page revealed nothing to her. She recognised the letters as Hindi and glanced at him with amazement and curiosity.

‘Can he read this?’

“Well?” he drawled

“I… it is in Hindi. Can you read it?”

“I can.” His short reply stirred more questions, but his half-challenging half-amused look aggravated her. She flipped few pages but they only contained text. While turning pages her eye caught movement.

“What is this book?”

“I am not sharing that information.” He replied, his voice tight

“It looks like this one has pictures. Maybe I can figure out on my own. It is nice of Malfoy to give you the book with schemes and pictures” she mused flipping through the pages. The book looked old and she was careful not to damage it.

“Yes, because I find the letters boring, the picture might do the trick.” His voice laced with sarcasm she decided to ignore.

She opened the book and issue a small yelp, feeling the heat wrapping around her and settling on her face. This was not what she expected. She was sure it is one of the books on Dark Arts, not this…

“Does it have pictures?” he taunts her

“Ummm… yes.” She replied slowly

“I hope you satisfied your curiosity now” even if his tone clipped, she could recognise the hint of mockery in it
“Ummm…. Right… well…” she stuttered, gaining a new layer of red with each syllable “it appears to be…ummm…a sort of…a wizarding version of… Gods!... Kama Sutra.”

He let her shudder through the answers, his face impassive. He didn’t seem surprised at all and she hated him for not warning her. She looked at him and blinked… he did warn her. She was the one not listening.

“If you are quite done playing with the presents…”

“There is one more book!” she burped before she could pause and think what she was saying. But the burgundy coloured leather made her fingers itch and her curiosity flair. The other book had no markings on its covers.

She placed the first book on his lap, letting it go like it burned her. His eyes narrowed and darkened, he looked annoyed but didn’t say a word. She opened the book and closed it almost instantly. Her face couldn’t be redder at this point. The room felt like it was a hundred degrees in it.

“Ummmm….this is…ahem… Maverick’s guide to tantric and sex magic.” She whispered, placing that book on top of the other

He laughed. That pretty much scrambled her brain as thoroughly as the titles… and pictures…did. It was not that this was the first time she heard him laugh, it was that he never did that with her. The privilege of his laughter was reserved for Malfoy’s. And then it hit her… his words… he knew what the books were, he probably recognized the covers.

“You are vile, evil….” She stated but the new roll of laughter shut her off

The change in him was…disturbing…mesmerising…confusing. He looked... looked... different. The relaxed brows and laughing crinkles around his eyes seemed to shave off the years off his face. He looked so much younger. The mischievous glint in his eyes clashed harshly with everything she knew about him so far. Abruptly as it started, his face morphed once again into the hard mask of scorn.

“In retrospect… What did we learn about opening the presents given by one Lucius Malfoy?” his voice still raspy from laughing but sharp

“Not to open them?”

“Indeed.” He nodded, ignoring the questioning note in her answer

She took the books like they could spring the teeth and bite her. If given the option she would rather wrestle with the Monster book of monsters than holding… this. She placed the books on the nightstand, not knowing what to do with them. And swiftly placed Narcissa’s gift over them.

“I hope you learned your lesson, Hermione. Unless…” the glimmer of mischief flickered in his eyes and his voice “Unless... the titles are to your preference. In that case… you are welcome to borrow them.”

Apparently, she could blush more, impossible as it seemed. Shaking her head, eager to express her denial. Her throat constricted. It took her three or four attempts to subdue her voice to her will.

“Errrrr… thank you… I mean… NO! Thank you… Well, yes... I… I’ll just go… to take a shower…” she turned on her heal towards the bathroom. Then returned to pick up all necessities and moonwalk back to the bathroom. Her hand was on the door handle when she heard a soft chuckle.
Her brain raced. The realisation of what she said equalled the feeling of smashing at the hard wall at the speed of light. She twirled on her heel to face him, she probably did look a bit frantic. She certainly felt frantic, if she could go by the shrill note in her voice

“NO!!!! I didn’t mean like that! Errrr… I… just… The guests and the… I didn’t mean like that.” The last part was nearly a cry

“Take you shower Granger.” He dismissed her, but she could tell that he bit down another burst of laughter. Shutting the door behind her, she warded them, not ready to hear him laughing at her expense.

Shaking her head to dispel all the pictures that swirled around her brain she sighed. This wasn’t his fault. She pushed the matter. She did what she always does, and it retaliated.

“Lesson well learned, indeed.” Mumbled to her chin.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The moment he felt the ripple of magic in the air he started laughing again. He couldn’t remember when was the last time he laughed from the heart. Oh, right – Poppy came on him like a ton of bricks for that – and he had to thank Hermione for that as well. It was when he saw her polyjuiced into a cat.

He glances at the books. He knew both of the books well, they were part of Lucius’s library. It must have pained Lucius to wrap them as a mock gift. It will pain him, even more, when he refused to return them once the amusement of the whim expires. After all, he did receive them as a gift. And now, he owned one of the three remaining copies, the first edition - handwritten Wizarding Kama Sutra. In pristine condition. Not to mention, banned in England, Maverick's guide.

That would be ample punishment for all Lucius’s antic. And he won’t share the memory either. Even if the memory was one to keep. Her face was… indescribable. Emotions clashed on it with such speed and clarity it was almost fascinating. There was no painter in the world, Muggle or Wizarding, which could capture and portray the shade of red on her face. He chuckled. His throat burns from laughing, but it was worth the pain.

This birthday turned out to be quite… pleasing, surprisingly so. His hand brushed against the forgotten box. He tried to pick it up, it was light and radiating slight magic. With painstaking slowness, he forced his limbs to function and moved the box to his lap. It took time to open the box, returning him to reality. He was still weak as an infant. With an annoyed groan, he finally managed to open the box and gasped.

His wand rested on the purple velvet. Raising one shaky hand, while his muscles screamed in pain, he guided trembling fingers over the polished wood. He won’t be able to use his wand for a while, but just by having it, gave him comfort. The comfort he thought never would feel in his life.

Today feared much better than he hoped for or ever believed possible. This wasn’t life after the war, this was life with no impending doom in the future. Too bad it was already late for him, he might enjoy this new and liberating lifestyle.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

When she returned to the room he was, once again, gloomy. She sighed, disappointed. She could get used to that persona, buried deep inside him. It was far more pleasant that sharp-fanged, poisonous snake he usually was. Even when he laughed at her expense.
The rest of the day passed in more or less familiar fashion. Minerva came after the late lunch hour and send her out of the room. She spent the time with Narcissa. The woman seemed determined to mould her into one of the high society ladies. She couldn’t figure out why. But, maybe, Narcissa just couldn’t tolerate her informality and took upon herself to educate her.

Minerva certainly didn’t do anything to lift Severus’s spirits up. He was even gloomier after she left. Whatever they talked about wasn’t for her ears. He remained lip-locked and grouchier that in a long time.

When Harry came she was half afraid he would snap at Harry and toss him out. To her surprise, he didn’t. Through, the conversation didn’t go smoothly. She suspected it had something to do with the present, the one she wished Harry didn’t bother to compile. Harry made him a scrapbook as well, filled with pictures of Snape and his mum. He added the letters his mother wrote and in which she mentioned Snape.

As much as she understood how hard it must have been for Harry to part for those things - she disagreed with Harry's choice. If you are giving a gift to someone who set his heart on suicide, you do not give him a rope as a gift. This will make what she tries to do all that much difficult.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Harry frowned. He didn’t like what Snape just told him, not one bit.

“I don’t see…”

“If you want to make a difference, Potter, you bloody well have to learn those things.” Grumbled Snape.

“I’m afraid Severus has a point, Harry.” Hermione nodded “It is not that I disagree with you, but... Look, I learned a lot since I got here… And... well, the fact is – nothing really changed. If we don’t speak in the way they want to hear, they won’t listen. Even your fame won’t influence them enough to listen. Besides, you need at least learn the laws to be able to make a difference.”

“But to accept the title, Hermione that goes against all we fought for.”

“It does not. We fought against bigotry and madman, but not customs and traditions. And the wizarding world has some lovely traditions. Imagine if you let everything from the Muggle world to comes through. No more same-sex marriages, for starters. The wizarding world is open-minded, even if it is stuck in time. To let the progress for the sake of progress alone… is not the best option.”

“Now you sound like that pink toad.” He huffed

“I do not! And you know it. The wizarding world is in a desperate need of progress. But cleverly filtered one. The kind of progress that comes slowly and preserves the good while enhances and changes the bad. The title would only help you! Take Severus for example.” She waved her hand toward the Snape who frowned and hissed, but she ignored it “He is the descendant of one of the oldest wizarding families in England. And yet his status was significantly diminished by the fact that his mother married the Muggle. That fact alone placed him on a very low bar in the hierarchy. If his father was a wizard, his status would have been much better. That is the prejudice you should fight against. Not the fact that one is proud of his family tree, I am proud of mine! But that fact that family line falls down solely to a male heir. And it is infuriating because in everything else women are equal with men. And the worst of it, that law came to wizarding world from Muggle world.”

Halfway through her lecture, Hermione stood up. Now she was pacing back and forth, waving her
hands and pointing at him. He had a flashback to their school days when she did that often. Lecturing him and Ron on this and that. Worst of all, she was right, as usual. He glanced at Snape who looked almost amused by her lecture.

“Well… yes. I see your point, Hermione.”

“Do you?” she huffed turning to him “It is school all over again, I have to do all the thinking. I can’t think for you forever, Harry. And you have to stop rushing into things.”

“I will. I promise.” He sighed, this was school all over again “I am sorry, but I have to go…”

‘Did Snape just chuckled?’

“And you have to read the books from the list I gave you.” Hermione continued. He was glad that she seemed much better, almost her old self. Unfortunately, he forgot how taxing her old self could be

“I will.” He promised, his hand on the door handle

“I might have gone easier on you, Potter, if I knew with what you are dealing.” Snape did sound amused, but his remark spur Hermione to turn to him

“And you…”

Harry used the opportunity to slip out of the room. At this moment he didn’t envy Snape at all. He even feels for him. When she got like this the smartest thing was to bend your head and not talk. Snape will have to learn that the hard way.
The January slowly slide into February. He was more than a little disgruntled with seatback he had to face. After his birthday majority of visitors went on with their lives, abandoning the notion to force their company on him. At the same time, the remodelling of Malfoy Manor commenced. But still, one of the careless visitors brought a cold upon him. Poppy named that as a good thing, baring the Peper-me-up in the favour of hot tea with lemon and runny nose.

If he had any saying in that... If he had any means to defend himself... But he hasn’t. Poppy’s explanation that cold was the perfect opportunity for him... to build his nearly destroyed immune system anew, sounded like a poor excuse. After seven days of high fever and both Hermione’s and Misty’s fussing, he was downright murderous. Malfoy’s wisely proclaimed his room as a quarantine zone and avoided him and his moods. Hermione seemed to grow the extra layer or two of skin, and nothing he said set her off her tracks.

By the end of January, he was free of the cold. Hermione, however, fell a prey to it. The stubborn idiotic child refused to budge from the room or to stop fussing around him. For reason unknown to him – Poppy supported her decision. In his own opinion, they devised this plan with the sole purpose to aggravate him. More often than not, the girl was too exhausted for anything. She would fuss around him only to lose her strength and fell asleep curled at the foot of his bed. As the first week of February slipped away, he almost... almost, get used to the fact that she would do that at least few times during the day. Begrudgingly, he consoled himself with fact that dog or cat owners suffered the same fate. He never owned a pet other than Hades. But he head enough to know, the cat or a dog would force their owners to relent and grant them the sleeping space on their covers. With all the stories he heard... he should consider himself lucky. At least, she didn’t try to adopt more of the quadrupedal habits and tried to wiggle her way under the covers. He cringed at the thought.

Unfortunately, all this put the stop on their exercises. After nearly twenty days of break and strength draining sickness - his strength was waning. He thought that this seat back was inadmissible, but he had no power to change anything.

His than her sickness also put the damper on their research. Even if the joint effort progressed, as fast as their conditions permitted – he deems it too slow. He never voiced his gratitude to whatever Deity took charge, even if he felt it. The said Deity must have been some obscure, minor and long forgotten. The one with the penchant for lost sinners. There was no other explanation why would any Deity take pity on him. But the influx of his memories stopped, for good – he dare to hope. Her nightmare was another story. But, in overall she was getting better, and he started to wonder when...
the next breakdown will happen.

It wasn’t the question if but when. Even if to the surroundings she seemed fine. Returned to her old bossy insufferable know-it-all ways… he knew better. Working through the issues was a slow and painstaking process. One that he managed to thwart with outbursts when he would lock himself in the room and drink. Drink until his body couldn’t handle it anymore and until he put himself out off the consciousness. Followed by days of headaches, and bitterness and gagging at the smell of alcohol. Any alcohol at all. However, she wasn’t him. And with trepidation, he waited the moment when he would have to suffer the unpredictable moody mess once more.

Things did tone down for now. Especially after the day when Potter showed up with Ginevra and George at his heel. Why she was so hung on the Weasley’s was beyond any reasonable comprehension. But they were one of his options if he was to get rid of the girl. Luckily for him, the whole crying episode was unnecessary. And once he is strong enough, he will personally hex the living life out of the youngest Weasley male. Slowly and painfully. He will put him to the same amount of misery he had to suffer. The missing gifts, as it turned out, weren’t missing at all. Ronald hid them, telling his mother that he already sent them on their way, an attempt to ‘call her to her senses’. And for once in his life, Severus was ready to agree with the dolt. If the said dolt had brain enough to understand the situation. It was just his luck that Ronald’s action had the opposite effect.

The moment when Potter entered the room she froze. Blinking mutely before spurring to action followed by a flood of tears and words. Words in such tone that he had to banish them all into the hallway. Narcissa followed his example by ushering them to her parlour and warding the door for sound. After that day the floodgates finally closed down. Not that he had any doubts, Molly always the mother hen never abandoned anyone. Not only that she got presents and best wishes from various Weasley’s. He was also cursed with one of the sweaters. Molly went on an edge to make him a black sweater with a green snake that looked more like a lizard splattered over the road than a snake. He won’t have to suffer… this… social atrocity… for long – hopefully.

For now, in rare moments when he had peace, he contemplated deep philosophical questions of the afterlife. Hermione’s persistence to include Muggle medicine into their research nudged him in that direction. He entertained himself with combining the knowledge of Muggle theories, no matter how absurd, with wizarding ones. After all, he would have plenty of time to confirm or deny his conclusions, once he faces the Deity in charge of him. He would wrestle the answers if need be. For now, those musings seemed like a wise course of his rough thought process. Far more… safer… than to face real problem at hand. The conviction fortified itself after she got sick. Contemplating on afterlife seemed like a healthy course. Especially when she adopted the habit of passing out on his bed.

The second week in February, Lucius started coming to the room again. It gave him a pleasure to inform Lucius about the changed ownership of the books. It didn’t make Lucius happy, but his friend didn’t put much of a fight either. Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes… life was at least bearable – to the certain degree.

Hermione was gazing through the window, pretending to read. More and more she used books as a cover instead of their actual purpose. It suited him fine, as long as it would grant him a bit of breathing space. When Lucius hobbled into the room she jolted out of the sofa and with a hiss marched to the bathroom. Lucius had the sour look on his face. From constant arguing, those two slid to disdainfully ignoring.

“I grabbed a few moments for you, Severus.” Lucius turned to him

“You want to say that you wiggled you’re but out of the work again.”
“Precisely. I am not nor ever will be a mason, carpenter or decorator.”

“Things are progressing fine, then?”

“Better than. I wanted to thank you for coaxing Draco to talk to me.”

“And how that went?”

“We talk. It is a bumpy road, but at least we talk now. I made the arrangements and new contract is being drafted.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

With an annoyed huff, she closed the door behind her. Working as fast as she could. She warded the door, set the blanket in front of them, sliding one of the extendable ears she had into the room. After Severus’s birthday, she started to spy on their conversations. If she wanted to crush down Malfoy she needed the ammunition.

She leaned her eye to the keyhole. It was one of the ancient keyholes, large enough to give her the good view of his bed and part of the room. So far, their conversations revolved around boring topics. Mentioning of Draco, however, gave her hope that she might hear something valuable. Her eyes narrowed at Malfoy’s words

“You may take the page from your own book, Severus. You know?”

“I have no idea what are you talking about.”

“I don’t say that you go on the limb and find ‘love’. But, the little bit of relaxation and distraction wouldn’t do you any harm.”

“Lucius…” Snape sighed sounding tired

“How long has it been, Severus?”

“We are not having this conversation, Lucius.” The tingle of threat in Snape’s voice didn’t do much to sidetrack Malfoy

“Yes, we do.” Growled Malfoy “I am sick at tired of watching you denying yourself.”

“Yes, because I am surrounded by opportunities. How do I manage to resist them?” sarcastic drawl had familiar note of malice

“One word from you and opportunities will present themselves.”

“Lucius….”

“I do what I can, Severus. For all I care, you can indulge yourself…”

“Lucius!”

“Oh! Don’t tell me you didn’t notice her.”

“The mentioned ‘her’ is my student.”
“If you exclude all your students you are in a serious trouble.”

“As it happens to be I. Don’t. Fuck. Children. ”

Her eyes widened. Angry as she is, Malfoy maybe onto something. If he could find… distraction… a bit of pleasure in his life… he might just stop thinking about offing himself. How to arrange something like that was one problem. The other would be how to find someone who won’t run away screaming from him.

She will have to give that idea a thought. She will also have to tread carefully not to tip him off. Apparently, Malfoy didn’t share her careful line of thinking

“Your problem is, my friend, you don’t fuck. Period.” Hissed Malfoy

“My choices are my own, Lucius, and I urge you to respect them.” Came terse reply

“What choices? Living like a monk because of your misplaced longing for that stuck-up swot.”

“Don’t you dare…”

“What? Speak the truth? You do not intimidate me nearly enough to remain silent any longer.”

“And what would you know of her beside her blood status?”

“Plenty as it happens to be.”

“You never liked her or supported…”

“No, I did not. And it had nothing to do with her blood status either.” Snapped Malfoy which earned him one derisive snort from Snape. Malfoy continued “My dislike of her had more with the way she treated you.”

“She was my friend.”

“She used to be your friend. Yes, but only to the point you were willing to bow your head and follow the path she designed.”

“You were not present, you have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Don’t I? Tell me, brother, how many times she complained about your love for Dark Arts,? Without an attempt to understand it? How many times did she complain about your choice of friends? Did she ever voice that you may socialise with her friends instead? Did she offer anything except reproach? And… how many times you wrote her potions homework?”

“Lucius, I’m warning you…”

“How many times she gave that same homework to Potter and Black? Face it, my brother, she may have been your friend once. When she had no one similar at her side. But once she came to the school, her true colours shone quite brightly. She was manipulative and she couldn’t stand those who had the backbone to protest her. She never gave if she didn’t see a benefit in her gift. And you…had nothing to offer, not what she craved for.”

“Lucius…stop it.”

“Do you know how I know? Regulus. Black wasn’t shy on bagging how he never pursue her only because of his respect for the Potter. She wanted status, one you couldn’t give her.”
“Shut up Lucius.” Hissed Snape.

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand. Snape looked like he would jump out of the bed and strangle Malfoy with his bare hands. Mask of pain and anger distorting his face. For some reason, Malfoy kept on twisting the knife in the wound his words opened

“I won’t. For once in my life, I won’t remain silent. Not anymore! I won’t stand by and watch one of my own white into nothingness. I won’t watch you punishing yourself, wasting your life away. For whom? For her? If she loved you, if she showed an ounce of affection towards you, I would find the way to help you. To make it happen, Dark Lord or not. For all my life, as long as we know each other, I did my best to sidetrack you. To show you that there are others, more deserving of your attention. At least more willing to have your attention. So yes, at this point I’d be grateful for anyone. Anyone . Even that little menace locked in the bathroom!”

She sat on her heels and closed her eyes. Torn between the feeling of anger and agreement with Malfoy. She could barge in the room and hex him for speaking that way about her. Putting that aside, logically thinking, she thought that Malfoy’s words had some merit. Especially if they were true.

Magic rippled through the air and she started to remove the blockage she piled up next to the door. The Loud bang of broken stone tore up the scream from her lips. She runs into the room. Malfoy was next to the window, leaning on his cane. Mask of cold anger on his face. Snape was sitting in the bed. One trembling hand stretched, fingers curled around the wand. Wand pointed to space above the fireplace, where once was a mantle, but now an only gaping hole. Neither of men looked at her.

“This conversation is over .” Rasped Snape

Malfoy hobbled to the exit door, eyes locked on Snape. To her, time seemed to crawl at snail's pace while Malfoy picked his way through the rubble. He left the room without a word.

She watched Snape unsure of what to do. Her first impulse was to run to him, try to offer comfort… but… He was still petrified in the same position. His face shadowed by pain. And she was reluctant to approach him and set him off once more. Finally, he fell back to bed. Hand still gripping the black wood. A desperate grip of a drowning man that took all the colour out of his wrist and knuckles. The covers started to shake in a distinctive motion of silent, dry sobs.

Her body twitched. She wanted… no! She had almost physical need to go to him. To help and protect and heal. It surprised her how tight her chest felt from the realisation that her help wouldn’t be accepted. As quietly as possible, she turned on her heel and returned to the bathroom. If she couldn’t help, least she could do is to give him privacy.
Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delayed posting of this chapter, yesterdays tempo was insane. I got home too late and too tired of check the chapter before posting it.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

He couldn’t stop it. He bit his lips to stop the scream, and that was all he could do. If he could be grateful for anything in his life, it would be the sound of bathroom door click. Pain wracked through him. Searing, mind-numbing pain. He gripped his wand with all his might. A warm piece of wood his only connection to reality.

Lucius’s words cut him. Carved him up from inside. The air is like ice. With each breath, his chest constricted. Led-made fist gripped his throat and squeezed with inhuman strength. Even if he bit down the screams, he would sell what’s left of his soul for tears. His eyes were dry. They burn and prickled, full of cactus needles, but they stayed dry.

The worst of all… he could hurt Lucius. Not only him. He could have brought entire wing of the Manor down. Lucius’s words sounded cruel. But no matter how cruel, they ringed with the truth. Lucius never lied to him, he may omit but he never told an open lie in his face. The fact only deepened his agony.

She was not only his life. She was the reason. For years, everything he did, he did because of her. He would never even consider joining the Dark Lord ranks. Not if he didn’t want to prove himself... if he didn’t need the recognition. Recognition and good job, money and status. Those were the thing he could offer to her. After she turned her back on him, they were all that left. And still, if he managed to fight his way to the top… she might have changed her mind. He sold his life to Albus for her, to save her. Albus used him and failed him. Her death sealed his fate. He stayed alive to save her kid. Twenty-odd years. Twenty, blood-sweating, years.

He had no choice. Not anymore. No matter the truth. He had to believe. She was his lifeline. The only reason to force this shell he was to move. Empty space, where his heart once was, pumped pain into his veins.

If he allows himself to believe in Lucius’s words, even for a second… then, his entire life was... misspent. All his life squandered for nothing. If he let his brothers words to be true… what did that say about his ability to judge character? Why then he suffered through all? If that was true, then death is a blessing for him.

Faint taste of copper tickling down his tongue. He bit harder. No amount of physical pain can
compete with what he feels now. He is so tired. Tired of lies. Tired of truth. Tired of life. And all he desires is to end.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She paces around the bathroom. Her heart beating a tattoo against her chest. Should she go in the room? Should she at least try? But how? How to console someone whose heart was just ripped off, while still beating? And, didn’t she spend weeks crying, because of Ron? How painful was for her to admit that Ron does not love her, at least not honestly?

She came to the door and glanced through the keyhole. He still didn’t move. Misty came and cleaned the rubble a while ago, but that was the only motion in the room.

What was puzzling the most is not the revelation of what Malfoy said. It was her own reaction to the words. Her brain trying to work out a solution, whom to ask? Someone had to know the truth, but who would be willing to tell? Maybe Poppy? People always had a habit not to speak ill of the dead. Not even to think ill of the dead. In that regard, Snape was the most honest person she met. He didn’t change his mind about someone because that someone was dead.

She almost squealed and took her wand, conjuring Patronus. It was still the blob, she thought that only for a second her blob started to take shape. She shook her head

‘Wishful thinking, Hermione.’

She sent a message and sat on the ground, waiting for a reply. Hoping that the one person she could think off was willing to shed some light on the subject. And she hoped that whatever she finds out, Harry never will. Knock on the door snapped her from her thoughts. Draco’s head poked through the door

“Mother is expecting you in her parlour, Granger.”

“Thank you.” She whispered. She has no strength to be impolite or snappy to Draco. She will never see him as a friend, but at the moment she is grateful that he is here. “Please, take care of him.” She added in quiet, soft voice

Draco looked at her like she lost her mind, but only nodded. She practically runs to the door and knocks on them, before entering the parlour. Narcissa is sitting in her usual spot.

“Thank you for answering my plea, Mrs Malfoy.”

“You are welcome. Now, how can I help you?”

“Do you… have you… met Lilly? Harry’s mum?”

“I did. She was younger, Severus’s age. We didn’t have much of a contact.”

“But, you did notice her. Right? You know about her?”

“Within the bounds of our limited contact, yes. Why would you want to know about her? I do not think that your friend would accept any knowledge about her… that comes from Malfoy, or a Slytherin for that matter.”

“No! It is not about Harry. Gods, I hope Harry never finds out… if… if it’s true.” She gulped

“You… know what happened…?”
“It is hard not to notice or know if one blows up a part of your home.”

“Was he telling the truth?”

“Who?”

“Malfoy, your husband? Was he telling the truth or merely provoking Severus?”

“Lucius isn’t insane, Miss Granger. He wouldn’t provoke Severus with that. You give Lucius far less credit than he deserves.”

“I… you know this already, but I don’t have a good opinion about your husband. However, even I can see that cares about Severus. And as much as it pains me to say… I agree with some things he said. But for now, I need to know. Please.”

“Very well. What I know about Lily Potter nee Evans isn’t much. But the girl did do her best to get on everyone’s good side. In the first year, she was shy. By the second year, she was one of the smart but popular girls in her dorm. Even then, she did try to put some distance between her and Severus. Delicately, mind you, she didn’t push him off. He never noticed that. He was… infatuated with her. You might say obsessed. Which is no big surprise if you consider where he’s coming from. Or what his life looked like and how everyone looked at him in his own house.”

“In Slytherin? I thought…”

“Miss Granger, he was half-blood. The one coming from Manchester slums. His mother disgraced and disowned. He bears Muggle last name. All that in time when the Dark Lord was in his prime.”

“Right.”

“He wasn’t bullied. We never bully our own. But he wasn’t supported much either. He had to claw his way among the student ranks. To prove himself more than others. He was not entitled. Even with Lucius’s protection, which he had from the first day.” Narcissa sighed “And he was friend with Muggleborn. In that time – that was a serious crime. To be open about liking Muggleborns or Gryffindor's for that matter.”

“I guess so.”

“Do not draw the conclusions. Not all Slytherin’s hated Muggleborns or gave a damn about blood purity. But they were smart enough to hide it. He was… shy but stubborn. Always strong in what he believes. She on the other hand… was not. I can’t tell you what happened after I left school. But by the time I did, it was obvious that she made up her mind – he was to follow her idea or to be gone. By that time he was the only black spot she had. She didn’t condone the bullying. But, she was very adept at… turning a blind eye to what was going on.”

“I see.”

“They were in the third year when I was seventh. After that, I only knew gossips. But Regulus did talk about his brother speaking not in a… polite manner… about her. He told us that she wasn’t above flirting if that would score her points. She was modest, but as you know, modesty can be a powerful weapon.” Smiled Narcissa “That is all I know. Now then, I won’t even ask how do you know what Lucius said.”

“Yes, well… I…” it never occurred to her that in asking Narcissa, she tipped her hand

“Do not worry, Miss Granger, my lips are sealed. As I told you before, female magic is different than
“You are welcome. Go now. Take good care of him. He will need it in days to come.”

She nodded once more. Her head spinning. It wasn’t much, but it was something. The pain she felt for him wasn’t pitying. Somewhere under the peak of her ribcage, it coiled into a hot ball of anger. Anger at fate, at destiny so cruel. It wasn’t fair. When did the so-called ‘good side’ turn to be not so good? Why did such obvious villains turn to be the ones you could respect if not like? She was aware of the fact that being noble, wasn’t a house trait. But she wondered, how many more noble ones they overlooked, based on house allegiances.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The crowds are cheering, but his insides are crunching. Something is wrong, he can tell. It is not something at which he can point his finger, but he can feel it. It tingled his skin in an unpleasant way. Then he felt it! At first, it was mild sting then flash of white pain. It feels like his left arm is on fire. He leans to Albus.

“My mark is burning.”

“Are you sure.”

“It is rather an unforgettable sensation.” He hissed wanting to smash Albus on his head “What do you want me to do?”

“Wait. I’ll need you.”

He nods and pulls back. Cold sweat trickled down his back. The pain intensifies, lasts for a minute or two more and then stops. Dark Lord will punish him. When Albus finally sends him, he will be lucky if he gets out of the meeting with his life. He glances around the crowds and spots Igor, he looks almost frantic. He smirked.

‘Wrong choice.’ He thinks bitterly.

Time ticks away and he is getting restless. What is going on? Nothing good. Potter returns and everything explodes. He glances at Albus and rushes to Igor, grabbing him by the sleeve.

“You still have time. Don’t do it.”

“No, no. I’m going into hiding.” Igor shakes his head and rushes off. Albus calls him and he rushes to fell into step behind Albus…

…It is late. Idiots! All of them! He scribbled the note and steps out of the castle. One sharp whistle and Hades swoops in. He pins the note to his leg.

“Find him, and if he demands – wait for a reply. Find the Dark Lord.”

Watching Hades flying away, his breath hitches. Fear. He didn’t feel it for years. He should be inside, doing… anything but standing in the same spot. But… he can’t. Finally, three long hours later Hades lands on the ground in front of him with a disgruntled squawk.

“Any messages?”
Hades ruffled his feather and gave him an annoyed glance before he outstretched his leg. Crouching to untie the note he asks

“Did he hurt you?”

Hades puffed his feathers and flew off without a backward glance. Holding breath he unrolls the note and casts Lumos. The note is short

‘I am waiting.’

The fear made him shiver for a second. He takes a deep breath and starts walking toward the school gates. Once he was at apparition point he presses his wand on the mark. Short sting and he is pulled into the tight squeeze of the apparition.

The Manor he is in is unfamiliar. After all those years… and still, the place is unfamiliar. Dark Lord stepped out of the shadow and his breath hitched for a split second. Once beautiful face now is only disfigured, inhuman mask. The eyes, however, are the same. He does not wait but falls to his knees. It is one of those life or death situations, and he has to do his best to survive.

“My Lord.”

“You are late Severus. How… disappointing.”

“Yes my Lord. I am guilty of not answering the call right away.”

“And what is your excuse, Severus?”

“I have none, my Lord. Dumbledore demanded my presence until the last task was over. And after… Potter announced your return, my Lord.”

Dark Lord’s head snapped up, he noted the motion even if his eyes are on the ground.

“They didn’t believe him.”

“Show me.”

He raised his head directing his eyes to the Dark Lord. Carefully, he pushed the memories to the front of his mind. The familiar sensation of intrusion. A headache swirls the hot needles in his temples, but he ignores them. After a while pressure and pain signal him that the Dark Lord found all that he wanted.

“Good. Very good. You prove to be useful as ever Severus. But not even you… looked for me.”

“No, my Lord. I did not.”

“Why? You were one of my most loyal ones, Severus. With what did I deserve your scorn.”

“I followed your wishes, my Lord. Your last instruction, given to me. ‘No matter what, stay at the old fool’s elbow. He needs to trust you unconditionally.’ And I stayed. I played my part. Even after your call came, my Lord.”

“To what end?”

“I am here at his instruction, my Lord. He want’s me as his spy once more.”

“I am… pleased to see… that I did not lose you. You did well.”
He breathed the breath of relief. He will survive. Whatever happens next, he won’t die. Through, the death might be preferable before the night is over.

“However. You did ignore my call. And I do not tolerate disobedience, Severus. Not by those who forsake me, let me rot. Did not have enough in them to sense my presence, when I was so close to them.”

“I… deserve any punishment my Lord deems fitting.”

“Indeed you do. Indeed you do.” Hisses Dark Lord and runs one cold deformed hand over his hair
“I will be merciful this time. Do not disappoint me again, Severus.”

“No, my Lord. I won’t...” he whispered, but even if the words slip against his lips his mind prepares. There are few spells Dark Lord could use, but his favourite...

“Crucio.” The words are only whispers before spell hits him. Before pain colour the back of his eyelids with bright white. Before he unlocks his jaw and let the scream out.

His eyes flew open. He hears the hiccup of a muffled cry. Closing his eye in front of an inevitable he managed to choke one, voiceless

“Boloks”
He tried to scoff at her. His voice rough and scratchy

“Don’t you dare, Granger.”

But the words sound broken, dissolved and shattered by the chatter of this teeth. There is no way around what’s going to happen next. His arm twitched, muscle trying to contract and stretch at the same moment. How much longer his ligaments will endure before they start to tear? Before the damage is permanent?

He can feel it. Her small hand pressing down on his right forearm, pinning it to the bed. He wants to speak, to send her off. It is nothing he can’t handle. He endured these aftershocks for years – alone. He can do it again – alone. He does not need her help. He does not need human touch or company. What he needs is to everyone leave him alone. Like the wounded beast. Alone to fade out quietly, unthreatened. Is it too much to ask? Just one, the last one, the act of mercy. Or is he doomed to muddle through this life without being on recipients end of mercy?

She leans, he feels the pressure of her torso on his ribs. She managed to hunt down his left arm. She pinned that arm too, to the bed. Her action adds to the whirlwind of emotions inside him. He opens his mouth to chase her away. The taste of copper fills his mouth. That’s is going to hurt tomorrow.

The top of her head presses gently on his chin, forcing his mouth to stay closed, tilting his head slightly back. He can feel her struggle. Her weight pressing him down. Her hands are warm. Too warm. It feels like pouring a sizzling oil over the open wound. It feels like silk. Now he can’t tell her to leave him be. She prevented even that! And no matter how much her unorthodox method efficiently serves the purpose, he can’t find a gratitude for it in his heart.

Warm puffs of her shallow, laboured breath create a moist patch on his neck. She is careful not to disturb the wound, turning her face to the other side. Tumbleweed residing on her head is anything but helpful. It tickles his face, nose, shoulders and collarbones. One might think that a padding of that magnitude can be the advantage in the situation rather than a problem.

He is not grateful! Is it too much to ask for solitude? Not visible to the bare eye but he is bleeding. Bleeding inside. It is enough that he has to face the entire ordeal. Witnesses are not desired nor welcomed.

Her feet are bearing in the middle of his tibias. Alarm bells in his head ring with clarity. They raise
long neglected conundrum he has. His head, his freshly ripped off heart and his body are at odds. He despises it. The loss of the control. He was always the master of his mind and his body. He carefully measures every breath, little less everything else. Tight control and reign on his actions, feelings, thought processes is imperative. That kept him alive. That will help him in his future endeavours.

His head jerked. The sharp sound of chattering teeth and her soft yelp mixing with her laboured breathing. That had to be painful. His chin collided with the top of her head. She is not giving up. Nearly pressing her face to his neck, she gives her best to maintain her grip on him.

Salazar, will this ever stop? He wants to get rid of her. He wants her as far away as possible. Away from him. Tremors subside, only to reappear with the new onslaught.

‘Merlin, give me strength!’

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Poppy stepped out of the fireplace and glanced around the room. Severus looks like he wrestled with the Death. Hermione looks bone tired. She approached the bed, casting diagnostic charms. Nothing out of the ordinary. The boy only needs some rest.

Narcissa slipped into the room. She stands near the door, unobtrusive. That girl always had good manners. She walks to the bed only when Poppy went to check on Hermione. The child faired well, more adapted to take care of him than she thought.

“Matron, can I ask a question?” Hermione’s voice is low

“Just a moment. My apologies Narcissa, we need some privacy.” She turns to the lady of the house

“It is fine, Madam Pomfrey”

She casts privacy spell. The one often used in hospital and turns to Hermione, casting diagnostic spell on her as well

“You can speak now, girl.”

“Can you tell me more about...ummm...”

“Lily Evans?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Girl, you are best friend with her son. You are taking care of Severus. There is only one connection between those two.”

“Well, yes. I suppose...”

“I can’t tell you much. She was a healthy girl. Clever as you can find them. Smart but not very studious, talented in magic. One thing she wasn’t... she was not a good match for him.”

“That is common knowledge. She married Harry’s dad.”

“Don’t speak rashly, girl. Learn to listen before judging. I am not talking about common knowledge. In old times people used to pair based on the compatibility of their magic. It may have caused revolt and tears, but in the end, unions forged like that were stronger. Suffice to say, wizarding world had no need for divorce laws back then. I note the magic one possess to a student’s chart, along with the
name and eye colour. She was not a good match for him. That boy needs an inquiring mind, not a restless spirit.” She glanced at the man on the bed. “Too bad he never realised that.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide, she glanced at the bed, sadness colouring her eyes. For the girl, he is her teacher, but Poppy only sees a boy, too thin for his age, bruised, shy and too serious. He didn’t change much over the years. Finishing her diagnostic, she nods

“Do you know any couples that married that way nowadays?”

“I do, and so do you.” she smiles at the girl “You are as good as you can be.”

Canceling privacy spell, she bid her goodbye to Narcissa and hurried back to Hogwarts. She has the room full of kids with sniffles as an addition to usual mishaps.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione felt tired, almost as tired as she was during their hunt for Horcruxes. It wasn’t only the lack of sleep of exhaustion. Her spirit feels tired. Her brain hurts when she tries to think.

All her efforts paid off. He regains his strength steadily. The discovery would make her happy if tonight never happened. With a gain of his strength, she discovered how hard it is to hold him down. It took too much of her strength to pin him down.

He is still composed of jutting bones and sharp edges. She is certain she has a bruise in a shape of his hip. Her head hurts and she has a bump in a spot where his chin collided with the top of her head. It was a difficult night. In more ways than one.

She tried, she did! And failed. At first, she tried to do what she usually does, to avoid as much contact as possible. But this time… finally, she abandoned all attempts to prevent contact and used her own weight to pin him down. Her arm muscles hurt from the struggle to hold his hand on the spot. It wasn’t easy when he was weaker, but now it’s almost impossible. He didn’t just trash like he used to. He was twitching and bucking, giving his best to arch his back. The entire experience left her bone-weary, muscle-sore and confused. Angry.

Once again, angry at faith. Angry at Dumbledore. If he knew that Snape will suffer the punishment – why not sending him right away? True, Harry would see him. But Harry saw the Mark on his hand anyway. And it isn’t like Harry trusted him before. There was no damage in that. Minister refused to listen to him anyway. So, what was the point? Why letting him wait? Why risking his life? He could have died that night.

How long Voldemort held him under the curse? And why he screamed? It is not the first time she saw…experienced his punishment. He never screamed before. Was it on purpose? He was so scared. How could he think and plot while being so scared?

She shakes her head, glancing at his direction. Narcissa is next to him, speaking softly, to low for her to hear. She has a look of a mother bent over a sick child. Suddenly, she is grateful. Grateful that he had at least someone who cared for him as much as all Malfoy’s did. There are things she has to think through, when she can think straight and when he’s asleep.

“Mrs Malfoy, can I ask you to stay with him? I need a moment to take a quick bath.” Her voice is unsure

“Go ahead, Miss Granger, take your time.”

She takes her things and enters the bathroom. The tub looks so inviting but if she gets into the tub she
will feel asleep. Deciding on a shower she removed her clothes. Peace by peace. With each move, her joints pop and complain. Muscles tremble. Standing nude in front of the mirror she assesses the damage. She looks like she wrestled the ox. Above her hip, there is a bluish bruise. There is one on her thigh.

‘How that happened?’

She can’t even remember. There is a redness above her left collarbone where his shoulder hit when she lost her grip on him. She looks a mess. Her hair sticking in all directions. Dark circles under her eyes.

‘Gods! I look like him!’

The thought is not so disconcerting as she thinks it should be. Stepping into the shower, she groans when warm water surrounds her. Misty popped up and she shrieks. Elf shook her head with scorn on small face

“Missy already knows what Missy has.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Madam sent Misty. Missy is to use this after a shower.” Elf left one jar of bluish cream and one jar of pale green one “This blue is for bruises. This one for soreness.” Sniffled elf and disappeared.

She rubs her hair, wincing when her fingers graze the sore spot. The water feels so good. It washes the tiredness. The odd thing is, she is not upset. She is not concerned or scared or embarrassed. That is the novelty indeed. It didn’t bother her… the closeness. The feel of him beneath her.

‘Maybe I finally start to think like Medi-which?’

She knows that she is not cut out to be a healer. But, taking care of him is not one shock after another to her. It doesn’t bother her to touch him. His nakedness is not an issue anymore. True, he is not so much nude anymore. He is wearing those pyjama bottoms. Even after he complained, and argued for days on end when she proposed them. Poppy sorted things out, she gave him an option... to choose between briefs and pyjama bottoms. Poppy refused to bend and give him permission to wear the nightshirt.

Who still uses the nightshirts anymore? Besides him. Well, Malfoy’s. She discovered that one night when the alarm woke up the entire household. She frowned. Did she even see Snape wearing anything else but robes? No. She and Harry, even Ron, tend to put robes over Muggle clothes. But most of the wizards she met wear robes. Witches too.

The salves help. She makes a mental note to thank Mrs Malfoy later. When she returns to the room, Narcissa is still in the same position. She stands up from the bed and calls

“Misty. Take care of Severus, if Miss Granger needs to take care of him, come to my parlour for her.” Narcissa gives command to the elf

“Misty will, Madam.”

“Do you need anything, Severus.”

“Nay. Dead tired is all, love.” He slurred the words. Akcent is heavy and unfamiliar.

‘Did he called Narcissa Malfoy love just now?’ her brain rotates this question.
Narcissa pushes her towards the door

“Come along, Miss Granger. I believe you would benefit from a strong cup of tea.”

“I would die for coffee.” She mumbles, still baffled by what she just witnessed.

“Then, coffee it is.” Narcissa nudges her “Oh, don’t look so surprised, Miss Granger. He is from Manchester area after all.”

She looks at the woman confused

“I never heard him talk like that.”

“And it is unlikely you ever will. Only on very rare occasions, he slips into the dialect of his childhood. Now, let’s see if that coffee can aid you.” Narcissa is still talking in a soft voice, ushering her into the parlour.
My life is as usually spinning out of control, work-wise. So, we will return to posting every 2 days until madness passes.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

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She stopped writing and raised her head, wrinkling her nose at the thought. Snape was sleeping, peacefully. She frowned and scribbled on the margin

His memories – only when both sleep!!! What changed?

She raised her head again fixing her eyes on him. It wasn’t the only change. February tickled into the soggy March. Snape was quite more than ever. Even their research slipped into an exchange of limited words. Their research, however, advanced. Soon they will try to reverse the damage she caused.

He was more… prickly… then she could remember, even from her school days. Gruf and deflective. His mean demeanour didn’t touch her.

‘When did I became immune to his poisonous words and mean remarks?’

He couldn’t say or do anything to make her falter, to push her off balance. Of course, he was more work now than ever before. Her frown deepened at the memory…

… It was few days after that night. She was reading, he was gazing through the window. His face expressionless mask and yet she knew… he was anything but an empty shell. She could almost taste his pain. Memories of the summer before their fifth year were dark, drenched with fear and anger and pain. But not much violence. It surprised her to see that most of the gatherings resembled more board meeting than… what? No one knew how their meetings looked like. No one except him.

He suddenly turned to her

“If I help you… will you leave me alone?”

“Help me?” she’s confused

“To regain your parent's memories. If I teach you how… would you go and look for them?”

“You just want to get rid of me so you could kill yourself.” It was an accusation
“What I plan to do or not to do is not up to you, Granger. I made my offer, now don’t sleep on it for too long.”

“Even if you teach me…there are consequences…”

“It is magic, there are always consequences. Now then, what will it be?”

“They are happy. Without me. I actually thought about it. I found the reversal spell, I did my research while we were at the Hogwarts. Even then, I made my decision. But I am grateful for your offer.”

His face darkened, eyes glazing with mirror-like patina.

“What do I have to do to get rid of you?”

“Get better.”

“Are you so willing to throw away your life, your entire life?”

“Are you so determined not to allow yourself to heal?”

“Said a pot to a cauldron.”

He turned to the window again. That was the weirdest conversation they had. So atypical from all the rest before and after. He sounded almost like every other human, and it was an Oscar-winning performance on his part…

…All of that put her plans to devise a strategy based on Malfoy’s words on hold. Malfoy! That was another puzzle. He didn’t show up in the room, not once after that day. That puzzled her. It didn’t seem like a quarrel that couldn’t be overcome. And their friendship certainly looks strong enough to survive it. For some unknown reason, Malfoy never came and Snape never asked of him. Not her, which wasn’t much of a surprise. But he never asked Narcissa and Draco either.

That worried her. She knew a little about boys and their quarrels… but these were not boys. They were grown men. They lived through two wars. Death Eaters. They had more on their shoulders than… Maybe it was just harder to forgive in their age? Whatever the reason, Malfoy’s absence only added to the depression he was slipping in. She has to do something, and fast.

Her eyes slipped from his face to his chest and arms. They toned down the exercises for his upper body in favour of the intensifying the effort on his legs. What worried her was his the lack of visible progress. His strength returned, no doubt about that. But… he didn’t gain in the mass. He still looked thin. Sure, he put a thin layer of fat over his bones. But...his muscles only steeled up, looking more like vire than an actual muscle. More like metal ropes under the skin. Strength was there. Vitality was there. Mass was missing. His muscles just roped over his bones. If anyone saw Severus, he might think that the slightest wind could blow him away.

Curious enough, she thought that it suited him. Inconspicuously strong. No muscle mass to betray him. No quality to draw in the awe or stir the notion of romance. Not visible anyway. And yet, it was all there, beneath the surface. Hidden. Like his body and his mind conspired to hide every single ounce of goodness in him. Even the goodness he possessed bore a mask. The poison of his sharp mind and double-edged blades of his words. However, his body did the best it could to remind him that he is alive. His rebellious body was her only ally now.

He’s dreaming. She knew all the signs. His mouth parted slightly, low growly moan in his throat. His hands fanned and curled. His shoulder lightly pressed into the mattress. His features relaxed and at
the same time tight. She took special care not to lower her gaze down the covers. It wasn’t that she felt embarrassed. Not anymore.

Something shifted inside her. The change was not drastic but it was there. And with all honesty, she couldn’t even say if it had any connection to him. Whatever the change was, she didn’t have time to deal with it now. So, she tucked it away for later.

“It won’t work, Granger.”

His voice startled her. She moved the parchment, quill and inkwell on the trunk, her hands shaking.

“What won’t work?”

“Whatever crazy idea Lucius managed to plant in your head. It won’t work.” His voice gravelly from sleep but cold and sharp.

She turned to face him. Angry. Insulted.

‘How dare he?’ “I would rather die than act on an idea that came from that… sociopath.”

“It sounds…almost…believable and yet it is sadly untrue.”

She jumped to her feet, taking his entire figure. Squinting her eyes at him, she allowed a smirk to lift the corner of her lip.

“Projecting your state on me… won’t solve your… problem.” She hissed “Aggravate me and I won’t help you.”

“I do not need your help, Granger.” He hissed.

“No?” her eyes slipped to the covers “Then we can wait until your… problem… goes away on its own. “Experience thought me it won’t, but hey….”

“I am perfectly capable to solve all my problems you insolent brat.”

“Go ahead!” she snapped waving her hand at him in a dismissive motion.

“Are you sure little girl?” he smirked, his eyes gleaming with malice.

“Quite sure.”

“In that case, I suggest you run and hide, or you can stay and… watch.” The slow poison in his voice took her by surprise.

‘Stay and watch? Run? What is he talking about?’

She knew he can’t use his magic, even with the wand. She was so sure that he would relent. So what was she missing? The shine in his eyes bordered on vindictive zeal. She didn’t like that at all. But what he could… Her eyes widened in sudden realisation. She picked up her wand and the book, turning her back on him, fighting the blush that crept up her cheeks.

“Fine. Bathroom.” She hissed “I’ll even help.”

“Help how, little girl?” his dark chuckle accentuated with one raised eyebrow.

She reached the bathroom and turned.
“Like this.”

One flick of her wand rolled the cover to the side. Another flick and his bottoms vanished, leaving him naked on the bed. She focused her gaze on his face. The smirk never left his features, but the slight widening of his eyes gave her satisfaction. She managed to surprise him even if he hid it well. Without another word, she walked into the bathroom closing the door.

‘How stupid can I be?’ she wondered

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He glared at the door. Magic crackling around him. Bugger it all! Granger didn’t rise to his bait. The annoying child left him… Left him! In this state. He was counting on her meddling ways. He provoked her but hoped that she would flick her wand at him. Not in the slightest he could foresee what she did now.

He had no intention of handling this on his own. He simply wanted to unbalance her. Throw her off her tracks. In normal circumstances, he would wait. These, however, were not normal circumstances. One morning he woke up before her, sporting the usual morning erection. He hoped that it would pass on its own before she wakes up. His body seemed determined to defy not only his wishes but also laws of biology and medicine. Two hours later, when she finally woke up, he was in pain and his state unchanged.

It seemed to him that his own body went rough on him. Or that it was in cahoots with Lucius’s insane ideas. As if his own body tried to prevent him from achieving his goal. Or maybe this was just the unfortunate byproduct of some random curse. Merlin knows, he was on the receiving end of many curses in past three years. Whatever it was… he had to find his way out of the imminent problem.

He was, as it happens to be, reluctant to do so. His mind scared him these days. He used to find solutions not deal with emotions. Now he had to face – emotions. In the past days, it was all he did. He made peace with the futility of his life, past and future, fortifying his decision. But his body refused to abide by his will. The emotional part of him followed his body, filling his dreams with desires he never had before. He would strangle Lucius if he had strength.

His dreams filled with the faceless female figure. Warm and caring and understanding. One that focuses her affections on him. Not what he represented but who he was. She was smart and witty and temperamental.

He isn’t stupid nor ignorant. When the craziness of the youth passed, he became aware of certain proclivities. His hopeless yearning for Lily aside, there weren’t many women who had the capacity to catch his attention. He thanked Salazar for not so small fact that annoyance that plagued his life now, was who she was. She was a child. His student to boot. And those facts alone were enough to keep him safe. In any other circumstance, she had a fair chance to argue and hiss her way, to warm up to him. It would still be far from any true emotion but she might pose a danger to his balance.

With a sigh, he moved his hand. Reluctantly. All the thinking in the world won’t help him now. He can’t think his way out of this one. It was the matter of pure mechanics and he hoped he has enough in him to see it through to the end.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She paced around the bathroom. Fuming.
'Who does he think he is? If he thinks he can do without me – let him try!'

But after a while, the pacing seemed to work out her annoyance into her usual state of mind. And she started to wonder would he be able to... And how long it would take? Sure he regained his strength up to the certain degree but he was, for the better part, still weak. Maybe he was just venting out? Something he did often after his argument with Malfoy.

He would use his hands but not for long and with prolonged use his hands would shake. Sometimes terribly so, even if she pretended not to notice. Gathering all the knowledge she had... it was a physical work. And not easy if it is to go by what she heard in the girl's bathroom at school.

She frowned. One might think that being friends with two boys she would have some knowledge of the matter. Some even indicated based on the year she spent sharing a tent with them. But either neither Harry nor Ron were too much into that, or war took president. There was just one incident, and she didn’t really see anything. She stumbled onto Ron, and he jumped so high and start yelling and... well, a week later he abandoned them.

How does it look like? She knew what books covered... but how it really looked like? She supposed she could peek? Not to intrude but only to glance, and to check how long she should stay in here. That’s right. It is not that she is doing something wrong... if she takes a glance... she’s just checking how he’s doing. If he needs help or maybe if he finished and she can come back in the room. She is not curious. And she definitely is not interested in seeing him – doing that. She just taking care of him.

Squaring her shoulders she crept to the door and kneeled, pressing her eye at the keyhole.
I know, I’m late again. On top of work, I had to prepare myself… tomorrow I’m travelling to Vienna. My friend and my honey gifted me a ticket to Vienna ComiCon 2017.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech
Warning: Angst, voyeurism, erotics

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She peeked through the keyhole and moved back swiftly, frowning. He was still in the same position, and things seemed… unchanged. Maybe she didn’t see correctly? That certainly merited for one more peek. Of course, if she is decent enough just to check and focus on his face.

Taking a slow, deliberate breath he turned to the keyhole again. His face was almost angry, that confused her to no end. Why would he be angry? His hand moved slowly and she held her breath, biting her lip. She really shouldn’t be doing this.

She moved again. Blinking. He seemed either not thrilled with what she did or not quite there yet. She sighed. Well, there was no way around it, she has to look again. For the briefest of a moment, she paused to consider why is she doing all this? He was still weak and she left him alone. She nodded to herself. Yes, that was it. There was no chance that she had any other motif. And no, she most assuredly was not interested in him. with a small pang of guilt, she grudgingly admitted to herself that there was some curiosity about the act. But that didn’t go deeper than that.

Sometimes she did feel like she was missing on one huge part of life, especially in comparison to her peers. It wasn’t a bad thing on its own, and she did prefer this way, most of the time. But it was a gaping hole in her life. In the school, she had her grades, and she did her best to contribute and keep Harry and Ron alive. Her entire experience consisted of few awkward snogging session with Krum and one rather unpleasant tumble in the cot after he returned. It was clumsy, painful and not satisfying by far. She justified her lap in judgement with life-and-death situation they were in... and her long and futile crush on Ron.

She really didn’t have much to go on. It’s not like she had an abundance of opportunities. She wasn’t good looking like Ginny with her lush red hair. She was not willowy like Luna. Not even breasty like Lavender. She had – brains. Guys didn’t like smart girls and especially smart and not good looking girls. It seemed that they were intimidated by her. Not just boys, even grown men… they either run away or dismissed her. Apart from Krum, no one shown any real interest in her. Even Ron, all he wanted to snog and talk about Quidditch, making excuses when she wanted to talk about her interests.
No, she was not interested in Snape, but at least he didn’t shrink from talking with her. She owed him for that if for nothing else. She couldn’t just abandon him. Besides, if he could peer into her shirt…she had right to peek through the keyhole. Right? She frowned again. And it isn’t even if she is doing same as he did – she is just taking care of him. lulling herself in the decision that she will focus on his face she moved with determination.

Hermione stayed true to her word and focused on his face. It wasn’t her fault, that from vantage point of view first that came to her site were his feet, then his body and finally his face at the end.

Looking at him she bit her lower lip. He switched hands… a lot. Did all guys do that or is it due to the lack of strength? His pace was slow and he still had a pinched expression on his face. Digging through her memory, she was sure that the girls in her room talked about the change in rhythm, speeding up and hand cramps. She frowned. Perhaps she can give a light massage to his hands during this evening bath? As an apology of sorts.

His face changed expression. Relaxed and his jaw slightly slack. Low sound, akin to quiet groan deep in his throat, fled from his parted lips. His toes curled… She blinked.

‘Well, that was…messy. Is it always like that?’

She pulled back, shifting to lean her back against the wall. Narrowing her eyes at the thought. Tilting her head she let a long breath accompanied by the sound of confusion. What to do now? It isn’t like she can go into the room. She could, but… She didn’t think this through. He couldn’t use his magic and if she walks in – it would be highly embarrassing on both sides. The fact that she didn’t know, well, of course, she did know basics but she didn’t think it would be this… messy.

“Misty!” she called as loud as she dared

“What Missy want now?”

“Ummm…could you…ask one of male hose elves… to… errr….help…”

“Misty will.”

“Yes, well…you see…he is…it is…”

“Misty being house elf. Misty took care of Master Snape for years. Misty will.” Stubborn look on Misty’s face didn’t leave room for argument

“Right. Can you…ummm… not tell him that I sent you?” she stuttered

“This time – yes.” Elf tilted her head and blinked at Hermione “Missy would be a good rent-a-elf if she learns to keep her nose out of Masters business. And her eyes. And her ears.”

Hermione blinked. This was closest to any sort of approval she ever received from grumpy elf.

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Severus frowned. All the musings and thinking won’t help him now. He was counting on her self-righteous meddling know-it-all pushy ways. What she did leave him stunned, not to mention in a particularly nasty prediction. He could either call for help or help himself. Cursing his bad luck which saddled him with… her. Suddenly, with the painful clarity, he recalled all the times he caught her after curfew… She was either in the library or practising in some deserted classroom. With all fornication he witnessed as a teacher, during his rounds, she was the only one that he never caught with a boy. Potter and Weasley didn’t count if he caught her with them it as another problem
altogether. From all lust driven dunderheads that surrounded him for years... he had to get stuck with only one that was painfully unaware of the situation he was in. She just didn’t understand or think about effort demanded of him.

In all honesty, he didn’t indulge like this for years. There simply wasn’t any need for it. Seventeen years to be precise. When Lily died something inside of him broke off, rendering him incapable. Incapable of happiness, not that he knew how to be happy before that. Rendering him impotent, not that he had complaints. Now, he wondered how he’s going to solve this problem. Not only that he was…out of practice but out of strength as well.

With a disgruntled sigh, he slowly moved his hand and curled the fingers around the reanimated appendage. Only too late he remembered that besides physical labour he will need at least part of his brain engaged. The problem was – what to think about or whom? Lily was out of the question for more than one reason, especially now. and he didn’t really have a substitute. He could have predicted that Granger will leave him to drown, he should have – but he didn’t. of course Narcissa, he didn’t even pause to reconsider, she belonged to Lucius.

He could have used the female from his dreams. Those dreams were responsible for more than few flicks of Granger’s wand. She could have just flicked her wand and put him out of his misery. His hand hurt, his arm muscles trembled aching distractingly. He switched hands setting a slow pace. In this tempo, he’ll need time. And he had no desire for her to stumble on him in this…

Anger flared in him. She was to blame for the entire mess. Forcing his mind to focus on the dream girl. It wasn’t someone with a face. No, he saw her as a silhouette with detail here and there, but she had no face, no distinguishable features. His dreams weren’t even erotic. Mostly he dreamed about them talking, covering various topics. He blamed Granger for that too. She would jump from topic to topic. No wonder those two idiots followed her around with baffled expressions. He would have the same expression if he was anyone else. He was glad to have at least someone, even imaginary to think about.

The female was talking, waving her hands in the air. She stuck a quill in her hair, continuing with an animated explanation. The tip of the feather tickled the tip of her ear. And only that small patch of skin was what he could see, everything else presented as a shadow. He wished that he could replace that feather with his lips and tongue. He would trail light kisses over the sensitive skin behind her ear. Just before the hairline, down to her neck. He would avoid the pulsing vein and lick and nip the soft skin with his lips until she would squirm and beg for more, arching her back, pushing her chest up.

She had nice breasts. Not the big ones... He wasn’t one of the men who liked female breasts big enough to be considered a weapon. No! He liked when women had nice, palm-size breasts. His dream girl did. Two soft globes, covered with fine robes, that would fill his hand just so. He would tease her until she would offer herself to him. He could practically taste her skin on his tongue, sweet and calming, blend of chamomile and lavender with just a hint of orange blossoms.

Try as he may, he couldn’t suppress the groan entirely. Heat licking his skin is insides before dissipating leaving him in the state of soft glowing haze. Now, this he did forgot. The shooting emptiness after orgasm. The moment when universe stilled. When his brain still leaving him to float and bask in a sea of calmness. Dulling the pain, blocking out the outside world and annoying Granger menace.

His arms muscles screamed in pain. Returning him rather abruptly to reality. He also forgot how untidy it was. And he had no magic or strength to clean up. This was an alarming and rude return to reality. He had no other option but to wait for someone to enter the room. He could call Granger, but he won’t. With a little luck Draco…
“Misty is here Master Snape.” Elf popped next to the bed

With a snap of her knobby fingers, she cleaned him.

“Master can be in this state when Missy gets in room.” Misty reasoned with herself, snapping her fingers again. He had clean pyjama bottoms and cover over him once more.

“Thank you, Misty.”

“Master don’t need to thank, but Master need to call for Misty. Missy don’t need dirty ideas about Master.” Grumbled elf and popped out.

Sometimes, he was lucky beyond the merits of reason, despite his fate. With a tired satisfied grin, he sank into light slumber.
Chapter Notes

I returned from my “forced” vacation! And I landed into work madness. Next chapter won’t be coming up before the beginning of December. Again, I am truly sorry for delayed chapter posting, rl just won’t give me a break :( 

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Hermione huffed and wrinkled her nose. A long row of complicated equations and diagrams danced in front of her eyes. She was checking and rechecking their final calculation. They worked with zeal on it. Snape seemed more determined than ever to get her out of his head. Not that she’s complaining. Having his memories was a curse. In a way, they put some of the things into perspective. Whatever she survived, whatever she thought was bad, his ordeal on a daily basis was inhuman, inhumane…

Weeks ago she made her peace with fact that Dumbledore for all his benevolence wasn’t so nice or benevolent. She even got another perspective on their own behaviour during school days. What seemed to them as a valiant fight against evil... turned out to be aimless running around and falling from one trap to the other, with Snape as their personal shepherd dog. He watched over them, along with all his other tasks, he landed them a hand from the shadows. He was the hero, one that never got the credit for all he’s done.

Standing up she stretched. Her mind wandered to the Snape and the room they shared. Now, she was in one of the unused rooms at the end of the corridor. This morning Lucius walked into their room with Narissa at his heel. Narissa stopped her from entering the bathroom and urged her to this room with words:

“Don’t be so worried, they had worse arguments and didn’t kill each other. Give them space to work through the difference in opinion.”

This room was obviously set for her. It had a small reception area with settee and two armchairs around tea table next to the fireplace and a kind of a workroom space near the window. And as much as she would appreciate the gesture when she first time came here… now she was unhappy.

Hermione frowned. Thinking of herself as a peeping-tom wasn’t pleasant but it was accurate. She got used to listening to their conversations. She also got used to looking at him. After that day, she would flick her wand at him in the morning, but for all other occasions, she would find an excuse to leave the room letting him “deal” with the problem on his own. He didn’t complain, and in all honesty, it does him some good, his recovery speeded up. His mood wasn’t that much better, but even there she noticed some improvement. He was not so cranky and acidic anymore. He still
growled and argued and snapped, but somehow his words lacked the bite behind them.

More concerning was her own addiction. There was no other name for it, not really. It wasn’t healthy or good or acceptable. And if he knew he would find the way to powers her for sure. Watching him masturbate turned out to be her shameful little secret. Most of the time it wasn’t sexual for her, more like a bizarre art performance. Or at least that was what she told herself. It did, on occasion, provoked intense feelings and odd itching, nudging her in the direction of the shower to calm herself down. But it wasn’t… it is not like she felt attracted to him, or anything like that. He is her ex-professor and he is older, much older. No, it’s just… that he looked so different. Sometimes she thought that only in those moments she got a glimpse of the man he could have been if his life went in another direction. Oddly enough, she liked what she saw.

Her eyes roamed over the snow-covered garden. The scenery looked like it was a fairytale came to life.

“I wish I could stroll through that garden.”

It all happened in a moment. Suddenly, she was in the garden, shivering on the cold. Hermione blinked confused, how did she manage to get there? The panic rose like a tsunami, fast, hitting her hard. She had no idea how she managed to will herself into the garden. How to return was obvious and that caused her to panic. Shaking, she dashed through the garden, cutting through the Aurors milling around the courtyard and into the Manor hallway.

Her breath sounded loud in her ears. Eyesight greying and blurring. The heart was pumping, rattling in her ribcage. The air left her lungs when she recognised green marble columns. Continuing her mad dash, she turned left, nearly knocking someone on her way. The darkness of the windowless corridor gave her a bit of comfort, it looked sadly familiar. She runs into the room and slammed the door. Two pairs of eyes fixed on her. Pale blue ones looked confused, black ones surprised. She leaned on the wall and glided against it, her legs finally giving out. She was still breathing fast, struggling to bring oxygen into her lungs.

“Calm down, Miss Granger and breathe slower, you are going to give yourself a dizzy spell if you maintain that kind of breathing.” Snape’s voice sounded distant

“Severus…”

“Fear, Lucius. You should be able to recognise it by now.”

“I know what it is, but what caused it?”

“I know as much as you do.”

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He was more than little startled by Hermione’s sudden entrance. It wasn’t the way she barged into the room, it looked on her face. She looked less afraid of that incident with a Troll. He recognised the symptoms of the panic attack. What could have caused it was beyond him. Before he could say anything the door slammed open, hitting her on the knee. At the same time, Lucius turned to the girl. Hermione yelped, but the sound was off, distant and that worried him.

Potter, followed by two aurors barged into the room

“Hermione!” called the boy

The cacophony of voices, the speed of events annoyed him. Hades decided to rejoin, he flew to the
Lucius and screeched at his face. Turned to Potter and swooshed his wings at Potter before landing on the girl's knee.

"Later, Lucius. Not now." he glanced at his friend. Lucius only nodded but didn’t move from the spot. “I'll ask you all to leave.”

“I am not going, not until...”

"Leave, Potter – now."

He wasn’t looking at the boy or Lucius. He wasn’t looking to her either. His entire attention focused on the Hades. The bird took a liking to her, but he never acted like this. Hades was standing on her knee, stretching his neck and body to reach her face and nuzzled next to it. Hades wasn’t a cuddly or affectionate bird, his reaction to the girl told him about the severity of the situation.

Lucius moved, albeit too slow, he turned to Potter.

“Come along Mr Potter, let us leave them alone.”

“But Hermione...”

“Whatever happened, I’m confident that Severus can deal with it.”

“Or make it worse…”

“I doubt it, but we can’t exclude nothing.” Quipped Lucius which earned him an angry look from Severus and wide-eyed stare from Potter. Lucius chuckled “I wouldn’t test the situation, Mr Potter. But if you decide otherwise...it is your funeral.”

Potter frowned, glanced at Hermione who seemed not to notice him at all then him

“Will it be ok if I drop by later on?”

“Later in the afternoon will be perfectly fine, Potter.” He retorted not taking his eyes from the bird. Potter reluctantly followed Lucius out of the room. “What happened, Granger.”

“I...outside...” she mumbled

Hades screeched loudly and pecked the strand of her hair, keeping it in his beak like he wanted to maintain some contact with her. He started to worry. Hades rarely reacted this way, and never to anyone besides him. she raised her hand and stroked Hades’s chest. He could swear that the bird purred, or did what was the bird equivalent of purring.

“Come here, Granger and tell me what happened.”

She raised slowly, like she is walking through the tik dough, and walked to his bed. Hades preached himself on her shoulder. He knew that the bird's claws are sharp and unpleasant, but she seemed not to notice.

“What happened?”

“I... I don’t know...” she sounded defeated

“Tell what you know.”

“I was in the study, and then I was in the rose garden. I had...to...walk...” her voice gave out
“You had to walk through the house?”

“Yes.”

“Granger, whatever happened, and I’m sure it isn’t pleasant, this is just a house. If any harm was to come your way, it already would.” He sounded dry and clinical, even a bit annoyed but he could understand her “Did Lucius, Narcissa and Draco done anything to you in here?”

She shook her head

“Who?”

“Bellatrix and Grayback.”

“Both dead, deservingly so.”

“Still…”

“House is just the house. You were a prisoner here as much as Malfoy’s did. But you got to go after, they had to stay. They have to live in here.”

“I… I understand… still….”

“Granger,…” he started then stopped. He didn’t want to reveal anything about himself to the girl, but if they are about to proceed… she needed to be calm and in the good mental state. Well, as good as she can be. He would settle for calm and focused. What they planned was risky enough

“Can I ask you something? It is personal and if you don’t want to answer I’ll understand, I just don’t want to end up hexed later on. When you get your magic back.” She sounded almost scared

“For as long I know you, asking questions was and are what you do. I can hardly be shocked by anything you ask. Whether I’ll answer, depends on the question.”

“How could you do it? Staying in that school after… after… I mean, it must’ve been hard to…” she stuttered, blushing to the foots of her hair

“After I killed Albus?” he asked almost amused. The lack of words amused him, but her question still twisted that rusty dagger that slowly bleeds poison into his system. Answering that question would be too revealing for his liking. On the other hand, it might push her in the right direction. And he needed her facing that direction more than he had a need to keep a secret that wasn’t a secret anymore. He could thank the Potter for his life becoming an entertainment for the masses. In a way, it was a public knowledge, his answer might give another dimension to it. with a sigh, he fixed his gaze on her “I had a job to do. There was no one else who could do it. It wasn’t… a choice, that does not mean it was easy… I focused on the task at hand. And that is what you should do. Moreover, the school was the place where that happened, but it could easily happen anywhere. Places, Granger, are only that – dead patch of land with equally dead construction on it. What you make of it… it is all you’re doing. Bad or good people are not places, they can easily move around.”

“I know, I can’t help it! I still feel… anyway, I have no idea how to stop feeling like this.”

“By sheer will. It is not easy. It is not even pleasant. You can either deal with it or succumb to using opiates that will numb you. I strongly recommend against the later, but it is still your choice.”

“Opiates? Like alcohol and drugs and such?”
“Yes.”

“Are you insane? How can you even recommend something like that?”

“I advised against it, as I recall.” His voice was cold, but he congratulated himself on her reaction.

“But… even if I do indulge… the nightmares will still stay, pictures in my head will still stay…”

“They will.”

She blinked at him. He could see the cogs turning in her head. He was almost fascinated how loudly she was thinking. Her face melted from one emotion to another as clear as the sunny day. She truly was an open book.

“You did it…”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You indulged.” Her voice almost a whisper. She was looking through him rather than at him “You didn’t have the time or will or both to heal, to deal with it. Right? That’s why you want to kill yourself.”

“Granger…” he warned her, his voice vibrating from anger. She had a point, and she was correct in her assumption. But, by poking an open wound she glided into a dangerous territory and he will eviscerate her if she tries to go any further.

“Right. But I know I’m correct in my assumption.” She glared at him “Why are you helping me then?”

“I am not. If anything, I am doing my best to get rid of you. I’ve been doing that from the moment I opened my eyes, Granger. My only chance of getting rid of you is to help you.”

“You could tell Matron you don’t want me near and solve that problem” she huffed insulted

“Could I? When was the last time you tried to argue with Poppy?” he sneered at her, the kid was making fun of him for sure. It took all he had not to start yelling at her.

Hermione’s face rearranged into a mask of confusion, and he realised - it didn’t occur to her that Poppy might argue with him or win the argument.

‘Is she honestly think that? Stupid girl, no one wins an argument with Poppy.” His thoughts grumbled. But it felt…nice. To see that she had that much confidence in his abilities. He couldn’t remember when someone trusted that much in him, beside Malfoy’s. It was one thing to hear a praise about his skills as Potions Master or about his skills and knowledge in Dark Arts. But this… this was direct praise of his personality, something not connected to his work. He felt annoyed that it was her of all people, but it also felt nice to know he got recognition for once. He sighed. She looked much calmer.

“Are you all right now, Granger?”

“Yes.” She whispered “Thank you.”

“Then get ready for tonight.”
The darkness seemed impenetrable. It was the dead time of the night but Hermione was awake. Her stomach was clenching, coiling inside her like a pit full of angry snakes. She was so determined to do this… but now, when the time was almost upon her, she lost her nerve. What if she makes another mistake? What if she makes things worse?

Selfish thought inserted itself in the swirl panic in her head, no more memories. There will be no more insight into his pain, into his suffering. He made her feel so small and insignificant. They had protection! In danger, true, but it was war and everyone was in equal danger. But they also had help, more than anyone else. Dumbledore, Snape, Minerva, Lupin, Mad-Eye, Tonks,… so many names… they all watched over them, constantly. The only time they went out of the radar – and what happened? They ended up breaking into the Ministry, flying dragons, getting caught by snatchers. Ron splinched himself. They were a mess and utterly lost. They called them heroes, but they wouldn’t be even alive if there were no so many others, lurking in the shadows, giving them a silent support.

But, the worst was the fact that only now, after everything was over she finally managed to get to the information. Majority of Snape’s memories revolved around Order meetings. All the information they deprived them of that summer, she was receiving them now – too late. Too bloody late. She heard steering and her eyes snapped open.

“Granger, are you up?” his voice was a hissed whisper, sharp as a steel

“I am.” She whispered back, cold hand of fear and uncertainty latching to the base of her spine

“Then come here, and let’s be done with it” Snape sounded impatient.

With a sigh she slipped from the sofa and tiptoed to the bed, climbing awkwardly on it. crawling to sit as near to him as possible she sighed again. He was eager to this… but she screwed up once before.

“What is the matter, Grange?”

“What if I make mistake again?” she replied before she could stop her mouth from talking. On the
one hand, she wanted this link they shared severed as much as he did. On the other, repercussions of failure could be devastating.

“Calm yourself down, Granger. I will guide you.”

“But…”

“Miss Granger,” he sighed and alarm bells start ringing in her head. He rarely used Miss nowadays and that signified to her how annoyed he was. Even if his voice painted the picture of calm patients as if he had to explain something to the small child. he continued “if there is any possibility for me to do this – I would. As it is, I am forced to rely on you. And if I know one thing about you-you know how to follow instructions to the letter.”

“Yes, Sir.” She replied, feeling like she is in his classroom once again

“Now then, I did what I could, leaving for you familiar markers. Joint memories if you like. Familiar pictures. Do try to follow them and not stray away trying to poke your nose too much.”

“Ummm, I’m not too…versed in the art of…” her voice failed her, it pained her to admit that she didn’t know something or was good at it

“That is painfully obvious, if you were we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place. Now, you have to do what you did the last time, for the first part. Focus on my voice and follow the instructions.”

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The girl shuffled uncomfortably and he sighed, his patience dwindling fast.

“What is the matter now?”

“I… well, you see… last time…I need to look straight into your eyes and…”

“Before I expire from old age, Granger.” He snapped at her

“Well, you see… last time I sort of had to…” she continued to stutter. Even if her face was no more than a shape in the darkness he could swear that she was crimson to the roots of her hair


“Well, sort of… stradleyourchest.” She breathed out and it took him a moment or two before he managed to discern what she told him, anger rising. He did his best to push his rage aside, he needed her help and blithering her was counterproductive.

“Is that all?” try as he may there was a heavy note of tightness in his voice, and he felt bed twitching as the girl recoiled

“Yes.” She whispered and added in a rush “But I took care that I do not touch you, more than necessary. I had to hold your eyes open. But we still need to have a straight eye to eye contact now and…”

“Granger, I’m quite sure that you have no qualms about touching me. In fact, I’d prefer if you develop one. As it is, I fail to see the problem.” He sighed still fighting the urge to behead the girl with few chosen words.

He didn’t like to be touched. And her intrusion on his privacy was more than he was generally willing to allow. Nevertheless, given the circumstances, he would willingly endure her intrusion on
his physique if it meant that he would get rid of her from his head.

“Now, please proceed with our plan.”

“Ummm…yes…right.”

He started to wonder how did she manage from walking-talking dictionary or encyclopedia to succumb to this less than an eloquent mess. All thoughts of her diminished oral capacities, left him once he felt bed shifting. She moved closer, stepping over him and whatever he had from muscles tighten in need to push her away from him. tightening his yaw and breathing deeply through the nose he fight the urge

“This is your own doing. You can handle it. Clear your mind and grant her the access she needs.”

Her looming face danced in front of his, too close for his liking. Then again, everything the girl did was uncomfortable and irritating and intrusive. And with a bit of luck, it will all stop tonight.

He felt her, slipping in his mind, her intrusion light like the summer breeze. She is not skilled but her natural tendency towards nurturing guiding her inexperience. In a way it was comforting, knowing that at least he won’t suffer from that pain. His defences, as feeble as they were, tried to rise and he fought against them. It was a natural instinct, like breathing. He had to allow this. Clearing his throat he softly spoke.

“Good. Now follow the path that looks like a thin silver thread.”

“What if it’s not silver?” he could hear the twinge of worry in her voice, her soft-spoken words resonating in his ears and inside his head

“It is, it always is. I did my best to push all memories aside apart for the ones you need to memorize, as touchstones.”

He repressed the feeling that emerged from the swirl of paranoia that plagued his chest. Feeling equally unpleasant. One that if nothing more enhanced his need to defend himself against her. When his brain wasn’t ransacked like a stolen purse, it felt almost…intimate. His breath hitched in his throat. The gentle brush of her mind was akin to caress. And he didn’t like it, not one bit.

“I found it.” her voice was quiet but it rang like an exclamation in his head.

He followed with avid attention her almost mad dash through his mind. She followed the line of their connection until he felt her again. She reached their destination. And he felt her, more complete, not a pebble anymore, but rather like the boulder wedged in his mind.

“You do not need to re-enter the memory, but you do need to…fuse…yourself with the point of origin.” He instructed her, wondering if she managed to understand him

“I am not stupid, I know what you meant for me to do.” She huffed and he wondered if he spoke the words aloud. He shouldn’t, he wasn’t that unaware of himself, even if his defences were down. She sighed “I can hear your thoughts.”

He froze, stilling even is breathing. The swirl of thoughts rising and he quelled them.

“Do what you supposed to do and be gone.” He hissed. He will worry later.

He felt a nudge like someone was poking inside his head with a velvet covered finger. And then she started to retreat. He felt her stopping at each memory he left for her, leaning on them almost. Finally,
she slipped off his mind as tenderly as it was possible and gazed into his eyes. Her irises foggy and unfocused.

“I think it all went fine” she breathed and collapsed.

The impact of her body against his pushed the air out of his lungs. Her weight making it hard to breathe in again. All he could manage were small, shallow breaths. If he doesn't move her he will feel dizzy and his strength will perish. With all his might, breathing in more of her hair than air, he tried to push her off.

Panic rising as he realised that he couldn’t feel her breathe. He hoped that she wasn’t a dead weight on top of him.

“Misty.” He croaked. His chest burning from lack of oxygen. He tried to roll her over, off himself at least. Not that he could do much even if he did manage. Everything he could do demanded either physical strength or magic, and he had neither.

Misty popped into the room and huffed

“What Missy Dirty Mind do now. Move Missy, leave the Master Snape be.” Misty shooed her hand at Hermione’s direction.

“Misty,” he choked out “help me roll her off me.”

“Misty will move her to her cot.” Grumbled elf

No, next…to…me.” Talking with nose and mouth full of hair while he struggled for air was taxing “Now.”

He could hear Misty grumble, but the weight that was Granger rolled off and settled next to him. With the effort, he rose his left hand and pressed the backs of his fingers against her nose and mouth. A feeble but regular waft of air tickled his skin. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“She’s alive.” he sighed, voicing his relief

“Misty will move her now?” asked elf and he gave that question a thought.

He probed his own mind, but he couldn’t feel her. That was a relief. He felt more inclined to deal with aftermath now. The breath of freedom surging through his veins. He would welcome any excuse to not have her so close, but…. No matter what others believed... he was a Head of House for a good number of years... and for better or worse she was his student. If Misty moved her he couldn’t reach her if the need arises. He couldn’t even check upon her to see if there is need to call for help. The only way he could take care of the girl was, if she were within his reach and that meant next to him. With almost desperate sigh he shook his head

“No, Mity, leave her here. I’ll call you if she needs help.”

“Master shouldn’t help Miss Dirty, she attacked master and it’s all Misty’s fault.” What started as an angry tirade ended up in a wail

“The girl tried to help me and passed out, Misty. She did not attack me.”

“It is all Misty’s fault. Misty will punish herself.” Wailed elf and he briefly wondered what crime of his merited this punishment
“Misty, you did nothing wrong…”

“Misty did! Master said I shouldn’t be so harsh on Missy. And Missy did take care of Master Snape. Misty heard Missy wanting to be in the garden, and Misty took her there. Misty scared the Missy. Now Missy won’t be a good rent-an-elf anymore.”

“You did what?” he gaped

“Master is angry, Misty will…”

“I am not angry Misty. You did your job and followed your orders. But next time, maybe you should ask her first?”

“Misty will. Master won’t give Misty away again?” sniffled elf and he sighed

“Misty, you are part of the Malfoy…”

“Only if the Master is dead, and Master is alive. Misty has only one Master.” She sniffled blinking tears from her huge eyes and he sighed.

“Fine, you do not belong to Malfoys as long as I’m alive. I will repeat my offer…”

“Misty don’t want money. Misty is proud to be Masters.”

“Fine Misty, I’ll call you if I need you.”

It was too much, and he had more pressing worry than stubborn elf, no matter how fond he was of the said elf. Misty shimmered from the room and he released a deep sigh. Pressing his fingers against her mouth again, he noticed, with a relief, that her breath was stronger. By the rise and fall of her chest, he could tell that she was in a deep slumber. With a bit of luck in the morning, everything will back to normal and he will be free from her at long last.
The tremors run down his spine but he ignored them. His voice sounded almost like a stranger's voice while he was giving the report from the last meeting with the Dark Lord. His worries growing each day, and he knew that soon he will have to make the unfavourable decision. The one that will cost him dearly.

The pain hit him hard and the words died on his lips. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep the painful yelp at bay, feeling the taste of copper dribble down his throat. He did, however, release a muffled groan when his knees collided with cold stone.

Albus turned to him, a faint glimmer of worry in his eyes. He approached him and leaned over

“Cruciatus, Severus?”

He just nodded, not trusting his own voice. His hands were feeble support at the moment, but he gave his best not to appear too weak in front of Albus. The pain rippled through his body and he was breathing through his nose. Deep measured breaths. He knew what he had to do, but it was still hard to go through the motions when every nerve in his body screamed in agony. The thin coat of chill sweat clung to his skin. Eventually, the pain and the tremors ebbed away and he took one shuddery breath, sitting on his heels. Albus handed him the glass of water and he took it without question. He would drink the poison at the moment if it would clear the dusty feeling in his throat.

“He is still angry at me.” He croaked “It will take time before I convince him in my... devotion to him... yet again.”

“Whatever it takes, Severus. It is an impediment that you do this. But, for now, rest. We will repeat your report to me, once you are feeling better. And I’ll call up the Order meeting for this evening, it should give you enough time to recuperate.”

He just nodded, but he knew that he has to warn Albus. He won’t be doing ‘whatever it takes’, not this time. Fourteen years of nightmares thought him a valuable lesson – he lost his taste for blood long ago.

“I won’t accept to resume all my duties I once held, Albus.”
“Severus, I don’t think you understand…”

“I do understand Old Man.” He growled at Albus “But I won’t willingly hurt anyone. Not anymore. There is enough blood on my hands as it is.”

“He might get suspicious…”

“Let me worry about his suspicion. I will find a way, and I will see this through to the end. But then… I want you to grant me my wish.”

“I rather thought that once you are free you would try to find joy in life.” Albus sounded reproachful

“I will be free to walk away, Albus. Once this is over. If I don’t end up in Azkaban, I will walk away.” Even with a tremor of pain, his voice reflected his determination.

He did want to walk away, far away. Enough away that no one could find him and stop him. And then, he will end it all.

“Once we defeat Tom, Severus, you may have whatever you want. And as for now, I have enough faith in you.” Said Albus mildly and offered him a supporting hand which he accepted. “Let us go one more time through your report, you have to have a memory to show him. I trust that by now you know what to do, and what not to mention tonight in the meeting.”

He nodded tersely. He never agreed with Albus’s tactics of compartmentalising information. It made him weary and paranoid, wondering what he didn’t know in return. And how fast that ignorance would kill him in the end. Not that he wanted to live, but he did hope that he would be recognized for his efforts – while he was still alive.

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The sound of breathing was loud in the ears. Her cheek burned when twig hit her across the face. A mad dash through the forest was futile, but they had to give it a try at least. She turned and cast another stinging hex at Harry’s face. Ron’s and her glamours will fade away fast, but Harry’s face will stay disfigured for the much longer period. And no ‘Finite Incantatem’ would change it. It had to be enough for them, for now.

He lungs burned from lack of oxygen. Her throat constricted by fear. She tried to push it all down and think. Shouts echoed all around her. She glanced and saw Ron stumbling while trying to run. Harry followed them, turning to glance around.

Hopeless.

It was all hopeless, they will be caught. She had to believe, hope beyond hope, that they will get out of it. She failed them, she let her own guard down. If she didn’t put perfume, they wouldn’t find them. It was all her fault…

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“No!” he jerked from the sleep abruptly, covered with sweat. His head reeling. Eyes wide open in terror. “Rooting… Sodding… Bugger me!” he grounded through clenched teeth.

“I would, but I do have a small issue with infidelity. It can be arranged, though, if you set your heart on it.”

Slow, familiar drawl forced him to snap his head towards the window. Lucius was leaning on the
window frame. A glimmer of amusement in pale blue eyes.

“By your... selection of... phraseology... I take it that you are not quite satisfied with your little... bed-mate.” Slight note of taunting in the Lucius’s voice

“Lucius...” he managed to squeeze through clenched throat

“Don’t get me wrong. I am glad that you finally took my advice.” Lucius kept his voice lithe. “But, if she isn’t to your satisfaction, we will have to find you more suitable...partner. I do see that you did... tier her.”

“It is not what you think, Lucius.” He growled

He knew that Lucius was mocking him, fully aware that his insinuations were nowhere near the truth. And his friend knew it. Still, his muddled brain didn’t provide him enough to properly fight back. Swirling paranoia, fear and anger didn’t do much to help either. Everything was wrong. Now, they were in more mess than they had to begin with.

He knew that she followed his instruction to the letter, so he couldn’t blame her. The only viable explanation was that they missed something in their calculations. It wasn’t exact science and most of the spells were a combination of trial and error before they were final. He blamed himself for rushing. He only hoped that the girl will wake up. He had too much blood on his hands, too many stains on his soul to add this one as well.

Lucius made a soft laughing noise and he focused his attention back at him. and even if the flicker of amusement stayed on his friends face, the blue eyes hardened, a hint of steel in them. Same steel that reflected in Lucius’s voice

“Ah, but I do know what you did last night. I told you, Severus... I warned you not to do it. I should have known that you won’t listen. That lack of books won’t stop you, either of you.”

“Now is not a good time for one of your self-appraising lectures, Lucius.”

“No? Too bad, you are going to hear one anyway. I do not know what went wrong this time.... But tell me, Severus, do you think I would leave you in that situation if I knew how to dispel it in the first place?”

“No, I know you wouldn’t. I wasn’t aiming my finger at you Lucius” Lucius’s attitude annoyed him. All he needed was the time to think.

“Then why you risked it again? With... her?” Lucius asked with open disdain in his voice, waving his hand at Hermione’s direction.

The girl was curled around his right hand, pressing her cheek in the crook of his elbow. And she probably did that for the better part of the night, he couldn’t feel his fingers. In the normal circumstances, he would be outraged by this if it wasn’t practical in a way. This way he could feel her breathing which gave him at least some comfort. However, he won’t know how wrong things were until she wakes up. If she wakes up. Fear pressed hard on his chest.

“Not with her, Lucius. I had faith in me.” He replied, forcing himself to sound calm bordering on board “She was a tool. Though, I wonder, how useful this tool will be in the future.”

“Same as it was until now, I wager.” Shrugged Lucius lightly “I’ve seen her like this before. She will wake up, in time.”
The wave of release wash over him. Cold sweat chilling his body. He relaxed, glancing at the girl wrapped around his arm. Whatever the consequences were, he will deal with them – somehow.

“Poppy won’t be pleased. Potter either.” Continued Lucius, walking towards the door “Do you want me to call Misty to… relieve you of her presence?”

“No. This way I can react if something goes wrong.” He scoffed, weighing how much this will cost him. Lucius certainly will not this one slide.

“Very well. Enjoy your life-size cuddle doll then. Who knows, maybe you’ll even develop taste for it.” jabbed Lucius closing the door behind him.

That man was infuriating. How in Merlin’s name he always managed to be there at least desirable moment was beyond him.

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Hermione stirred. The fog of a dream lifting slowly. Her mind attuning to her surroundings. She slept restlessly, but oddly enough she felt safer than she did in a long time.

Nuzzling her cheek at the warm pillow beneath her. The pillow was slightly hairy and for the moment she thought that Cronks sneaked into bed with her. She sighed with satisfaction and hugged tighter.

Something was wrong. Cronks was fluffy and puffed. Whatever her furry companion was, it was thin and sort of… bony, and long. She could feel the bony length all the way to her stomach. She frowned, whatever it was she wasn’t threatened by it, and it was secondary to what she will have to tell Snape.

Her eyes fly open and she faced the rising curve of the comforter. Shifting slightly she brushed her cheek against the pillow. Except, it wasn’t a pillow – it was an arm. Her frown deepened, before she jumped into sitting position, scooting away from the arm and its owner. Her action causing her slight dizziness.

Deep frown and burning anger in his eyes told her that he did notice what she did. Well, at least a part of what she did. Using him as a teddy-bear. She opened her mouth to speak but words stuck in her throat.

“We failed.” He quipped and she nodded. His words were cold and she felt a prickle of failure.

“I… I… yes.” She bowed her head. Suddenly, words broke out of her in a gush “I did what you told me, and I don’t know what I did wrong. But I’ll do my best to fix it. I promise. Trust me I didn’t want to see your memories anymore. No more than you do. I am so sorry!”

She stopped abruptly when his eyes widened, clouding in a smouldering rage. Deep wedge etched between his brows. A growl rumbled from his throat before it formed in just one word

“Bugger.”
LXI

Chapter Notes

A/N: New chapter is up, and I hope to your liking.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
‘Single quotation mark’ - inner monologue, thoughts
“double quotation mark” - actual speech

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She pressed her hands against slick tiles. Water cascading against her body, beating at her neck with shooting heat. Sound, something between a growl and a frustrated groan tore of her throat. Anger, frustration, hostility, warmth, protectiveness, low burning heat in her lower belly, animosity, helplessness, and so much more coiled inside her. Seven days after their botched attempt to undo the mess and Hermione couldn’t tell where she ended and he started. She wasn’t even sure if all emotions were hers.

One might think that sudden and unwelcome mutual insight would bring more understanding between them. One might. But nothing was further from the truth. She was still plagued by his memories. Bits and pieces of information he hid from Voldemort. The insight that made her feel angry and disappointed. Not in him but oddly enough at Albus.

She knew the adults knew more than they let them, the children, to hear. But, she learned that Albus kept information from Order as well, controlling tightly who learned what. Not one single person having a whole picture. She could feel Snape’s repulsion by the fact that he was forced to lie to the Order. His paranoia and fear. She could understand it. If he was forced to conceal what he knew – what Albus hid for him?

Another insight, most unwelcome, accompanied with a not small amount of guilt plagued her these days. They were all so convinced that Snape came to report directly from Death Eater meetings, unscratched and full of disdain. They gloated when Sirius taunted Snape, enjoying that their ‘enemy’ finally run into the wall he couldn’t break. But now she knew. Feeling of deep shame gripping her throat, making her avoid his eyes, half expecting to see the smug gleam of contempt in them. He never came straight to the meetings. He first reported to Dumbledore, healed his wounds, withered in pain. And only when he was once again his old self he would don his Death Eater robes anew and played his part. He was the best actor she ever was seen.

Her heart quivered painfully. She admired him. His strength, his resolve. She mourned for his feeling of loneliness. His pain, forever present. She hated him. His skill of deception, he deceived even her. She was angry at him. His intrusion, now she couldn’t hide from him, in the same manner, he couldn’t hide from her.

And maybe she would be curious, intrigued how this happened and what that entailed – if it wasn’t happening to her. No, there was no mutual understanding. No better insight. Only anger on both
sides. She closed her eyes, remembering that morning…

…”You still can see my memories?” he choked out after a long silence and she nodded. He shook his head “This can’t be happening. Not to me.” It was almost a moan full of desperation, concealed in an aggressive hiss

“We can fix it…” she tried

“Fix what, Granger? You had one task. One task, child, and you failed to execute it.” he growled “You will not root around my head again. Not while I manage to use my magic. I will fix this. And then… you better never come close to me. Ever. Again. As. Long. As. You. Live.” He bit out last words through clenched teeth

“It’s not like much changed.” she countered it, anger slowly rising in her chest. Fine, she failed, his reaction was uncalled for.

“Everything changed you twit!” his voice slipped to a dangerous whisper “You didn’t fail to resolve the issue – you enhanced it. It serves you right, I supposed.”

“Serves me right – what? You can yell at me. You can hiss. But unless you tell me what is wrong… I have no clue what are you talking about.” She snapped

“Now, at least we’re even. Now, Granger, I. can. See. Your. Memories.” He hissed at her…

…After that situation exploded. And by the time Malfoy entered the room with Harry and Matron in his wake they argued. If she was honest with herself, their visitors landed in a middle of a war zone. She accused him of deliberately steering her towards the wrong strand of memories. Of course, she knew that he was correct and that silver was the colour of foreign memories – inside someone's head (not that she ever heard about such case) or out the head in general. And it was her fault, she followed his instruction when she should have followed her own instincts. She should have known her own mind, how it felt, better than he did. Soft, golden glowing strand was hers. She was so sure of it, but she listened to him anyway.

If she told him anything, argued her feeling, they might have solved all this. But no, she had to do as he told her, landing both of them in this situation. And now, he was privy to her memories. All of her memories. A deep blush spread like a wildfire to the roots of her hair and down her chest. She had so few of nice memories and she clung to them with the desperation of a drowning person. She didn’t want him to see them. They were hers, and hers alone.

Shaking her head she let the grim smile stretch over her lips. It was in a way a form of poetic justice. Another insight. Another notch on her already bleeding heart. Now she knew how he felt all this time. Deprived. Violated. Subjected to constant shame. She hated herself for doing that to him, on top of all he suffered. She hated him, for giving her more reasons to hate herself, to doubt her abilities and capacities. But most of all, she hated him for not being guilty but yet again the victim.

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Severus blinked, letting his eyes finally open at the sound of rushing water coming from the bathroom. He was finally alone. It wasn’t that he couldn’t think while she was in the room – he could. But the tension between them was palatable. He wondered how he allowed himself to end up in this situation? Unbalanced, he was unbalanced, unprotected and exposed to emotions he rather wouldn’t face. That’s how.

Still, nothing could justify his behaviour. He was thirty-something nearly forty years old. Not
eighteen. Truth to be told, he had more command over his actions and emotions at eighteen than now. By that age, he was already Death Eater. He already took at least one human life, one that he knew about. He was ruthless, cold and controlled. Now… now he was bickering like an old woman. He growled, voicing his displacement with his own behaviour.

How, in Salazar’s name, could he allow himself to be so thrown off track by a mere child? A swotty, prissy Know-it-all. Brainiac menace from his classroom! In a way, he should be satisfied. Even if the girl didn’t notice, her demeanour changed. She was more prone to fight and less to self-imposed guilt. She placed the blame where it belonged now, and that was a good thing. She even started to fight depression, which was good… except… Her recipe was simple. So simple that he could kick himself for not seeing that solution for himself. She almost desperately clings to what she perceived as ‘good memories’. She matched them with ‘bad memories’ and trained her mind to slide from ‘bad’ to ‘good’. Simple and elegant. And torturous!

Her good memories were few. Scattered all over the school days, war, including even few of the recent ones with him. After two days he could discern a pattern. When she dreamt of the forest, she would slip into memories of class with Hagrid. And he was fine with that. But when she dreamt of using memory charm on her parents…. It was more than he ever wanted to know about any of his students. She would cling to weak and greyish memories of her and that Weasley oaf. He wasn’t interested in his own sexual life, not that he had one – by choice. He certainly wasn’t interested to be privy of clumsy fumbling of two teenagers in the dark tent. Even less interested to witness her less than satisfying her first, and only, an excursion into the world of carnal pleasure. He smirked. Not in a million years one could call that experience…pleasurable. Painfully obvious that she had no clue what to do, besides her knowledge of contraception charms, that she mercifully used. The boy, on the other hand, did have some experience, but not the incentive to make the event more pleasant for the girl. Suffice to know that event ended with her tears and the oaf’s snores.

In a way he pitied her. Maybe it was a small mercy that she didn’t know about anything better. Granger will after all certainly end up married to that oaf.

He shook his head violently. He has to find something to entertain his mind. Contemplating on amorous experiences of his students was… unacceptable. With all atrocities he committed in his life he could take pride in one thing… he never lusted or have been inappropriate toward the student. And he had a firm determination not to start now. Sure, he did try to annoy the girl, but he never had any real intent behind his actions.

Forcing his mind to switch the subject he focused on his last dream – his Dream Lady. She was perfection. Of course, he wasn’t unaware of the shift. And even if he gave a slight ‘could shoulder’ to Lucius, he had to admit that Lucius had a point. He wondered, on the rare occasion when he was left with his thoughts when that shift started. The Dream Lady was just a manifestation, a final product not the initiator – he was sure of it. Then again, if he allowed himself to face the hard facts, he wouldn’t be able to go through all of it. He needed something to get him over that path of glass chips barefooted.

Lily. She was still open wound inside his chest. In a way, she would always be, as long as he breathes. She was his reason. Painful truth was – for a long time, even before she died… she wasn’t his love. And that was the truth he didn’t want to face. Not yet. Even if he was aware of it, he ignored it. He let is slide and focused on the non-existing woman, one created by his muddled brain.

And she was… perfection. Subtle. Gentle. Sensual. Intelligent. Focused on him. He didn’t care how she looked like. What was the colour of her eyes or hair? Any physical marking was unimportant. To him, she was perfect. The memory of the last night’s dram floated in front of his eyes. Pale green dress, floaty around the middle of her shins. Her small bare feet buried in a dew-soaked grass. Her
laughter and the way she tossed her head back. The silhouette of her perfect proportions leaning against the body of an old tree. Her small hand beckoning him to come to her and take a refuge in the thick shade. Her head in his lap, leaning on his thighs as they read, each its own book in amiable silence.

Groan emanated from his chest. His wayward libido decided to mistook a pleasant and emotionally satisfying moment for an erotic one. He forced himself to think about anything else. It wouldn’t bode well if she got out from the bathroom to see him wank. He had to do something, solve the problem somehow… get better and get the grasp on is magic and his walls… and to get rid of her – for good.

He felt like screaming. His re-awakened libido, facing naked truths and his runaway train of thoughts were new kind of torture – his own special brand of hell.

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Hermione groaned in frustration. Heat from her neck and back plunged down her spine pooling in her lower abdomen. With an exasperated sigh, she unhooked the shower and switched the stream on the head from ‘spray’ to ‘massage’. She wasn’t sure should she be lucky that Malfoys did possess this modern bathroom or not. However, she discovered in past few days that one could do so much to alleviate piled up stress with a simple shift of stream on the shower head. Closing her eyes she pressed her back to the tills and glided toward the till covered shower floor, clutching the shower handle in her hand.
This is it, the moment of truth. He is kneeling and his knees scream in pain. This is vivid reminder that he isn’t young anymore. Even if he were young, after almost hour and a half in this position, his knees would be in pain. Even if he’s on the soft rug his knees would still hurt. But he isn’t. He isn’t young anymore. The cold uneven stone floor pressing at his knees, and they hurt. He knows why he has to kneel for so long. He knows what he must do. Despite Albus’s order. Suppressing the sigh he stores all the pain and all the hurt an fear behind his protective walls.

Someone enters the room. He can hear the footsteps, they are faintly familiar. But he keeps his eyes fixated to the spot on the floor. He won’t rise them without permission. A female voice, high pitched and raspy at the same time. Her laughter creeps against his nerves. He knows that he is in this position partly because of her. She whispers poison into Dark Lords ears, poison against him. Grim satisfaction creeps into his soul. This very well may be the last day he takes a breath, but even if it is so… he knows that she may live a thousand years and yet… never getting what she wishes. Not from the Dark Lord, not from other Death Eaters, not even from her husband.

He is not only half-blood among death-eaters. In fact, there are more half-bloods than pure-bloods among Dark Lord’s troops. But he is the only one in the Inner circle. He is the only one that sits among them as equal. And he is the only one Dark Lord trusted even more than her. Ever since her…punishment… she is seeking the way to destroy him. Maybe today is the day she will succeed, not because of her efforts but because his own resolve not to yield.

Her cackling laughter scrape against his nerves, like nails on a chalkboard.

“Poor, poor Snapey. Are you in trouble.” She singsongs against his ear, he can feel her husband’s glare on his shoulders. If looks could kill… If… but he is still alive.

“Bella, you know better than that…” Dark Lord’s voice is cold and stern. She may be his pet dog but he has no real love for her. And her usefulness is no more than to stroke Dark Lord’s ego with her blind devotion.

“My Lord.”

“Do you have news?”

“We do, my Lord.” He can hear uncertainty in her voice and nearly cracks a smile.
“Now, Bellatrix.” Dark Lord sound’s annoyed.

That is good and bad. The more she annoys the Dark Lord, his chances are better to remain in the high position he had until now. good in general, but not today.

“The boy moved at the safehouse, my Lord, but the trial will be held in a few days. We had our sympathizer in the position. Everything is set to be placed in motion at your order.”

“Do you have any news, Bella? All of what you told me I already know. For all your dislike of Severus, he had that information for me days ahead of you.”

“My Lord, he sits at that old man’s elbow. But he couldn’t know about our sympathiser…”

“And yet he did. Days ahead of you, Bella.” Dark Lord’s voice is cold and sharp as an edge of a blade “Anything else?”

“N…No, my Lord.”

“Leave.”

Shuffling. He can hear footsteps retrieving, growing faint and distant as they depart. He can feel Dark Lord’s gaze on him. His heart trumps few times fast and hard before he manages to take it under control and slow the beating to normal thruds.

“Severus, it seems that allegations against you are false.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

“Bella did not forgive you…she is determined to bring you down.”

“I am aware of that, my Lord.”

“I expect nothing less from you, Severus. Perhaps…a reminder is in order. Maybe Bella forgot the lesson she learned that night. Punishment can only go so far before you need to…issue a reminder.” There is almost the gleeful tone in the Dark Lord’s voice.

“If my lord desires so…” he whispers, deliberate hesitation straining his voice. This is it, the moment of truth. Life or death?

“Are you opposing my wish, Severus?”

“No, my Lord, not even for a moment.”

“But…”

“If I may be…”

“Speak, Severus.” There is an undeniable annoyance in the voice of Dark Lord

“My position as a teacher, my Lord, as a Head of Slytherin House… I am in a position to influence children, my Lord. They spend more time with me than their parents. But, if their parents fear me, distrust me… it will reflect on their children.”

“And your influence will diminish.” There is a long pause before Dark Lord speaks again “I haven’t considered that. And I do have to admit, you were feared. Still are by many. And you did amuse me…”
One boney, cold finger curls up under his chin, lifting it. He meets Dark Lord’s gaze. He can feel pressure, slashing through his mind. It would hurt less if he pushes what the Dark Lord wants to see. And it would be his demise. No, he must let the Dark Lord rip the memories on his own. The pain is staggering, blinding, but he endures it. Finally, he is alone in his mind once more.

“Very well, Severus. I accept your reasoning. You are, after all far more useful to me as you are now. I will, however, have to find you a replacement. Dolohov perhaps.” Dark Lord trails off

Dolohov. Yes, that name will infuse fear. Dolohov is a sadist. The man thrives on fear and pain he can cause. And he only hopes that if he ever ends up punished by Dolohov... he has poison ready on. There won’t be any survivors, at least not functional ones, with Dolohov. The voice of the Dark Lord snaps him back to reality.

“You did defy me, Severus. Spoken against my wishes. I should give you to Antonin as his first task... But, I do need you able to return to Albus once more.” Finger returns under his chin, raising his head once more. “You are still loyal to me beyond what other can comprehend. I can be merciful if I wish so. I am merciful.” The finger is gone and his head falls back down “But you did defy me.”

He takes a deep breath, relieved. He will live. Steadying himself for what is coming. He is almost grateful that he won’t have to stand up. Above his head, he hears almost gentle hiss

“Cruchio”

Pain hits him hard, mixing with the pain from his knees. Darkness...

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She sat, jolted from her sleep, not by his memory as much as painful cry. For few moments she couldn’t figure out where she is or what is going on. This wasn’t a hospital but everything else reminded her of it.

Right. Malfoy Manor.

Hermione shook her head and jumped out of her sofa, running to the bed.

‘Don’t let it be, please, don’t let it.’ she prayed silently, jumping on the bed.

He is not shaking, at least not enough to merit holding him. Tremors are not that strong. She can’t feel him. First time since the... mistake... she can’t feel him and that scares her.

His cries still reverberate against the walls, but that only means that he is alive.

‘Don’t let it happen again. Gods, just keep him awake. Please.’

It is dark, and she can’t find time or brain enough to cast the charm. Blindly, she presses her hand to his chest. They are convulsing.

“Bloody tremors.” She muttered, ghosting her hands over his body.

No reaction. He is not awake yet. She touched his face, it is wet with tears. Reluctantly she turns focus to his legs. When she touched his knees his cries enhanced. She breathes the breath of relief, at least she discovered the source of his discomfort and pain.

Sliding off the bed she casts the charm, conjuring the jars with bluebell flames, she charms them to
float around him. Stumbling, slightly dizzy she takes one jar with pain balm, given to her by Matron. There was no need to use that balm until now. Scrambling back on his bed she flipped the covers and grumbled, charming his pyjama bottoms off. He is going to be mad at her, but she doesn’t care. Mad and yelling is better than in coma as far as she is concerned.

Taking a good dollop of the balm she rubs it gently, first into one than the other knee. She continues to massage them, rubbing. The cries slowly subside. Her heart still beats hard and fast against her chest.

She is angry. Mad at Albus for exposing him to this. Mad at Dark Lord for ever existing. Mad at him – for enduring all that. Lost in her thoughts and anger, he startled her when he suddenly spoke

“What are you doing, Grange?” his voice strained and hoarse. And Hermione thought it is the most beautiful sound she ever heard.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Reality returned to him, creeping into his brain. His throat is in pain, but that pales in comparison to the pain of his knees. The pain that slowly ebbs away under the cold feeling and tender pressure. Laboured puffs of cold air ghost over his this… His naked this. He wasn’t naked when he fell asleep!

He opened his eyes, alarmed. He's surrounded with floating jars with Granger’s signature source of light. He is most definitely naked. And the Granger is massaging his knees wearing a mask of terror on her face.

“What are you doing, Grange?”

She jerked back and gazed at him. Her features spilling from fear to an absolute delight in seconds. Suddenly, from being frozen and wide-eyed she blurred into motion. He released a puff of breath and a loud “Ugff” when she draped over him, squeezing him into a tight embrace.

“Thank Merlin!” she breathes in his neck

“Granger, get off me! What gotten into you? And why in Salazar’s name am I naked?”

She tensed and pulled back so fast with a flustered look on her face, he nearly chuckled at her reaction. He is more confused than amused.

“Right… I… Sorry… I…..”

“I am expecting a coherent answer when I ask the question, Granger.”

“You were screaming and…”

“I do not scream, Granger.” He admonished

“Yes, you do.” The stubbornness of her face laced her voice “and you were screaming, and thrashing. You had mild post-cruciatus tremors, but not like before. and I… I… I was scared. You didn’t wake up. But you were crying and then I touched… your knees and…”

“And?” he raised an eyebrow

“You were in pain.”

“So you removed my clothes?” he is still unsure should he be angry at her or not. The sense of relief
is overwhelming and he’s sure it’s not his.

“I… it was the only thing I could remember to do, I needed to put the medicine on your knees.” She frowned, then jumped to pull the cover over him. He nearly laughed when she blushed.

“So to add to my discomfort you had to jump on me, Granger?”

“You…I… I thought that you are in a coma again.”

“Now, why would you think that?”

“I… I suddenly woke up, thinking I’m at the Hogwarts Medical ward… that’s all.” She frowned

“Do your knees still hurt?”

“No.”

“Good. I’m going to sleep now. Good night.” She blurted in a rush and slipped from the bed, vanishing the jars with light.

“Granger?” he used his classroom voice

“Yes, sir.” He could hear her sitting up

“You are a terrible liar.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She lies awake, listening to his breathing until she's convinced he is asleep once again. Sitting up and curling against the side of the sofa she took one shuddery breath. Something changed. She can’t say what but something changed, she can feel it. Shaking her head she lie down again. She needs time to think. Time to sort through things, emotions… everything.

Thoughts swirl in her head. She has questions, but she can’t ask them. Well, maybe there is one person she can ask. Yes, that’s right. Tomorrow.
A/N: Sorry for the delay in posting people, my health decided that I won’t have an easy pass through the holidays. But I’m finally back on my feet, and I even have a number of prewritten chapters. So, buckle up, we are returning to the fast line again :) 

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Tomorrow in which she could ask questions never came, she didn’t get the chance. March melted into May. And the 2nd May came. She watched Draco running around the house like a headless chicken in preparations to take Astoria to the ball. Neither Narcissa nor Malfoy senior came to visit Snape that day. Harry knocked on the door just to let her know that they will talk tomorrow and that he will make excuses for her. Hermione frowned, she had no desire to go, and Harry knew her so well but still… he could have, should have at least ask. For a long time now Daily Prophet was a gossiping newspaper. This time they tried to guess which of the lucky witches will escort Ron. She was, as expected, slandered by Skeeter.

‘She does need a reminder of what I can do.’ Hermione thought grimly.

It seemed to her like she and Snape were either forgotten or abandoned. Snape didn’t seem bothered. He enjoyed a day of peace and quiet, not even talking to her. Not that him talking to her would improve her mood. Their conversations were more like the hissing of two snakes ready to attack each other.

‘Snakes don’t attack each other. At least I think they don’t.’ her brain was an obvious mess while she contemplated on whether snakes do attack other snakes or not for a while.

Hermione shook her head, convinced that she is losing her mind.

That evening owl swooped into the room with evening edition of the Prophet. Hermione looked at the front picture and growled. Harry was with Ginny while Ron had unfamiliar blond witch attached to him. She bounced off the sofa and start pacing around the room. She couldn’t figure out why?

“What is the matter, Granger?” came annoyed question from Snape. She glared and tossed the Prophet at him. He glanced at the front page “Ah. Stop with that irritating pacing and come here.”

Her shoulders squared, she didn’t hear him use that tone of voice since her sixth year.

‘It must be some sort of reflex, like that psychology thing I read about. Ummm Pavlov’s reflex. It is almost like Imperius curse.’ She argued internally with herself. Her body, completely ignoring her
mind and will, obeyed the order.

Snape raised on his hands and tried to pull back in sitting position. He nearly succeeded at it. His physical strength returned somewhat. He gained better use of his hands, but they still lacked the strength. His legs gained some mobility as well. He still couldn’t move them freely, except his feet – he could flex them at will. But with the assistance of his hands, he could slightly bend his knees. They implemented new leg exercises almost every other day.

She climbed at the bed and sat near him.

“You are better off without that lump of wood, Granger.” He sounded cross and gruff. She frowned at him, refusing to believe in his words. It was painful enough to admit to herself that Ron didn’t love her, not the way she loved him. And that she won’t forgive him. Not this time. Her vision blurred from the tears she suppressed for the better part of the day.

“You may think he loves you or that he loved you and somehow you managed to destroy that love. To push him away.” Snape started to speak, his words flat and measured, clinically impersonal like he is delivering a lesson “The youth often does have those presumptions. Love, Granger, is not demanding, limiting or taxing on the other party. Love is not selfish. At least true love isn’t. Love puts another party above oneself.”

Tears burned behind her eyes. Hades screeched and flew from his perch to the bed, settling between them. Snape lowered his eyes to the bird. Uncharacteristic and a bit startling warmth and softness coloured his gaze. He lifted one hand and gently caressed black feathers.

“Traitor.” Grumbled Snape but his words had no bite behind them. He directed his eyes at her. They were once more two mirrors, cold reflective surfaces. All she could see in them was her own reflection. “If he truly loved you, Granger, he would at least stopped to listen to your side of the story. He wouldn’t just demand.”

She lost a battle and one tear glided down her cheek. She knew that there was no need to rub it in her face.

“Ask yourself if you are in love with him as you so firmly believe you are? Were you truly and honestly ready to settle down, have a Quidditch team of screaming whelps? Forgive every infidelity, because it made him happy? Hope to get any scrape of attention from him and relish in it without complaining? Without snapping?”

Each of his words hurt. He stabbed a dagger into her heart and mercilessly twisted it with each syllable.

“Or did you convinced yourself that you love him? Why? Was he good to you? Was he kind and caring? Does he treat you right? Were you pressured by his family, by other people expectations? Or did you convinced yourself to settle for less than you deserve because the opportunity presented itself?”

She blinked, frowning until her face started to hurt. To each of his question, her brain screamed ‘No’ as an answer. Her heart shrunk and quivered. She wanted to scream at him, to hurt him, to bolt out of the room. Instead, she narrowed her eyes and said nothing. Hades squawked and nestled closer to her, pecked lightly on one of Snape’s fingers. He directed his attention to the bird shortly then back to her.

“Look into your heart, Granger. Not only to the surface, scrape it well. Face those unpleasant emotions…”
“You’re the one to tell me that.” She hissed, her voice unrecognisable even to her

“I am.” there was firmness of conviction in his voice

“You can sell that story to Harry, but not to me. You nearly hex Malfoy’s life away…”

“I did. And I’d do it again.” He replied, his voice lowering to dangerous whisper “Not only Lucius. And I am lucky. Lucky to have a friend who is willing to risk our friendship and possibly his life to face me with what he thinks is a truth.”

“What he thinks? Did you ask yourself all those questions? Did you?” she couldn’t control the pitch of her voice “Will you hex me too if throw them back to your face?”

“Yes.” He sounded calm, cold, like a silence before the storm hits

“How can you be so much of a hypocrite? To force me to face… to see what? Your version of the truth?” she hissed “When you are not willing to face…"

“You, Miss Granger, are not in the position to question my willingness to face anything.” Snape’s voice vibrated with the promise of impending doom “The fact that you violated my person does not make you noble or heroic, nor does give you the right to meddle.”

“That is just not fair.” She protested, his words stung even more than his questions

“The truth, Granger, is neither pleasant nor black-and-white. Truth is merely the truth.”

“The truth is also subjective.”

“Indeed.”

“Fine.” She huffed and scrambled to get out of the bed. Her sudden movement disturbed Hades who screeched and fly to his perch eyeing both of them grumpily. “I’d say it is time to turn off the lights.”

“A wise decision, Granger”

She mumbled the spell and turned off the lights, hitting the pillow which seemed lumpy and uncomfortable all of a sudden. Sleep found her slowly, kept at bay by her wayward thoughts. She won’t admit to him, but his questions did rise a very unpleasant truth she tried to ignore for a long time. She asked herself same questions for months. And she always stopped herself before getting to know the answers.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

If he could he would banish her from the room. Little meddling child. Anger boiled inside him. He could feel the crackling of magic around him and he hoped that if his magic does act up, she is one of the victims. His magic took turn for the worse now that he finally managed to regain at least some small control over it. After their failure to undo what she did, he lost his grip on magic once more, and they managed to find out in a hard way…

… She was in the bathroom, and he wanted to sit down. Forcing his muscles to bend to his will, he used his wand to levitate more pillows under his back. Or at least he tried. Instead of levitating the pillow he sent it whizzing through the room, nearly knocking her down when she stepped through the door …

‘How dare she? The brat.’ His mind boiled
Counting slowly, he focused on his breathing. These simple occlumency lessons did nothing to help him raise his shields, but at least they kept the girl alive. She was the odd mixture of pragmatism and pure Gryffindor bravado.

‘Lethal combination when one is determined to poke at a monster that is Severus Snape.’ supplied his brain. He deliberately ignored the thought. He did all he could to prevent himself to be a monster second time around. It was true, one could run from is past but not hide from it. And he had too many people not allowing him either to run or to hide from his past. Moreover, they all expected of him to live up to their expectations.

Dark, everything around him is dark. The voices sound as a distant intangible murmur. Only pieces and broken words floated to him. He couldn’t pry his eyes open. A buzz, white noise, came and went in waves. Finally clearing out. He took care to keep his breathing even, mimicking the sleep. It is not smart to alert those around you that you are awake, especially if you do not know where you are. Muffled whispers.

“You cannot see him now Albus, he’s still out of it.”

“It is of utmost importance that I do talk to him, Poppy.”

“You can talk to him when I say that he is up to talking, not before.”

“Poppy…”

“Don’t you ‘Poppy’ me. I do not know what is that boy up to, but this is the sixth time in two months that he is out of consciousness in my infirmary. Crushiatus, Albus. And that is when they bring him here.”

“Who brought him?”

“Same as always, an elf.” Huffed Poppy “I do, however, believe that you know what is going on.”

“I do, and it is better not to ask too many questions, Poppy.”

“Well, at least make him come to me. Every time. I cannot heal the damage if I do not know about it. I am a healer, not a miracle worker.” She grumbled

He forced his eyes to open. The throat felt dry, unpleasantly so.

“I am fine. When can I get out of here, Poppy?” his voice sounded like sandpaper dragged over the glass

“When I say that you are fine.” Poppy frowned at him

“Severus…”

“Not now, Albus, not here.”

Two hours later Albus was walking with him towards the dungeons when they stumbled on to Trelawney. He shivered, the woman was appalling at best. She shifted through the deck of cards, mumbling to herself racking of cherry. She nearly passed them, but then she stopped and grabbed his sleeve. He resisted the notion to shake her hand off. Her eyes, enlarged through thick, jar bottom like glasses, gazed at him or through him, he couldn’t tell

“Beware of the lions, or they will rule your life.” She mumbled in eery whisper “they will be your
death and your life if you let them.”

“Yes. Kindly release my hand, Sybil.”

“Abandon the company of snakes in lions skin, and prevent your doom.” She continued, releasing him, glaring at Albus in an unfriendly way “Come and join me for a cup of tea.”

“Hello, Sybil.” Albus smiled at her

She just shuddered and glared at Albus “Mark my words.” Her bony finger nearly grazed his nose. She stepped backwards and let the pass.

“Are you sure it is wise to let an insane woman teach the students?”

“She is, as you know, a true seer, and as such, we need her safe and close.” Replied Albus in the same tone as he was discussing whether “You shouldn’t refuse your old position, Severus. I don’t want to lose you to the same fate as Frank and Alice.”

“You won’t, Albus. I am not so weak minded.”

“Still…”

“Do you propose that the teacher, the Head of House no less, is the same person who tortures his student’s parents? Yes, I can see how that would do wonders for school moral.” He replied in same aloof tone

“I didn’t think of that.”

“You two are not that much unlike.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Both looking at some goal visible only to you... forgetting that peaces’ you move around are not able to repair themselves, unlike ones in the wizarding chess.”

“Is your proposition to sit with him and...play chess?”

“It is too late for that now.” they reached the door to his quarters “I need to rest, Albus. We will talk later, it is of no importance and it can wait.”

“I trust your judgement, Severus.” Smiled Albus giving him a glance over the rim of half-moon spectacles. He winced at the words...
…They were in the Room of Requirement, practising. Ron standing across from her, grinning

“I’ll go easy on you, Hermione.”

“No need.” She smiled back “Expelliarmus!” she cried suddenly sending Ron on his butt, gliding across the floor…

…The dummy they used for practice turned and hit Ron over the ankles, making him lose his balance and tumble to the floor…

…She managed to produce an otter Patronus, while Ron’s wand still spits out wisps of ethereal smoke and sparks but no Patronus…

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“Walk with me, Severus.” Albus called him after the teachers meeting adjourned

He followed the Old Man, wondering what he has to do now. His time stretched thin as it is, between teaching, grading, running to Death Eater meetings, running to Order meetings, reporting to Albus, brewing and trying to keep an eye on Potter and his patsy. Not easy feet with quiet rebellion brewing all around. His own students running amok, following that toad of a woman. Weasley twins along with few of their friends causing havoc whenever they had a chance. He had barely time to sleep – one more task might easily be his doom.

“Ah, don’t worry, Severus, I won’t give you more tasks. At least not the ones above what are you doing. The time has nearly come…”

“Albus, do you think it is smart to speak about it now? Here?”

“Safer, I should think. Now, while I’m into hiding, you will have the excuse of fewer reports to either side I think. But I do trust your skill…”

“Ahem.” A third voice, annoying high pitched with a recognisable cough stopped them in their tracks “Hiding something from the Ministry, Headmaster?”

“Not at all.” Albus turned to face toad-looking woman
“I do hope that you do not try to destroy only decent teacher this school has besides me.”

“Thank you Madam Undersecretary Umbridge” he forced himself to sound polite

“Hardly. The boy is…incorruptible.”

He blinked at Albus. Was the old man lost his mind, trying to poke a hornet's nest?

“I see.” Umbridge coughed

“Yes. But you are welcome to join us for the rest of our stroll, while I discuss urgent school matters with Severus”

“And why that couldn’t be discussed in the meeting?”

“It is no one's concern beside Severus, of course.” Politely answered Albus

“Why is that?”

“As you know, Severus is not only Potions Teacher in this school, he is as well the school's Potions Master. I find that rest of the staff is bored if I discuss a long list of potions that need to be replenished in the Infirmary. Of which you will be informed, no doubt, given that you now approve of the expenses.”

“What expenses?”

“The ones for the supplies, of course. Severus places the order for school supplies for classes. But, as you undoubtedly know, supplies for infirmary have separate funding, and that each order is placed separately, according to needs.”

He held his breath. That wasn’t how things were done. Each year before the school starts he would sit down with Poppy and go through her estimation of needed potions. The ingredients purchased in advance. Only on the rare occasion when special potions were needed they would request for more ingredients. By the look on Umbridge’s face, he understood well enough why Albus gave him this small cue. He didn’t appreciate the way Albus spring on him this new and tiresome task.

“That is ridiculous, why not stock the infirmary at the beginning of the year?”

“Because, Madam Undersecretary, some potions have a short shelf life, while others lose their effectiveness if they are stored for a long time.” He answered, wondering if women understood that he rejected her appointment to the school and her authority by using her title rather than her name.

“I see.”

“Would you care to join us?”

“No, after all, I’ll introduce myself with ingredients through the request.” She hiccuped “Mr Snape, bring me the list personally if you will. That would be all.” With that, she turned and left.

“As expected.” Chuckled Albus

“Shall I inform you if she makes alterations in the order?”

“Yes. I place the safety of school kids at your hands, Severus. You could whip something up, for the kids, to be more…energetic…perhaps?”
“I could. I’ll let you know Albus.” He tilted his head slightly and walked away, hating Albus more than usual. How was he to control a classroom full of students doused with energy booster was beyond him…

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat in her bed, well sofa that she came to call a bed, and frowned. Pale dawn was shining through the heavy drapes. She turned to look at Snape’s sleeping form. He looked much better now, not a skeleton like. His face filled, still long and pointy with pronounced cheekbones. He looked… younger than she remembered. Thinking back, that year she focused on the Army and Umbridge more than on any other teacher. Even so, she did notice that Snape was looking more and more worn out as the time passed by. Dark circles under his eyes looked deeper and his mood was more grouchy than usual. She contributed that to that toad of a women, but now she knew better.

“How many ropes did you have to balance on?” her mumbling was barely audible

Snape continued to sleep, without so much as a twitch. His hands rested on his chest, neatly folded and she shivered. It looked to her like he was guarding himself, his heart, even in sleep. She continued to stare at him, nearly jumping when he rumbled, his lips barely moving.

“Quit staring and find another source to kill your boredom, Granger.”

“I didn’t want to wake you up.” She mumbled her apology

“Staring usually does wake me up.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Did what, Granger?” he sighed opening his eyes, the white of his eyes glowing ominously in the rising dawn

“Dumbledore. Let him give you so many obligations without crediting you, without letting anyone know?” that was one of the questions that bothered her

“My reasons are not up to debate, Granger.” He grumbled through clenched teeth

“But…”

“Sleep, Granger, or at least let me sleep. Find. Other. Source. Of. Entertainment.”

With a sigh, she flopped down and stared at the ceiling until she fell asleep again.

~S ~ S ~ S ~

“It is not an idea I am comfortable with, Albus.”

“The boy need’s it.”

“Find him another teacher, anyone but…”

“Severus, you are the best.”

“Albus,” he sighed feeling like he is arguing with a wall “The boy has no discipline, no capacity, not to mention that he doesn't trust me. What possessed you to think that I could be a good choice to teach him Occlumency is beyond me.”
“I can’t do it, and he needs a strong teacher.”

“He needs a teacher he will obey, follow his instructions not resist all the way.”

“I don’t trust anyone as much as I trust you.”

“Words, Old Man.” He hissed “Do you realise…what will happen if he finds out? Is this your way of setting me to be killed? If you do desire me dead, I can assure you I can provide you with much faster and, for me, pleasant ways to go.”

“Nonsense, Severus! I don’t desire your death. And he won’t find out, you will tell him.”

“Tell him what?” a twinge of horror gripped his insides. Wasn’t the point of all this to hide the fact that the brat had a connection with Dark Lord’s mind?

“That I punished you for taking too many points from Gryffindor by ordering you to teach my pet student Occlumency, the student you detest. You may freely express your doubts about boy’s success to him.”

“This is but one in a long line of mistakes you are making, Albus.”…

…he was standing in the middle of the room, still shaking. The brat. Arrogant little bastard. How dared he? Of course, this was all Albus’s fault, he gave that little tosser too much leeway.

He repaired the damage on broken jars, but what he really wanted was to throw and break things until everything around him was torn apart. He was humiliated. No! They may kill him, torture him…. They may go directly to the Dark Lord and tell him he is on their side. He won’t teach Potter anymore.

The audacity of the brat! To use the moment of his absence and look at his memories! To stick his snide nose into his Pensieve. Privacy obviously didn’t mean much to Potter. Like father, like son. What else he could expect from the spawn of James Potter. The hate for the long-dead enemy flared. He couldn’t muster the tender thought or a feeling even for Lily at the moment. She was equally to blame. She abandoned him, turned to his most hated rival. To that bully. Potter was her son, as much as James’s, she was equally guilty. If not more.

He continued to stand there, staring blankly, frozen. Immobilised by the intensity of shame and anger he felt….

…”They are gone, Albus! That idiot you call your champion just lead a bunch of school kids into a trap!” he roared into the floo-call “Potter, Weasley, Granger, Ginevra Weasley, Lovegood and even Longbottom!”

“Thank you for informing me, Severus! I will send someone to bring them back before…”

“What part of the trap you do not understand? Black is evidently with you, which mean that firstly Dark Lord knows about the connection, and secondly someone already waiting for them in the Ministry. I have specific orders to stay in school. Not your orders Albus, but his!”

“Calm down, Severus.” Albus smiled briefly before disappearing from the connection…

…They were standing in the hospital room in St. Mungo’s. The hospital was eery in the dead time of the night. Albus turned to him.
“They have trouble detecting the type of curse used. Is there anything you could do, Severus?”

“Who cursed her?”

“Dolohov.”

“Does anyone remembers the colour…”

“Purple, Longbottom said it was the purple.”

“Longbottom, a trusted source indeed.” He snorted “But… possible if it was Dolohov. May I?”

The Granger was laying on the narrow hospital bed, pale, her forehead beaded with large specks of sweat.

“It is not appropriate…”

“I need to see the wound, Albus. Proprietary has no place in here at the moment. Unless you are insinuating…”

“Not at all, Severus! You may proceed!”

He cast a charm to split the hospital gown at the middle, and using a wand slid the ends to keep the girl covered but the wound exposed. Leaning closer to examine the swollen, angry red flesh, he cast a few charms. The gash glowed. Nodding he turned to Albus

“For once, Longbottom was useful. I can perform the charm, to stop the spreading of the curse. There is a potion she will have to drink, I will make it, but it is your duty to persuade staff in here and her to take it.”

“I am certain that if you explain…”

“Having a death wish does not necessarily means I am willing to do die slowly and painfully, at the hand of the man who did this.” His voice laced with sarcasm “I know the curse. No one outside of the Death Eaters knows it. Not even all Death Eaters know there is a cure. I won’t put my neck on the line for this.”

“Very well, Severus.”

“You will have the potion tomorrow evening. I can’t do anything for the scarring. It might bother her, it will also be a reminder not to follow the Potter blindly. She should consider herself lucky by ending up with no more than just a thin scar.” He nodded and turned to the girl, casting a counter-curse…

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat in bed, blinking. Her head snapped toward the Snape, still sleeping, snoring quietly. The room was full of light and bright, but she couldn’t bother to check the time. Her mind swirlled, spinning almost out of control.

‘He saved me. Not the Medics in the Mungo’s. He saved me.’

She raised one hand and pulled the neckline of her oversized shirt she used as a sleeping gown, glancing down. The thin pale line run from the tip of her collarbone, between her breasts and ended at the peak of the ribs. No one knew that she was left with a scar. She always kept a glamour over it,
the same way she kept glamour over the mark Bellatrix left on her neck.

‘No one knows, except him. He knows, and he never said a word, never asked about it. Bathing suite can’t cover it, so why?’ she frowned ‘He doesn’t want to draw attention. Not to the scar, but to the fact that he healed me. I wasn’t supposed to know this’

The thought formed out of nowhere, she frowned again, staring through the window

‘Now, where did that came from?’
LXV

Chapter Notes

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

With the corner of his eye, he noticed Narcissa and Lucius slipping into the room. It was morning routine. Poppy would come, poke and probe and nod and hummed. They would be there, quiet and worried. Granger would sit on the sofa and watch Poppy like a hawk.

This morning, however, something was off. Granger was more attentive than usual and he wondered if that is even possible? Poppy nodded sharply

“You are recovering well, Severus. Better than I predicted. You gained muscle mass faster than I expected.”

“You released your dog on me Poppy, and you are wondering about my recovery rate? I am molested and tortured two times a day by this…”

"Now, listen to me, young man! That is not..."

“Matron, I am worried that he does not gain weight.” Quiet voice of Granger cut Poppy off in the middle of her scolding, he glared at her

“Nonsense girl, he is fine. He gained quite a few more than he had this time last year.” Poppy replied, her voice still sharp “How is your magic?"

“Not useful.” His throat felt clenched, as of lately he wondered what good was he alive to anyone? He couldn't use his magic. Tremors will prevent him from brewing. So why then even try to keep him alive? Unless this was his punishment, the ultimate one.

"Hmh, your magical core is strong and fully restored. Whatever issues you have unresolved… when you sort out through them, your magic will return to you. Full strength.”

That was relief of sorts. His issues had deep roots and he doubted he will ever resolve them. If... if he manages to regain enough balance to restore his walls, maybe then he could use his magic as before. After all, his ability to repress kept him alive for decades.

“Miss Granger, it is time to start working on walking. His leg muscles are strong enough. You will support him at the beginning… what is the matter, girl?”

“Ummm…he’s too heavy for me. I mean, he is not heavy… but he is...for me.” Granger stuttered and frowned
“I will help him, Poppy.” Lucius glared at the girl

“And how you plan to do that? You can barely hold yourself on your feet, and that is on a good day.” Poppy had no-nonsense voice that allowed no argument

“But I can and I will help Miss Granger. Surely, between two of us, we can follow your instructions, Poppy.” Smiled Narcissa

“Yes. Thank you, Narcissa.” Poppy smiled “Well, I have to run. Start today.” With these final words, Poppy stepped into the flames.

“Miss Granger, at your estimation when will be the best time to start?”

“In the morning. Now. I assist with other exercises, but they still tire him. I can do few short warming up exercises and we could…”

“HE is still in the room.” Hissed Severus. He felt like things started to spin out of his control more than they already did up to that point. Both women looked at him, while Lucius only chuckled

“Well, I’ll do the smart thing and remove myself from the line of fire.” With that Lucius walked to the door, leaning heavily on the cane.

‘Smart man.’ he thought fondly and glared at stubborn-faced Granger and determined eyes of Narcissa. He knew when he lost the battle, only this time there was no space for retreat and regrouping. He sighed.

“Now Severus, stop being so stubborn.” Narcissa reprimanded him lightly “Miss Grangrenger, you will walk me through what has to be done.”

“Yes. Madam Malfoy, please sit down until I do the warming up exercises with Severus.” Granger politely motioned towards the sofa and took her wand, placing the spongy padding on the floor. “Misty, I need your help, please.” She called

Misty appeared transferring him to the floor. This morning, however, they did it without a customary volley of grumbles. It was a nice change, one that he could get used to.

After a couple of minutes of light warming exercises, the ones that did not tire him anymore, Granger looked at Narcissa.

“We should straighten him up, in standing position. If he can make a step on his own, we will follow, but for now only standing will suffice.”

Without the word, Narcissa approached them and lowered to help Granger pull him up. Sitting up, with a bit of help, he wound each of his arms around shoulders of both women. They stood up, slightly wobbling.

Finally, he was... well... standing. If one could call it that way considering that he was slumped over the shoulders of Narcissa and Granger. He felt dizzy. The ground never looked further. He could feel a solid floor under his soles, but his legs felt useless. Somehow, too fragile and not supportive at all.

“Don’t force yourself.” Granger smiled at him, clenching the wrist of his hand that laid heavily on her shoulders and tightening the other hand around his waist.

He wanted to reply, to say something insulting... but his clenched teeth and hissing breaths were all that left his throat. Narcissa supported him silently for which he was grateful.
He felt utterly useless. A dead weight when he realised that his legs refuse to listen to his silent command to move. Carefully, he managed to wiggle his toes on the right foot. Cold sweat running down his spine. He was still able to move, it was the question of will and muscles.

“Do not push yourself, you spent months and months in bed. Standing with assistance is more than enough for today.” Granger almost cooed to him like he were a small child. He glared at her “Fine, suit yourself but if you exhaust yourself it won’t save you from pool or floor exercises.” Her voice turned from coo to a huff, insulted by his glare.

Finally, his strength gave out and his knees buckled. Narcissa and Granger carried him to the bed. Narcissa moved hair from his forehead, he avoided looking at her. Humiliated. Granger fussed around him, using a soft flannel to remove the coating of sweat from exposed parts of his skin.

“I have to go now, Severus, but I’ll be helping Miss Granger from now on.” gently whispered Narcissa and he moved his hand over hers, squeezing lightly. She smiled at him.

Once alone he turned to glare at Granger. She removed the padded pillows they used for exercises, her brow furrowed, her face determined.

“Granger.” Either he was too quiet or she ignored him on purpose, he cleared his throat “Granger!” she still didn’t react.

He observed her carefully, she acted insulted, not by his glaring but by the usage of her last name. Who did she think she is?

“Miss Granger, cease that immediately and come here.”

She paused her work and glared at him, with a sigh she obeyed him.

“What?”

“Do not use that tone with me, young lady. You are…were my student and I do expect proper amount of respect from you. You and I are not friends and it is unlikely that we will ever be.”

“Why? Why can’t we be friends? I am friend with Filius and with Hagrid and….”

“I am not interested in acquiring your friendship.”

“Oh, that’s rich.” She huffed at him, but she looked more hurt than angry “Fine. My apologies, Sir… or should I call you Professor.”

“Granger.” He growled, annoyed by her cheek

“Snape.” She bit back “Misty will bring breakfast soon… if you do not need me I’d like to read.”

“Do what you like as long you don’t bother me.”

She nodded making a small mock curtsy and stomped to her sofa. He felt angry, but annoyance and an odd feeling of emptiness soon replaced anger. It is impossible, and he is probably mistaken. He could not under no circumstances missing the discussions they had. Granger wasn’t his dream lady but she was interesting enough conversationalist. She did possess a sharp mind, even if she lacked imagination or boldness of thought. They spent a good part of the day in silence. He nearly jumped out of his skin, contributing his bad mood to the failed attempt of walking. Granger’s frowning didn’t help either. His nervousness reached almost a boiling point when Potter knocked on the door, peeking into the room.
To his and Potter’s surprise, Granger jumped to her legs, her curls flying out of the bun.

“Harry Potter, how could you!!”

“What did I do now?” Harry send him one bewildered look. Granger marched to Potter pushing him out of the room and slamming the door behind. The door clicked and slid open just so. He could hear Granger hissing at stuttering Potter.

“A Pensieve, Harry? How could you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“We were so mad at Snape for stop giving you lessons. Really? You looked at his stored memories! If I’d only knew…”

“But, Hermione, you know well that at the time I doubted him, we all did.”

“I didn’t. How many time I told you if Dumbledore trusts him so should we? But even if that wasn’t the case…you had no business…well, I can hardly blame Snape for not wanting to teach you after that.”

“Hermione… I just can’t believe he told you about that, I thought he doesn’t…”

“He did not tell me, Harry, I’ve seen it. I think he hates that I’ve seen it more than anything else. But he can’t help it, no more than I can prevent seeing his memories.”

’You do not have to think, I detest it.' he thought bitterly

“Still… So what now?” there was a reluctance in Potters voice

“You will go this instant, Harry. You will apologize to him and you will mean it !”

He allowed a grin to spill across his face for an instant. She sounded like his student, one he detested. Bossy know-it-all. Those boys had their divine punishment in form of their best friend. How did he miss that before when it should have been obvious to him?

There was a knock on the door and he schooled his features into a grimace of bored indifference. Potter sneaked into the room with confusion written all over his face, he glanced at the door with a hint of fear.

“Good day, Professor.”

‘Professor, he didn’t call me that when he should but he calls me now. Irony at its finest.’ He raised an eyebrow “Potter, what are you doing here?”

“Well, you see…I...ha...came to apologize.”

“For?” he asked, enjoying in Potter’s discomfort

“Our last Occlumency lesson, the one when I…”

“I do not wish to talk or think about it, Potter.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. Neither do I, but Hermione…she…from your memories and she found out…”
“She found out how you came by to see my memories.”

“Ummm not exactly, you see I never told them why we stopped with our lessons. I never told anyone what I saw in that Pensieve.” Potter’s voice lowered to a whisper.

That surprised him, he was expecting that Potter couldn’t wait to blabber what he saw to his friends. He lifted one eyebrow.

“To be honest, Professor, I felt ashamed of what my father and Sirius did to you. Everyone always told me how great they were. The truth was…devastating. I hated you for destroying the image I had of them.” Potter rocked on his feet than strode to the window “Dudly, my aunt’s and uncle’s son… he was a bully. And, I was his favourite target. I…hated you more after that, not because what you said to my mother – that was a moment in which everyone would bite. I hated you because I thought that I felt more for you than for my own father. And that was wrong. I guess, what I’m trying to say is…”

“I believe you are trying to apologize. And not out of your own sense of guilt.”

“Well, yes.”

“Was she like this in school?”

“So you heard?” Potter turned to him, frowning. He just smirked “Yes, she was, worse even. She can be a slave driver when she puts her mind to something.”

“Then you already had an ample punishment.”

“Cruel one at that.” The boy smiled shyly “Ummm, I am wondering…should we continue to…”

“Yes, but not at the moment, Potter. The situation is even more complicated than it was before.”

“It is true then, now you can see her memories…”

“Yes.”

“Can I…ask for a favour… a plea if you like… Don’t use it against her, whatever you see…”

“That is none of your business, Potter. What I do with her memories is out of your reach. You may leave. Now!” he felt insulted. The nerve of the brath. What was there to use anyway, even if he tried he would end up with a witch in tears. He had no desire to listen to her sobs and sniffing, no more than he already did. He had so much of her crying as he could handle for a lifetime, two even. No, what he wanted was simple, to regain his strength, his magic, to get rid of her and disappear.

Potter didn’t leave as he ordered him. Instead, he walked to the door and stopped, turning, dark red colouring his forehead.

“Professor, may I ask one more thing? I… I have no one else to ask this, really.”

“Speak, Potter, and be quick about it.”

“Everybody says that Hermione… that she is much like my… my mother was. Is that true?” there was hope, reluctance and apology in equal measures in Potter’s voice.

“No, Potter. It is not true. They are as different as they can be. Now, if that is all…” he replied tersely, refusing to elaborate more on the matter. He may be annoyed with Granger’s know-it-all
attitude and meddling ways, but in overall, Granger was different – better than Lily ever was.

The matter, and the name, still a living wound on what left of his heart. The question stabbed him, rubbing salt on that wound. The futility of all, his mistakes and his penance, glaring from the corners of his mind.

“Right. Thank you.” Mumbled Potter and walked out.
Hermione flexed her hands. Snape was in a foul mood. Harry’s apology apparently wasn’t received well. They went through a usual set of exercises for hands and legs in the pool. Gulping audibly she turned to him.

“Snape…”

“Granger…” he hissed, narrowing his eyes at her

“What is the matter with you?!” she snapped, “You told me yourself, you are not my professor and that we are not friends. I call my friends by their name, my professors by their title. Until you decide what are you… I have no other option but to call you Snape.”

She was frowning at him, refusing to budge down, but inside all alarm bells turned on.

‘Gods! What is wrong with me, he could feel annoyed by any number of things, or for no reason. So why did I had to bring this up now?’

Snape glared at her. His nostrils flared. She was sure, if he had the strength he would pick her up and tossed her out of the pool, but not before he shakes her like a rattle. His voice, when he finally spoke, sounded like and menacing hiss

“As I recall, Granger, I did give you permission to call me by my given name.”

“For just one evening.”

“Yes. And after that evening you continued and I did not retract that permission... thus extending it.”

“Then, why can’t you call me by my name? I have a name, you know?”

“It was hard to miss given that I read it during the class call for six bloody years.”

“Funny, I had a feeling you thought my name was either Granger or know-it-all.”

“It is too early for your hormonal outbreak this month, Granger.”

“I hate it! Alright? I hate it when you call me like that. It is the constant reminder of what... I’m sure you of all can understand that. I can’t change my last name. I don’t want to change it – but to be
called by it all day, day in – day out… And they may never... Just... STOP !”

“Now, that is the reason I find valid. Very well Gran...Hermione. Can we get out of this pool now?”

“Ummm, actually, I had an idea for another exercise, if you feel up to it?”

Snape glared at her and she sighed, maybe he can go along with her plan if she explains to him what she had in mind.

“It should help you gain more strength in your legs. It requires that you lean your hands to the edge of the pool, I’ll remove the charm from the water. You just move our legs as if you are walking, for as long as you feel comfortable. I’ll be next to you and with water holding your weight…”

“I am aware of the physics.” He grumbled darkly, she gazed at him “Well?”

Realising that he was waiting for her help she moved. He couldn’t hold on for long, but she counted these few minutes as a small victory. In time his strength will grow in his legs, the same way it returned slowly but steadily into his arms.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

His muscles screamed in pain, trembling under the skin. The jitter of exhaustion he could not prevent. He welcomed that pain, and the slumber after they reached the room.

… The school was empty, no students, no teachers. But there was Albus and Hagrid and elves, so he had to be in school now. A pleasant visit, for once, even if he had dark news. Now that he had an encumbrance of that rat, sniffing around his home. He often wondered if the rat was sent to spy on him or he was supposed to keep an eye on the rat. The line was thin and blurry.

His mood darkened with various brewing tasks he had for the Dark Lord. He went on for days hoping that his potions won’t be discovered for what they were. Even if there was little chance for that with Lucius in the prison. That was another thing, his friend, his brother was rotting in Azkaban. Bellatrix her husband and her brother in law took permanent residence in the Manor. Their presence preventing him to properly take care of Narcissa and Draco. He shuddered at the thought of those he held dear in the hands of a lunatic Bellatrix was now. Not that she ever was same, but now she could scare monsters bigger and worse even than him.

He hated every time he had to bow his head and stay quiet during the meetings. Dark Lord was not known for mercy, and Lucius’s failure was to be paid tenfold by his family. He reached the Headmaster's office and Albus looked at him with anticipation

“Ah, Severus! What news have you brought me?”

“Grim, Albus. The Dark Lord has a task…”

“What is he demanding of you now?”

“Not for me, Albus. For Draco.”

“Young Malfoy? I thought he refused to take to his lines anyone still in school.”

“Draco’s circumstances changed.” He hated it. He was the boy’s Name Keeper. And even if the duty of the role did not apply to him with the boy’s parents still alive, he felt protective. And powerless.
“What is young Malfoy told to do?”

“To kill you.”

“So, the Malfoy family is punished. It is rather ingenious if you think about it.”

“Are you still claiming that you are nothing like the Dark Lord, Albus?” he allowed irony and dark accusation to colour his voice

“I am.” Replied Albus “But it is. I could let young Malfoy carry on his task, protect the boy and die. Or... I could defend myself and condemn our student and his mother to certain death. In which case he would burden someone else with a task.”

“Indeed.” He failed to see what was so amusing or fascinating

“It is quite a puzzle, Severus, but puzzles are to be solved and we will solve this one. Do not worry, between two of us, I am certain we will find a solution to save your young protégé and hopefully myself.”

“You are aware if Draco fails who is his next choice? It is enough that only even family member doesn’t know I am informed of the task given to Draco.” he huffed annoyed.

“I am surprised he didn’t ask you already.”

“He might, but you forget…I still report to you and not to the Order.”

“Ah, yes. There is that.”

“So, have you any messages for him?”

Albus gazed through the window, he sighed

“Before I grow old and all the feathers fall off Albus, would be acceptable.”

“I am going for the time being to the trip.”

“Where?” he asked realising Old Man’s game

“I can’t tell you that, it is...ah, sensitive information. One, with which, I’m afraid I can’t trust anyone, even you, my dear boy. But, shall I prove successful in my endeavours, we will tip the scale of war to our side. Go, Severus, rest as much as you can during summer break.” Albus replied mildly, turning to him and watching him with fatherly affection.

He nodded, hating every moment of that game, the “dear boy” Albus used only in these moments, but mostly his own life….

…He was reading, nearly three weeks passed and not a word from Albus. The Dark Lord was getting restless. Words flowing in front of his eyes, not really forming into coherent meaning. Owl pecked at the window and Pettigrew let her in. The bird refused to give the note to the rat, landing on his chair instead.

He removed the note. Pettigrew was dusting, trying to glare behind him into the note. He read the lines before incinerating the note and spreading the ashes over the tea-table.

“You, clan this.” He barked an order to the rat and called “Misty!”
Elf popped and gave a dirty glare to the rat.

“What Master Snape wants?”

“Take me to school.”

Misty grabbed the hem of his robe and blinked them directly into the Headmasters office. Even if the note was plain, reading just “I returned to Hogwarts.” all the all arms start ringing in his head. It was not the first time Albus went somewhere, but he never before notified him of his return.

Now, the Old Man sat slumped in the chair, looking tired and beaten down. The room still tingled from magic. One hand blackened as he rested it on the table. He hastily approached the man.

“You old fool!” he hissed

“Quite right, Severus. Through I had to try.”

“Try what? Kill yourself?”

“No, sadly that task will fall into the hands of another. In my arrogance, I thought myself stronger than a curse.”

“Indeed.” He mumbled casting a charm after charm, his concern growing with each flick of his wand.

“If I succeeded, Severus…well, what is done - is done. I'm afraid this does complicates things. For you and young Mister Malfoy.”

“Malfoy is my concern, Albus. And I am but a chess piece.”

“Do you really see yourself that much expendable, Severus?”

“And you do not? I made my peace with my destiny, Albus, long time ago. It is not a question of if but rather when and how. Stand still now, let me see what I can do.”

“Did he asked you yet?”

“As you knew he would.”

“I am sorry, I know it had to be hard on you…”

“Do not flatter yourself, Albus.”

“No, never when it concerns you.” Albus smiled tiredly “At least this makes things easier, don’t you think?”

“No, I do not think that. But, it is not for me to think about such things… unless I’m asked to do so.”

He was pacing in his room in Hogwarts. He did not return home after he tended Albus. He knew that the Dark Lord will summon him soon, but he needed few moment of solitude. He needed to sort out through things. He knew what they expected of him from both of them. He just wasn’t sure if wanted to follow the orders. It was not that death or murder bothered him, he had enough blood on his hands. It was not that he held Albus close to his heat. It was not that with committing the act with which he would sign his own death, no matter who won. He was simply tired of the game they played. He hissed as his arm burned…
…”Yes, Albus, I can see your point. Explain to me one thing...how did you envision for me to convey the message to the Potter? Shall I call him for tea and scones?”

“I am sure that you will find the way, Severus.”

“The boy hates me – as much as I dislike him, I might add – can you imagine what his reaction will be after I kill you?”

“I have no doubt that you will find the way, Severus.” Repeated Albus tiredly but sternly, blue eyes shone with cold determination “I know you will do whatever it takes to give the message to the boy.”

He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. That was not the way he imagining he would die. Bitterness gathered in his throat constricting it. The irony of all ironies, to die from the hand of Potter.

“Between two of you, Albus, Muggle idea of Hell starts to look like a very appealing vacation destination.” His voice was low and bitter

“Are you religious, Severus?”

“No, but even if I were once... it would have been taken away from me, a long time ago.” He sighed, turning to walk out of Albus’s office...

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat in her bed, eyes wide open. He was still sleeping. Harry, she has to talk to Harry.

‘Dirty, manipulative Old Man. How dared he! How the bloody hell he dared?!’

It wasn’t just what Severus had to allow to happen, it was Harry. How would Harry felt once when the truth was out? What would it do to Harry if he killed Snape and then learned all that they knew now?

She bit her lips in silent anger. Wasn’t Dumbledore cared for Harry at all? For any of them? Or were they all expendable, pieces on the chess board as Severus said? The new comprehension and understanding washed over her. He may have been unfair, and bully in the classroom and favour his own house above others. He may have been many things. But even Snape was not deserving such blatant use of his life, such soulless approach to his own existence. If not his life, he deserved at least that his death meant something. He did not deserve to be an instrument that would destroy Harry, once the world was free from Voldemort. None of them deserved to be sacrificed with such lightness.

Damn that Old Man!
Chapter Notes

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

Warning: Ron bashing big time - if you like Ron, you better skip this chapter.

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The days went on. Painful, slow days full of two women fussing and ordering him around. He didn’t expect much more from this day either. What struck him as… preposterous would be a correct word, was that he missed the time when he was plotting with Gran…Hermione. Calling the girl by her name presented a difficult challenge. Names were intimacy he avoided at all costs.

Dull ache in his legs throbbed, reminding him that his morning “walk” and torture in the water just ended. It was, however, welcomed pain given the fact that he managed to lift his foot off the ground, even if only for few short moments and not making an actual step.

The door swung open and Lucius hobbled in, followed by Potter. He frowned, couldn’t the boy wait outside?

“Miss Granger you have guests…” started Lucius giving him a sly smile

“Harry! Let’s go out of the room, you shouldn’t have… Sorry, Severus. Thank you, Malfoy…”

“Not only Mr Potter, your second guest is waiting in the small garden, he is not permitted to enter my home!” Lucius’s voice was cold and full of detest. There were only a few people who could evoke this reaction in Lucius.

The girl blinked at Lucius then at Harry, confused

“Ron is waiting for you, Hermione.” Boy-annoyance smiled at her

Hermione squealed and jumped, clapping her hands. To surprise of all in the room, she darted to her trunk, digging through it then ran into the bathroom, passing Lucius and nearly knocking him down. In record time she darted out of the room wearing the same robes she had at the Malfoy ball. He frowned. Potter cleared his throat

“I appreciate what you are doing Mr Malfoy. I’ll wait outside.”

“Nonsense, Potter. Stay. By all means, I do believe you should see this.” Lucius sounded…pleasant, polite…

“What are you up to, you old fox?” he thought
Lucius snapped his fingers and an ancient looking elf appeared.

“You two may not follow the gossip columns, but I do.” Informed them Lucius, sounding all too amused “This should be good. Grouch if you will.”

Elf napped with his bony fingers and a sphere appear floating in the air, displaying Ronald Weasley, dressed haphazardly and without care. He was pacing up and down with a dumb look on his face. He suppressed the shudder. That block of wood was completely undeserving of a woman Hermione Granger will be one day. The girl showed up, running over the cobbled path through the maze of a short hedge, straight into the arms of said block of wood. Lucius cleared his throat

“You two do realise what she just did?”

“How…how do you do that? How we can see them?” blurted Potter and Severus rolled his eyes

“Made a mistake of colossal proportions.” He grumbled, “She can be incredibly dense for someone so smart.”

“Oblivious.” Lucius clucked his tongue

The sound spilt from the sphere and they turned their focus on it.

~ “Ron!” it was a happy cry

“Hey, Mione.” The oaf smiled

“How…how are you? How’s your mum? Your dad? How’s George?”

“Fine. Mum…she’s still…it is hard on her, but she’s put’t’n the brave face, you know? Dad got a Ministry position, Percy returned to work with him. He got a rise, so…it is better. I’m working with George, now. Well, more like I’m replacing him in the store… It is still tough on him, more than on the others.” He paused awkwardly “How are you? Harry, he won’t talk about you, you know?”

“Never better.” the girl flashed him one radiant smile ~

The sensation of wrongness pressed hard on Severus, he frowned, there was no reason for him to feel that way.

~ “I…I had some problems, I still do have them but not as much, I am much better now. And Severus is going on nicely, I hope he will start walking soon.”

“You call him by his name now?”

“Well…yeah. We sort of shared a lot. And he helped me. Not sure if he wanted to, but he did it anyways. And I found out some things… Why?” she wrinkled her nose

“I was just hoping… Look ‘Mione, I was wondering if we could…you know…maybe try it again?” the boy sounded irritated, rocking back and forth on his feet

“Ron?” she whispered “I… You… you do not love me. So why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you want to be with me if you do not love me?”
“We… we were good together.”

“Did we?”

“You don’t love me anymore?”

“I do, I always did and always will. But, Ron, I am not **in love** with you. No more than you are in me.”

“But we could still…don’t know…try to make it work.”

“But – why. ”～

Severus glanced at Lucius who had an amused look. He had a need to growl. It did look like the girl is going to relent. All his talking… it was just useless waste of air. In the garden, Weasley oaf was digging the tip of his foot into the meticulously trimmed grass. Lucius did growl at that. Potter had such expression of hope on his face, he found it almost painful to see.

～“**We were** good together. And… I **do care** about you. How…how do you know that you are not in love with me?”

“I know…it is complicated but…Severus…no, it is just complicated?”

Ron lifted his head sharply, his expression changed. ～

“Oh, this is going to be… gooooood.” Mumbled Lucius under the breath, so quietly that Potter didn’t even catch it, but he did.

～“Severus?” hissed Ron “Since when do you call him by his name?”

“Well, yes. There was that Ball for the New Year, and…” she tried to explain “it is just to mixed up to explain, Ron.”

“I, I can believe it, ‘Mione. You and Harry both. He…you know **who he is**, remember?”

“I do, Ron. He had to… he is a hero…”

“He chopped off Fred’s ear, he is a Death Eater, he **killed Dumbledore!** ”

“At the moment I could kill him myself.”

“Snape?” asked Ron with voice full of hope

“No, Dumbledore! You don’t know…”

“I know…”

“No, you don’t! Look I tried something and I messed up…it is complicated…let’s just say – I know more than I ever wanted to. Dumbledore wasn’t…”

“Don’t.” stopped her Ron “What are you doing ‘Mine? You live in the Manor! You do not leave Snape’s side! You trash-talk Dumbledore! Do you know what people talking about you?”

“As a matter of fact, Ron, I do. More than once they told me to my face.”
“And you don’t care?”

“I do share the room with him, I have my own bed but I am sleeping in the same room with Severus. And yes, I live in the Malfoy Manor at the moment. **Not** because I want to but because I have patient to take care of. I know the truth. Harry knows the truth. Do you?”

“Here we go” chuckled Lucius, Snape glared at him, Potter’s head jerked in Lucius’s direction “You really do not follow gossip columns.”

~ “Do you even hear yourself? Patient? You are not mediwitch! There is not one reason why you should be here, beside him! Worse even -you are proud of it! I thought maybe… I… and here thought I am doing you a favour, taking care of you.”

“Favour? What favour? I do not need to be taken care off, Ronald.” her shoulders squared just a bit

“Right, like you are doing a great job of taking care of yourself. Helping, living with **criminals**!”

“Severus is not a criminal. Malfoy is a prat but Malfoy’s still helped Harry. They are all officially exonerated, Ron.”

“Yeah, like that’s gonna change who they are?”

“What. Favour. Ron?” her voice determined, her brows narrowed in a frown

“My family, we hold some status now, you know? If you need someone… I thought… we already did it and…”

“Did what? Dated? You left me, Ron. You couldn’t handle being with me like I was and you left me. So what did we do that you wish to repeat? Because I didn’t and I won’t change my mind. So what do you thought we could possibly do?”

“Well, I don’t have a girlfriend right now, you know…. So I thought it would be good for you if you are seen with me. You know – be with me. We already did it and…” ~

He looked like a storm cloud ready to explode. Lucius still looked amused. Potter was changing colours and expressions as he caught up with the meaning behind Weasley's words.

~ “And – **WHAT**, Ronald?” her curls bounced around in anger, her eyes furious in sudden realisation “You thought if I am helping Severus to recover that I am actually sleeping with him?” she paused, Hermione’s voice had a dangerous thing in it “What did you think, if we fumbled in the tent we could continue? I told you - I am not ready! Not now.”

“But…”

“But? You know I thought you came because you care. You really care about me. You just want to have someone until next girl comes along! What did you figure? That the rumours are true? That my reputation will improve if I am in the gossip columns with you?”

“Well… yea. It would be good for you.” ~
Severus suppressed the growl. Shure, the girl was annoying. He wanted her as far from him as possible. She was irritating. But even with all that, she did not deserve to be treated like that. Lucius looked like he’s having the time of the day. Potter was gaping, mouth open, blinking in disbelief.

~ “I am not hanged on a hook, Ron. I do not wish to be the girl you choose when all other options are unavailable. I don’t want to sit and wait for you anymore. Let me tell you something – you weren’t all that good. Not that I would want a repetition of the experience at any rate.” She hissed

“So it is true?” Ron narrowed his eyes “If you can be with him – why not with me?”

“I am not. With. Him. And I am not stupid not to know when I like something or don’t. Go. Just, go, Ronald.”

“You really are…” Ron’s face was red and angry before he managed to finish the wand was in her hand, she flicked it

“Avis”

A flock of yellow canaries spring into the air and fly towards Ron, pecking him. He covered his head and run, yelling at her

“You really are mental! Fine – he can have you!”~

Lucius nodded and eld snapped his fingers, the orb disappeared. Heavy silence spread between them.

“I am going to kill him!” that was Potter, he jumped to his feet

“Where are you think you are going, Potter?” he growled, he felt angry, inexplicably angry

“Hermione… she needs me! I have to go to her…”

“And tell her – what, Mr Potter? That you just witnessed how he humiliated her?” Lucius raised an eyebrow, Potter blinked dumbly. “Do you think she would take it kindly?”

“No, Malfoy, you are right. What… what to do?”

“Potter, go to the tea room and wait. She will come into the house, and she won’t come here. Not in that state of distress. Do not tell her what you know – let her tell you, at her own pace.” Lucius sounded like he is instruction particularly dumb child how to mount a broom.

“Yes, yes you are correct, of course. Thank you, Malfoy. Snape.” The boy swiftly exited the room.

Lucius turned to him, looking like the cat that just ate the canary.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione was standing there, shaking from anger. She was so mad, not even sad or disappointed – only frustratingly angry. She turned to exit the garden. On the garden entrance, leaning on one of the ornamental arches was Draco. Her eyes narrowed at him

“That was a good one, Granger.” He grinned

“What do you want, Malfoy? Came to gloat?”
“No, I came to keep observers at bay in case you need it. It turned out I was right.”

“If you say a word…to anyone about this…” she threatened, pointing her wand at Draco. He raised his hands like he surrenders

“Not a peep. I may not like you Granger, but at least I am civilised.”

“Sure.” She growled pushing past Draco. She wanted to scream. To blast everything in front of her. Only when she was nearly in the main entrance hallway she realised where she was.

“Misty!”

“You is call?” elf asked

“Yes. Can you… just, please, can you take me to the tea room.” Her voice broke.
“I do not find this amusing, Lucius.” He sighed, Lucius looked like he was having fun

“Oh, it is not amusing…well, it is – at least a bit. However, this was expected. And I thought that you should know…” Lucius paused, paying attention to his nails suddenly “At least now…well, she is not a maiden and she is available.” Lucius’s lips quirked a bit “Why do I have a feeling you did know that already? But, solid confirmation is always welcomed, I suppose.”

“This is not funny, Lucius. Whatever she is…she did not….” he started, Lucius looked bored

“No, she did not.” His friend finally looked at him, nodding “And I am not uncivilised, I do have manners. I through I do despise her being…well, what she is. I would never allow myself or Draco… This is sullying my reputation too, you know?”

“Lucius.”

“It does. She is m…muggleborn, and I’d never allowed myself or a member of my family… well, the member that bears Malfoy name at any rate… to lower itself like that. To water down our blood. Not even to taint itself with the lady of the profession. You know me well enough, my friend, to know that I never even… Well, that and there was a matter of fidelity.”

“No, you did not. That is my department I believe.” He replied grimly, why was Lucius mentioning that of all right now was beyond him.

“What is he plotting now?”

“Oh, come on, Severus. It happened only once. And in all truth – she deserved it. That deprived lunatic would enjoy it if it wasn’t for your… blood status.”

“That was the point.” This talk didn’t make him feel better, bitterness mixed with anger settled in his chest

“Oh, you did send a potent message with it.” chuckled Lucius

“I do not find it funny. It was revenge, Lucius. What I did… There was no message.”
“O, it was. Even if you do not know it.”

“And what would that message be?”

“You had the power. The power to ask our Lord and be granted permission to exact your revenge. The power to punish. It was easy with Dolohov if he got you – you were likely to be dead. With you – you left them alive. Alive and branded for life. They were terrified of you, more than they ever fired Dolohov. While you issued the punishments they followed the suite, they would fall in line at the mention of your name. With Dolohov, there was fear but they never fell in line. You did remarkably well for the only half-blood in the Circle. You did remarkably well even for a Malfoy, brother.”

He frowned. Lucius hobbled towards the door.

“At any rate, your path is cleared now. She’s… well, she is what you like…and now – she even might be willing.” Lucius grinned walking out and leaving him with his thoughts.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Harry paced, he reminded himself over and over again that he shouldn’t reveal to Hermione what he knew. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Ron at that moment. Ron was his best friend, a brother he never had, and Harry loved him with all he had. But, he could not condone, he could not ignore how Ron behaved towards Hermione. As much as Ron was his brother, Hermione was his sister.

He knew that Ron was still grieving, even after a year. Fred’s death was still a fresh wound for Ron. And he did hope that Ron and Hermione will end up together, that they will be a real family one day. He hoped, until now. Now, he wasn’t so sure how good of an idea that was. Hermione did deserve someone who could accept her the way she was, and that wasn’t Ron.

He nearly jumped when elf popped into the room, holding Hermione’s hand. Her face was a mixture of thunderous anger and crushing despair. She let a sound, something between a growl and the sob, and dashed into his arms, squeezing him tightly.

“Hermione?”

Only sobs and shaking off her shoulders answered him. He let her cry on his shoulder, hugging her tightly.

‘I have to look confused. She can’t know…’ he chanted in his mind. At this moment he could beat Ron to a bloody pulp.

Finally, she stopped crying. Gently, he let her out of his embrace.

“Hermione, what happened?”

“Ron… he… he doesn't like me…. ” She hiccuped

“You knew that he doesn't love you the way you wanted… you told me that.” He tried then stopped ‘Smart one, Harry, make her cry again!’

“No, and that is not an issue, I don’t love him that way either. It did take me some time to realise that, but I still like him. But he doesn't like me – like a friend.” She started to sob again.

“I’m sure it is not true, Hermione. Ron is… well, Ron is Ron. He is slow to accept change and he is still grieving.”
“He is an idiot. Mean, thickheaded…idiot!” she snapped “Did you know what he wanted? Did you?”

“He said he is worried about you and that he wanted to talk to you. I managed to arrange with Malfoy for him to visit you”

“Worried about me.” Hermione sounded bitter and he couldn’t blame her “Please! He asked me to sleep with him again. To be with him again.”

“Well, that is good. Isn’t it?”

“You do not listen, Harry. He thought he would do me a favour if…if I am in gossip columns with him. If I get back with him. Do you have any idea how that woman would make me look? What would she say? And that, that is not even the worst of it! He does not even care about me.” She smiled bitterly “I am just a convenience. He thinks if we slept once that I can sleep with him again – until he finds some other girl. O, he didn’t say that outright, but I knew what he meant, it was obvious enough from the way he phrased things. I know Ronald Weasley enough to know what he’s saying.”

Hermione pulled back and started to pace, now she looked angry, extremely angry.

“Can you imagine the nerve of him?”

“Do you think he would cheat…”

“No. He wouldn’t, he never did. But, I have the feeling like he thinks I’ll be there for him always, no matter what he does. That I’ll wait for him because I have no other options. You should have heard him… I mean, why not do it with him if I… if I…” Hermione shook her head “No, I can’t even say it. Harry, do you think that too? That… that I am… with… Severus or one of the Malfoys?” she shuddered at her own words

Harry cleared his throat and shook his head. This was the conversation he really didn’t want to have with Hermione. With any girl for that matter. It was just wrong.

“And you don’t… don’t mind… if I ask you something? I mean, there is no one else I could ask.” her demeanour changed so abruptly that confused him

“Sure.” He mumbled, painfully aware how big of a lie that was, he couldn’t even guess what she’s going to ask and that unnerved him

“Well, you see…” she walked to the chair and sat in it, looking thoughtful “I was wondering…how do you guys compare or know…you know…the size of…” she blushed and pointed at his crotch

If he could jump out of his skin and run, he would. Blushing, he sat in another chair, crossing one leg over the other. He cleared his throat again

“Well, we sort of…you know. We actually don’t. It…no one wants to know if someone else is…well, better equipped than the others.” he fastly added “We just don’t.” quickly curled his hand into a fist, blushing “Why would you want to know?”

“Well, Matron said… and I was reading and I was just wondering…you know…with Ron being the only one…Not that I want that right now, but for the future references.” She was blushing to the roots of her hair, avoiding his eyes.

“Well, I am not sure how to explain properly. But, the smart thing would be not to compare, you
know, at least not out loud.” He smiled, this was more like Hermione he knew

“Right. Never mind then. Thank you.” She nodded, frowning

“So, Snape… How is he doing?”

“Better. He started to standing up, with help - but still, he will start walking soon. But he still has those flashbacks, and…you...you would not believe what I found out.”

“About Snape?”

“About Dumbledore.” She shuddered “What he was planning… I am so…mad…at him. Do you know he planned for you to kill Snape?”

Harry blinked, his throat felt incredibly dry, he almost regretted that she changed the subject. Talking about sex sounded far better than talking about…this.

“Ummm, no. Are you sure?”

“Well, how else would he give you the information or power over the wand?”

“But wand was Draco’s.”

“He didn’t plan that one, it happened by accident.” She added grimly

“Ummm, Hermione, do you mind if we…don’t talk about that? I am not… I can be mad at one person at the time and now I’d rather be mad at Ron.” he was still having a problem with all negative feelings in connection to Dumbledore, the man was first father figure he had and if he did something wrong then Harry would rather not know.

“Oh, Harry, I’m so sorry.” Hermione’s face suddenly fell “I shouldn’t have told you anything. Ron… he is like a brother to you. Please, don’t fight with him on my account. I…I’ll handle it.”

“Hermione,” Harry stood up, pulling Hermione on her feet as well “he is my brother but you are my sister. And he does deserve a good slap on the back of his head for treating you the way he did.”

“Harry…please. Weasleys are family, Ron or no Ron, to you and to me. Don’t do that to Molly… Promise me, promise me you won’t argue with him.”

“But Hermione…”

“He is my problem, Harry, and I'm going to solve it.”

“Fine. Just so you know – you have my support, if you need it.”

“That is all I need to know.” She hugged him again.

Harry wanted to run, today was too much for him. he needed solitude and time to think.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione walked into the room just when he felt ready to jump out of his own skin. The solitude he craved for turned out to be his biggest enemy. With the girl annoying him by invading his space he had a distraction, distraction from himself. He wasn’t alone for a long time, not even half an hour. But in that short time, he managed to go through long list of his crimes, entertain few ideas how would he retaliate to Weasley should he said something like that to him and had a brief recapitulation
of his never-ending debate about living vs dying. Dying still seemed like an ample and valid option, even if lifting his foot off the ground gave him a small boost of optimism.

The door opened with force as Hermione entered the room. She had thunderous look on her face, he deemed that as good. He was afraid that she would look broken, which would mean she regressed. Anger was correct reaction.

“Why are you alone?” she asked from the door

“Lucius had other obligations than to sit here with me. I believe that it is your task, one that you started to neglect as of lately.”

“Neglect? All I hear is you complaining that I don’t give you any space at all. So, was it good? Being alone for a while?” she hissed at him

“That is none of your business.”

“Well, I’m just re-assuming my neglected duty by asking that question.”

She, obviously, had an excess of anger and need to spend it by attacking the first moving target. The corners of his mouth lifted, he was far from a moving target but he was a target nevertheless. Smiling, however, was a mistake, one he realised too late.

“O, you find that amusing! Fine, I won’t talk to you or bother you. In fact, I’d appreciate if you do not address me at all until I speak to you or you need something.”

“I assume the date with your paramour didn’t go as well as planned.” He paid attention that his voice sounds taunting and disinterested. She was rummaging through her trunk, at that Hermione turned to him with narrowed eyes

“ That is none of YOUR business.” She growled, “And tell your…. whatever Draco is to you, to keep his nose away from me if he wants to keep his bollocks attached to his person.”

“Draco?” he lifted an eyebrow, what Draco had to do with the entire situation. And since when she called him by his name?

His question remained unanswered, she picked up a bundle of clothes and headed to the bathroom, ignoring him completely. Now, this was an interesting development, one that he would look into. His brain started to plot, he didn’t feel so alive in a long time.
I know I’m late, and it is entirely my fault. Even if I have everything pre-written, I realised that I rushed the story to fit it into planned 75 chapters max. And I didn’t like it. So, instead just “tweaking” the chapter, I ended up first debating with myself to keep the story bit longer but true to the original idea. Second, rewriting the entire chapter.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

…The cold hand of fear squeezed on his insides as he watched students leaving the train. Draco had a highly self-satisfied expression as he joined Pantsy. Granger was running like a headless fly annoying everyone with her enforcement of rules. Weasley blabbered about Quidditch. Potter, however, was nowhere on the site. As the last students left the train he turned on his heel and rushed to Headmasters office.

“Albus, did you sent Potter to school by some other means of transportation?”

“No, as far as I know, Harry boarded the train with the others. Why?”

“I didn’t see him get out of the train. Check with the others.”

Albus took his wand and conjured his Patronus, sending the message to the Order. Soon, the reply came in the unstable shape of the wolf speaking with the voice of Nymphadora Tonks.

“We put the children on the train. I’ll be at the school gates, Meet me there.” Patronus disappeared but burst again into the room only seconds later  “Found him! We are going to the gate, meet us!”

“The Welcoming Feast…”

“Will start without me. You have to be there. I’ll go look for him. Undoubtedly, Potter found another way to make his entrance more glamorous.”

“Severus.”

“You put too much faith into the boy Albus, he is not as special or capable as you would like him to be. I’ll keep you posted, Albus.”

With that, he turned and walked from the office. But the moment he was safe from prying eyes, he speeded up his pace, rushing towards the gates. First time since he noticed the boy missing he felt that the tension and fear are gone…
...The brat had not only the audacity to be terse and bash but to oppose his new post as DADA teacher. In that moment he wanted nothing more than to strangle Potter himself. Didn’t he understand how much knowledge is necessary to teach them how to defend properly? Death Eaters won’t go easy on them, he should have understood that last year with all Black fiasco.

Not that he mourned Black’s death. Still, it was unnecessary death caused by Potter’s rash actions and stubbornness. Underneath all, achieving his decade’s old task came at a heavy price. The price which Potter would never understand...

...Why Albus insisted on playing a chess now was beyond him. The Old man did everything, bar twisting his arm, to coerce him to play with him. He had essays to read through, Draco, Potter and his patsy to follow, potions to brew for Poppy. By Salazar, did he have a list of potions to make. Students were particularly inventive in ways to hurt themselves or others this year. They already depleted potions reserves for the infirmary, and the year barely started.

“It is your move, Severus.” Albus reminded him

“Yes.” He glanced at the board and moved his pawn

“You are not paying attention, Severus. You sacrificed…”

The pain seared through his left hand and he hissed, standing up.

“I have to go.”

“Severus, please, let’s finish the game first.”

“I have to go, Albus. I’m summoned.”

“Use the floo to your room.” Albus motioned to the fireplace. With a nod, he grabbed the powder and stepped into the green flames. In the room, he summoned the robe and the mask. He had too much to do and no time to spend a night in bed, which would happen if he displeases or angers the Dark Lord. Casting a disillusionment charm he rushed to the gates.

The world stopped spinning and the uncomfortable squeeze of apparition spit him out, surprisingly, at the gates of Malfoy Manor. Practically running, he reached the main entrance of the Manor fast. Grayback growled at him but let him pass without the word.

In the drawing room, Narcissa was sitting in the corner, pale and quiet. He royal posture did not fool him, she looked worried to him. Bellatrix glared at him. She was standing near Narcissa, looking spiteful but tamed. Being related to the Malfoys didn’t boot well for her now when Lucius was in prison. His failure affected them all. At least now, Draco was safe in school.

He didn’t greet anyone in the room. Reaching the spot where Dark Lord was standing, he bend slightly at the waist and lowered his eyes.

“My Lord.” He murmured

“Ah, Severus. You came quickly to my summons.”

“Not as quickly as I desired, my Lord.”

“I am aware that you have obligations to the school, and that you can’t apparate as quickly. You came fast enough.”
“Thank you, my Lord.” He bowed a bit deeper, unsure if this was a good or a bad start. One could never be sure of that these days, if ever

“Walk with me, Severus.”

He followed the slow walk of the Dark Lord, wondering what was the reason for his summon. The moments of slow stroll stretched, seeming indefinitely. He nearly sighed out loud when Dark Lord started to speak.

“I assume that everything is going according to my plan.”

“So far, my Lord, yes.”

“Good. That is good. You will be excused from future summons until I deem you unquestionably necessary by my side. Your task is more important than squabble I am forced to listen as of lately. Watch over my young recruit, see that he completed his mission but do not interfere. However, keep him from being expelled, should he prove to be skilled as his father in messing up. He has an important task.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“If anything occurs that I need to know, send that bird of yours. I am sure that he will bring the news and amuse me in process. He, after all, holds no love for Bella or Grayback. I trust him more than owls.”

“Yes, my Lord.” He kept his head low and his mind blank. There will be time for thinking and strategize later

“Now, this means that if my plan changes you won’t be informed timely. You can handle any change in the stride.”

“I can, my Lord.”

“Very well. You know what to do. That Old fool knows you are here tonight?”

“He does my Lord, I was in his presence when summon came.”

“Very well, you may tell him that I am displeased with some news which, I do not want to reveal. You may tell him that I summoned you to witness how I treat those who fail me. As a reminder.” softly hissed Dark Lord “You do not need reminders, do you, Severus?”

“No, my Lord. I will tell him as you instructed me, my Lord.”

“Do you have anything to report?”

“Only that Potter has private lessons with Dumbledore this year. However, everyone is in the dark what those lessons are, even his friends. The Old man locks the memories in the boys head, without attacking and damaging the boy's brain, I can’t extract them.”

“It is of no consequence. I have the means to find out without you exposing yourself and endangering your position at this moment. Your presence in the school is of utmost importance now.”

“Yes, my Lord, thank you.”

“Well, now, let us give you necessary material to bring back to the old fool. Dolohov!”
He kept his breath. The Death Eater in question was lower ranked one, and unfamiliar to him. He watched dispassionately as Dolohov butchered the poor wretch to death. Not feeling sorry for the man. Dolohov’s performance was, however, short, unimaginative and the Dark Lord did not seem to enjoy it. That brought him the small measure of satisfaction. He remained a step behind Dark Lord, not wasn’t released, he did not want to enrage Dark Lord by moving away from him.

It was past midnight when he returned to his quarters. Albus left that infernal bird to wait for him. He sent a message to Albus using the bird as a messenger and sat in the chair. His head felt heavy. Not to be on beck-and-call for every Dark Lord’s whim was good. Being in the dark what Dark Lord plotted was bad. At least he will have more time to follow the children around the castle and to brew and teach undisturbed…

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She modified her parent’s memories and slipped out of the house. Pain constricted her throat, she knew what she was doing but it still hurt. Now, in their mind, she didn’t exist. Tomorrow, they will embark on a plane and travel halfway across the globe. Not knowing that they have a daughter at all. She wasn’t even sure if she can reverse the spell. In theory, it should be reversible… in theory. Suddenly, she felt sick

‘What if I survive but can’t reverse it?’

Her stomach lurched at her throat. She dashed to an ally and bend down, expelling everything that she ate that day. Retching dry, long after her stomach was empty. Finally, she managed to straighten up, cast an Aguamenti to rinse her mouth and wobble to the nearest coffee shop. Walking in a secluded separe, she ordered a cappuccino. Only when she was sure that no one will bother her or see her she started to cry.

It took her good half an hour to calm, stop crying and convince herself that she did a good thing. The right thing. Her parents are safe. Even if that was well planned, months in advance. Even if she did what she had to do to protect them, it still hurt. It still scared her. It felt as if they died. Blinking to stop the tears, she paid the coffee and dashed out. But, when she boarded the bus to the part of London where Leaky Cauldron was, the tears rolled again. She cried through the entire trip.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus blinked. The sound of sobbing woke him up. He turned his head and glanced at the sofa. Hermione lied curled up in a ball.

“Miss Gra… Hermione, what is the matter now?”

Quivering bundle on the sofa moved. It took her time to sit or turn to him. She moved like she was in a jello. Huge brown eyes blinked at him, large tears rolled from them and clung to the eyelashes.

“Nothing, just…a bad dream.”

“I am aware of that. To my misfortune, I can’t escape them now.” he sighed

Her eyes changed, from lost and sad they turned to angry and fiery in a split of a second.

“If you are aware, then kindly leave me be. If you are capable of being kind at all.”

“I may have agreed to call you by your name, that does not give you the right to address me as one of your peers.”
“I don’t care what you think.” She hissed “It is your fault! This is all your fault!!!”

“And how pray tell, is it my fault?”

“You…” she choked, hiccuped and jumped out of the sofa, pointing a finger at him “…you and your questions. You did this on purpose! You robbed me of my happy memory!”

“Happy memory? As much as I do hate to witness what you refer as a ‘happy memory’… And make no mistake, I wouldn’t call that happy by any stretch of the imagination. …I equally detest to wake up in the wee hours of the morning by your sobs.” He growled “Furthermore, I fail to see how did I rob you of your ‘happy memory’”

“You, you…made me think…re-think…” she stuttered, tears still rolled down her cheeks

“Yes, for a good part of my life I am guilty of that crime. Forcing a bunch of brain-dead dunderheads to use what little brain they have. With almost no success, regrettably. ” He growled at her “I still fail to see how that robbed you of your happy memories.”

“You… and he… and I…” it seemed to him that she tried to say more than few thing at once. Her attempt resulting in hardly coherent gibberish at the end

“One sentence at the time.” Drawled Severus.

He knew what she was referring to, but, given that she did not mention to him anything about her altercation with Weasley - he had to pretend. However, he thought that a nudge in the right direction wouldn’t go amiss

“I do believe that you did have a rendezvous with your paramour…”

“Stop!!! Stop calling him that! He is… he’s not my paramour. He isn’t my anything!” she hissed, her voice falling to near whisper “He is as mean and… and… The two of you would get along quite well, now.”

“I doubt that.”

“He is as vile and…debasing as you and your…friend! You would get along just fine.”

“Be that as it may I still…”

“Before! Before… I could hold on to a few good thing I have left, no matter how small or weak they were. Now, I have…nothing! Now I am forced to relive…” she broke down in sobs once again

“I fail to see, how facing one's fears and regrets…”

“Don’t you even dare finish that.” She cut him off once again, she started to annoy him in earnest “You…you lived your entire life… like an ostrich! So you have no right to lecture me about facing my memories or actions or truth! You. Have. No. Right. I can’t even research now…”

“That is hardly my fault.” He growled “I did not ask of you to use me as your test subject. But I am going to lecture you.”

“No, you won’t! You are not my teacher any more – you made that clear. You have no obligations to teach me anything. And I won’t accept you preaching to me what to do when you do not listen to your own advice. It is hypocritical of you! I did try to help you…”
“You didn’t try to help me, you practised on me. What did you think, that I’ll help you with memory charm if you wake me up?” he whispered, his voice trembling with repressed anger.

The little hussy had the gall to use him and call him on it, blame him for her own misguided beliefs. She blinked at him.

“No…yes…no.”

“Make up your bloody mind!”

“No not at first, at first I just wanted to save you. To help you. Later, yes… I did hope that you would help me… but, but soon I realised that. After you woke up after I realised… It doesn’t matter anymore. When I finally manage… it will be too late anyway. And now – I need all of my ‘happy memories’ no matter how undeserving you see them. I am sure that you can understand at least that.”

“Pray tell, what did you plan to use as a bargaining chip for my help?” he asked in a cold voice, this was it, the moment, his chance. At least he hoped it was.

She blinked at him confused.
Hermione blinked at him. Severus’s question confused her, forcing her to stop and decipher what did he meant by that. Anger still bubbled in her body, but the logical part of her brain took over. The result was an unexpected halt accompanied by total confusion.

‘Bargaining chip? For what?’

Snape smiled snidely

“Oh, I see. Tell me Gra…Hermione, when did you join to my stroll down the memory lane?”

“After you received your Merlin of Order…..” she stopped, something she said didn’t sound right

“If you refer to Order of Merlin, I can see your logic behind it. It still does not answer my question. What was the first memory you…invaded…”

She frowned, it didn’t sound to her like he wanted to know, not really. But at the same time asking her that was important enough for him, or he wouldn’t ask at all. She sighed, he won’t like the answer.

“Umm…yes…well, that would be the moment when you…you know…” she stuttered, pointing out to his left arm “When you received your mark.”

“Mhm.” He nodded, but Hermione was sure that he looked…relieved “So you did witness some of less savoury moments in my life?”

“Well, not all of them of course, but yes.” She wondered when he’s going to explode

“Then, pray tell, what misguided notion possessed you to think that waking me up, keeping me alive would merit my help as a form of gratitude for your meddling?” his voice was calm, cold and she felt every word brushing against her like sharp blades

“Yes, well….ummm….like I said I gave up on that…”

“Yes, as you informed me. Still, didn’t you learn anything about Slytherins so far? You never go into the deal with them if you do not have on the table something that they want.”

Hermione shivered, his voice was so cold, so precisely focused that she could tell she won’t manage
to get away from this conversation so easily. But even if she felt like she walked straight into a trap, this was the trap of her own making. She made it possible. Question was, how she can get away from it. He smiled, it was an eerie smile

“You do, however, possess something that I do…want to have.” His voice faded

Hermione sighed, she enabled him to entrap her…so either she will get his help but at the price, she was sure she doesn’t want to pay. Or… she will back down and … Hermione felt like screaming, with a sigh she glared at him. Fine, if he wanted to play this game she will have to be smarter than him. Right? Somehow, that did not sound easy or possible to her.

“Except, you ignored the fact that I told you, I gave up.”

“Grang…Hermione, so far, by my knowledge, you do not give up. You are simply unwilling to put that bargaining chip on the table. May I remind you that, unlike you, I have nothing to lose.”

“Oooo, you have plenty to lose. Do you take me for one of…how do you call us…dunderheads? I am aware that if you could use your magic – I wouldn't be here, you would find the way to get rid of me. If you could use your magic – I couldn’t see any of your memories. I know that I see only parts of it – parts you hid from Dumbledore, from Voldemort or yourself. **If you** could face your own fears and truth you would know what I know.”

“Perhaps. But, if you would stake your honour and your promise, that you would evaporate from my surroundings once your parent’s memories are restored – I could lend you an **extremely** helping hand.”

“To what end?”

“I thought that the said ‘end’ was clear from the start.”

“If I agree to that – the moment I leave you, you are going to off yourself. That is unacceptable. This way, I’ll find the solution, slower but I will. And you will still be alive.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus sighed, he was hoping that this will go much easier. Then again, he should have seen this coming. She was not one to break easily under the pressure. But if he plays just right…maybe…

“True, though I can inform you that your ‘solution’ may come a tad bit late. Memory charms, as you can see for yourself, can be tricky and unpredictable at best, when performed by…amateurs.”

“I know.” She sounded tired, hanging her head low “I know it! But what are my options? To choose? To trade your life for their memories?” she shook her head “No. At least they are alive, even if they never remember me. I’ll find the way, but I won’t sacrifice you.”

“You are not doing anything to me. In fact, what you are doing now feels more of a punishment than help.”

“No! You may think that now…but, I won’t…Besides…” she raised her head, the look in her eyes suddenly hard and determined

‘Bloody Gryffindor's and their false sense of justice and righteousness’ how was he supposed to navigate through that?

“Besides, I **know** that you can’t do squat without your magic. I also know that you won’t regain
power over your magic until you face your demons.”

“And what if, I ‘face my demons’ as you phrased it, and still do not change my mind? What then? Would you be willing for a lifetime of commitment?” he let his voice to convey what he thought of that prospect. Mild intimidation could go a long way, besides he wasn’t threatening her, he graciously offered a fresh perspective for her. An easy way out, spiced with unfavourable and scary outcome should she choose to ignore it.

She blinked at him again. She obviously didn’t think about that, didn’t even considered it as possibility

“I don’t think it would happen” she didn’t sound too confident at that

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.” He reminded her gently “I asked a question and expect an answer.”

She blinked again. He suppressed the need to smile, feeling almost giddy. He had her now, and if he plays all his cards right she will be out of his way. A very private problem, one that he will keep hidden was… As of lately, ever since he made that first step, lifted his leg from the ground… he had hope. And that was notion so strange and foreign to him that he didn’t know what to do with it. Hope was a dangerous and treacherous thing. He abandoned hope a long time ago and the prospect of the feeling returning was unsettling at best.

She was still mulling over her answer and he deemed that as a good thing.

“I am waiting.”

“If needed be.” She finally whispered but continued with much more confidence “I still don’t think it possible. If you have your magic – there is not much I can do, isn’t it? So, this is really a trick question. However, if you get rid of that guilt…”

“It is not matter of emotions, it is a matter of logic. Certain crimes…”

“That’s where you are wrong Severus Snape. Penance, guilt, repent…those are all emotions. That’s why we no longer have ‘blood revenge’ but the court. Impartiality without emotions. Until you make peace with yourself – you won’t be able to use your magic…”

“And what in my current memories or behaviour imply that I’ll ever manage to get to make a…”’peace with myself’….was it?”

He could see cogs turning in her head. Suddenly, she was kneeling next to him. He pulled back into sitting position. She waved her wand and floated a flat board between them, like a table. She placed her right arm on it.

Her behaviour confused him. Begrudgingly, he had to give her credit for it. Rare were the occasions when he couldn’t read his adversary’s moves – this was one of them. She smiled at him

“What if… what if Voldemort decided that child in question was a child born in some other part of Europe? What if Potter’s never crossed his mind? What if you never made a mistake of joining Death Eaters? What if Dumbledore never saw you fit to use you as a spy? What if… Dangerous question, Professor.” Her eyes blazed at him “We only cross ‘what if’ bridge when we are in front of it. I do have a proposition for you.”

“And that proposition demand all this?” he pointed at the board

“Mine does. For now, you can’t get rid of me. You do not have the physical or psychological
strength to get by on your own. And as much as Malfoy’s care for you, they still have their own problems. And I won’t allow you to trick me into... to force me to leave your side just yet. So, I’ll make you a deal – you win and I go, I win and I stay no complaints. I even make a side offer, I’ll reveal at least a bit of what I know if you beat me.”

“I beg your pardon?” he had a need to snarl at her or gape at her in confusion, neither booted well with him

“We will hand-wrestle. You do know what that is?”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Snape looked thunderous. His eyes narrowed, a deep chasm wedged between his brows, mouth tighten in a line. He nearly barked at her

“Of course I bloody know what hand-wrestling is. What I do not know is why are you proposing such asinine plan.”

“Well, we can argue until the end of time with ‘what if’. If I lose we may continue if I win we postpone that argument until you can beat me. But, since you pointed out that when negotiating with Slytherin’s you have to have bargaining chip... I did learn something from your memories. Something I can tell that you failed to see.” She tilted her head

He was trying to incinerate her with his eyes. She waited for him to respond chanting in her head ‘Please, don’t make me promise something stupid. Please, don’t make me promise something stupid.’ It was another trap, laid to trap him but it could easily turn on her as well. In fact, it was pure desperation on her side. She was losing the battle and this was the first thing that popped into her head. Her cousin solved all his disputes this way. Of course, he was built like a mountain and he knew that he could win. Snape still didn’t regain most of his strength, that did not guarantee that he won’t win.

Getting into academical of philosophical debate with Snape could lead to quick defeat. The man was scary smart and he had years of spying as a backup. He could easily spin the conversation to his benefit. She had to take him by surprise. And this was the only thing where she did have at least some leverage if not an advantage.

“And what would my part of the bargain be?”

“An information for information if fair.” She offered, hoping that he could share anything really but can’t rope her into something she didn’t want to do “Unless you want to back out of it all together. In which case we can just get back to sleep.”

“Very well.” After a long break Snape final nodded, she didn’t like the sly lift in the corners of his lips “If I win, I will tell you why Draco was following you the day Mr Weasley visited.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“But…that…” she blinked “it’s not fair! If you win I have to tell you something!”

He nearly laughed at that

‘Lesson one in negotiating with Slytherin’s.’ he raised his eyebrow

“Is it now? Then do you want to back down?” he asked “If you win, Gr...Hermione, you already
have your victory. No additional incentive is needed.” He smirked

Hermione was chewing on her bottom lip. He thought that she did lose her mind when she proposed a game. A game! Of all things. Stupid, muggle, a game of strength. It took him few moments to work out her angle, but smart as she was – she wasn’t at his level. He could have pulled out, but it amused him not to do so.

Oh, he is going to lose. While he was tired after eating a bowl of soup, she was tugging him around. But victory in this stupid game was irrelevant. One wasn’t a spy his entire life if he didn’t learn what battles he has to lose in order to gain upper hand.

It did amuse him, however, to see her reaction if he did dangle in front of her nose something she really wanted to know.

‘How far will you go, little girl?’

“She hissed, displeased with a poor bargain she struck.

She positioned her hand and he slowly raised his. Through the entire game of cat and mice, he neglected to pay attention to one minor detail. Reluctantly he locked his hand with hers. She grinned like that was a victory on its own.

“On my mark.” She smirked, “Go.”

It wasn’t really the struggle. He knew he didn’t have the strength to win. However, it was surprising that she did not hesitate. His bait, no matter how attempting, didn’t hold enough strength to make her waver. And precisely that is why she was so dangerous, and why he had to get rid of her.

She grinned at him.

“Better luck next time.”

“Indeed.” He smirked at her. “Well, good night.”

Silently, she slipped off the bed and dragged that blasting board with her. He watched her turning off the lights and curling back on her sofa. Her face told him that she understood well how bitter her victory was.

Only then he slid back to bed. But sleep was far from his mind. She did raise so many questions. Her irritating need to correct things, even when they did not need correction stirred the murky waters of undesirable notions and thoughts he had recently. And, even if he couldn’t hide behind his Occlumency walls, long years of denial taught him how to ignore undesirable. With his defences weaken…now he had no other options but to face them until they settle down again.

At first, it was clear to him why was she so dead set on keeping him alive. But now? The girl was on the mend. Her original motives gone. Still, her mind was focused on keeping him alive. So much so, that she was willing to sacrifice her parents in order to save him. It didn’t add up.

Didn’t she understand that there was no life for him after the war? What he had to look for? Years and years of solitude and nightmares. He was lost for the wizarding world. He was lost to the art of Potions. He was lost to love and family. Not even the prospect of suitable partner existed, even if for nothing more than public image. He couldn’t tolerate most of the females and their stupidity. He was not interested in males. So, what was there for him?

Reluctantly he slipped into a sleep and dreams that became his refuge and his torture. The dreams
about…her.
This chapter is a bit longer than usual, but I figured out it is better to make this one bit longer and then leave you with a nasty hanger tomorrow.

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

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She was opposing his opinion, re-affirming her ideas with wide gesticulation. They argued about using powdered Fluorite vs Fluorite water in potions. She was fierce in her claims, and he listened to them, unwilling to cut her off. Even if she was wrong. She was leaning slightly towards him and he focused on her words and on the exposed patch of skin trailing down to the dent between her collarbones. That unexpected revelation, created by her body position excited him. He wanted to stop the flow of words with a kiss, to trail his tongue down the pale expanse of her neck and dip it into that dent. To taste her skin…

The cot was too small for both of them, and downright uncomfortable. He was heavy and she had a problem with breathing at times. He managed to lean more than once on her hip at a very uncomfortable angle, making her flinch. She counted her blessings that she could at least frown, in almost absolute darkness, he couldn’t see.

Even if Ron claimed that he knows what he is doing, she wasn’t so convinced. The book clearly stated that there is a certain point in the body – erogenous zones. With the proper stimulation, they could make the whole experience much more pleasurable. The certain spots ached to be touched and she contemplated should she maybe ask Ron to pay attention to them. But that just might set him off. And she didn’t know anything besides what was written in the books. She was, however, doubtful that treating her breasts like he’s making the bred will have the desired effect.

Ron flinched almost every time she would try to touch him, grumbling how that is distracting, so after a while, she gave up. She wanted to map his skin, his muscles with her fingers. Finally, she grabbed the edges of the cot, squeezing them tightly to prevent her hands to move of their own accord. She wanted this, maybe…not the way it was playing out but in general. And she did want to be with Ron. She so desperately didn’t want to die and never know… But, she was also still mad at him...

She felt wet down there, almost like when she would get her period. But, that was a good sign, the book called ti – natural lubrication – it meant that he was doing at least something right. She was afraid, but not nearly enough to stop him. her muscles started to tremble and shake, but it wasn’t from pleasure. Ron, of course, misinterpreted the signals. He panted into her ear

“This will hurt a little.”
She nodded. She knew that. He lied, the book lied, it did hurt. A lot! Every move he made was unpleasant. After a while, it wasn’t painful anymore but it was still far from what girls in the dorm told her how it felt. Ron sounded like a bear, slobbering on her shoulder. Soon, he just grunted and sort of rolled off, as much as limited space allowed.

“Was it good for you?”

“Mhm.”

Next moment, he was snoring. She cast a contraception charm, cleansing charm and started to cry, certain that she doesn’t want to repeat the experience…well, maybe not never…but certainly not anytime soon.

Severus woke up with a groan. As far as he was concerned, this clearly couldn’t qualify as an erotic dream. That left him more than a little disgruntled, given that his dream was pleasant until her memory overrun it.

She was still sleeping, restlessly but without crying or emotional outbursts. The dream finally ended up where deserved, by his opinion, in her nightmares. And much to his displeasure, it gained in details. Details he could live without. Not that he needed to know any of it.

The fireplace blazed and Poppy stepped into the room.

“The two of you are still sleeping?” she asked in displeased tone

Thump.

Like it wasn’t enough that she had a bad dream…memory, Poppy came and woke her up. She tried to get up fast and…fel.

“Ah, Severus, I see you are at least awake.” Poppy said and she breathed the breath of relief, he couldn’t see her memories if he was awake. It only worked if both of them were sleeping.

“Come, girl, stand up. Go to the toilet and use water to wake up. If I have any instructions for you, I’ll leave them with Narcissa.” Poppy helped her get up pushed the bundle of clothes in her hands and gently nudged her towards the bathroom. She could see Malfoy’s entering the room as she closed the bathroom door.

She glared at her reflection in the mirror. Grabbing the toothbrush she started to scrub her teeth, certain that her parents would strongly disapprove the way she did it. Her mind floated to last night. She stopped scrubbing

‘How in Merlin’s name did I ended up negotiating, last night?’

She resumed scrubbing, mulling on every word. He insulted her, made her feel angry, confused her. Was it on purpose? Or did he just seized the opportunity to get rid of her? Maybe he wanted some sort of revenge because she compared him to Ron?

‘Ok, fine, that was an insult.’

But, she didn’t mean it as an insult to him. He did have a point. He wasn’t one to blame for her situation with Ron. And he didn’t know what Ron did or said. She was sure that if he knew he would be displeased as well.
Still, she somehow ended up struggling to get out of a deal. She had no idea how they got to that point at all. Worst of all, she couldn’t tell about what they negotiated in the end?

‘Think, Hermione, think!’

He wanted to get rid of her, that was obvious. He offered her help with her parents in exchange for leaving him alone. And she refused. She refused!

‘What was I thinking?! Was I thinking at all?’

She moaned, pressing the toothbrush harder and scrubbing with more zeal, even if all the foam from toothpaste was already gone. Fine, entire conversation had no meaning, to begin with. They were stuck with each other until he regains his control on magic, and untangle the mess she made. So, what could he gain but striking that deal?

Voices in the room rise, but she paid no attention to that, lost in her thoughts. Finally, she rinsed her mouth and resumed glaring at her reflection.

‘Why was I so stuck on keeping him alive? If he really doesn’t want to live, to heal…he’ll find the way. Eventually. So, why?’

She had no answer to that question, and that bothered her. Logically, she knew that she would try to stop and help even Malfoy. But that was just the common decency. No one in his or her's right mind would stand by and allow the person he or she knows to kill itself. However, that never went beyond sacrificing the members of the family. And that is exactly what she did last night.

‘Stupid! How could I be so stupid?’

And, all logic was beside the point. She didn’t react logically. If she did, she would never think of solving the problem with arm-wrestling. So why then she did that?

Like in a dream, she went to the toilet and sat on it. It wasn’t like he was grateful for what she was doing. He wasn’t friendly to her. He wasn’t even nice. In fact, he didn’t change much at all. If nothing, he was more volatile than before. He never treated her nice, not before or after the war.

Sure, she had insight now. And that did change how she perceived him and his outbursts. She understood on some level, why he was the way he was. That couldn’t excuse his behaviour. He kept calling her ‘little girl’, not missing opportunity to point out that she is still a child. In reality, his behaviour didn’t differ much from Harry’s or Ron’s. He was older, and with that came certain knowledge. But, at the base of all this, he still reacted to emotions like a teenager, more than a grown-up.

She was sure that grown-ups reacted or at least dealt with emotions differently. And, she was of age, anyway. She was a young woman, not a child. So, zeroing on the fact that she is a child, treating her like that… It didn’t add up.

She nearly jumped when a loud bang on the door snapped her from her thoughts. Malfoy’s voice was annoying as always, he barked through the door

“Stay in there until I tell you that you can come into the room.”

She blushed, even if he couldn’t see her. It was unpleasant to hear him talk to her while she was sitting on the toilet.

‘Blast it! I don’t have my extendable ears with me.’
Hermione moonwalked to the bathroom. Lucius and Narcissa entered the room. And Poppy poked and probed him. It was the same as every morning.

“Unusual that you are sleeping so late.”

“It was a rough night.”

“Did you had another attack?”

“No, just a bad dreams. On both sides.”

“Ah.” Nodded Poppy “Well, you will be pleased to know… you can wear at least some sort of shirt. Not a nightshirt and nothing with the high collar.”

“And, what am I supposed to wear?”

“Narcissa, dear, you see with Miss Granger if she can provide upper part of these pyjama bottoms. Something with a wide opening around the neck.”

“I will, Poppy.”

“I AM PRESENT IN THE ROOM! Stop treating me like one of your students.”

“Do not shout at me, young man.” Poppy turned on him “I am not treating you like one of the students.”

“Then give instructions to me, not to the person next to me.”

“I am treating you like the stubborn mule I know you are. I am giving the instructions to ones I know will enforce them. I do not make deals with the devil which will try to find the loophole and do things his way.”

“And, here I was just assuming that you do enjoy treating me like a child, and a common whore on top of it.” he snarled at her

“Mind your language with me, Severus Snape. I couldn’t care less how you perceive your state of dress or undress. You were there when we tried to heal Arthur Weasley. And he was bitten in an area far less perilous than you. I don’t want to risk any leftover drop causing any more problems, now that the wound is finally healing. You know how that poison works. So if I have to keep you naked as the day you were born to keep you alive and unharmed… I couldn’t care less if you think I do treat you like… Narcissa dear, he may skip today’s exercises. Tense as he is, it will only do him harm.” Poppy huffed and turned to Narcissa “Follow my instruction. If he starts making problems… clobber him.” Poppy growled, glancing at him “I’ll leave you enough headache potion. And you won’t hurt that thick skull of his.”

With that, Poppy stepped into the fireplace. Leaving him fuming and Narcissa chuckling. Lucius turned to his wife.

“Cissa, can I have a moment alone with Severus, please.”

“Certainly. I have to instruct the elve’s, Mrs Longbottom requested an audience for the noon. Don’t worry Severus, we will find you something appropriate and less… revealing, Leave it to me.” With that, she left the room.
He loved Narcissa like a sister he never had, and her words did calm him down a bit. But his nerves were frayed from last night and calm wasn’t the state he was in. He watched Lucius make a slow progress to the window. Stopping only to bark an order to Hermione.

“Don’t get me wrong my friend, I understand you, but that behaviour was uncalled for. Am I correct to assume you still didn’t make progress with…that.” Lucius motioned towards the bathroom door “Personally, I do think that being shirtless can aid to the cause.”

“Don’t start that with me Lucius, not today.” Rage bubbled through his veins

“Not today? Then when? It seems that never is the right time.”

“I had… not so restful night, Lucius…”

“I know. Your… not so restful…. conversation woke up the entire household.”

“What happened to the sound wards…”

“I drop them at night. With Aurors still walking in and out, I can’t take a chance. I have and I will protect my family, by any means necessary.”

“So you heard.”

“I did.” Chuckled Lucius “I was hoping that things could progress…”

“She is but an annoying child. Extremely annoying child. And my student.”

“As I recall, my friend, she denounced you as her teacher. And she is…far from being a child. I might even argue that she is quite good looking, well at least good built, young woman.” Lucius raised his hand to stop him from talking “If she isn't to your taste, fine. It would be convenient but…what can you do? Few highly prestigious ladies did request to see you. I’ll see that they get the chance to talk with you.”

“Lucius…” he sighed, he was angry, tired and his emotions still caused havoc in his mind. Peace and quiet. Time to think and plan was what he needed.

“Well, they are of marrying kind, but you do have to start thinking about that as well Lord Prince.”

“Lucius, if you release your wife on me, I swear on Salazar’s grave, I will hex you to oblivion.” He growled and Lucius chuckled, ignoring him

“I am however curious, what was the point of last night’s exercise? Do you want to get rid of the girl or keep her?”

“You are not that naïve, my friend.” He couldn’t help but chuckle, he knew that Lucius understood what he attempted to do last night and that he was just fishing for finer details. For the time being he was stuck with Hermione, but the moment he manages to correct her mess, he wanted insurance that she will leave him alone.

“Do you know why I tolerate…her…in my home, Severus?” asked Lucius, suddenly serious

“I am sure you have your reasons, besides the desire to punish me for something.”

“I am not punishing you, my friend. But do want you to live. I need you to live.” Lucius paused, and even if he had the desire to argue, something in the tone of his friend voice stopped him “I had a
visit from my Medi-wizard yesterday. I have but a few good years to live."

“When I’m back on my feet, Lucius, I’ll make you…” he started but Lucius prevented him to finish

“Yes, the potion could help. But it will only prolong inevitable, and not by much. I do need you to live. To live and to take care of Narcissa and Draco. They can manage on their own, but for the peace of my mind, I want to know that they have you once I’m gone.”

He was speechless, his throat constricted. He wasn’t there when Lucius was released from Azkaban, he wasn’t there when the Dark Lord cursed his friend. And even if he was, what could have he do? He did help, first chance he got, but it was too late already.

“And that is why I tolerate…that, in my home. She is useful, you see. Extremely useful to me and my plans. I do want you to live. I did not save your life just so you could toss it away. And I want you to live, not just exist.”

“To live for what? Of what use I can be with the damage I suffered? How could I aid if I can’t even feed myself? What reason do I have to live for? Alone with my… Just let it go, Lucius. Let. It. Go.”

“You do not need means to survive, you are well suited for life. You don’t need to make a Potion to be able to research and invent. And with use of potions, you can live with minimal discomfort, even brew. With wife pliant enough to provide occasional entertainment, life can be quite pleasant. No matter how I feel, I did hope that you will see the reason and choose at least someone who can provide you with good mental stimuli. Maybe, some things are just not meant to be.”

“Lucius, the kid is… Half of the time I am but a step away from blasting her, and myself and half of the house along the way. I do not think that Narcissa would appreciate that.”

“I wouldn’t, Narcissa would welcome the opportunity for another remodelling. I, however, would hunt you even as a ghost.” Lucius smiled at him “And precisely that is the reason I did think that… the…girl…could be good company for you. But you are so stubborn, so set in your ways and unwilling to admit the truth, at least to yourself.”

He wanted to argue, to hex to make Lucius see…and he couldn’t. His entire life, people came to him with their problems – to solve them. He felt powerless, useless and angry because of it.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand and moved from the door. She barely registered the knock and instruction that she can get out now.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Lucius made a slow progress to the door. He stopped near the bathroom door and banged his cane at it, shaking his head

“You can get out now.”

Once he reached the hallway he leaned at the wall, thinking. A small pang of guilt flickered in his mind but he squashed it. For his family, he will do whatever it takes.
The morning dragged slowly. Severus was in his not so unusually quiet mood. He acted like she is not even in the room. She forced herself to look at the book, aware that she does not read it at all. Her thoughts wandered, partially focusing on the events that took place that morning but mostly still trying to figure out what happened last night.

It was early afternoon when Hermione realised she couldn’t stand the silence anymore. Snape, was lying still, staring through the window for hours. And if she couldn’t see the rise and fall of his chest she could swear that he is the inanimate object. The tension she felt was unbearable. Finally, the question burst out of her before she managed to stop it

“Will you tell me why?”

Silence. He didn’t move a muscle. She jumped to her feet and rushed around the bed, blocking his sight.

“Stop ignoring me.”

“Kindly remove yourself from my sight.”

“No. Not until you explain to me.”

“Explain what?” he glared at her

“Last night, what was that all about?”

“I might ask you the same question. Now, remove yourself…”

“What was the point of all…that…” she didn’t even have a name

“Gra…” he sighed “Hermione if you are dissatisfied with the outcome you shouldn’t negotiate in the first place.”

“Yes. I mean, no.” this wasn’t going well “I am not dissatisfied. What I mean is – why we negotiated in the first place?”

“I believe that among all that screaming… Did you know that Malfoy’s strip the sound wards at night? Subsequently, entire household was awoken by your dulce voice last night. But, onto your
question.” He continued, not letting her answer “As I was saying, I believe you revealed that you had the intention of manipulating me into helping you. I simply showed you that I am not easily manipulated.”

“That is not… I never wanted to manipulate you. If you want to know I wanted to…” the tension intensified inside her “I planned to ask you for your help. I, actually, believed that you would be changed. Better. How naïve was that.”

“Quite naïve.”

“You arrogant, ungrateful,…” she started but stopped surprised by sudden noise

Through the ajar window, the raised voice of Lucius Malfoy floated into the room. Words were unrecognizable but sheer strength of the sound surprised them both. His face twisted briefly into a mask of concern before his features smoothened into focused expression. Severus raised to one elbow, leaning towards the window.

She blinked at him. Never, not during the war and not after she heard Malfoy raise his voice. Swirling on her heel she turned to the window and hastily approached it, pulling it wide open. She had to lean, flinging her upper body outside so she could see what is going on.

On the far side of the rose garden was Lucius Malfoy. Narcissa was at his right, Draco at his left. Malfoy was blocking the passage, refusing to let Auror past that point.

“You will not, I repeat, not take even one bird from my premises!” boomed Malfoy, leaning towards the Auror

She slipped back into the room and looked at Snape, confused

“Bird?”

“Peacock. Lucius breeds those silly birds.”

“Oh.” She bent to look again just in time to see Auror pointing a wand at Malfoy with one hand while motioning like he is going to push him with the other. Broken words floated through air

“…Azkaban…don’t care…died…”

All the tension inside her boiled. With a growl, she pushed herself from the window and dashed out of the room without a word.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He was jolted out of gloomy thought by Hermione’s outburst. Not willing to fight and argue with a willful child he tried to brush her off. He had more pressing things to mull over than participate in a conversation that had a tendency to run in circles.

Hearing Lucius raises his voice thrown him out of balance. His friend rarely raised his voice. But it could have been nothing serious, Lucius wasn’t one to handle pain gracefully. And he supposed that curse did give him grief, even if most of the time Lucius acted like nothing was going on. Maybe conversation from this morning set Lucius into a bad mood.

The shouting, at least, forced Hermione to move. In retrospect, he wasn’t sure how good of an idea that was, given that he was presented with a sight of her behind while she dangled out of the window. Whatever it was, he thought it can’t be that bad if involved Lucius’s birds. The man was
insane with them and horses.

But the moment when Hermione sprinted out of the room with an angry expression on her face he groaned. Something was definitely off.

‘If she insults him… if she tries to say the word to him… I will curse the life out of her’

“Mistry!”

“Master Snape call Misty.”

“Can you track Lucius’s elf, the one that can show me what is going on in the garden?”

“Misty can show. All elf’s can. Does Master Snape want’s…”

“Yes. Show me. Show me Miss Granger, stay with her until instructed differently.”

Misty plopped to the floor and snapped her fingers. The sphere appeared in the air.

~ Hermione was running through the main hallway. The mask of boiling rage on her face. She cut straight into the remodeled drawing room and through the portrait hall. She nearly damaged the door running to the terrass and quickly descended down the stone staircase. Muttering as she run wand already in her hand.

She headed towards the group. Lucius, Cissa I Draco standing on the path that lead towards the chicken coops, blocking the way. One Auror, in battle stand argued with Lucius.

Cutting over, she run across the meticulous lawn and jumped over the short hedges, reaching them in record time.~

He growled, listing the curses that will find their way to her if she dares to oppose Lucius and deny him the right to defend his property.

~ Hermione reached the group and inserted herself in the middle, between Lucius and Auror. Auror smirked and Lucius flexed his arm around the cane.

“How dare you? How dare you behave that way? Threatening the Master of the house. Attacking the man with cane?” she hissed in Auror’s face.~

Her words stunned him. His brain was doing summersaults trying the grasp what was going on? By all appearances, it seems that Hermione Granger, the brain of the golden trio, was indeed defending no one other than Lucius Malfoy. It was so surreal that he couldn’t grasp it.

~ “I am not threatening anybody Miss, I am simply trying to do my job.”

“You won’t remove them from my sight!” bellowed Lucius

“I have power to arrest you, Mr Malfoy if you refuse to abide by your agreement.” Growled Auror

“You can bring whoever you want and he can look at them here, in the presence of my animal caretaker and myself.”

“You are in violation Mr Malfoy, I am forced to bring you in…” hissed Auror and made a step, but he was stopped by a slender form of Hermione. She pointed her wand
Lucius made a motion like he is to step forward, but Cissa laid a gentle hand on his biceps.

“Miss…”

“Do you know who am I?” Hermione growled at Auror

“Yes, Miss Granger. However, even you are not allowed to interfere, no matter how... fond you are...of your hosts.”

“How fond I am of my hosts is none of your business. I am, however, familiar with the law. In fact, familiar enough to know that Mr Malfoy is not in violation. Not unless you suspect that... peacocks ... are some form of rare and dangerous Dark Magic.”

“Miss Granger, Minister himself…”

“Minister? Why, why didn’t you say so before. I happen to know Minister Shacklebolt. In fact, I was present when Minister promised to a war hero, recipient of the Order of Merlin First Class that Aurors who have a prejudice against Mr Snape and Malfoy family won’t be allowed to the Manor.” She smiled cruelly “In fact, I think I’ll ask him myself if Mr Malfoy is in violation.”

Before anyone could react she twirled her wand and shapeless blob appeared

“Harry, we have a situation at the Manor. Could you come here, please, with Kingsley? As fast as you can.”

The blob disappeared. Lucius sent a stare accompanied with the wicked grin to the Auror, over Hermione’s head. Auror shuffled his feet, not sure if he should continue to argue or if bolting would be a smarter idea.

“I do not recommend you to desert us now. Even if you are not present, I will be more than willing to lend my memories of the event to Harry Potter and Minster Kingsley.” She smiled sweetly at Auror

Like he was summoned by her words Potter appeared, he ran towards her pushing Auror aside

“Hermione, are you ok? Snape, did something happened to Snape?”

“No Harry, Severus and I are fine. But the nice Auror here is causing problems.”

“What kind of problems, Miss Granger?” the deep voice of Kingsley joined the conversation forcing Auror to jump slightly.

“Well, you see Minister, he claims that Mr Malfoy’s peacocks have to be taken for examination. When Mr Malfoy refused to allow his birds to be removed and offered to grant a pass to Ministry official to check them in their coop. Auror... what is your name?” she turned to Auror

“Jenkins.”

“Thank you. Auror Jenkins told Mr Malfoy that he is in violation and tried to arrest
him. Now, in normal circumstances, I wouldn’t oppose, but I happened to overhead
Auror Jenkins voicing his displeasure with Mr Malfoy’s release from Azkaban. And
Harry did show me Wizengamot decision concerning Mr Malfoy prior to my arrival
here.”

Lucius glared at Potter but the boy ignored them. Cissa clasped her hand over Lucius’s.

“And I know that Mr Malfoy was well within his rights. When I tried to explain that to
Auror Jenkins, he told me, not is so open words, that my fondness towards Malfoy
family clouding my judgement. He told me that you Minister authorised…” she paused
“….removal of dangerous objects as… peacocks.”

“Hermione, are you insane? I stopped the Wizengamot session over a dispute about
some silly birds.”

“Those are not silly birds, Harry. Besides, Auror pulled his wand at Mr Malfoy even if
Mr Malfoy never treated Auror or took his wand.” She smiled at Potter naively “And
even you were present when Minister promised Severus that Aurors with a negative
attitude towards Wizengamot decision won’t be allowed on the premises.”

“Miss Granger is correct, Harry. It wasn’t an emergency but this is a serious violation
of power abuse. Auror Jenkins, why did you try to remove the birds?”

“Sir,” Jenkins gulped “when we tried to close the chase, we found numerous
complaints against Mr Malfoy and said birds.”

“Complaints?”

“Yes, over the span of 15 years. Claims that Mr Malfay using Dark Magic to breed his
birds.”

“Well, does Mr Malfay use Dark Magic on these birds?”

“I…I don’t know, sir.”

“Then why did you tried to remove them?”

“To test them, sir.”

“And who made those complaints?” asked Kingsley confused

“Other contestants, sir.”

Lucius smirked, puffing his chest proudly

“I never used any magic on my birds.”

“Comestants?”

“Yes, sir. You see, Mr Malfay is taking his birds to the shows and competes with other
breeders. He is winning for 15 consecutive years. We tracked Mr Malfay’s purchase of
the birds from a Muggle dealer, 15 years ago, and…”~

Severus started to laugh. Kingsley was mad but not at Hermione, no, he was mad at foolish Auror.
Hermione and Potter had flabbergasted expressions on their face. Little did they know, even if
Lucius did buy the blasted birds from Muggle dealer, he roped Severus into a task. He had to chase the man across England to get the bloody feathery pests.

~ “And…what?” Kingsley’s voice sounded threatening

“Well, Mr Malfoy did win for the past 15 years.”

“That is not proof, Auror Jenkins. Why did you try to remove the birds?”

“Well, complaints sir.”

“Auror Jenkins, Mr Malfoy was freed by the **Wizengamot** and I support that decision, under a condition that Mr Malfoy hand over all Dark Magic objects that are in his position. **Harry Potter** supported that decision. Mr Malfoy handed us the list of all such objects in his possession, passed down as a **family heirloom** from generation to generation. He opened his home to us. Not a single object was found that was not on that list. If you had doubt, you should have sent Ministry official to perform necessary tests. And, I for once am inclined to believe Mr Malfoy, that the birds are not tainted with Dark Magic.”~

Kingsley was nearly red in his face, which Severus thought was feet on its own. For as long as he knew Kingsley, the man never lost his temper. Apparently, Hermione did had the talent to push people over the edge.

~”And even, even if the birds were exposed to Dark Magic… The birds , Auror Jenkins, are not Dark Artefacts, the birds are not to be removed even in that case. I do not see the reason for the removal of bloody birds unless you intentionally wanted to provoke Mr Malfoy into violation.”

Lucius twitched when Kingsley said ‘bloody birds’ but remained silent. Hermione, on the other hand, was starting to lose colour gradually.

“I postponed session in which we discussed passing of new law about Werewolf rights because you tried to inflict your misguided vengeance against Mr Malfoy by **directly disobeying my orders**. Report to your superior Jenkins, you are on desk duty until the investigation of this incident is conducted and the decision is made. If you set foot on Malfoy property, the next step will lead you directly to Azkaban.”

“Yes, sir.” Auror managed to shrink somehow “Good day, sir” he stumbled and rushed to leave Malfoy property.

“My apology Lucius.”

“Thank you, Kingsly.” Lucius shook his head

“I’m sorry, Kingsley. I really wasn’t…”

“It is fine Hermione. You were right, maybe bit too rash, but you did correctly.”

“If there is anything I can do to help with a new Werewolf rights law…”

“Your support will mean a lot, once when the law is voted. Give it a thought what can we do for them, based on the previous treatment of Werewolves.”

“If you wish, Miss Granger, you are free to use the law books in my library.”
Graciously offered Lucius, she beamed at him

“Thank you.”

“Harry, escort Hermione upstairs.”

Hermione shook Kinsley's hand, nodded to Lucius and Cissa and walked towards the house, in the direction from which she came, pale in the face. Cissa leaned to Draco and whispered something, he nodded and hurried to catch up with Potter and Hermione. Draco fell few steps behind until Potter motioned him to join them.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Harry followed Hermione. She was going in, for him, unfamiliar direction.

“Hermione, where are we going.”

“Oh, this is a shortcut.”

“Since when you are familiar with Manor so well?”

“I'm not, not really. Misty always talks about remodelling, so I knew.”

He glanced at Draco who just shrugged. They followed her silently through a room full of portraits and drawing room, main hallway and up the stairs. When she stopped in front of the door of room she shared with Snape, Draco spoke

“Mother and father will come to see him. Severus is probably worried, and since you came down, he knows. Let’s go to the tea room.”

At that Hermione glanced at Draco then him, her eyes bulged and she glided towards the floor, her knees buckling. Both of them caught her. She was pale and looked lost but not scared or panicked. Draco lead them towards the tea room.
Chapter Notes

You may expect next chapter on Monday evening :)

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

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They lowered Hermione on the settee and just kept standing across her. She didn’t look scared or panicked, but she had a most confusing expression on her face. Harry glanced at Malfoy, he seemed to be equally baffled by Hermione’s behaviour. Malfoy looked at him

“Do you think we should call Madam Pomfrey?”

Harry just shook his head. He had no idea what they should do. He had no idea what the hell was wrong with Hermione now? If they were in school, he would say something along the lines ‘Let her keep revising’ but they were not in school and she wasn’t studying.

Suddenly, she raised her head and smile. Big, happy, bright smile. Jumping from her spot, Hermione launched herself. She hugged him, laughing.

“I did it! I truly did it!”

“Yes you did. “ he affirmed her statement, having no idea what she was talking about

Hermione stepped back and glanced at him, still grinning but now shaking her head in amusement. She turned to Malfoy, who was looking at her like she lost her mind, and the glint of mischief glimmered in her eyes. Before Malfoy could react she hugged him too. Malfoy flinched and tried to back away, expression of pure horror on his face.

Hermione released Malfoy quickly, she had a wicked grin on her face.

“What are you on about Bucktooth?!” Malfoy nearly screamed at her, grumbling “The clothes can be burned but there is no spell strong enough for me to use it on my skin.”

“Oh, no?” Hermione raised an eyebrow, her expression reminding him of Snape’s at the moment “Well then, scrub this if you can, Ferret Face.” She dived and landed a kiss on Malfoy’s cheek.

Harry wasn’t sure if he should start laughing or be very worried about his friend. From one side, look on Malfoy’s face was priceless. Malfoy had almost green shade, eyes bulged. He pulled the sleeve of his robe and rubbed it over his cheek with enough ferocity to peel the skin off. On the other side, Hermione Granger was hugging, kissing Malfoy, acting giddy. He was wrong, she wasn’t getting better, she lost it completely.
“Ummm, Hermione…”

“Just keep…that…as far as you can from me.” Groused Malfoy moving back towards the chairs.

“Hermione, not that I have anything against you tormenting Malfoy…”

“Why, thank you, Potter.”

“…but, what is going on? First, you made me drag Minister here with twenty of the best Aurors Ministry has and at least dozen Unspeakables. Now, you are… hugging …Malfoy. What did you do?”

“Don’t you get it, Harry?” she shook her head, eyes still glittering “I am better!”

Harry didn’t think she was.

“I went in the yard all of my own. I walked twice through that room, and I didn’t have a panic attack. Harry, I am better.”

Harry, blinked. In all the confusion he didn’t even notice that.

“Hermione, you managed to make Minister mad, not at you, but that was just sheer luck. You made Kingsley angry.” He shook his head

“Yes, about that. Sorry, I, fine I wasn’t thinking. And to be honest, I didn’t think that you would actually bring Kinsley with you. Honestly, I just thought that you would show up with some clerk or something similar.”

Malfoy barked a laugh, flopping into the chair, one leg dangling over the hand rest. He was still rubbing his cheek with a sleeve of his robe, the flesh was now red, burnt from the friction.

“Malfoy, if you do not actually intend to rub off your skin I suggest you stop that. Hermione, you asked for Kingsley.”

“What did you think, Bucktooth, that he won’t come? You are the brain of Golden Trio. ‘Smartest witch of her age’. You can’t be that naïve!”

“But, Kingsley is ok, he really tries, but he uses us…”

“Sure. Look, Granger, you have to give some to get some. He needs to stay on your good side, as long as the voters are on your side. Honestly,” Malfoy shook his head “all that influence is wasted on two of you.”

“Shut up, Ferret face.”

Harry sighed, he was tired of their bickering. If this was going on daily, Snape must have been worse than he thought. Even he was tempted to stop them with magic.

“Hermione…”

“Look, Harry, I know I made a mistake. I’ll make it up to you somehow but I… I was just tired and annoyed. We had a rough night last night. I had nightmares, we argued and…it is complicated but I ended up negotiating with…”

“You negotiated with Snape”
“Are you insane?”

“You negotiated about what?”

“Is that what all that screaming was about?”

“Screaming?” he turned to Malfoy

“Yeah, she yelled Snape’s ears off last night, middle of the night, mind you.”

“And you survived?”

“Well, it’s not like he can do much of anything now.” she huffed “Besides he couldn’t win a single arm wrestle against me, and I have no strength worth mentioning.”

“Arm wrestle?” he and Malfoy said that in unison

She shook her head. Boys. They always focused on wrong things. Harry jumped to explain the concept of arm wrestle to Malfoy. She walked to the window. Her mind was racing. She felt giddy, almost like she had a full dose of Felix Felicius.

At first, she didn’t even notice what she did, the realisation reached her only when they were in the hallway. Even then, it wasn’t panic, it wasn’t fear. She did need a couple of minutes to sort through things, but now she felt like a huge weight was lifted off her shoulders.

‘I guess Severus was right all along, it is not the house it is the people and the situation.’

She couldn’t tell that Malfoy’s were her friends, they weren’t even on the list of people she considered tolerable. But she didn’t perceive them as evil anymore. Malfoy senior as still repulsive slime, but she defended him anyway.

But now, now she could be part of something really big. Werewolf rights. Her brain worked fast. If she goes to the library now and just glances…

“Hermione. Hermione!” Harry’s voice snapped her from her musings, she raised her eyes to him

“So, why were you screaming at Snape?”

“Oh, he accused me that I woke him up just so I could manipulate him.” She sighed “He is wrong, of course. But, I did plan on asking his help, once he is better.”

“Hermione, Auror department or Ministry could help you with that. You don’t need Snape for that.”

“Are you kidding. He was thought about Occlumency, Legilimency and mind magic in general, by both Dumbledore and Dark Lord. He is her best bet, Potter. I didn’t know you’ve had it in you, Granger. Good for you.”

“But I didn’t want to manipulate him. Honestly. What I do for him… I don’t expect any gratitude…”
“Good, you won’t have none.”

“Don’t you think I know that. Anyway, I didn’t expect…at least not before I messed up. Now, I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t kill me. And, really there is an only slim chance I’ll find correct counter-curse in time.”

“So why didn’t you just used our library since you came here?”

“You don’t know?” Harry turned to Malfoy

“Know what?”

“I had an accident, I tried Legilimency while Severus was in a coma. To wake him up. I sort of ended up seeing his memories. And then they banned me from all mind magic books.”

“What do you need?”

“No!” Harry stepped in front of her “She can’t have any books on mind magic. Poppy’s orders. She tried without that, and…”

“Harry…!”

“And what?”

“And nothing.” She hissed, but she was slower than Harry

“And, now they are more screwed up than before.”

“HARRY!”

“Screwed up how?” Malfoy narrowed his eyes glaring at her

“It is none of your business, Ferret face.”

“They sort of cross-wired connection.” Blurbed Harry “Ouch, Hermione!” he jumped when she pinched him hard

“Sometimes, Harry, I really wonder about you.” She huffed at him.

Fine, she knew Harry was sort of friendly with Draco lately, that didn’t mean that she trusted the little stuck up weasel.

“Glad to have you back, Hermione.” Harry grinned at her, she ignored that

“Fine, no mind magic books. But I can still get books on Werewolf law, Mr Malfoy offered it to me. In fact, I think I’m going to ask him for books now.” she walked past Harry in order to go out of the room. Now when she could move around the house, maybe they will even allow her to be in the library. She could only imagine what books she could find there.

Hermione jumped back, nearly colliding with Draco.

“Are you insane? Ask my father? Now?”

“Yes, now.”
“Look, Granger,” Draco was suddenly very serious “I advise you to avoid my father in the next few days. In fact, if you just get a whiff of him coming to your direction – duck and hide until you are absolutely sure he’s gone.”

“Why?”

“Is she for real?” Malfoy turned to Harry who looked at him equally confused as she was

“I…I don’t see why she should hide from him.”

Malfoy shook his head in disbelief.

“Hopeless, both of you.” He sighed “Suit yourself, Granger. But, if you do decide to look for him, let me know – I want to watch.”

“Watch what? Why wouldn’t I ask him if he gave me the permission?”

“In front of the Minister, Granger.”

“So what, he will deny me access to the necessary books on the law?”

“I can bring you the books. Or Misty can. Misty can transport you directly to the library.”

“But…”

“Do whatever you want, Bucktooth. It’s your funeral.” Shrugged Malfoy.

She looked at Harry who just stood there confused, looking at her. There was something she was missing. The door opened and Narcissa walked into the room.

“Boys, I need to have a word with Miss Granger, could you give us some privacy?”

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Misty wasn’t gone for long when Lucius burst into his room, followed by Narcissa. His friend was fuming, leaving the trail of steam in his wake. Narcissa had a gentle smile, but she was pacing few steps behind her husband, creating an impenetrable wall, preventing him to turn and change direction.

“I am going to kill her! Ministry be damned! I’ll call Prophet to witness and record happy event.”

“Come now, Lucius, she meant well. I don’t know, but maybe Muggle women act that way in general.”

“She is not a Muggle.”

“But she is Muggleborn.”

“That’s why that is precisely why they do not belong here!” snapped Lucius turning to him “I see you know what I am talking about.”

“I do.” He was calm, as long as Narcissa blocked the door and Lucius screamed in his room the girl will live.

‘Where is she?’
“I sent Miss Granger with Draco and Mr Potter to the tea room.” Informed him Narcissa like she read his mind “I was sure that Lucius will benefit from your company at this moment.”

“Thank you, Narcissa.”

“Stop treating me like I am on a killing spree.”

“And you are not? Too bad, I was hoping you will find the way to remove her from my presence after what she did.”

“Severus.” Narcissa gave him one reapproaching glance, focusing her attention on her husband again “Really, Lucius. The girl spent the war defending two boys, it is a natural instinct to her.”

“I am not a boy, not her friend and I don’t appreciate being publicly humiliated.” Lucius hobbled to the edge of the bed and heavily sat on it

“It can’t be that bad. Besides, she is a part of Golden Trio, and she stood by your side. It will have a nice ring to it, no matter how media spin that. And Potter came to join her. Honestly, I don’t see how this can reflect badly on you.”

“Oh, it can.” Bitterly huffed Lucius

“Severus, try to make him see reason.”

“I’d love to, Narcissa. But, you see, his displeasure with Miss Granger is working to my advantage.”

“Severus, you know that you cannot send the girl away from you. Not while… Lucius, she will learn our way. We can’t blame her for what she never learned.”

“I am afraid that you are sorely mistaken, Narcissa. From what I know, Muggle women are if nothing then timider than witches. No, I’m afraid this was all Miss Granger. And the more she returns to her natural frame of mind, the more of…incidents…like this you may expect.”

Lucius looked ready to launch himself through the door in any second.

“You are not helping, Severus.”

“I am helping – myself.” He practically purred, allowing satisfaction to show on his face and resonates in his voice “Why, only this morning Lucius was here, telling me that Miss Granger’s meddling working towards his goals. He told me he keeps her here because she could force me to do what even he can’t. So I do indeed welcome this change of his mind, Cissa. In this matter, you cannot lean on my support.”

He tilted his head as a sign of apology, eyeing Lucius. If that brat managed to, by some miracle survive Lucius, she is going to hear from him. And she may consider herself lucky if she reaches the point where she has a chance to hear what he has to say.

Narcissa raised her eyebrow at him, her eyes hard beneath the soft glow. He had to admit that Narcissa’s reasoning was sound. He also knew that the woman wasn’t so ignorant as she pretended to be at the moment.

“You are almost as bad as he is.” sighed Narcissa

Lucius was quiet. He was still boiling in his anger, but he could see that his friend was contemplating
on some idea. His wife wasn’t blind to it, either. All softness was gone from her voice when she spoke

“Miss Granger stays. Unharmed either physically or mentally. No!” she raised her hand when Lucius took a breath to protest “I do not care. The girl stays. We need her and her good reputation. Her’s and Potter’s. I have no use of your frail male ego’s, but I do have a son to think of. Lucius, stay here and keep company to Severus, I’ll have a word with Miss Granger.”

With that, she left the room leaving both of them a bit caught off guard.

“Sometimes I forget that woman was Black before she became Malfoy.” He nearly chuckled

“That woman is going to put me into an early grave.” Huffed Lucius “That little swot, Severus! You saw…saw…what she did.”

“As I stated before.”

“I don’t care what she says. That pest has to go. Do me a favour, Severus… just fuck her. Fuck her – so I can kick her out.”

“If that is the only reason you really keeping her around…”

“All jokes aside, it might help with untangling all that mess she made.”

He gawked at Lucius. His friend was dead serious. He briefly wondered if curse somehow damaged his friend’s brain.

“It won’t and you know it. Now, if you manage to smuggle few books past Potter and Poppy…I might find a way to instruct you how to… untangle… the mess she made. And honestly, Lucius? I know what I am about to say does not present me in stellar light but…” he pointed at his prone form “I am hardly in a position to do anything. Little less… fuck…anyone, even if I was inclined to do so. And I can assure you I am not.”

Lucius gave him one silent stare.

“Now then, let Narcissa give Granger a piece of her mind. It might be received in a manner in which she will actually retain the information. And I will give her the peace of my mind later today. Narcissa does have a point, whether you like it or not.”

“I know. That does not mean I have to like it or agree with her.” Lucius still sounded on edge but his rage was slowly slipping away, giving space to something his friend focused on. Some thought that gave him power over his anger. And that worried him. Calm Lucius was always more deadly than enraged one.

“No, it most certainly does not.” He agreed
Hermione sighed and rubbed the spot between her eyes. She felt a headache forming and yet she was still giddy, still riding on that toxic feeling of easiness. It was as she managed to escape from prison and into the sun. Nothing could put the damper on her good mood.

Narcissa didn’t sound too annoyed with her outburst towards the Auror, she did, however, point out few of the general rules about men. With a heavy emphasis on stubborn men. She did warn her that Severus won’t be happy with what she did, given that her actions hit a bit too close to home for his liking.

If the woman only knew how right she was! Snape’s displeasure came in the form of long, tedious lecture. Delivered in a harsh tone and with his customary snark. Nothing she didn’t face before. After he finished lecturing her, returned to stare through the window. She frowned. If he was reading she would have been just fine, but his focus on the window ticked her off.

Now that she finally felt better a nice conversation wouldn’t go amiss. They worked amicably before, when they had a common goal. It didn’t work out in the end, but she did like the long debates. Those moments were, without a doubt, the most stimulating conversations she had in her life. It did feel nice to talk and think, building idea stronger instead of trying to simplify it just so others could understand what she had in mind.

The door burst open, Draco dashed into the room with the smile she wasn’t sure she liked.

“You are the star of the evening edition, Bucktooth.” He chirped merrily tossing a folded Prophet in her lap.

“Draco! Manners.” They both flinched at the Snape’s harsh words
She sent a glare at Draco’s direction and unfolded the papers, feeling colour draining from her face. In the centre of the front page was a flashing title in *huuuge* letters and underneath was a picture of her standing between Lucius and Auror. No Harry and no Kingsley and no Aurors in the background. She frowned at the letters

**DOES GOLDEN TRIO ABUSES THEIR POWER TO PROTECT DEATH EATERS?**

**Read more on pages 4 and 6**

She growled and glared at Draco

“This is the picture before Harry came! I saw no reporters…Skeeter!”

“Did you really think my father can’t defend himself against that cockroach of Auror, Buck… Granger?” snickered Draco “It gets better, just read.”

She rushed to open the page 4 and groaned as she skimmed through the text. More pictures were there. One of her conjuring patronus above the lines that questioned why her patronus don’t have a shape, speculating if she indeed switched to the side of Death Eaters losing her ability to produce corporeal patronus. One of her hugging Harry, making a rude commentary hypothesizing weather is she in a relationship with Snape, Lucius or Draco… or maybe with all three of them.

“This is utter rubbish.” She groused “This woman has no shame.”

Not even Kingsley was spared. On page 6, under the picture of Kingsley criticizing Auror, Skeeta splashed **letters WHO IS RUNNING THE GOVERNMENT – MINISTER OR GOLDEN TRIO.** Text that followed gave a surprisingly accurate description of the events with only a few barbs directed to the fact that Minister did postpone a meeting of a Wizengamot because of her. Criticizing the pass of the new Werewolf law and Minister's statement that she will be included in the workings of new Werewolf division.

She pushed the papers to the side groaning, rubbing her hands over her face.

“I can’t believe it! Actually, I can! That woman!”

“Do not blame the reporter, girl. Deal with the consequences of your actions.” Barked Snape. She wanted to argue with him, but he was right. Narrowing her eyes, as realisation dawned on her, she rounded up on Draco

“This was a setup!”

“Of course it was. It wasn’t the first time either. Do you honestly think that mother and I follow father around?”

“You all knew that the Auror brought her and you let me make a fool of myself.”

“Well, no one expected you to charge in and start threatening people around.” Snickered Draco “And, it would be stupid to tip our hand by stopping you. I did warn you, later to avoid my father, didn’t I.”

“You could’ve said why.”

“Now, where would be fun in that? Why would I? It is not like I am kept in a loop what is going on around here either.”
“Aghhhh. So, what now?” she sighed asking more herself than two men in the room with her.

“You messed up, it is up to you to fix it. Do try to improve your ‘fixing’ skills before you try anything first. We wouldn’t like for the situation to escalate, wouldn’t we?”

“Right.” She grumbled. ‘It figures, now he has a need to talk.’

“Draco, could you pass me the papers?”

“Certainly.”

Draco picked up the Prophet and handed it to the Snape, who read through the articles with a stone-like expression.

“This is not entirely unsalvageable as Lucius thinks right now. Then again, he was never one to take it kindly or think straight, when someone interferes and muck up his schemes.” Hummed Snape, to her surprise he wasn’t enraged with what he read “Draco, ask Lucius to join me. Hermione, I believe this is the moment to use your newly gained right to explore Malfoy libraries. Misty!”

Elf appeared instantly

“Take Hermione to the main library and give her the book with first mentions of Werewolf laws. And stay with her! Take care that she does not touch any other books while she’s there.”

Before she managed to react, she was whisked away into the huge library.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco sighed as he navigated through the corridors. He wasn’t happy with the prospect of delivering Snape’s message to his father. Lucius rarely allowed himself to let loose of his bad temper, but this was definitely one of those moments.

His father was strict, autocratic and demanding, only the mother could make him follow her lead without complaint or resistance. But, he wasn’t his mother, so he fully expected to be signed by father's bad mood.

He nearly felt sorry that Snape didn’t give this unpleasant task to Granger. After all, she was the one that put the father in this mood in the first place. In retrospect, maybe it wouldn’t be such a good idea. At least, father won’t draw his wand on him. And no more than harsh words will be swung in his way.

Only sparse few knew how good of a father Lucius was. Stubborn at times. Demanding good grades and proper behaviour. But the man would give him the moon and the stars if he asked for them. The only time he had a dispute with his father was over breaking out of the deal with Parkinson’s, and even that worked out nicely once Snape got involved.

He supposed he owed Potter and Granger for that, even if it was unintentional. For that and for saving his life – again. He groaned silently. He didn’t like to owe, owing was bad business. And he didn’t like Granger that much. He did not have anything against her, especially since she did take care of Snape. But he wouldn’t go as far to say he liked her as a friend or even possible friend in the future. Through, the association with two out of three members of Golden Trio could be beneficial. He will have to sit on that idea.

However, today’s events left little of positive feeling towards Granger. Not only that he had to owl Astoria and explain the entire situation before evening edition, but now he had to fetch father.
Winding around the corner he noticed that a door to Lucius’s private library was ajar. A female voice floated through the air. Draco sneaked closer to the door, listening

~“…you owe me that Malfoy.”

“You do not have to remind me.” Grumbled Lucius sounding displeased “I did save his life if I remember correctly. I do hold my part of the bargain.”

“You grew attached to him.” chastised female voice

“And if I did? That still do not influence your plans or my role in them.”

“I instructed you to befriend him, not to mix your blood with him.”

“It kept him alive, didn’t it?” snapped Lucius “I won’t let you use him, not to the point of his unhappiness. He suffered enough as it is.”

“Finally, we are in an agreement.” Replied woman tersely “However, you progress too slowly for my taste.”

“I did find a suitable candidate, however…circumstances are complicated.”

“I am well aware of the circumstances.”

“Then you know that the girl…”

“What I want to know why are they still here? In here, my influence is diminished, I nearly lost my grip on his magic recently.” Woman’s cold voice was hard as steel “Marble Hall needs fresh blood if we are to keep it alive”

“If you keep insisting on rushing things the only blood Marble Hall will see will be Severus’s, and in an abundance of it. I won’t endanger him or his life for the sake of Marble Hall.” ~

There was something familiar in woman’s voice, but he just couldn’t put his finger on it. And Marble Hall, he heard of it before but where and what it was?

~“It is your task to prevent it.”

“And I am doing that. I might add that I’d be doing much better work if you would stop pestering me.”

“Do not take that tone of voice with me, Lucius Malfoy. Your family's debt is still not repaid.”

“I did things the way you asked of me, and it didn’t work. Now let me do things my way, or risk it all away on off chance that your plan works. Let me remind you that she has to go with him voluntarily.”

“Do what you have to do.” Huffed woman’s voice annoyedly “But get her there, get them both there.”~

Draco backed few steps and cleared his throat, making the amount of noise he would usually make if his father wasn’t in the foul mood. He came to the door and knocked

“Father…”
“What do you want.”

“He asked me to give you his message.” He called not entering the room or opening the door further, father’s private library was off limits to him.

“Well, what is it? Or you socialising with Potter retaliated in the diminishing of your ability to remember what the message was?”

“He asked you come to his room, right now.” he replied ignoring the barb, so far it wasn’t so bad

“And why is that?”

“I… he wouldn’t tell me.” His brain worked fast “He did send Granger girl to the library, he practically banished her there.”

He could hear his father's disapproving huff

“Fine, I'll be there shortly.”

Not wanting to provoke his luck, Draco turned on his heel and hastened to put as much space as possible between him and the father’s private library. He wasn’t sure if he should feel lucky or not for his father's brush off.

‘Marble Hall, where did I hear about that?’

Once he reached his room, Draco sat in his favourite chair and gazed at the dead fireplace, mulling on all he learned today. He has to remember. He has to find out what is going on.

‘Who is that woman?’

She sounded familiar to him, but he couldn't quite place her voice. He did hear it before. But, he couldn't remember meeting a woman that had so strong magical powers. This one had to be powerful indeed if she could put a damper on Snape. It could be due to his overall weakened state. The woman did want Snape somewhere where she could control him more.

And by looks of it, she wanted Granger's blood. That wouldn't end well for his family. Not that he particularly cared for Granger, but it would be extremely bad publicity should anything happens to her while she is in their care. Not to mention, the mother would skin father alive if he does anything to further stain Malfoy reputation.

However, he couldn’t just go to the mother or anyone else for that matter without having more information. He didn’t want to risk enraged his father any further. So he focused on the facts. First, he has to find out what Marble Hall is, and why does it need fresh blood to stay alive? Then he has to figure out who that woman is, or at least what is she holding on her father.

But most of all, he has to prevent either Snape or Granger moving out of the Malfoy Mansion until he gets his answers.

‘Potter will be displeased.’ He thought
LXXV

Chapter Notes

To avoid further confusion:
Italic - Past, memories
'Single quotation mark' - inner monologue, thoughts
"double quotation mark" - actual speech

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Two weeks. Two weeks after the whole mess with the Minister and Malfoys. She was expecting much more. More fuss, more yelling, more of something. Maybe this was the way Slytherins dealt with the problem? In a lack of better explanation, she could call it a ‘cold shoulder treatment’. The whole situation puts her teeth on edge. She is...well...antsy as Harry would put it.

Nothing changed and everything changed in those two weeks. It was annoying. Or was it her head, playing a trick on her? With a sigh, she placed the book on the table. She wasn’t reading it anyway. Dark tones and the smell of books and parchment linger around her. A balm to her frayed nerves.

Media uproar lasted only a day or a two, then the whole incident fell into painful neglect. She wrinkled her nose, displeased with the outcome. It seemed that no one cared if Aurors abused their power to molest Death Eater family when Ron had a new paramour. Even the new Werewolf Law wasn’t that much of an interest. Minister plastered Lupin’s name over it and public swallowed it without complaint.

In a way, she expected more. Not from media and not from the general public but from Malfoys and Snape. She was on her toes for days on end, careful and ready to clash with Malfoy senior. That clash never came – she didn’t even saw him for almost ten days after the incident. And even then he glared at her with contempt, ignore her apology and hobbled off.

Snape ignored her as well. Well, as much as he could given the circumstances. Narcissa never changed a thing in the way they interacted. Draco….he was another story.

She raised her head and glanced in a direction of a huge wing-back chair, facing the fireplace. Sneaking her hand down she carefully touched her pocket. Few lumps meet her palm under the material of her jogging suit. Few balls of Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder gave her some measure of comfort. She started carrying them around after she noticed that Draco is following her.

She never gave too much thought what he was doing or where he was going. She never cared what either of Malfoys did when she wasn't around. It was a mutual silent agreement between both parties that they didn’t interact too much. Narcissa, again, being an exception. But ever since that day, Draco was popping up at every corner, like Jacko-from-the-box.

He was here now, reading. They rarely talked, but he would…linger. It was never a good thing to get a tail in a form of a Malfoy. Lucky for her Fred left her with a box of goodies she could use in case she needed them. It gave her some measure of comfort.
She hunched over the book, faking reading, toying with a quill in her hand.

Three days after the incident, Minister came by. They voted the Law. Her task was to find all still active laws, all past laws and to give suggestions how to change them – for the better. The Minister advised her to look for solutions in Muggle minorities law. To her surprise, Malfoy library had even Muggle law books.

Malfoy library was heaven! Big almost as Hogwarts library. Composed out of four adjoined chambers, each with a gallery, filled top to bottom with books. When she first entered the library her fingers started to itch. All that compiled knowledge within her reach! Navigating through that monstrosity would be nearly impossible without Misty’s help… and Draco’s. He knew, not only the library but also law section like the back of his hand. The place fast became her safe haven. Even if she wasn’t really allowed to take any of the books herself, or any other books except law books. But that was voluminous material to digest, for now, she was content with it.

…She was reading a book, frowning.

“Trying to intimidate the law, Bucktooth? It doesn’t work that way.” Draco mocked her

“If you want to know, the reference book apparently isn't in your library.”

“Sincerely doubt that.” He smirked

“Well, Misty can’t find it.”

“What book?”

“The one with the article ‘Tractate about werewolves – damned among us’”

“And you look for it in a Law section? Pathetic.” Draco clucked his tongue, and she growled at him

“Either help or disappear, I have work to do.”

To her surprise, Draco decided to walk off. Only to appear next to her moments later, nearly hitting her when he dropped large, thick ancient looking book on her table. She glared at him and he smirked.

“It was in the Dark Creatures section. The article speaks about the first mentioning of Werewolves in our society. Discussing the point of origin of the curse.”

Her mouth fell open, she didn’t expect from him to know the article no more than in what book it was.

“You really don’t know anything about Purebloods.” He shook his head “I was homeschooled before and during Hogwarts.”

“So you know about the laws?”

“Most of them – yes.”

“Well, good for you. Now let me work. Ummm…thank you, I guess.”

“You guess?” Draco raised an eyebrow, muttered something in his chin and walked out of the library…

Ten days after the incident…well, that was another story. Misty pop into the room with news that
Harry brought Draco home, he was again hit with a curse. Luckily, with nothing too serious. He was, however, rather out of it, acting almost like he’s drunk. Severus was so upset that she finally decided to go and look for herself…

…She crept through the door. Narcissa was sitting next to rumpled looking Draco covered with few bruises. His hair a mess. Harry was talking to Lucius.

“Ummm…I’m sorry, I had to come, Severus is really upset. He wants to know what is going on.” Her voice was quiet and thin.

Lucius snapped his head to glare at her, Harry looked worried but Narcissa was calm.

“Nothing to worry about. A minor accident in the Ministry.”

“Ministry?”

Lucius growled. Narcissa turned to him.

“Lucius, go and talk to Severus. Poppy will be here shortly, I have Mr Potter and Miss Granger here to help me.”

Lucius glanced at his wife

“Didn’t she done enough?” asked in a dry accusing hiss

“Lucius.” Narcissa gave him pointed look

He nodded and headed to the door, leaning heavily on the cane. Glaring at her with obvious accusation.

“This happened because of me, because I…?” she asked, realising only now why they staged such stupid rouse. Her meddling that day shifted the focus to Golden Trio more than the attack itself. Or to the Golden Meddling Duo as Prophet called them. It was rather clear now, given all the titles in Prophet. “I…I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

Lucius only continued to glare daggers at her. He stepped around her like she was no more than an offending piece of furniture, hobbling out of the room.

“Harry, Mrs Malfoy, what happened?”

“They cornered him in a corridor. He did put up a good fight Mrs Malfoy, but he was outnumbered.” Harry said softly

“And no one tried to help?”

“It isn’t very crowded corridor Hermione. He is in the Archives.”

“Archives?”

“Yes, apparently he is good with laws…”

“I know that…”

Fire blazed green and Poppy followed by Minister walked into the room. Poppy walked to Draco and shooed Narcissa, casting spell after spell.
“Nothing serious, he’ll be fine in an hour or two. Just a mild confundus charm and few bruises.”

Narcissa was whispering with Minister, Harry tried to talk to her, but she wasn’t listening. Among the myriad of feelings guilt dominated. Her brain worked fast.

“I have an idea, Harry…”

“Hermione, I don’t think you should…”

“This might work, …trust me.”

Harry shook his head, but she cleared his throat

“Minister.” Both Kingsley’s and Narcissa’s head turned to her “I apologize for interrupting. I... ummm...could it constitute as his penalty if Mal...sorry...Draco helps me? He wouldn’t have to leave the house and I could really use his help.”

“Miss Granger, I am not so sure…” Kingsley shook his head

“Just imagine, Mr Minister. What could please the public more than to know that an ex-Death Eater and Malfoy to boot works for a Muggleborn on a new Werewolf Law. It does sound...humiliating for Malfoys...Sorry about that Mrs Malfoy. And, gives the satisfaction to the people. They may decide to leave him alone and alive and unharmed so he could... suffer." her voice dropped to a whisper, she felt wrong as she voiced her reasoning. It wasn't why she suggested it, but she did learn a thing or two from Slytherins around her. “Can it be...arranged?”

“It will require approval from the Council, but essentially – yes.” Nodded slowly Kingsley “Thank you, Miss Granger. Narcissa I’ll see what I can do. Poppy?”

“The boy only needs rest.” Hiffed Poppy

“Hermione are you sure?” whispered Harry

“I messed it up, I can fix it...or at least try. Don’t worry, Harry, I can handle Malfoy in my sleep.” She smirked, hoping that Harry won’t see through her bluff

“Miss Granger, go with Mr Potter in the tea room. I will stay with Draco. Misty will call you when you’re needed.” Narcissa told them softly, her eyes conveying silent gratitude...

Now she had no choice. Then again, it was a far better option to have Malfoy junior in front of her eyes than as a tail.

Working on a Law influenced the time she was spending with Severus. For all intents and purposes, her life still revolved around him. And that was frustrating at the moment.

Severus was grumpy or silent most of the time. It didn’t bother her when he would direct the barb of his words to her as much as it bothered her when he ignored her. Her brain would quiver in an effort to solve a rather unsolvable puzzle. She was missing him, and that was so disconcerting on so many levels.

She couldn’t wrap her brain around the idea that she could miss anything that came from Severus Snape, for one. And, how she could miss someone she spent a good part of the day and entire night with as the other. It was maddeningly frustrating.

His memories were few and apart from each other. But she did learn that he helped Katie Bell after
she ended up cursed. And even if the Dark Lord didn’t summon him to the meetings, he did call him quite often. Each time Voldemort felt dissatisfied with slow progress he would call him. And each time he didn’t like the answer he’d be angry.

No, there is still no progress. – Crushiatus

Dumbledore is absent from the school again. – Crushiatus

No, he doesn’t know where Dumbledore went or for how long this time - Crushiatus

Dumbledore is not an easy target in the school. – Crushiatus

Two failed attempts. – Crushiatus

Those nights, when memories hit, were filled with episodes of tremors and her struggle to hold him down. With the growth of his strength, she had to put more and more effort to hold him down. Each time after the episode ended, Severus was highly displeased with the position they were in.

Well, it wasn’t like she was enjoying herself either. But what else she could do? She reached the point where seriously wanted to ask Poppy is there a spell she can use? But somehow, she was sure Severus wouldn’t appreciate that particular solution.

Lucky for her, he had more dreams than memories. And she wasn’t privy to those dreams, not that she wanted to. She knew that he was dreaming. Each time they woke up she either had to flick her wand at him or he would send her to the bathroom. Well, lately out of the room during the day.

Her own memories reminded her of the broken record. Night after night she would dream only about that cot in the tent. She reached the point in which realisation was obvious. Either she will find a way to stoop all that or she will end up broken all over again. She rather enjoyed the fact that she was her old self again.

Narrowing her eyes, she pulled a muggle pocket notebook and pen. She clicked the top of the pen and scribbled into a notebook

Connection – correlation…

1) Memory of crushiatus – post-crushiatus episode

2) Memory – reaction (???) – whose memory – possible triggers (?)

“What is that?”

She nearly jumped glaring at Draco. He was leaning at the table with curiosity.

“It is a Muggle thing.” She huffed

“Is it something about the law?”

“No.”

“Well, what is it about?”

“None of your business.”

“Maybe I can help…Unless it is full of your dirty secrets. In that case, I want to see it.” grinned Draco and she had the wish to smack him. Most of the time she found him irritating and annoying.
But he was also useful. The light in her head turned on

“In fact, you could. Do you have the section with medical books?”

“Misty would skin us both alive if I give you books on mind-magic.”

“You won’t give me any of the books. You will look it up! And no, it is not the mind magic. Is there anything about crushiatus in those books – about the consequences?”

“I have to look up, but it should be. Why? Planning on using it on someone?”

“No.” she frowned at him “Severus…he has those…”

“Say no more. What do you want to know?”

“Anything on post-crushiatus. How far they researched it to find the cure.”

“I can tell you that.” He huffed, sounding disappointed “They came up only with a potion. It relaxes the muscles and prevents the tearing of the tissue during the attack. But nothing much beyond that.”

“And how do you know that? Don’t tell me you wanted to be Medi-wizard.”

“Preposterous thought.” He barked at her “Potions, Granger. I couldn’t care less about the disease. I do know Potions.” He had an air of gloating around him

“Fine, whatever. Can you still look it up – not just the ‘cure’ but any abandoned theory why they happen.”

“What, you think you can solve what they couldn’t? Presumptuous much.” He sneered

“I have something they didn’t.” she hissed at him “An insight before it happens. Actually, I have a theory…but, I need confirmation. At any rate, most of the time you can recite Law books without even glancing at them. This will give you something to work on and I can ask you if I get stuck.”

He frowned at her and stalked off, presumably to find suitable books for the research. She felt a surge of energy and returned to her reading with renewed zeal.
Severus stared at the pale-blue line of the sky. It seemed like his entire world shrunk to that infinite view. In a way, he felt like he is on the open sea – not that he knew how it is to be in the open sea – but he was sure it had to be the same. Just water and empty expense for as long as one could see.

He projected his thought to the pale canvas of the sky.

If he would think in his head, without a focal point his mind would wonder. And that scared him. Was he losing his sharpness? The only thing that he still possessed!

He was unable to move. In past days he managed to make few steps, leaning heavily on Hermione and Narcissa. Nevertheless, those few steps gave him hope. He hated that. Hope was dangerous. Hope was for the fools and idiots. Still, it meant that he was on the mend – physically at least. But even if he managed to walk, what good will it do?

He was unable to brew now. And even if he stays alive long enough, it was only matter of time... Matter of time before he can’t brew anymore. True, Lucius had right – he could take an assistant. But assistant which would possess the required level of skill was... Well, the one who could satisfy his requirements would be a Master, not assistant or apprentice.

Now, his mind would not stand still. His thoughts roaming all over the place. He couldn’t focus on them in his head. He was losing his mind – slowly and steadily.

And Hermione... ever since she got that task from Kingsley, she was locked in that library! Wasn’t she supposed to take care of him? Instead, she left him alone, day after day. She would torture him and leave him alone. The nerve of that snotty brat! She was spending most of her time with books and Draco instead to take care of him!

He was grateful for what she did for Draco. Even if that was not a solution in the long run. He hated it. Hated seeing his family suffering. Locked away from the world, unable to get out of their home. But, Draco seemed happy. He spent more time in here, even talking to Hermione. Their conversations still resembled fighting, pushing insults at each other like the beach ball. But he could see, they were at the truce. The closest to friendship they’ll ever be.
He had to admit, the strength in his arms returned with a steady increase. He couldn’t say it was all due to Hermione’s rigorous regime. His dreams held a good deal of credit for that. Blissfully, his memories stopped rushing at him at a fast pace. His dreams however increased. They invaded not only his sleep, he was daydreaming. Too often for his liking. Idle entertainment for idiots - apparently now he qualified in that group.

As a direct result, he was in need of his private time more often.

He relished those dreams, almost cherished. They represented the moments of peace and happiness, albeit, followed with wanking sessions. He was almost giddy when he realised that he didn’t have to switch arms every so often. He was grateful for that.

And, he hated them! They dangled in front of him something he never had and never will have. Love. Acceptance. Intelligent partner. They gave him hope. Not the same kind as the wobbly steps he made. False hope. Dangerous hope. The one that was set to fail.

He is alone now. Waiting. He hated it. Another of Lucius’s airheaded ideas. He sighed.

Hermione was sitting on the sofa, reading one of the law books, thick enough to measure same as she did in weight. The ritmical scratch of quill lulled him, shooting his nerves. The door opened and Lucius hobbled in. Hermione jerked her head, put away her quill and parchments, marked the page and stood up heading to the door.

“I’ll be in the library, Misty can get me when Mr Malfoy leave.” She told him.

“No need Miss Granger. In fact, I’d appreciate if you stay. After all, this concerns you too.”

His ears perk up. Lucius had a plan.

Lucius made his slow walk to his bed and sat on it, biting the groan. He could see the fog of pain in pale-blue eyes. Hermione was standing indecisively on the door.

“Close the door and sit down Miss… Hermione.” He barked a harsh tone.

The girls obeyed him tentatively. He could see her clutching her wand in her pocket. He couldn’t blame her, she didn’t know Lucius like he did. It wasn’t physical attack she should be afraid of. Dueling, even if proficient at it, was always beneath Lucius.

Lucius, on the other hand, was holding a stack of parchments in his free hand, and now he was sifting through them. He was waiting for the girl to sit on the sofa. He didn’t even glance at her direction. Finally, Lucius raised his head and looked at him.

“Is Miss Granger still acts in the capacity of your secretary?”

“It should.” He replied hiding his confusion. “I did not seek another one, and given that she still has permission to use my given name… Even if she neglects her duties as of lately.”

“I do not!”

“Fine.” Lucius cut her off. “I arranged for few visitors. Given that Miss Granger will take care of their admission and times I’ll leave her all necessary papers.”

He frowned. Visitors? What visitors? What was he up to now?

“Miss Granger, if you will.”
Lucius had a cold and detached voice, the one he often used in negotiations. The one that spoke volumes about his superiority. Hermione stood up and approached Lucius carefully like she’s approaching dangerous wild beast.

“Hurry up girl, I don’t have the whole day.” Barked Lucius at her and shoved papers in her hand “You will contact these individuals and arrange their audience. I’d suggest one at the time, no more than two visitors per day. And whatever you do – I would avoid for these two individuals to meet, even by chance. If they do… Well,” Lucius cleaned his nails against his chest with the dispassionate look. “If they do meet, I fully expect from you to protect Severus or die trying.”

“Why would you wanted to allow individuals who want to hurt him to visit him in the first place?” She hissed at Lucius

“You misunderstood me, Miss Granger. Neither of them has anything against Severus. Their dispute is among themselves. They might unintentionally harm Severus while… resolving that… dispute… And I do not want to see him caught in a crossfire.”

“Right. In that case, I’ll take care of everything. Am I free to go?”

“No need, I just wanted to solve this. I have other matters to attend to.” Lucius dismissed Hermione appeared equally eager to scamper off. Lucius turned to him. “I respect your wishes, I do hope you will appreciate this.”

“Lucius…” His brain worked fast but still couldn’t come up with ample solution or full realisation

“I do have important letters to send. I’ll see you this afternoon Severus.” With that Lucius struggled a bit to stand and then slowly walked out.

Hermione was studying the papers Lucius gave her. When he was out of the room she bolted. He could hear them in a hallway.

“Mr Malfoy, thank you.”

“What for, Miss Granger?”

“For… this… for what you are doing for…”

“He is family, Miss Granger. Now, do your job.”

That was almost two weeks ago. Now, he was waiting. He didn’t know who his visitor would be, neither Lucius nor Hermione were forthcoming in sharing the names from the list. The girl went above and beyond to make him look presentable and that irked him.

He directed his eyes to clear cheery summer sky. The cheerful weather mocked him.

The door clicked and the voice he most definitely didn’t want to hear squeaked in fake accentuation.

“Severus! I didn’t see you in ages!”

He bit out the groan.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

They were in the library. He was still digging through the books about cruchiatus compiling information. Granger had her nose in a law book when a wave of pulsating energy shook the walls. They raised their eyes and looked at each other.
Without a single word, they just jumped and dashed running through the meandering corridors. Tripped over the stairs. And barged into Severus’s room. The sight that found them left them frozen.

Draco tightened his grip on his wand. It wasn’t smart. No one in his or her right mind didn’t draw his or her wand at Severus. Even aunt Bella, insane as she was, wasn’t crazy enough to do that. But, his father had to be at the Ministry today, the mother decided to accompany him. Draco didn’t like the prospect of having to fight Severus but… having enraged Severus sending waves of wild magic wasn’t good either. If situation doesn’t calm he will be forced to… he gulped.

Granger was still and unmoving. Her eyes huge and unblinking. She didn’t look like someone who would be able to help.

“Novelty Muggle fashion.” He groused horrified with realisation.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She was frozen with sight.

Severus was lying on the bed. His right hand outstretched and curled around females neck. His grip couldn’t be strong and she could get out at will, but it appeared that the poor girl was scared motionless. She could see a smear of bright red on his cheek, above the lip.

_Was she tried to hurt him? Or did she try to kiss him? It looks like lipstick._

Her brain tried to work out that puzzle rendering her unable to move or avert her eyes. Her chest felt tight and air in the room nonexistent. The entire scene was like a Muggle picture. Stopped in time.

Draco mumbled ‘Novelty Muggle fashion’ and that snapped her to the motion. She took her wand and stepped towards the bed.

“Miss, you violated the rules in addressing Lord Prince. I have to ask you to leave.”

Severus’s loosened his grip and his hand fell to the bed. The girl whimpered and run out of the room. He still had that stony expression. His voice weighed a ton when he rasped.

“Draco, leave. Now.”

Malfoy managed to pull off marvellous disappearing act, without much as a backwards glance, leaving her with Severus. Severus who was still vibrating from magical outburst and anger.

“Miss… Hermione, if you want to act in the capacity of my secretary, I expect you to do so.” His eyes full of undiluted rage turned to her. His voice bit her like ice. “I expect you **never to leave** me alone, ever again, **alone!**, with those harpies. If you do, you better run and hide. I assure you, I am **not** Lucius. I will **retaliante**. Did. I. Made. Myself. Clear?”

“Y…yes.” She sighed. _How is he going to find love if I linger in the room?_

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Nothing has changed. Everything changed. Few more days passed. His and hers nights plagued with nightmares. Few more girls came and went. He was polite and distant towards all. She started to worry. She would sit through every visit, trying her best to be invisible.

She hated it!
All of them. All the girls, pure blooded ‘ladies’, empty-headed and frivolous. Not one of them could even spark his interest. Not even for a second. How is he to find if not love at least someone like that. What is stopping him?

His memories got caught in a strange interloop, shifting between very obvious dreams and nightmareish memory with Bellatrix. It backfired in a most unexpected way drawing out more of her own memories with Ron. Driving her insane. Causing her a headache. She would wake up each time with the desire to cry or scream. He wasn’t any better when he dreamt… remembered… They were like two insects, caught in the spider web.

And those girls!

**What was Mr Malfoy thinking?!** She hated every single one of them. They talked about gossips and fashion. About new stores in Diagon Alley. Didn’t they know with whom they were talking to? That was Severus Snape in Merlin’s name! She thought she will start screaming if she has to sit through another empty chatter. She presumed he wasn’t much better either.

He was sleeping now, and for once he had a good time. Well, obviously he had a good time. In fact, he could simmer it down a bit if someone asked her. Nobody asked her anything. She nearly jumped at the sound of his voice.

“I’d appreciate some privacy.”

“I have to take a shower anyway.” She mumbled not even looking at his direction.

Still not looking she flicked her wand at him when she was at the bathroom door. Once she was in the sanctity of the bathroom her wayward thoughts continued.

*Why can’t he think of those… those in that manner. I hope he doesn’t dream about her. I don’t think so, he looks different when he dreams about her. And then he calls her name.*

She disrobed, moving like in a dream, still lost in her thoughts.

*At least he has something nice to dream about. Not like me. Not like me!* She moaned clutching her head. She would sell her soul to erase those memories from her head. To erase her experience with Ron. She was tortured by those memories to the point of insanity.

**Bellatrix! Same as me! Maybe that is the problem.**

The thought formed in her head. Crazy, insane even. But, she was there already. Insanity in the form and shape of Ron followed her around like a rainy cloud. If she could… She can… She has to… She moved spurred by the thought. By the idea. Solution! The solution for both of them!

With sudden determination, she launched herself from the bathroom floor pulling a long oversized T-shirt over her naked form.

*No more. No more.*

She opened the door and stepped into the room.

“No!”
Her eyes narrowed, focusing solely on his face. He stopped mid-motion. It took him few moments to bellow at her.

“**What do you think you’re doing? GET OUT!**”

“No.” she repeated through a constricted throat. This had to stop! Stop now. Raising her wand she cast a silent incantation, first to him than to the door.

“What…! What are you doing, you lunatic?! Release me at once!” he demanded. She can feel his magic flaring and brushing against her but then dissipating. And even if he’s struggling she is confident that the charm will hold.

_I know you don’t understand but you will._

That is the only way. And she knows she can do it… She has to, for both of them. Pacing with firm resolve she approached the bed and climbed on it. It is the only way. To erase his and hers bad memories – to create new ones.

She is fine. She managed to beat her demons – all but one. And now she’ll erase that demon as well. The memory of Ron. Determined not be haunted anymore. In a way, he showed her the way – Severus. He taught her that bad memories can be circumvented by nicer ones if one had a point of comparison – which she didn’t.

And his memories of that… of what… of Bellatrix. Maybe he can’t move on because he keeps thinking about that. Just like her. Maybe he is also trapped in his bad experience, just like she is. Her brain is working properly now and she could easily add two and two together. How could anyone think of being with someone, if his _last memory on sex_ is… she shook her head. No, she won’t call that a rape. And even if it was – it was Bellatrix. Besides he did everything he could for her to enjoy herself. The only problem crazy bitch (Thank you Molly!) had was his blood status.
She hovers above him. He can’t be angry at her or his magic would react. He protests, but he’s always like that – not accepting even when he knows something is good for him.

“Don’t you dare you little brat!” He growled at her, his voice vibrating dangerously.

She decided to ignore him. She stepped above him and he jerked his hands. They were secured by the spell Poppy provided her with. She grabbed him in her hand and frowned. Forcing her brain not to think about – sizes, it was no time for that.

His face stoned, his eyes narrowed and his jaw squared, tightly clenched. He was the embodiment of the phrase ‘if look could kill’.

She descended slowly, frowning. *Maybe she should think about the size after all? Or lubrication for that matter.* She guessed that her face revealed at least portion of what she was thinking because his face rearranged into a menacing mask.

*What am I supposed to do now?*

Fine, she had some idea about the basic mechanic, how that could work, but... she felt more stretched than she expected. Slight burn, probably due to a dryness wasn’t pleasant either. And his defiant glare full of loathing and defiant wasn’t helpful.

*Ok, so I need something…right? Well,…*

She closed her eyes and tried not to focus on the unpleasant or *surprising* elements. What to think about was... challenging. Shifting through her head she tried with Krum but that didn’t work either. Ron was *out of the question*. His face, cut by the keyhole floated to mind.

She opened her eyes, he was still glaring at her with the same expression. She closed her eyes again. *This is ridiculous, I can think of him but not look at him.* But she did started to think of him and gradually same itchy feeling forced her to move. Thinking did help with lubrication, but the stretch – there wasn’t much she could do about that.

She carefully moved up and down, trying to figure out the best way for a mechanics to work. It didn’t work so far, at least not in the way she expected. It wasn’t unpleasant or painful, it just wasn’t… too pleasant either. But maybe those things need time. She hoped that at least he had a better time than she did.

*Or maybe I should speed up a bit?* Deciding to take her own advice she forced her hips and legs to work a bit faster. She slipped a bit and changed the angle. *Oh! Whatever happened, felt much nicer than what she was doing until now. and what she was doing until now could be described as riding a bike without a seat, a bike with very, very thick bar. Change of the angle, however, felt nice.*

Trying to retain that angle she tilted her pelvis. Now, that was much better. or it would be if her thighs didn’t start to burn. *Sex is hard work. Not so sure about the pleasure part.* Frowning in concentration, keeping the chosen image in front of her eyes, she continued to move. There were definitely sparks and mild jolts.

She ventured a peek at him. He still had the same expression but muscles under his skin seemed somehow taut – more than usual. His hands fisting bed covers where they were pinned. She could feel tightening of his muscles. But he didn’t look like he is enjoying himself much either. Or maybe he did she just didn’t know how to read the signs.

Closing her eyes again, she continued to move. Ths was hard work. She was sweating and she could
feel tightness and jolting of her muscles, but… whatever she needed – eluded her.

Finally, she gave up. She hadn’t had any more strength. And even if this wasn’t what she expected it still was far better than she knew by that point. She just hoped that is was same for him. Deciding that she can’t go on anymore, and she didn’t expect of him to participate…Not that he could, the charm was rather effective. She heavily sat down and jumped right up. Ouch! Right.

She carefully removed herself from him. Fine, there were no fireworks, for her and apparently not for him – the flagpole was still there. But it wasn't altogether unpleasant. Maybe fireworks demand joint effort? Well, no help there – he won’t cooperate. She opened her eyes and glanced at him.

Severus’s chest rise and fall just a bit faster but he still didn’t change his expression. She bit her lip. Maybe fireworks demand joint effort? Well, no help there – he won’t cooperate. She opened her eyes and glanced at him.

“He was forceful too,” she commented.

“Move. Away. From. Me.”

“I… I thought that… Well, I won’t apologize.”

“It is hardly a requirement in these situations.”

“What situations, we just… And at any rate, it didn’t help. I’d say it wasn’t all to…”

“It never is, Miss Granger, when rape is concerned.”

“Rape?” Her brain just did a somersault colliding with her intestines somewhere in her throat. Is that what he thinks I did? No. No, I did not… I was just helping… She narrowed her eyes at him “Well, it sure beats your last time with Bellatrix.”

“That, Miss Granger, is a matter of opinion. Now, move away and release me.”

She rolled off the bed and walked to the bathroom, only then she took her wand and flicked it first at him then at door. She nearly reached a speed of light disappearing in the bathroom. Her heart was beating like crazy. Matron is going to kill me.

She could hear his bellow ‘Misty!!!’. He had to call few more times before elf appeared.

“Master called Misty.”

“I did. Where have you been?” She never heard him sounding so harsh towards the elf

“Misty was forcefully sleeping, Master. Big book hit Misty and Misty had to sleep.” She peeked through the keyhole, Misty was sporting huge bump on her head “What Missy did to Master?”

“Nothing, Misty. I just…require your help.” He sighed. “Missy is in bathroom and I… I’d hate to see me…”

“Misty help Master.”

She blinked, he lied. Why did he lie?

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Everything after that was… well just wasn’t so good. When she exited the bathroom he ignored her – glaring through the window. When the time for the pool exercises came it was almost impossible to do them. He would flinch or tried to avoid her touch. When they finally went to sleep it was almost a relief.
He was grading papers when Flitwick hopped into his dungeon. He couldn’t remember if he ever saw a little man so excited.

“Death Eaters! Death Eaters are in the school!!”

Draco – supplied his brain, he was on his feet before he could think of it. His mind working fast, waving his wand and map of the school appeared.

“Where?”

Flitwick turned to show him and he pointed his wand at Flitwick’s back ‘I’m so sorry, Filius, but I’m saving your life.’ He thought casting a silent Stupefy and catching a small figure before it hit the ground. Ice rolled inside him, freezing the air in his lungs. Sharp pain erupting in his chest and his guts.

After tonight he will be alone. He won’t have anyone to confide in. And even if he didn’t like the Old Man, Albus was the person he trusted the most. Albus was the only one who held almost all his secrets. After Albus is gone he’ll have – no one.

Professor…

Green light.

Pain so profound that hitched his breath.

Green light.

Avada Kedavra.

Pain! Merlin, the pain! Gut wrenching, blood-freezing pain. Unbearable pain!

Albus falling.

Alone.

Lost.

All is lost.

Alone.

Abandoned.

Dead.

He killed…

He’s murderer! Worse he killed his only ally! He is all alone! Blood, blood that never going to wash off. Not only Albus’s blood…

Why? Why did he survive? Why… He doesn’t deserve to live! He killed. He murdered. He tortured. He rapped. He… He… Even today! So many sins. So many… Why is he alive?

Severus, please.
Severus, please.

Severus, please.

Severus, please.

His lungs are burning. His useless body can't even… He tried to curl up but his legs can’t move.

Severus, please.

Severus, please.

Severus, please.

He grabbed his head, pressing it between his forearms. Make it stop!!! Make the sounds and the pictures stop!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione jumped! The sound was horrifying – it sounded like a wail. Painful wail. Inhuman. She raised her wand and whispered *Lumos*.

Severus was trashing on the bed. It took her few moments to realise that sound was coming from him. She tried to jump from sofa to his bed and failed. Raising from the floor she climbed to the bed and stretched her arm.

The tears were streaming down his contorted face. Her arm lingered in the air, memories of him flinching from her came to the mind. She reluctantly left her hand hovering above him – not really touching.

“Professor.” She softly called.

Another wave of inhuman wails and trashing. Quiet screams accompanied with the aggressive shaking of his head. The breath came from him in laboured rasps, like he was choking. Among all sounds, the only recognisable one was ‘no’ repeated over and over.

He rolled to his side and tried to… do something. Something he was obviously failing to do. She timidly touched his shoulder.

“It’s fine Severus, it’s only a dream…a memory…”

Trashing and twitching and sounds continued. But he didn’t flinch from her touch. She wasn’t even sure if he registered it. Feeling encouraged by that she squeezed his shoulder. He continued to produce a sound that resembled a wounded animal, a man in pain and someone who’s very soul is slowly burned out of him. Tears fogged her view.

“Severus… please…”

He tried to… it looked like he was trying to curl up in a ball. His entire body tugging in different directions.

“Please… Severus! Please…”

He screamed. Ear-piercing scream. He raised his arms and covered his head with them, digging his hands into the hair and curling them. Tugging on the long strands. She was sure that the grip was strong enough to make bloody marks on his scalp.
He can kill me later for all I care.

She pulled him to her lap, caressing gently his hands until their grip loosened. He stayed like that – with his hands in the hair. He pressed his face to her belly – sobbing inconsolably.

When Malfoys finally barged into the room they were both crying. The sobs quake his body in painful convulsions. His face still pressed against her belly. She was holding him half pulled to her lap and rocking him gently, caressing his hair and trying to croon at him.

She glared at Malfoys, afraid that they will try to separate them. She was determined not to allow them that. He needed support. He needed someone. He needed… her. And she would fight if need be to prevent… To her surprise, Mr Malfoy prevented his wife to go to them, glaring at Draco. He nodded to her and ushered his wife and son out of the room. She couldn’t be sure but she thought that she saw a watery glimmer in his eyes.

Severus was still sobbing and she focused on him.
LXXVIII

Chapter Notes

A/N: I want to thank you all! Yesterday my story hit 200 Kudos. Thank you <3

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

He was crying most of the night. Even when tears run out, dry sobs continued. His face was still pressed to her belly. The T-shirt that she used as a nightgown was sporting a wet patch that stuck uncomfortably to her body. Wet from his tears and drool. She ignored it.

The pale track of dawn brightened the room. She was dozing, in the state of half-sleep. Still sitting on his bed and holding him. Rocking him gently and crooning even in her state. Still caressing his hair and shoulders. Even when he stopped crying. Even when he just went slack in her hands.

She was afraid to let him go. To stop doing any of those things, not sure which or if any actually helped. And she was so tired. Tired of her own mind trying to figure out if she was the cause of this or his memory?

It was the early morning when Poppy entered the room. Not through the fireplace but at the door, accompanied by Mr Malfoy. Hermione felt relieved. Picture before her spilling when tears filled her eyes. Poppy approached briskly.

“So it finally happened. Well, it took him a long time. Let him go, girl. I have to check him out.”

She nodded. Her throat constricted beyond an ability to speak. She tried to roll him on his back and he twitched. Is he trying to curl up? Or is he bothered that I released him?

“Matron, I…” her voice broke.

“No my dear. This is not the charms.” Absentmindedly replied Poppy casting diagnostic spells. Finally, she smiled. “Well, he is not worse for the wear. Give him no more than three days – but after that… Force him to continue with exercises.”

“I will…” her chest tightened, fear constricting them. Should I...should I tell everything? I’m not afraid of the consequences, but… It was a lie, she was afraid of the consequences, but, not that much. Not enough not to tell. The bigger problem was - should she put him in that position? He lied to Misty, maybe he doesn’t want to be known?

“Give him this. He has to drink it.” Poppy’s words brought her back to reality.
“What is it?”

“Very mild Calming Draught. Nothing stronger than this. If he wants to cry – let him. If he wants to argue – let him. Don’t leave him unsupervised, not even for a moment.”

“I won’t.”

The whole time, Mr Malfoy was standing in the corner. He looked tired, dark shades under his eyes. He was leaning on his cane supporting almost entire weight on it. Silent and alerted. She approached him timidly.

“Mr Malfoy…”

He peered at her, not saying the word. But he didn’t look… he lacked his usual demeanour. He was just looking at her with a question in his eyes.

“Ummm. I think it would be the best if I postpone…”

“Quite correct Miss Granger. It would be, indeed, for the best until Poppy gives her permission that he may continue to receive visits.” His voice was nearly a whisper.

“Yes. Thank you.” She turned to walk away.

“Miss Granger, may I inquire…” He called at her back.

“Draco didn’t tell you?” She was certain that Draco reported her every move to his father.

“Miss Granger, contrary to your belief, Malfoys do not gossip.” He glanced at her from above.

“Hmh, yes, right.” She huffed. “Well, I do think you… miscalculated. I mean… those… I don’t know how to call them… but, they are horrific! Not even one is suitable for him. And he tried to strangle Miss Parkinson.”

Malfoy chuckled and she glared at him. *Is he insane?*

“Miss Granger, are you trying to tell me that you think you know Severus better than me?” He raised one eyebrow and his voice tingled with sudden ill-concealed sharpness.

“No, that is not what I’m trying to say. Not at all, just… They gossip, they talk about most boring things… They *bored me to tears* and I’m female, I *can* listen about makeup and dresses. Well, occasionally at least.” His eyebrow just travelled higher. “Look, I agree with you. It would be good for him to… to find someone. Some romantic interest. I *am willing to help you*, no matter how strange that sounds. But…”

“Miss Granger. Believe me or not, but ladies from that list are very carefully selected, to match his… *preferences*.”

“But you said…”

“I know what I said. I still stand behind everything I said.”

“Oh.” She blushed as sudden realisation slowly came to her. “Well, yes, fine. Thank you.”

She rushed to move away from Mr Malfoy. The fact that he didn’t try to snap her neck, she took that as a good sign.
Harry barged into the room and Poppy turned to her.

“Take him out of the room before he disturbs my patient. I gave you your instructions. Lucius will stay with Severus until you return.”

She nodded and placed a hand on Harry’s mouth pushing him out of the room.

“I will. Thank you, Matron. Thank you, Mr Malfoy. Let’s go, Harry, I’ll tell you in the tea room.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

He was sitting in the library. Worried and unable to sleep he went to library straight from Severus’s room last night. His leg danced revealing nervous jitter. Scratching of quill sounded too loud in his ears.

Draco sighed and stretched. Huge grin spilling over his face, he finally managed to compile all the information Granger asked him to. He cast a tempus and frowned. *Father is probably with Madam Pomfrey with Severus.* He gathered all parchments and rushed through the corridors.

He stopped in front of the door and leaned on the wall. It won’t end well if his father sees him looking like he just ran from France and back. Setting his hair and robes straight he knocked and entered the room. Before he managed to say a word, Madam Pomfrey harshly snapped at him.

“What is this? This man is sick and in need of the rest. You young people run in this room like it is a Quidditch field every few moments.” He took a breath to say something but Madam Pomfrey stopped him. “Not a word, young man. Now, is it something you have to say to me?”

Draco shook his head, mashing his lips tight.

“What is this? This man is sick and in need of the rest. You young people run in this room like it is a Quidditch field every few moments.” He took a breath to say something but Madam Pomfrey stopped him. “Not a word, young man. Now, is it something you have to say to me?”

Draco shook his head, mashing his lips tight.

“Do you have to talk to your father?”

He shook his head again.

“Are you seeking either Miss Granger or Mr Potter?”

He nodded. *Potter? Is Potter here?* Draco kept his mouth shut, making Madam Pomfrey angry was even less smart than making his father angry. And father did look like he is halfway there already.

“They are in the tea room. Run along now.” Madam Pomfrey released him, and he mutely nodded to both his father and Madam Pomfrey, swiftly slipping out of the room. But, not before he tossed a glance at the bed.

Once he was in the hallway again, on the other side of the door he closed his eyes. Snape looked peaceful to him now, but last night… That was the reason he was in the library until now. Draco never claimed that he knew what to do or how to handle tears. His or anyone else’s, for that matter.

Seeing Severus like that… Broken… It shook him up badly. He could bet Galleons that the sound will hunt him for years. The man saved his life, in Merlin’s name! Even after he was an absolute prat to him. The man was like a second father to him! He didn’t know why happened what happened last night… But, at that moment he was almost grateful for Granger being in their home.

Draco frowned. Granger really did gave her best to help Severus heal. Not once he entered the room to find them in deep conversation about the topic that sounded too advance for him to comprehend. Not that he would ever admit *that* to his father! And with all the arguing and growling, Severus appeared to be more tolerant towards her. Maybe, just *maybe*, Granger was good for Severus. He
will have to give it a thought when he finds the time.

Not now. Now he had to find her and give her all that he compiled. If there was an off chance to help somehow, no matter how minimal, in Severus’s recovery – he will seize the opportunity. That was the least he could do.

Jolted by a new surge of energy and determination he nearly dashed to the tea room. Words of his mother ringing in his head. Do not run down the corridors, Draco. If need be, walk briskly but do not run. You are a Malfoy. At this moment he didn’t give a rats tail about being a Malfoy.

He barged into the room. Potter was standing, leaning heavily on the chair’s back, with a bemused look on his face. Gaping like a trout while deep redness covered his forehead, ears and neck. Granger was near the window. It was easy to see that she didn’t have much sleep either. She was slowly shaking her head, voice broken by dry sobs.

“…I don’t know Harry. What if I caused…”

Her words hit him like a whip. What did she mean by that? Draco was sure that Granger was only doing the best she could for Severus. Then again, the memory of her mad rescue mission, when she spoiled father's plan came to mind. She maybe has good intentions, but that doesn’t mean that she didn’t mess up again. In two steps he was in front of her.

“What did you do, Bucktooth?”

“I… I…” She stuttered, her eyes wide open and full of horror. Before he was able to react, she was pressing her head against him, sobbing. He turned to Potter, panic rising inside him.

That seemed to snap Potter out of a stupor. He approached them and turned Granger to himself, hugging her.

“What happened, Potter?”

“As much as I could gather, Snape had a nasty reaction to the memory of killing Dumbledore.” Potter flinched at those words.

“What did you do, Bucktooth?”

“You call him that, after what I went through – Dark Lord.” He grumbled. “Dark Lord ordered the celebration. Severus spent the entire evening in the library with a book and a glass of wine. And he didn’t drink wine – he just held a glass next to himself.”

“It doesn’t sound to me like he was miserable.” Replied Potter.

“Whenever Severus feels miserable he reads a book and twirls a glass of wine in his hand. It prevents people from talking to him.”

Granger wailed and intensified her sobbing. He and Potter looked at each other. Apparently, both of them were lost and had no idea how to react. Finally, he decided that his news are more important than her pitty.

“Stop bawling, Granger. I finished it.”

“Finish what?” She hiccuped the words without raising her head or glancing at him.
“The research, about crushiantus. Don’t tell me you just wanted to swamp me with useless work!” He couldn’t hide the sharpness from his voice entirely.

Her head snapped up. She yanked the parchments from his hand and sat on the settee to read, still hiccupsing.
LXXIX

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

Not to forget! I have to say BIG BIG THANK YOU to all my readers! With the last chapter, I passed 10 000 hits milestone - which is first for me. So thank THANK YOU very, very much ^_^

Harry’s head was still reeling from the sheer amount of most bizarre information Hermione dumped on him in just few short moments ago. His brain was running in manic circles. He had a need to shake his head and chase away disturbing and undesired imagery.

Why would she do something like that? He couldn’t understand. Why would she stay up all night holding him in her lap?

What Hermione did went above and beyond her nursing duties. Harry, try as he may, couldn’t understand her. She acted normal lately. It was same old Hermione, self-assured and bossy to the point of annoyance. He tried to stop an onslaught of thoughts and questions focusing on her.

Hermione looked the same, reminding him of the days in the Common room. She was bent over the stack of parchments. From time to time she would tuck loose strand behind her ear. She was slightly frowning at her reading, chewing on her lower lip.

Malfoy, on the other hand, was sitting across her, teetering on the edge his chair. Looking at Hermione as if he expected that she will burst into flames any second now, or grow horns.

Hermione tapped her finger on the passage and glance around. Malfoy jumped from the chair and nearly knock him out. Draco dashed to the work table and returned with quill, ink and new parchments. They both kneel next to the tea table. She was drawing diagrams, writing unfamiliar formulas and scribbling around her drawing.

Nothing changed. Thought Harry, but deep down he knew it did.

The picture in front of him was so surreal, so out of comprehension, that he had to blink few times – just to make sure he’s not seeing things. Hermione and Draco teaming up to work on what appeared to be some kind of project. Harry felt a slight pang of jealousy.

This is wrong.

“Do you think this is it?” Asked Draco, his voice brimming with excitement.

“Well, we have to recheck at least once – just to be absolutely sure – but, yes, I think this is it.” Hermione nodded. She stopped hiccuping and looked excited now. I will never understand girls.

“Ummm, Hermione?” He asked, feeling left out form something that looked big.
“Yes, Harry?” She turned to him.

“What are you…” He started but stopped when she grinned at him happily.

“We found the connection! At least I think we did.”

“Connection? What connection?” Harry was lost.

“Between memories and post-cruciatus tremors.”

“Why would you look for that?”

“Harry,” Hermione sighed, with a familiar look on her face, one that announced a lecture, she stood up. “Look, you know how Crushiatus works. Right?”

He glanced at Malfoy they both shivered. He nodded.

“Right. We all do. We all felt it… Ummm… Feret face?”

“Just go on.” Mumbled Draco avoiding her eyes.

“Right. Anyway, spell attacks nerves causing intense pain.” She started, and he nodded prompting her with the motion of the arm to continue. “Post-cruciatus tremors, you have them an hour or two after you were hit with the curse, it is a normal reaction. Right?”

Harry nodded, wondering if really wanted to know.

“Well, if someone had prolonged exposure to the curse, either for a long time or on multiple occasions…” She stopped, chewing on her lip. Nodded and continued. “In any case, the recurrence of post-cruciatus tremors is well documented. It is a debilitating condition. It repeats until the victim is so damaged that is, in fact, unable to take care of itself.”

“Ok, I’ve heard of that.” He nodded, happy to understand what she was talking about. With Hermione, that wasn’t always the case.

“Fine. But, all mentioning of that tie tremors with nerve damage. They have that potion, which does nothing but relax the muscles. And that is it. Don’t you see, Harry?”

“See what?” He frowned. Did I miss something?

“They don’t know!”

“Hermione, what are you talking about?”

“It isn’t the nerve damage! It’s the memories!” Hermione beamed at him.

“Hermione, you can’t…”

“But I can! I am the only one who can know. With absolute certainty. Harry, every time Severus had an attack – he had a memory of being cursed with Crushiatus. And that got me thinking!”

“Yeah, but still… Hermione…”

“Look, it is not the pain that causes the attacks, it is memory and muscle memory. That is why monitoring spell was always wrong!”
“Wrong?”

“It would show that his reactions – blood pressure, heart rate, - they all react like he is in pain. And pain monitor does not detect pain. Because it is not pain, he… the victim doesn’t feel pain…”

“Ok, Hermione, but the condition does cause damage. How do you explain that?”

“Muscle tearing. Microfractures in tissue. They shouldn’t heal the body!”

Harry glared at her. *What is she talking about?* He glanced at Malfoy, he was also watching her with a deep intake of breath – presumably to contradict her.

“Yes, fine, I know.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “They should heal that too. But *not only that!* They should heal the victim's mind as well!”

Malfoy nodded in agreement. He was still sitting on the floor, leaning on the table.

“Let’s us assume that you are correct…”

“I am.” She cut him, but he ignored that and just continued.

“…You found out the reason – fine. How to cure it? What are you going to do with your discovery?”

“Hey!” Malfoy complained, insulted.

“Ok, What *two of you* are going to do with that discovery? It is rather useless without the cure.”

“Useless? Did you lost your mind, Harry?” Hermione snapped at him. “We are going to check everything once more and give our finding to Madam Pomfrey. She can give it to *healers at St. Mungo’s* and *they can find the cure*.”

Malfoy agreed with her, supporting her sharp words with an emphatic nod. He sighed, two against one, it wasn’t fair. Then again, he had a feeling that Hermione did simplify things for him. She and Draco spoke the language he couldn’t quite understand.

“I have to go. Feretface, today we will work in Severus’ room. Matron told me that I have to watch over him constantly now.” She briskly walked to the door. “See you later, Harry.”

Hermione let the room leaving him and Draco alone. He turned to Draco. Malfoy looked tired, same as Hermione.

“Did you also…”

“No, the father wouldn’t let us. My mother and me.” Clarified Malfoy. “But I couldn’t sleep after what I saw…”

“*What* did you see?” Harry felt desperate for information.

“I’d rather not talk about it if it’s all the same to you.” Sighed Draco standing up. “I think I’m going to take a nap, at least a short one. Later, Potter.”

Draco left the room. He was alone, confused and he didn’t like it one bit.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~
Hermione knocked on the door. It felt somehow right even if this was her room also. Cautiously opening the door she slipped into the room.

Severus was still sleeping. Mr Malfoy was sitting next to him with an odd expression on his face. She’d swear on Gryffindor’s sword that she could see a trace of tears on Malfoy’s face. But, no! It must be the shade. It simply couldn’t be.

Malfoy raised his head. Face turning from soft to tight. He mutely nodded and struggled a bit with getting up. Without a word, Malfoy hobbled out of the room leaving her alone with Severus.

He appeared to be peaceful. He looks drugged. She shook her head, he probably was. On her sofa was a scroll and she unrolled it. Matron left her list of possible reactions with instructions how to handle the patient in those situations. It wasn’t a pleasant read.

Elf popped up and glared at her. Hermione sighed prepared for another row with the stubborn elf. Misty crocked her head at her and huffed with annoyance.

“Missy is not sleep? How is Missy to take care of Master if she can’t stay wake?”

“Misty…” Hermione thought that her own voice sounded tired.

“Missy can’t be good rent-a-elf if she don’t take care of herself. Missy ben wake all night. Missy sleep now.”

“I have to…”

“Master sleep. Missy go to sleep. Misty will watch.” Misty made a shoo motion with her hand, tapping one foot. “Go Missy rent-a-elf, sleep now so you can take care of Master Snape.”

“I…. Thank you, Misty. Wake up if…”

“Misty will. Go. Go.” Elf shooed her in the direction of the bed and Hermione didn’t argue. After everything, she felt tired.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione blinked, sunlight stabbed her eyes with its brightness. With a huff, she forced herself to sit. The air around her felt dense, sluggishness deeply embedded in her muscles. Why was I sleeping so long? Her eyes still unfocused from drowsiness fell on the bed. Memories start rushing in.

“Misty.” She called

“Missy is awake early. Master sleep. Master Malfoy young one is still sleeping. Missy should sleep.” Grumbled elf.

“I can’t. I’m awake now. Can I just ask you for a mug of strong coffee?”

“Misty will bring.” Elf popped out, the sound of apparition echoed like a gunshot in Hermione’s head.

She slipped off the sofa and approached the bed. He was still in the same position, not moving apart from even rise and fall of his chest. And then his eyes opened.

“Severus…” She called, wanting to say and ask so many things that she wasn’t even sure what to say beside his name.
His eyes flicked around the room, vacant expression in them. They roamed over furniture and her like he is wondering where is he.

“Severus?” She tried again.

He didn’t react. His eyes continued to glance around before they fixed on the sunny sky. She stretched her arm towards him and then pulled it back, not touching him.

“Sever… Professor?”

His eyes flicked at her and returned to stare outside. It appeared to her that he did hear her, but she wasn’t sure if he was simply ignoring her or it was far more serious. With a sigh, she walked around the bed to stand in front of him. He didn’t even blink. His eyes were empty. Whatever he was staring at – wasn’t outside. With a sigh, she nodded.

“I understand.”

But, she didn’t, not really. *Maybe he just needs time.* She went to her sofa and sit on it. Misty appeared giving her a cup of coffee. With a snap of Misty’s fingers, in the corner of the room behind her sofa, the table appeared, two chairs and stack of books.

“Young Master and Missy work here now. Master Malfoy told Misty to provide working space.”

“Thank you, Misty.”

“Master Malfoy tell Misty to call young Master Malfoy. He comes shortly. Work, work now – Misty brings books.”

“Thank you, Misty. Severus is awake but he’s not speaking to me. Can I ask you to check if he’s hungry?”

Misty turned her head, glanced at Severus scrutinizingly and turned to her again – shaking head.

“Master Snape still sleep.”

She looked at Severus, his eyes were still open and staring outside. Hermione frowned and then the pieces clicked together. Jumping from where she was sitting, she shoved the cup into Misty’s hands and dived into her trunk to find Poppy’s instructions. Repeating ‘No, no, no, no’ over and over again.

Finding the scroll, she read through it and frowned again. It could be any number of things, including him ignoring her. The door opened and Draco wandered into the room.

“Did you rest at all, Bucktooth?”

“Shut up, Feretface.” She bit back, but her words lacked the sting and her voice was on the verge of panic “Try to talk to Severus if you want to be useful.”

Malfoy looked at her and ventured deeper into the room, looking at Severus.

“He’s awake.” That was a statement, so she didn’t reply. “Severus. You got me scared for the moment… Severus…” Malfoy’s voice slid from happy to worried, he turned to her. “Why is he ignoring me?”

“I don’t think he is.” She whispered. “I think he’s…broken.”
“He’s not a toy, Granger.” Snapped Draco at her.

“No. But, Matron left me this.” She raised her hand with the instructions. “And she did list this state.”

“Well, how long is he going to be like this?”

“I don’t know.” She whispered.

“Why is he like this?”

“I don’t know.” And that was the truth, she didn’t know. Fear suddenly made the air in the room feel icy cold and hard to breathe.

“Well, why don’t you check? You do have that… what did you call it? Link?” Draco was visibly agitated. She blinked at him and he smirked. “You have no idea what you can do. Do you?”

“What I can do?”

“Yes! Salazar, you are dense! You have access to his mind without Legilimency!” Her eyes widened. *Could I? No, no I can’t! I won’t! Never again – not without his permission.*

“No. I won’t violate him like that.”

“As opposed to what you already did?” Smirked Draco at her.

“What I did is in the past, I can’t correct that.” A sharp pain stabbed her gut and her throat. “I won’t do it again.”

“Are you just dense or are you just happy to see him suffer?” Hissed Draco at her.


“Then what? Are you going to leave him like that? Send him to Janus Thickery Award?”

“Neither.” She stated with determination. “I am… we are going to help him.”

“How?”

“Muggle way.” She grinned at Draco’s cringing face. “Can you send an owl to Harry?”

“Yes. But I don’t think that almighty Potter can save the day.”

“Harry won’t be saving anyone. I need to give him the key to my vault, my credit card and list of books he needs to buy.”

“Missy can’t have books on mind magic” Peeped elf with a frown. Hermione jumped a little, she completely forgotten about the elf.

“Those are not mind-magic books. Those are psychology books. Muggle books and I need them.”

“Why? What they can do that magic can’t?” Draco sounded appalled at the idea.

“Muggles deal with trauma issues more efficiently than wizarding world. Here, the problem is solved with magic, potions or not at all. Well, Muggles don’t have magic. They have medicines – but we
can’t give him that. They have therapy! They talk about the problem until they solve it. They help those who need help without magic and potions. And most importantly – they are successful in that.”

Draco blinked at her. He had a face like she just told him a fairytale and expected of him to believe in it. The silence stretched as Draco mulled over her words.

“Fine, we’ll try your way. But you won’t tell to my father I agreed to this.” He looked pointedly at Misty, elf shook her head. “And if this fails, you are going to check – even if I have to force you.” He glared at her.

Hermione just smirked. “That would mean proving to me that you are better dueller than I am.”
Finally, blissful peace.

His mind is quiet.

There are no thoughts.

No memories.

Nothing!

No pain.

No regret.

Just emptiness.

That is what he wanted. For the longest of time. For as long as he could remember. Without the feelings, he finally felt complete.

At first, he did not know what was going on with him. Was he dead? There were sounds around him but they were muffled by the *white noise*. There were light and dark but they seemed muffled as well - filtered. It took him time but he learned to distinguish.

The confusing *white noise*, the ‘whoosh-whoosh-whoosh’ sound – he finally figured it out – it was the sound of his blood roaring in his ears. He was - is - alive. The prospect of him being alive did not sound so appaling anymore, not now when he was at peace. In a manner, it was comforting to hear that *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh*, somehow shooting and reassuring.

He did hear noises, but they were distant. He could tell if it is a male or female voice. He could even tell if it was older or younger voice. He could connect the people with the sound. People but not the words. Words were obscured, floating to him like a distant echo, only in broken pieces.

He did not mind. The same way he did not mind silhouettes cutting through the blank canvas he was looking at. In his mind, after all the pictures, he could see… After all pictures, he *did* see… Blankness was welcomed. He could make a difference between night and day.

Darkness – night.

Glimmering whiteness – day.

Less activity – night.

More movements around him – day.
But, he – he was - is safe. There’s no need to worry or to leave the comfort of this peaceful place.

There were touches. But they won’t harm him. He can recognise who is touching him.

Deep voice, older, male, just occasional squeeze of the hand – Lucius.

Female voices, worried, tender, gentle touches – Narcissa and Poppy.

Male voice, concerned, on the verge of sadness, young voice and almost desperate touch – Draco.

And one more…

A female voice -tender, loving, worried, determined, expressive, younger, touch full of love and care – now he cannot connect that, and yet he knows that she does not mean any harm to him.

Maybe a Mediwitch or Miss Granger, perhaps. He does not understand why her name came up, it was not appropriate to think about his student. But in his mind, somehow, it could be her.

Or maybe, just maybe he did lose his mind completely. Maybe it was his dream girl. After all, she was caring, seductive, intelligent,…

She was mild yet determined.

She was seductive yet naïve.

She was intelligent and witty yet unobtrusive.

She was the promise and rejection.

She was everything he could ever want.

And he almost wished that he did lose his mind. That he will stay in this safe cocoon forever, hearing her voice and feeling her touch. If he had someone like her - if he… if….

From time to time there was a motion, made by others or by him. He did not mind. He didn’t think about it, it was probably only muscle memory. As long as they do not force him to leave this place, he is fine with it.

Whatever they do - he does not mind. It's only body and boy heals. Body endures.

As long as they leave him to be here...

He… He was happy. Satisfied. Alone and yet not alone. Sometimes he would stand and sometimes he would float, or lie, or sit.

None of it really mattered as long as he was safe and at peace.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco sighed and briefly closed his eyes. His mother and Granger were holding Severus between them. At any rate, they were holding what left of Severus. And what left of him was a seemingly empty husk.

One could position him in any way he or she wanted and Severus would stay like that. Like a bizarre human size doll.
Severus wasn’t eating. Or rather, he would chew and swallow if someone placed the food in his mouth, but otherwise, he would not move to pick up the cutlery or eat on his own.

You could scream at him and he wouldn’t blink. No matter what one said to him – Severus wouldn’t react.

Severus wasn’t reacting even when Draco realised that bating duty was falling on Grainger’s shoulders, along with exercises. Finally, begrudgingly, he offered – demanded was closer to the truth – to help her with all those duties. Granger grumbled but accepted his help.

If he was inclined to tell the truth, he’d say that he was feeling alone, abandoned in his need to help Severus. It wasn’t that all others deserted Severus – but to Draco, it looked like all of them just let the time pass by without really helping.

His mother and Poppy just claimed that these things take time.

His father left his private library only to visit Severus, and even then he would toss out both him and Granger.

Hermione was adamant for them to read all the Muggle books that Potter brought. They were helpful – up to the point, but useless in present situation. For them to apply any of suggested techniques, Severus should be responsive – which he was not.

Draco thought of all the times he saw Severus looking with blank stare through the window. Painfully aware that the man probably didn’t even see the window, little less the sky. But the serene expression on his face, with a hint of a smile on his lips… Draco wondered if they were doing Severus the favour by trying to figure out how to snap him out of this state.

For as long as he could remember - he saw Severus relaxed, even smiling, laughing or teasing – but he never saw him serene. Tension, the permanent tension was what he associated with Severus. It was so deeply embedded in Snape’s every move, every reaction – it almost seemed like his natural state.

The man wasn’t pretty or handsome – by any stretch of the imagination. Always too thin, too angular and sharp, too much of everything. But now, he was attractive in an odd way. He even caught Granger looking at him in wonder. Not that she would admit that.

And, whatever his personal feelings were concerning Granger, he had to admit – she did all humanly possible to help Severus. More than once he wondered…

Does Granger fancy Severus?

The sole idea sounded preposterous, but… not so much out of the realm of possibility. After few days, Draco abandoned wondering and decided that the question wasn’t Is she? But rather Is she aware?

After more careful observation, he decided that she wasn’t aware.

His brain returned to the idea he had before all this started. Maybe, just maybe Granger could be good for Severus. But his father had other plans, obviously… With a frown, he took the list of potential bachelorettes. He knew each and every name from that list. Neither one of them was even remotely suitable.

What were you thinking father?
He glanced at Granger. Her face tight but her eyes warm and worried. Her voice soft. Hands slightly trembling holding Severus in an upright position. Draco called into his memory every time they would be in the pool or on the floor. The tenderness and lightness almost like she was afraid to touch Snape, he would notice the same tremor when she did. The care she would dedicate to the washing of Snape’s hair. The gentleness in her voice when she would talk to Snape.

Suddenly, all the pieces fell into place. He jumped from his chair.

“Bucktooth, …”

“Draco!” His mother warned him sharply. “My apology Miss Granger, it appears that I failed to impart good manners to my son.”

“Yes, sorry.” He mumbled, a bit embarrassed by his mother's reaction. “Granger, mother – I’ll back soon – I – I have to speak to father. Urgently.”

“Is everything alright, Draco?” His mother raised her worried eyes to him and he smiled.

“Fine mother, I just want to arrange for Astoria to visit me here. It seems like a good time, that is all. You don’t mind, Granger?”

“We have at least half an hour of this, it is not like we need you now,” Granger replied, not impolitely but not too friendly either.

He exited the room and dashed to the father’s library, which was one floor down. Agin, he could hear the voices.

“…my magic can’t reach him.” female voice, same as the last time.

“I should think not, after all – there isn’t much you could do.” His father sounded almost smug. “The best you can do is to hope. Hope that little Middblood knows what she is doing.”

“I am sure that the girl knows. But time is of essence…” Draco shivered at coldness of female voice

“You have all the time in the world, unlike rest of us.” His father sounded respectful in a very unfriendly way.

“It is not my time I’m concerned with, but his.” Either female didn’t notice the tone of father’s voice or didn’t care, she continued the conversation in her cold fashion.

“Certain things do demand time, even our limited time. If you do want your fresh blood you will have to learn to exercise patience in situations like this.” Now, his father did sound smug, almost gloating.

Draco snickered, quietly but it was enough.

“It seems that you have company, Lucius. We will continue this conversation. But don’t you forget…” female trailed off, but the last part sounded like a threat.

Draco straightened out and backed u a couple of paces. The door opened and his father’s figure filled the frame.

“You listen on a conversation if you are sure you could hide and not be detected or not at all.” Chastised him Lucius. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you.” He replied calmly like he wasn't caught, faking nonchalance while his heart
drummed fast.

“I have no time for idle chit-chat.” Replied Lucius with a tight expression on his face.

“I am sorry father, but you will have to find the time. I do need to talk to you now, and I don’t have much time.” Draco put all determination he didn’t feel in his voice.

Not waiting for Lucius to invite him in, he pushed past his father into the library. He did his best not to twirl around in curiosity, it was the first time in his life he was in this room. And he thought that he saw a ghost of a smile on father’s face.

Lucius hobbled to the liquor cabinet and poured two glasses, giving him wine while he took Firewhiskey. Lucius sat in one armchair pointing at another for him to sit. Draco felt out of place here, but he did his best to act like he was doing a most natural thing in the world.

“So, will you enlighten me, what was that about?” He asked with more bravado than it was wise.

“What was what?” Asked Lucius naively.

“The conversation I interrupted.” He replied, praying that he won’t trigger one of his father’s bad moods and put the stop to the conversation.

“No. It is none of your concern. You said you have to talk. Talk.” Sharply intoned Lucius.

“Very well. I figured you out. You are doing that on purpose.” He hoped that wague start will give him chance to milk information from his father.

“I am doing more than one thing on purpose, Draco, including breathing. I’m afraid you will have to be more specific.” Lucius was mocking him.

This isn’t going as well as I planned. “The girls you arrange to visit Severus. You are sabotaging him on purpose!” Draco took a sip of the wine like he is barely interested in father's reaction to his words.

The same ghost of a smile passed over Lucius’s face. “What gave you that idea?”

“You can pull the wool over Gryffindor's eyes, but not over mine, father.”

“Is that so?” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed it is.” He smirked. It's ok, you can play this game. “You actually don’t try to set him up with one of the pureblood ladies at all. If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you are doing your best to set him up with Granger.”

He observed his father under the eye. Lucius was quiet but he looked almost amused with a hint of pride, while he was staring at the fire. After a long silence, his father finally looked at him. Eyebrow still raised, he could hear the concealed chuckle in father’s voice.

“And? By your estimation – is it working?”

“Your guess is good as mine, given the state Severus is in.” He shrugged. Even if Severus wasn’t out of his mind, the man was much harder to read on his worst day than his father was even on his at his best days.

“A good trap, Draco, is never set just for one pray.” Lucius sipped his drink.

“I am sorry to disappoint you father, but…” He deliberately paused, forcing Lucius to turn and look
at him. *Yes! Success!* “…if the trap was designed to trap Granger as well, it is needlessly set.”

Lucius was quiet, but his face was still turned in Draco’s direction, so he continued.

“However, provoking a reaction is easy. Provoking a realization and acceptance of that realisation is another matter.” He sighed. “It isn’t the girl you should be focusing on. I am confident that Severus can seduce one naïve Gryffindor Muggleborn – if he desires so – with ease.”

“Indeed.” Smirked Lucius.

“But it is Severus who need to realise what he has by his side.” He continued.

“Indeed,” Lucius smirked again.

*This was almost too easy.* “There is a flaw in your plan, father.”

“Oh?” Lucius mockingly raised his eyebrows with a naïve face.

“Severus may come around. He may even realise. But, - how you are going to make him act on it? Think about it, father. I have to go, my time is up. Thank you for the wine and your time.” He placed a glass on the small table and raised from the chair.

Lucius didn’t try to stop him.

When he was at the door he turned. “Oh, not to forget. Astoria will come to visit us in two days time.”

Draco turned and left the library. In the hallway, he felt cold sweat tickling down his back.

*Why does father want to push Severus in Granger’s direction if he wants to sacrifice her? He may not like Granger, but he love Severus, he wouldn’t do that to him. What is going on here? Who is that woman?*
Hermione closed the book and gazed at the direction of the window. He was sleeping again. However, these days it was hard to tell if he’s awake or not. Time seemed to crawl and he wasn’t getting any better.

All the books said the same - he could stay that way for years. And for his state, there was no magical solution. The peace he radiated now, the almost a smile that lingered in the corners of his lips scared her.

Wherever he was - he was happy.

She felt thorn. Should she just leave him like this - to live like a plant? Or should she try to help him? She frowned. Her track record with helping him wasn’t the best. In fact - it was disastrous.

Another worry was his physical condition. He would do all exercises she forced on him, moving like he’s sleepwalking. But without him putting in the effort, his muscle mass is going to dwindle again.

Hermione sighed. *It’s late. When is Malfoy going to show up?*

Even if she hated to admit, she welcomed Draco’s offer to help her with Severus. She kept herself busy, not wanting to dwell on thoughts - *is she responsible for his state?* She found some references in the books, but she couldn’t just ask Harry for more books. Especially books on that topic.

*Why would he call it a rape?* Her eyes prickled, a sure sign that she is close to tears. *I thought… Fine, I wasn’t thinking, but… All I wanted… Why did I do that?*

Hermione shook her head to chase away those thoughts. She frowned and grumbled but - she did gladly entrust most of the actions that demanded to touch Severus to Draco. Not that she had a problem touching him…

She was afraid to touch him.

And that pained her. She did everything that she could to minimize their physical contact. Hermione curled her hands into fists.

*What is wrong with me?*

Hermione sprawled across the overcrowded table, banging lightly her forehead on the closed book. She couldn’t decide how she felt. Her own thoughts tyrannized her, to the point where she welcomed Draco and his barbs.
She felt guilty every time she had to touch him. She missed touching him!

She wanted for him to be in peace. She missed his sharp, acerbic words!

He was in front of her. She missed him!

How is that possible?

She had a sort of tentative friendship with him. And she was scared that she lost that!

She would welcome if anyone had a suggestion how to correct things, how to make them better? But who to ask? It wasn’t like she could go to Harry and say ‘Hey how you guys stand on being raped and how to fix this?’ Harry would arrest her!

Hermione stood up from the table and approached the bed. Sitting carefully on the edge she stretched her arm, hovering with it over his. But she didn’t touch him.

“What am I going to do? How am I going to make you see? I never wanted for you to end up like this. Is it my fault? Please, just please come back.” She whispered pulling back her hand.

“What did you do?” Draco’s cold voice forced her to swirl on her spot.

“What are you talking about?” She asked.

“What did you do to him? Why are you apologizing?” Draco narrowed his eyes.

“I wasn’t apologizing, I was talking to him.” She stood up turning to Draco while her heart drummed insanely in her chest.

“What did you do him this time?!!” Draco’s wand was in his hand.

She slit her wand from the holder and pointed at Draco. This was a major seat back and oddly enough welcomed one. Draco did look a bit taken aback by her response but his hand never wavered or lowered.

The door behind them opened with a bang. Narcissa looked positively thunderous. Her voice was low but clear and threatening. “What is going on here?”

They lowered their wands and replied almost at same time.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing does demand drawing of wands?” Hissed Narcissa.

Hermione saw her like this for the first time in her life. The woman was radiating cold anger. Her stance and coldness were intimidating. Not only for her, obviously, since Draco curled his shoulders.

“Draco?”

“Yes, mother?”

“What is going on?”

“Nothing, minor dispute, mother. Honestly.”

“About what?” Narcissa raised an eyebrow.
“I came and heard Buck...Granger apologizing to Severus. I assumed she did something to him. And… ummm…. I suppose, I overreacted.” Draco was talking fast, looking at the floor.

_Tattle-tell._ Hermione frowned.

“Draco Malfoy, did I manage to teach you anything? I do hope that I am not as much of a failure as a parent as you just displayed.” a cold reprimand from Narcissa forced Draco to recoil.

Even she winced at the words, they sounded sharp and unusual. Narcissa was nothing but loving and warm towards Draco so far.

“My apologies, mother.” Mumbled Draco.

“Mhm.” Hummed Narcissa, slightly appeased but still evidently angry. “Miss Granger, did you or did you not do anything to Severus?”

“I didn’t. I was just talking to him.” She rushed to explain but her face felt unnaturally warm “Nothing besides what I already did.”

“Mhhhm. Draco, watch over Severus.” Narcissa gave her a pointed look. “Miss Granger, if you please, follow me. It is a long time since we had a conversation over a cup of tea.”

Even if Narcissa’s words sounded polite and calm, she still gulped and nodded. The woman could be mighty intimidating. She followed Narcissa, slightly unsure what to expect.

Narcissa ordered the tea, asking benign questions about Severus’s condition. The woman’s anger seemed to ebb further, until she was sitting with Narcissa she learned to share her tea with.

Narcissa took one sip of tea and placed the cup on the table, folding her army in her lap. With one long inhale Narcissa looked at her. It was a stern but friendly look.

“Now, Miss Granger, we can talk. I do not discuss serious matters while I’m - agitated. But, I do believe that you indeed did something.”

“I didn’t, honestly - I was just sitting on the bed and talking to him, I wasn’t even touching him.” She curled her hands around the cup, gripping it.

“Yes, I noticed that. As of lately, you are almost afraid to touch him. So much so, that you tolerate Draco helping you, and two of you do not share love for each other. Even a tolerance is a stretch. Why is that?” Narcissa sounded like she is discussing the weather, with much softer tone.

Hermione gulped. Her brain froze and refused to think clearly.

“Now, now, Miss Granger, whatever happened can’t be all that bad.” Narcissa smiled encouragingly. “Who knows, maybe my experience help you to solve your problem or dilemma.”

Suddenly she felt tired. Tired of not having anyone to lean on. Tired of feeble pep-talks she gave herself. Tired of her own thoughts. Tired of fear she felt. Narcissa’s kind words were the last drop.

Her eyes brimmed with tears. Placing hastily a cup on the table, uncertain how steady her arms are she sighed, shaking her head.

“I… I… You… No one knows… It’s bad…” The tears rolled from her eyes. “And, I’m sorry Mrs Malfoy, but I can’t tell.”

“Why?” Narcissa was still calm, but she detected a slight tone of worry in woman’s voice.
“Because it’s awful. And - if I tell - they are going to lock me away. I can’t… I can’t afford that now. Not while he’s like this. I can’t - not know .” She sobbed, unable to stop herself.

Narcissa stood up. Hermione shrunk into her arms chair, closing her eyes. She expected scolding or harsh words. What she didn’t expect was tender embrace. Her muscles were tight as a guitar string.

Narcissa caressed her hair and before she realised what she was doing, she was squeezing Narcissa in a desperate embrace, sobbing in woman’s waist. Narcissa continued to caress her hair, speaking in a soft voice.

“Come now, Miss Granger, calm yourself. We are all humans, wizards and witches or not. We are bound to make mistakes. But, mistakes can be amended and corrected if there is sincere desire to do so. There is nothing, apart from taking human life, that can’t be mended.”

Her sobs turned to open bawling. She shook her head as much as she could.

“No..” Sniff.

“You don’t understand…” The sobs interrupted her again.

“What I did…” She couldn’t continue.

Narcissa pried her hands and lowered herself to be at the same height as her eyes. Her voice soft.

“I am a wife and the mother of a Death Eaters. I am a sister of insane Death Eater. I am very close friend with Severus, and he was known among Death Eaters as Dark Lord’s monster. H e was someone other Death Eaters feared . So let me be the judge of how heinous your transgression is.”

“But you will demand of me to stay away from him. And I can’t… I just can’t. And he would kill me if-if I say… If anyone knows!” She hiccuped.

Fear gripping her, freezing her insides.

“I am very good at ‘not knowing’. ” Smiled gently Narcissa. “Make it easier on yourself and talk to me. If not with me then with someone…”

Hermione grabbed Narcissa’s hands clenching them. Tear renew their strength.

“There is no one… no one else! If… if I tell you, you have to promise me - just please, let me stay beside him until he’s among us again. If… When he decides to report me, I promise, I’ll go willingly. But promise me, while he’s like this… you won’t send me away.”

“Miss Granger, I’d send you away only and only if you endangered his life. Did you try to kill him?” Narcissa’s voice was still soft, eyes warm.

She shook her head. “No! Never. His life is more precious than mine!”

“I wouldn’t go that far, Miss Granger. Every life is equally precious.”

“But I…” She gulped and closed her eyes, squeezing them tight. “I raped him.”

She breathed out and opened her eyes. You have no right to hid from scorn Hermione, you deserve it, and you are going to face it. She told herself.

To her surprise, there was no scorn on Narcissa’s face. The woman’s shoulders did pull a little, back a bit straighter than they were. But, Narcissa’s eyes were sad and compassionate. Narcissa tilted her
head and smiled with curiosity, almost with amusement.

“Well, I must say I didn’t expect that. You must tell, Miss Granger - how did you manage to do that? But first of all, why did you do it?” Her voice revealed genuine interest, but no scorn.

Hermione took one shuddery breath and clenched her hands over her heart. Narcissa conjured one cushion and sat on it, her posture still elegant.

“Ummm, well…. Um, he’s… What I know from his memories - he is… he hasn’t had any. company since… Ummm, that punishment…” She stuttered, suddenly realising that Bellatrix was Narcissa’s sister.

“Since Bella.” Offered Narcissa calmly.

“Ummm, yes. I’m sorry.” She lowered her eyes.

“I was there that day. He was - kind - to her. And Bella was actively seeking the way to destroy him. I never took what he did against him. Bella was my sister and I loved her. But… It was war after all. We all fought for survival.” Nodded Narcissa, her eyes slightly clouded. “And, yes. I know what you are trying to say.”

“You knew?” She gasped, shocked by Narcissa's words.

“It was hard to miss.” Smiled Narcissa. “And you took it on yourself too - correct - that?”

“Yes. Well, no.” She rushed. “I also had a bad experience with Ron. It seemed like both of us are stuck on those bad memories. I thought… I had that idea… You see if we both move past that…”

“So, did you?”

“Did I wat?”

“Did both of you move past that bad memories?” Narcissa was still honestly curious.

“I… I don’t know. He was so angry at me that day. And all this happen that night… And now….,”

“And now you are wondering did you caused his condition?” Narcissa sighed, looking relieved. She got up from the floor and sat back in her chair.

Hermione nodded. Old fears rushing in.

“I wouldn’t be too worried, Miss Granger.”

“But… I….,”

“You did manage to…” Narcissa paused looking at her.

Hermione held her breath chanting internally: Don’t say it, don’t say it. She didn’t want to hear that word from Narcissa’ lips.

“...to execute your plan?” Carefully finished Narcissa.

“Yes. But….,”

“Do not worry, Miss Granger. I learned few things in life, and one of them is that Severus is never defenceless - no matter the situation.”
“But I used binding charm on him.”

“And you used something to shut him up, I guess.” Narcissa giggled.

She nodded, confused. *Wasn’t Narcissa supposed to be appalled by her action?*

“He certainly didn’t enjoy that. I can see *why* you acted this way. And, I must admit - your idea wasn’t the bad one. Execution of that idea leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Wha… How?” Her brain was turned into a mush, confusion dominated. It was so strong that he stopped crying and sniffing.

“As I said before - I never knew Severus to be defenceless, no matter the circumstances. I do think that a little bit of seduction could go a long way. I’ll admit, with someone as prickly as Severus - it can be a challenge. But, you can handle his prickliness, Miss Granger.”

“But… I never seduced anyone… I know the theory, of course,…” She started, wondering why is she talking about that.

“Oh, dear. Well, we will just have to teach you then.” Smiled Narcissa.

“Why would you do that, after… After what I just told you…” She was honestly baffled.

“Miss Granger,” sighed Narcissa. “Severus was through much worse than that. The only thing that you seriously damaged is his sense of morality. And, I admit, he won’t go easy on you. The man has a vicious vindictive streak. But, he’ll come around. Just don’t give up on him.”

“Why would you help me? He - is your friend? Right?”

“He is a dear friend. But you are also my friend.” Replied Narcissa calmly.

“You are… We are…” Hermione was stunned by that admission.

“I thought it was obvious. We drink tea together. We talk.” Narcissa raised an eyebrow.

Hermione nodded, blinking.

“Go now, Miss Granger. I trust you have work to do with my son. We will see each other tomorrow.”

“Y…Yes, thank you, Mrs Malfoy.” She replied.

If she was upset before this conversation, she was utterly baffled after. She did feel better, calmer.

“Miss Granger,” Narcissa called when she was at the door. She turned.

“Yes?”

“Do me a favour, stop avoiding to touch him. Severus is defensive, and he won’t admit even to himself, but… Severus does need to be touched and hugged and held. Mostly and *especially* when he claims he doesn’t need any of that.”

“Yes, Mrs Malfoy. I’ll… I’ll follow your advice. Thank you.”

She turned to exit the room, missing Narcissa’s warm smile and amused look in her eyes.
Something changed.

He was still moved around like a life-size doll. He was given food. He was positioned to stand. His body was pushed and stretched and forced to move.

He didn’t care about that.

He floated surrounded by water.

And he relished the feeling. Floating added something to the peace and bliss he was in. Maybe this was how after-life felt? But, he wasn’t granted the after-life.

This was nice. As long as he can stay like this - he is fine.

Food again.

Water again. Voices. He doesn't care.

The relaxing touch on his bare skin. It feels so nice.

Suddenly she is there - his Dream Lady.

She is still obscured from his sight. And she is welcomed in this place of peace. Her voice is soft and tender and he enjoyed in its cadence even if the words are not recognisable.

But this is new. The situation they are in is new.

The scene is more intimate.

She is touching him. Caressing him. Her hand travels down his biceps causing pleasant electric tingle that travelled up his spine and erupts in goosebumps all over his scalp.

He bites down the growl.

She is still talking to him and he just enjoyed in the sound of her voice.
A whisper of her breath on his collarbones.

Slow circular moves while she brushes her hands over his Pectorals and Abdominals.

He never thought he’d live the day. The day to be touched by a loving hand. Not lust. Love. Her caress is pure love - he can tell. He knows. It is in a slight tremor of her fingertips. In the way her skin warms slightly to the touch. In the lingering, almost longing, of her touch.

Her soft hands skim lightly over his hips and continue to glide down his outer thighs. His tibias and feet.

There is innocence in that touch. Inexperience and curiosity.

Gentleness.

He basks in her timid exploration of his body.

It is arousing.

Her hands return up. Now they are rubbing soft circles on his inner thighs. And for the first time, he is glad - glad that his manhood decided to be alive again.

His breath hitched in anticipation.

He knows what he wants. But he won't rush her. He doesn’t want to intimidate her. He can be patient. After all, there is plenty of time. They have all the time in the world. His fingers itch for her skin but he lets her set the pace.

Yes.

Her touch is nervous at first. She maps the entire area, feeling like a blind person. Her voice quivered and her hand shakes slightly. He couldn’t contain low guttural hiss.

She pulls back but returns quickly. Her motions are slow. Too lose. Clumsy. So intoxicating. But, they improve. They are getting stronger, more engaged.

And the pressure, the tidal waves one after another crash at his abdomen, settle in his pelvis.

Her hands are soft - like silken gloves.

He yearns to buck. To thrust up in to that silky smoothness. But he does not. It is her time to play, he’ll have his time - later. And he will return the favour - tenfold.

The white light explodes.

He’d forgotten. Forgotten how it feels. The feel of skin on skin.

How it feels to reach the bliss guided there by the other than yourself.

His chest heaving for few long moments. Her touch is gone. He feels drained and more charged up than ever in his life.

She is massaging his scalp. Why? Citrus and orange blossoms mix with the soft scent of almonds.

It is time.
He knows her. He knows her brilliant mind. Her wit. Her sharp intellect. Her playful seduction naive and tempting at once. Her gentle heart. Her tender soul.

And now…

...He will know body.

It is time.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione frowned. Draco was looking at her with guilt in his eyes and spite on his face.

“But, we need to wash him and…” she huffed.

“Sorry Bucktooth, today you are on your own.” He grinned. Her face heated. “Just don’t do what I wouldn’t and you’ll be fine.” Draco wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“But… I’ll have to…” She stuttered. “I mean I’m a girl. Surely…”

“What? You think it’s easier for me because I’m a bloke?” He looked angry now. “We don’t do stuff like that.”

“But you…”

“The man raised me! He saved my life! I’d go through fire for him. That’s why I help. But you are his nurse. So do your bloody job.”

“Can’t you postpone?” She tried.

“No. I had to move sky and earth to secure Aurors and reservation. I’m taking Astoria to the dinner.”

“But, you work with me.”

“I work my penance with you, I’m not your personal slave.” He hissed. “You took care of him before.”

“But I never… I used my magic on him and now I can’t…” She sighed. “He’ll kill me.”

“He might, but he might also kill me. I had to clench my teeth so I suggest you do the same.” He turned and walked towards the door.

“But… Draco.”

“Have a fun evening, Granger.”

She was left alone in the bathroom. Snape was in the tub, towel over his private parts. His eyes stared blankly into nothing. She sighed.

“He told me never to touch him without his permission.” She whined to an empty bathroom. “Misty!” Elf appeared. “Misty, can you help me wash Master Snape? Draco had...ummm... has a previous engagement.”

“Sorry Missy, Misty can’t.”

“Misty?”
“Misty use magic. Healer lady said no magic. Misty can’t. But Missy dirty eyes can. No more just watch.” Huffed elf with disdain.

“You knew. You really knew.” She gasped.

“Misty knows. If Missy can watch, Missy can touch. Misty won’t watch. Take care of the Master rent-an-elf.” Misty punctuated her words with nodding of her head and vanished.

She twirled around the bathroom. She was alone with him.

You can do it, Hermione. You did once already. Except, when she did that last time all of this happened.

Taking a deep steadying breath approached the tub.

“I am so sorry, Severus. I tried. I really did.” She took a bar of soap. “I will wash your shoulders. I don’t know if you can hear me. But I’ll keep on talking, just in case you can.”

She started to wash his shoulders and she could swear that he is somehow more relaxed. Not that she could claim that with certainty, he looked the same no matter what. She kept her touch light.

“I’m going to wash your arms.” She informed him, gliding studded hands over his arm.

I really hope you don’t mind me touching you.

She eased him on one of her arms and gently washed his back. Lening him back, his head lolled to the side. The ends of his hair spread around him in the water like black ink.

“I’m going to wash your chest and stomach.” She whispered. He hands trembled. “Do you remember the I first time I bathed you? You were ready to kill me. You did your best to toss me out.” Her hands followed slow circular motions to his abdomen. “Lucius barged in, you tossed him out. You told me that I’m desperate for male company.” She chuckled. “I wasn’t. Well, I’m still not, but I am desperate. For you to wake up.”

Her fingers skimmed over his hip. The bones were still sharp but with much more meat and not so jutting anymore. He did fill up nicely. He was still skinny, but she had a feeling that that was just him.

“You did enjoy this, even then.” She continued talking washing his legs. “Your leg muscles are returning. They getting stronger. Firmer.” She intensified her pressure over the ropey muscle. “But you are going to lose this if you don’t come back.”

She switched to another leg, enjoying the feeling of his skin under her fingers.

“The truth is - I miss you. I miss our conversations. I even miss your insults.” She sighed. “Now would be a good time for one, you know? At this point, you’d toss me out. You’d do this by yourself, with Misty watching you. If you don’t snap out - I’ll have to.”

She crossed her palms over her chest, not caring that she’s making huge wet patches on her top. She is shaking. Then realisation hit her - it is not fear. Anticipation. That made her pause.

Why would I anticipate?

Her own reaction scared her more than a possibility of his wrath. Timidly she unlocked her arms from her chest. Telling herself that the water will get cold. Even if she knows it won’t. The tub is
charmed - water will stay clean and warm no matter what.

But it is a good excuse as any, one that she can wrap her brain around. Because she can’t… She refused to even begin to ponder why would she anticipate? Why would she even want to touch him? She ignored the tingling in her fingers this entire time.

It couldn’t be connected to…

No, most certainly it can't. She didn’t want him. What she did - she did it in order to erase both his and hers bad memories. It was just that - slightly more pleasant experience. Nothing more than that. Right?

Her hands shake when she reaches into the water.

“Well, you had your chance, Severus. Really, I have no alternative - I have to - so, my apologies.” She mumbles.

With a frow and too strong bite on her lower lip, she touched him. Her focus is on his face and his face is no different than before. Blank face, blank eyes. The same position she arranged him in.

Her hands trembled when she glided her fingers, tangling them in coarse curly hair. A stark contrast to the soft silkiness of his hair. The water is full of foam, and suds and oily from potions she poured in it. Her hand glided over his groins to his sac.

“I know I can’t see anything. Because of the foam, you know, but here I’ll close my eyes. Would that make it easier for you?” Her voice is shaking. She is shaking.

And still, it is not fear.

Her hands brush over his sack. She frowns. All feelings aside - how do they wash themselves down there? It never occurred to her to ask. She knows how she does it, how she was thought. Biting harder on her lip she decides that she will use what she knows.

And the feeling is completely strange. She has a vague idea that she maybe shouldn’t - squeeze? The flesh in her hands is soft and wrinkly and… She’s conjuring images from anatomy books she saw. But it does appear that he has more - skin than she anticipated.

Still, she does not linger. Trying to be fast and efficient, she is probably a bit rougher than it should. But, the situation is embarrassing for both of them. And that pulsating heat in her chest doesn’t help.

His cock is… well...not hard, but also not quite flaccid either. Her frown deepened. How do they wash this part? Not sure what to do she decided to mimic his movements. Maybe it’s not the smartest idea, but she doesn’t have a lot to go on.

Tugging on his manhood, she is tightly clenching her eyes. Not that it helped. She can’t see below the foam anyway. But she can feel. And what she felt is… it started to - expand - in her hand.

He made a hissing sound. With a subdued shriek she released him.

Hermione turned to his face and opened her eyes, blinking at the light and yellow spots until they focused on his form. He looked the same, a tad bit more relaxed. Did he really make a sound or she just imagined it?

But now, they have another problem. She has another problem. And she can’t solve it with magic.
“I am truly sorry, but I have to…well…you know? I think I know how.”

With a sigh, she returned her hands on him. The feeling is the same as the last time. And either he is above the norm or her hands are too small. Or maybe she is just too inexperienced.

Trying really hard not to think of - that. She focused on all the times she spied on him through the keyhole. She mimicked his motions at first.

That blasted heat spread, making her skin perspire. It is in her belly and milling up her neck and face. And no cooling charm would help. The heat comes from within.

_Gods! Did it…? Is it…? Did - that - just moved on its own?

She remembered the sheet in the hospital twitching. _Maybe it is normal?_ She tightened her grip. Her arm hurt and her hand cramped a little. She speeded up, she has to - if she wants to help him before her strength and resolve give up.

_The girls were right - this is hard work._

His muscles tightened under her touch. And even if his face is the same - blank, she can feel it. There is something just beneath his skin. His lips didn’t move but the quiet grunt escaped his throat.

The - body part - in her hand pulsed. She still couldn’t see anything but she had a good idea what was going on. Hermione released him quickly. And she could swear that he looked more relaxed, and yet - unchanged.

Hermione stared in his face wondering _what now?_

The heat is still there.

With a sigh, she moved to wash his hair. And then - she felt it...
The feeling was akin to a caress. Gentle and sensual. Like someone was fluttering his fingers over her cheekbone, down to the soft spot behind her ear. She gasped and shook her head.

“What a…”

She continued to gently rub his scalp until his hair started to squeak under her fingers. Washing off the sudds she felt it again.

Slow ethereal fingers, slight crackle similar to electricity gliding down her neck, sending shivers and goosebumps all over her skin. She breathed out audibly and closed her eyes for a moment or two.

“I have to check something, I’ll be back in a moment.” She whispered to the man in the tub.

Another caress, fluttering over her throat forced her to stand up abruptly and swirl, glaring around the bathroom.

The whisper, like a breath on her earlobe.

She turned glaring at Severus. He was sitting in the same position, unmovable. She frowned.

“Do you think Malfoy Manor has ghosts?” Hermione asked Severus who remained silent and static. “I’m imagining things now. ‘Let us finish washing your hair and get you out of that tub.”

She returned to her task, enjoying the feeling of wet strands gliding through her hands. Her fingers touched the skin on his neck. Something like a tingle spread through her hand. She pulled her arm.

_Lovely. _She thought. _Why am I reacting this way? Was he right? Do I molest him because I need male company?_

She shook head. No, that wasn’t it. She hugged Harry all the time. She even kissed Draco on the cheek once... _fine, kissing Draco is opposite of…_

The fluttering touch made her gasp again. A slow glide down the length of her spine. Her skin erupted in goosebumps once more. She was unsure should she arch her back in or from that touch. Magic crackled in the air.

She sat on her heels and pressed her forehead on the cold porcelain of the tub, next to his head. The heat that warmed her insides ignited her skin. Slow throb pulsated between her legs. Hermione could see that her nipples perked up under thin tank-top.
She issued the sound between a growl and a moan. *Helping him I managed to work myself into the spot, it seems.*

Hermione would like nothing more than that she was alone in the bathroom. A quick shower would solve the problem. *Maybe it is some sort of Pavlov reflex?* Her voyeuristic escapades usually ended under the shower. Not that she was ready to admit herself - why?

The persistent touch travelled over her skin. Her back, stomach, legs. Making her tingle all over. Eliciting moist to gather at her core. Shortening her breath.

The touch was seductive, tender, oddly respectful, almost bordering on worship. This is how she imagined that the touch should feel like. The touch given by someone who loves her. She raised her head shaking it.

“I should take you out of the tub. You are going to prune.” She rasped. The invisible force just brushed a kiss - a kiss - to her inner thigh.

*Magic! Someone is using magic on me!*

She glared at the man in the tub. He was unchanged. Hermione chuckled and shook her head.

“No, no. How silly of me.”

But the fact was - someone did use magic on her. Well controlled magic. But who? Malfoy’s were out of the house, all of them. Only living beings in the Manor were Severus, her and elves.

*It must be a ghost.*

Some random, randy ghost. *Oh, Gods!* Her eyes fluttered closed and her back arched. A soft caress on the outer rim of her breast, a lick over her pert nipple and then a slow blow of air. That felt so good.

*I can’t be serious!*  

But she was. She was actually contemplating to allow this, whatever it was, to continue. She enjoyed this non-corporeal touch - it felt real enough to her.

A light scratch on her lower back and wet, sucking feeling on her other nipple. She moaned releasing the puff of air. Her skin heated up more, coating her with light perspiration. The throb between her legs intensified. Her knees glided apart over the tiled floor on their own.

*This is a bad idea.*

Her mind was getting fuzzy and she shook her head to clear it. Her cheek brushed against wet hair and she yelped quietly.

*Gods! I forgot about him!*  

Scrambling over the floor, away from Severus, Hermione whimpered. She completely forgot about him. Whoever, whatever this was - she won’t fight it - it felt too bloody good. But she was far from allowing something to happen while she is sitting back to back with her ex-professor.

He was her professor once! The small voice in her head reminded her that she had sex, voluntary or not, with said professor. That she just gave him a hand job. Hermione shook her head again. The same persistent voice also reminded her that she *missed* touching him.
That her skin tingles when she touched him. The same way her skin is buzzing now.

Leaning on the sower wall she arched her back, closing her eyes when invisible lips travelled down her abdomen to her hips… and lower. She widened her legs and arched her back.

That was it! The feeling, the experience she kept hearing about. The tenderness and passion. The seduction and worship. It wasn’t the act but the sensation evoked by the act.

Heat licked her skin like flames. Her clothes vanished and the warm spray of water soaked her. She just arched more. Hermione could swear that she could feel lips and tongue and teeth on that sensitive spot and fingers embedded inside her.

She bit her lip nearly to the blood, trying to prevent sounds. Her breath coming out in laboured muffled puffs. The invisible fingers pressed and rubbed something, some obscured spot inside her. Pressure coiled in her pelvis, rising up, choking her.

And suddenly the feeling of fingers was replaced by something… Something… The feeling of familiarity… Her hips danced of their own. Hermione widened her eyes and her head snapped in the direction of the bathtub.

Severus was still sitting there, positioned by her like a mannequin.

The pressure whizzed through her head, whistling in her ears. Bursting in a myriad of white and black spots. Forcing the air from her lungs and strangled whimper. Her eyes still wide open, glued to the back of head covered with black wet hair.

No, no, no. I’m losing my mind.

Breathing heavily, she curled under the warm spray. Dragging her shaky knees to her chest. This was disconcerting.

This was the best experience in her life.

This felt sick and twisted.

It felt like bliss.

It felt like love.

It felt like…

She shook her head pressing her forehead to her knees. Hermione was mortified.

Gods! What’s wrong with me? I just had sex with a ghost in the bathroom of Malfoy Manor. Possibly the best sex I’ll ever have. I just had sex with a ghost in the same bathroom with my ex-professor sitting in a bathtub just a few paces away! Merlin!

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco opened the door in a rush.

“Why are you still here, Granger?” He asked somewhat angry at her.

His eyes widened and he quickly turned around. Not the picture I wanted to see - ever.

He heard her shriek.
“What are you doing, Granger?” He asked, confused and bit worried at the same time. His back still turned to the bathroom.

“I...right...taking a shower.” Came shaky, thorn, reply. “What are you doing here?”

“Never mind that. Just…” He trailed off. What should he say to her? He certainly couldn't say why he was really there.

“Right. Can you...ummm…”

“Yes, sure.” She stuttered, cutting the air with a hand. He needed to go away more than she needed him gone. As the bundle of clothes floated next to him, he nodded -more to himself than to her.

Stepping into the room Draco shook his head. He actually felt guilty for leaving her to deal with Severus alone. And he rushed back home when he remembered that she probably can’t transport Severus to the room alone.

Now, he felt twice as guilty. He didn’t see much but what he saw was worrying. Granger looked devastated. She was so miserable curled on herself under that shower. Shaking like a leaf.

If it wasn’t so bad, the entire situation would be funny. In a million years he couldn’t even imagine Granger taking a shower in the same bathroom while Severus is still in there, in the tub. Albeit, Severus was a living doll at the moment and his back was turned to the shower, but still….

He frowned. How traumatic had to be entire experience if she was like that? He was convinced... Well, so many gossips floated around about her and Weasley and Potter, not to mention Krum. Obviously, those gossips were unfounded. Fantastic! Now I feel guilty because of the mud...muggleborn, Granger no less.

And even if he fumed inside he still felt guilty. That was annoying.

The light sound from behind forced him to turn around. She was at the door dressed in a jogging suit as she called it. Buttoned up to the throat. Her face shaded in deep dark red. Eyes darting everywhere.

The guilt bit at him again.

“What were you doing taking shower with him in the bathroom?” He barked.

Not what he wanted to say, but the entire situation was highly embarrassing. Not just for her. He had a feeling that he will sink through the floor the moment he opened the bathroom door.

“I… I wasn’t…” She still couldn’t form a sentence. She looked pitiful.

“Yes, well… Maybe I shouldn’t leave you…” He cleared his throat. “I better go and get him out of the water. He is pruned like a raisin by now.”

“Umm yes.” She blushed deeper and turned towards the bathroom, he stopped her “No, I don’t need another trauma like I had a few minutes ago. Just stay here and wait.”

He entered the bathroom and walked to the bathtub. He didn’t know what he would do if she tried to help him and ended up in the shower again. He presumed that she ended up in the shower to calm her nerves. Merlin knows, he did the same. Too many times to feel comfortable even thinking about it.
Severus was pruned. But his condition seemed unchanged. Draco was sure that Severus would hex him and Grange to the next week if he knew what happened tonight. *What really happened?*

He let the water drain and dried Severus with a towel. Charmin one chair in to a makeshift stretch he tugged Severus out of the bathtub. He shuddered and took the pyjama bottoms. He hated this part.

Closing his eyes, pulled the bottoms all the way up. He did use just a bit of wandless magic to lift Severus. There was no way he would touch the man - there. Draco had healthy survival instincts, in his own opinion.

That brought him back to the question - what really happened here?

Gently pulling Severus into a sitting position he slipped his hands in sleeves, one by one. Finally, he carefully pulled the neck hole over Severus’s head. When Severus was dressed, he charmed the stretch to float.

Granger already prepared the bed, and they transferred Severus to it.

Once everything was done he cleared his throat. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Yes… ummm… you see….”

“Fine. Can you at least tell me what did you do?” He smirked.

“ Took a bath.” She blinked.

“With Severis. What did you do with Severus.” He clarified.

“Washed him. Same way I always do.” She shrugged. “Well, not the same, I did have to wash…” Her face erupted in red.

“Merlin Granger!” He breathed out, suddenly realising. “Are you… Do you really think I…?” He couldn’t finish.

“Well, I don’t know. I… I presumed….” She choked gazing at the rug. “What do you do?”

“Ummm, just drain the water and use the shower hose and head…. I told you not to do what I wouldn’t.”

“And how was I supposed to know?” She snapped still staring at the rug.

“Ask I presume.” Now he really felt guilty, and he hated it. With a smirk, he wiggled his eyebrows. “Did he enjoyed at least?”

That was supposed to be a joke, but he realised his mistake when she issued a small unidentifiable sound. She looked mortified. Graner swiftly walked to her sofa, curling again. He sighed. This was supposed to be a joke.

On the other hand, he couldn’t afford to be friendly to her. She might take it the wrong way. He wasn’t her friend. This was a clean trade - she helped him so he was helping her and Severus.

*This is going to retaliate.*

He slouched his shoulders and took a cover from the sofa, placing it over her shoulders.

“Well, I won't make the same mistake twice. I won’t leave you to take care of him alone again.”
She snapped her head looking at him with wide mortified eyes, red in the face. He frowned.

“I want to live, Granger. And *he* will kill me if I let you continue to do… what you did. Rest now. I’ll be here in the morning.” He signed.

He was at the door when she called him.

“Malfoy…” She still sounded uncertain and shaken.

“What?” He looked at her.

“Does…does Malfoy Manor have ghosts?”

“No.” That’s an odd question. “Why, did you seen one?”

“No, I was just curious. Thank you. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She dismissed him quietly.

Normally, he’d be upset. He’d stay and argue. But not tonight. Tonight she deserved just a bit of slack. He left her to stare at Severus, hoping that she will snap out of whatever caused her to act like this.
LXXXIV

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: I like to stick to the books, but I find the symbolism of words "Mudblood" carved in Hermione's hand strong, especially combined with her words "I am proud to be Mudblood." so I opted to mix movie and books in this chapter a bit.

My dear beta edited this chapter, so you won't have to suffer through my EnGrish. Thank you, Loki God of Evil.

WARNING: Scenes of torture, the memory of events in Malfoy Manor - from Hermione's POV.

Hermione exhaled deeply when Draco had left the room.

She was still reeling from her experience, and not in a bad way when had Draco barged into the bathroom without knocking or announcing first. Now, that had been highly embarrassing. It certainly wasn't one of her lifelong goals to be naked in front of Draco. That was something she would struggle to live down for a while. Same way it made it all so real.

Wasn't I supposed to be a 'good girl'?

But to be ready to have sex, even with an imaginary partner, in the same room with her catatonic ex-professor…

Another moot point.

Hermione sighed. She might avoid contemplating her actions. She might have found a perfectly logical, albeit feeble, excuse for her behaviour. The truth was, her morality had a low bar when it came to sex, or maybe it was only this low when it concerned Severus?

She was more than ready to touch him, to watch him masturbate, touching his arousal while looking at her. Sweet Salazar, she had been ready to have sex with him. And now, apparently, to get him off or to do - whatever this was. And she was able to relax enough, to persuade herself, to let go and enjoy it.

Worst of all - she wasn't opposed to the repeating of the performance either. Ghost or no ghost. Whatever, whoever this was, it felt bloody amazing.

She felt alive!

Alive and a bit tired, exhilarated in fact.

And then, there was still that odd feeling. Familiarity. But maybe that was only her imagination? She didn't have much to go on in that department. Through, if she was right in her blind guess - would
she be so against the idea?

Hermione frowned. No, she would not. And therein lied the rub. Why? She shook her head.

"Silly me. I could parade naked as the day I was born in front of you, and you still wouldn't notice me. I reckon I'd have more chances with Malfoy senior with my blood status and all."

Hermione nearly jumped at the sound of her own voice as it echoed gently around her. She didn't even realise that she'd been speaking aloud. For some bizarre reason, she had a need to go to the bed and run her fingers over his face. But with a heavy sigh, she shook her head again.

Severus was on the bed. Resting with a serene look on his face. She could have sworn that he had a soft satisfied afterglow around him too. She softly smiled and spoke to him. "It seems that both of us had some luck this evening." She said, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. "It's time to rest. Please, come back to us, Severus. Soon."

Lying in bed and whispering an incantation, she wriggled, sinking more into her pillow and covers. She could definitely get used to this.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Floating. He was floating.

Softness enveloped him like a fluffy white cloud.

In the emptiness of bliss, he could still hear her subdued sighs and moans. Sweet Salazar, she sounded so sexy!

And most importantly - she didn't judge him! She always accepted what he had to offer without request or expectation. Her mind completely blank, with just a hint of shyness. Her shyness was like a fuel to his fire.

He could still feel her, taste her on the tip of his tongue. She was light honey mixed with herbs. A sweet and savoury mixture. Both fighting for dominance at the same time. The relaxing scent of lavender combined with the tangy bitterness of almonds.

She was utter perfection!

Darkness.

He sank into a sleep still listening to echoes of her voice.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

She shuddered at the look Grayback gave her. Her heart pounding in her chest. The whoosh of blood in her ears.

Pain erupted when Bellatrix grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the middle of the room. She lost her footing quickly. Bellatrix, as usual, showed no mercy. She shoved her to the floor, snarling in a twisted way when Hermione's knees collided painfully with grey and green marble.

The bedraggled looking madwoman cackled, she was upon her in a matter of seconds. Looming over her, wand in one hand, athame in the other.

Pain again. Searing pain, when a thin, obscenely sharp blade touched her skin, penetrating it like a hot knife through butter. The blade slid through her skin with ease, sinking into muscle, then almost
touching bone. She whimpered, pursing her lips to prevent the sound from escaping.

"Where did you get that sword?" Hissed Bellatrix, hovering over her face.

She mashed her lips again. A light touch to her abdomen. Pain! Merlin's beard, the pain! She'd never even heard the words being uttered. Her nerves were still screaming in sizzling heat when the skin on her arm erupted in another burst of pain.

Cuts running deep, like Bellatrix was trying to carve her bone. She screamed. She could be tortured to death, but she wouldn't speak. In fact, she would scream if she had to, but speak...Never.

Bellatrix repeated her question. The woman was screaming in her face, asking questions repetitively.

She lied.

Pain again. And again.

Another round of questions. And another round of lies.

Trying to distract herself, her eyes roamed around the room finally settling on The Malfoys. The family, all three of them were huddled together near the vast fireplace.

Lucius looked half scared, yet half gleeful. His expression was one of excitement mixed with fear causing the muscles in his jaw to twitch, giving him the unnatural appearance of having a nervous tic. He was holding one hand around Narcissa's waist and the other on Draco's shoulder. And she wasn't sure if he was supporting them somehow or warning them?

Narcissa's face, she seemed to wear a mask of calmness, but her eyes! Narcissa's eyes were full of horror, hope and sadness. Was she sad because I bled on her floor? She thought almost absentmindedly. It wasn't her biggest concern at the moment. But Narcissa's eyes confused her.

Then there was Draco. He was rooted to the spot, unable to move. His jaw was trembling so much he was sure Bellatrix could hear his teeth chattering. He was quivering. His eyes closed just for a second for respite, then springing back open again, he gave one terrified glance to Bellatrix's back then directed his eyes at her.

Pain again!

Another round of questions followed by another round of cruciatus. But it seemed like Bellatrix had learned her lesson - she didn't push her over the edge. Her technique hadn't broken the girl, Hermione was still defiant, sobbing but defiant.

Her throat though, it hurt from the repetitive screams. Raw from shouting, from pleading.

 Darkness.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

With a sharp intake of breath, his eyes blinked open. Shadows danced around the dark filled room. A thin streak of soft, fluttery light breached from the ajar door. He closed his eyes.

No, no, no. I want to go back. Bollocks.

It was so nice, so peaceful. She was there.

He fell asleep filled with bliss. With happiness. Replaying their encounter in his head.
This dream - dream about the Granger girl being tortured - invaded him rather rudely. It smashed his cocoon of peace as if it was made of glass. Yanking him to the harshness of couches world once more.

*Maybe if I pretend..., maybe they wouldn't notice and I'll be able to slip back?*

But why would he dream of Granger?

Reality rushed back in and he nearly moaned. No, not a dream - a memory. Whatever happened to the girl had triggered that memory. He shuddered. He didn't know. Not until now. No one told him, not even Draco.

So many missing pieces were falling neatly into place. He could understand a bit more about the girl. And, try as he might, he couldn't help but feel respect for her.

Like anything else with magic, the intent was the key. The strength of the spell depended on intent and casters ability to focus. Bellatrix was pure hatred and she was more than capable of focusing that hatred efficiently. He should know. She could go back to back with Voldemort in that.

Stabbing pain spilt through his chest.

He didn't want to think, to remember anymore. Not now. Especially not now. She was not his responsibility. He didn't know then. And even if he did - he wouldn't be able to help her. The best he could do would be to watch.

That stabbing pain radiated through his body again.

Footsteps and voices. Sniffling and sobs.

He kept his eyes closed and his breathing light. He pretended that he was sleeping.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco jumped from the bed, wand in hand. He was shivering. Screams echoed through the house, reverberating against the walls.

He grabbed his robe and pulled it over his head. Draco detested nightshirts and opted to sleep in his undies, but during situations like this - he always kept his robe at hand. It was one in the long list of mementoes from the war.

He ran to the hallway nearly colliding with his parents.

The door to Severus's room was open.

Another scream. His parents rushed in the direction of the sound. He followed them. He wasn't keen on going first. He would gladly admit being a coward. Better a live coward than a dead hero. His parents had more experience and he gladly let them lead.

The scream drew back images that forced him to shiver. Images long since repressed. Lost in thought he bumped into his mother's back when they had reached the source of the sound.

In the newly decorated room, on a white marble floor was Granger, curled up. She wasn't screaming at that moment. No, she was mumbling and the hair on his neck straightened in response.

"It is a fake sword, it is a fake… please." Granger kept repeating over and over.
He pushed beside his frozen parents and approached her. Kneeling next to her, he looked at his parents hoping for any hint what to do. They were almost in the same state as Granger.

His father was lightly swaying on his feet. Look of terrified horror on his face. That day, that event had cost his father, his entire family dearly.

After that day they were all punished. It was impossible to hide it from the Dark Lord. They had Potter and they let them escape. Escape with their wands, with the sword and worst of all with information.

The Dark Lord never believed him that he didn't recognize Potter. Even if he had concealed the truth from the Dark Lord like his aunt thought him... he had still been punished. Draco had the need to scratch his shoulder blade where a row of six brands was burned in his skin. Six circles with two snakes forming letters SS.

He later learned that the brand was designed by Severus. He had used it to mark those that the Dark Lord had considered as traitors. But then he was just grateful that he had managed to lie good enough to spare his young life. He was also grateful that he had a low tolerance of pain and that he passed out after first two brands scorched his flesh.

His father was punished by the curse from which he still suffered. But Lucius was punished even more than that - they never managed to repair their relations after that. Draco couldn't go past his father's reactions.

Even his relations with his mother suffered a bit in the aftermath. But for some reason Dark Lord didn't punish Narcissa so severely, holding her only shortly under crucio. In any case much shorter than he held his aunt.

Now, however, Lucius was pale-faced and his mother's eyes were full of unshed tears.

He leaned and lightly touched Granger's shoulder. She screamed and huddled more in herself. With a shaking hand, he reached her shoulder again, shaking her. "Oi, Granger, wake up. It's just a dream." He called.

She shrieked again, pulling from him but wearily opened her eyes. Shaking and cowering even more when she saw him.

"All right there, Granger? You're safe." He tried to sound consoling but his voice was breaking. He was shivering as well.

"Safe?" She repeated coarsely, confused and lost.

Her eyes darted to his parents, and him, then she crawled back, away from him and them.

"Yes, safe. It was just a bad dream." He repeated, unsure what else to say or do.

Time ticked on. She was darting her eyes around the faces and the room. Eventually, they settled on the floor. Her hand moved in slow motion like someone had cast the 'Aresto momentum' charm. She touched the white marble beneath her.

Finally, she nodded. Not looking at any of them she mumbled, "You didn't want me to be tortured?"

"I don't like you Granger, but I'm not a monster," he replied, feeling embarrassed that he had to admit that out loud. In the background, his father recoiled slightly.
Granger nodded again, lost in thought. "Right. Thank you. I'm… I'm sorry to wake you all."

"Yes, well," he cleared his throat. "Try not to make a habit of it. Let's get you back to your room and to bed."

She shook her head, still looking at the floor. "No, no need. If… If it's the same to you I'd like to stay here for a bit."

"Of course. We'll leave you alone." he nodded.

But when he tried to stand she grabbed him by the sleeve. "You, you never wanted me to be harmed," she repeated.

With a sigh, he sat next to her on the floor again. Motioning his parents to leave them. It appeared that Lucius would protest, but mother pulled him to the corridor. He stayed with Granger, not entirely sure why he was there with her in the middle of the night.
Time passed slowly, each minute dragging, felt like hours. In fact, it was more like an eternity. Draco was sat quietly, slightly distancing himself from her. Though he still observed her, eyes narrowed as he glimpsed at her discreetly. He wondered why he was here, with her. Deep down he knew… No, it wasn't like he'd shared friendship with her, but… he could understand the nightmares and bad memories. And they brought the sense of distant comradery.

She was still sitting, hunched over, hugging her knees to her chest and lightly rocking. She wasn’t crying or sniffing just watching the white marble floor. Her eyes occasionally flicking up and down the length of the room.

"I don't blame you, you know?"

He nearly jumped, her whisper sounded loud in the almost absolute stillness of the room. "Blame?" He repeated confused.

"Yes, for… When I was here during the war. I don't blame you. I blame your father a bit, I blame your au… Bellatrix. I blame myself for letting my guard down." She took a breath, recomposing herself. "But you saved Harry. Why?" she directed her slightly unfocused eyes on him.

"I didn't want any of it." He muttered. "I… I had no choice. Not after…"

Why am I talking with her?

"Neither did I." She replied. "I didn't want any of it. I still don't understand. Why is it so bad to be Muggleborn, what so wrong with it?"

Draco gulped, that was one question he didn't have a good answer for. Not the type of answer she would like, anyway. "Truth?" He asked, buying time. "Or do you want the most commonly repeated lines?"

"Truth. Propaganda… No! Both I think..." she sounded distant, her eyes directed at the ceiling and a brand new Venetian glass chandelier that hung.

"Pro… What? Never mind." Draco laughed softly. "Common excuse was - Muggleborns were lower beings, their blood muddied. They had no lineage to speak off, no rich ancestral heritage. Father says they have no understanding, they corrupt our ways." He gulped, unsure of how his reply would be taken. It was all he had ever heard during his years in Slytherin, as well as in his childhood home.
She just nodded, almost thoughtful in her musing.

"I... I can't approve all of it, but, I can understand how that appealed to the Pureblood families."

"Truth is - I don't know." he breathed out last words. Her head jerked to him. "I'm honest Granger. Ever since I was born I was never encouraged to socialise with Half-bloods. Before school, I'd never even met a Muggleborn. I always listened to adults talking about it, whispering it like it was some dirty secret that the magical community were ashamed of."

"Who?..." she asked, a trace of fear and sadness in her eyes. "Who whispered about it?"

"Others. Adults. Family friends. But not Severus. He never said a word, even if he was regular here."

"How you all could believe in that. He...Voldemort... he was half-blood himself!"

"He also was a direct descendant of Salazar Slytherin." Draco stated. "The idea isn't new, Granger. That idea originated during the Dark ages, it came from Salazar himself. I can't tell you about the first time, but now... I think it was different. Our parents were afraid of him."

"You called me a Mudblood in our third year." It wasn't reproachful, nor a scathing remark it was just a statement, a painful observation that had caused her upset at the time. Draco nodded. "I did. Why wouldn't I? Everyone around me repeated that word, called everyone who was Muggleborn like that. I was raised to believe that you were all - unworthy."

"But you don't now... you didn't... After the Ministry... You believed... Do you still believe?"

Draco could see that she was struggling. He sighed. "I don't know what I believe. You bested me in all classes - that wasn't much of a reason for me to like you."

"That is not the answer nor the incentive to hate Muggleborns," she said, frowning at him whilst subconsciously rubbing her forearm under the sleeve. "No reason at all."

Now that he thought about it, he never saw marks on her arm. He knew that dagger. "I don't hate Muggleborns, I just don't have a high opinion of them, there's a difference. Besides, I'm not one for blood and torture. Not even for killing."

Why am I defending myself? I did nothing wrong?

"Then why did you..." she pointed at his left arm.

"And what was I supposed to do?" He snapped. "Allow my mother and me get killed?"

She widened her eyes at him, confused, shaking her head. "No. Of course not, I can understand that. But," she sighed "I'm not judging you - I'm trying to understand, that's all."

"I was punished." He whispered, horror even now was evident in his cracked voice. "But you didn't do anything wrong!" She protested, confused by his outburst. "And that matters how? My father failed him, ended up in Azkaban. He was forced to reveal himself before time."

How naive is she?
"Surely? My father made a mistake, someone had to pay. The entire family was held responsible, even my aunt." Draco had never talked about this with anyone, but now it seemed to him that he couldn't stop the words from coming. "I was supposed to take my father's place. I was ordered to kill Dumbledore. Dumbledore! The wizard he couldn't kill himself."

"But if you'd gone to Dumbledore... If your entire family... He would've protected you, I'm sure of it." She protested.

_She is so... She can believe in that._

He felt anger, at her, just anger and powerless. The same way he felt back then. "Like he protected your parents? Like he would help Malfoy? Like he protected Potter's parents?" He snapped, shaking his head. "You might have trusted him, I never did though."

"Point taken," She said, her voice sad.

"Mother did all she could. She even went to Severus. And if I was less of a full...than I was... If I..." his voice breaking.

He had to take a few calming breaths. "But I was a fool then. And he told me that I was being bestowed with the greatest honour. That I was saving my family. And that I'd make them and him proud. Obviously, my aunt was ecstatic, elated. She was instantly on my back; teaching me Occlumency and duelling Death Eater style." He stopped abruptly, he felt he'd already said too much.

"Look, if Severus... I... I honestly don't care about you, but... **You have to help Severus.** It seems like you are the only one who can. And for that, you have my full support."

"That seems to be my mistake..." she mumbled, her gaze lost.

Draco was confused. "What?"

"I care. I care even for you. I don't like you, but I care. I care for everyone, even your father and I'm so very close to hating him." Her voice was still lost. "How... how did he get that injury? Your father?"

"He wasn't injured." He replied, baffled with her sentimental confessions. He shouldn't have said anything, but he couldn't stop himself. "The Dark Lord cursed him when he was out of Azkaban."

"Oh. I'm sorry." She said, quietly.

"Why?" he tilted his head.

"I didn't know...It was hard for your side as well."

"You don't understand, Granger. There is no *my side*." his voice was sharp, there were no mincing of his words. "My side was survival. Do you know why I lied that day?"

"No, I thought that you didn't recognize Harry" she whispered, blushing.

"Oh, you did a good job on him. But not that good. I recognized him alright," he said smirking.

"Why then?"
"At the time it seemed like it would be better if Potter won. I didn't want to spend my life answering to a maniac or my insane aunt. I knew I'd probably end up in Azkaban, but at the time Azkaban sounded like a better option." He shook his head. "It is not like I changed my mind about what I'm believing in… But, I don't know what I believed in the first place. What I knew at that time - I didn't believe in all that he was selling us."

Hermione was quiet but she didn't look repulsed by what he said. "I know what your mother asked from Severus. It's why she came to the Hogwarts hospital wing. The unbreakable curse was slowly killing him. Your mother came to release it."

"I didn't know that." Draco was shocked. "But that is more the reason, you have to help him. Why are you helping him anyway?"

"I…" she appeared almost scared to say. "At first, I had to. No specific reason - he survived so I had to. Later, well, I mean now… He is too good to just let him die. Besides your father, no one was ever good to him. Someone had to." Hermione sounded sad, almost on the verge of tears. "Now, he… He seems happy, and I don't know… What if we can't wake him up? What if he doesn't want to return to reality?"

"Then we will take care of him." He stated firmly.

She shook her head. "No. He's my responsibility."

"Then why are you sitting here, with me? Why aren't you up there, with him?"

"I had to know," she whispered. "I had to know if I was still afraid of this place. This room."

"And?" He probed for an answer. "Are you?"

She shook her head again. "No. It's not pleasant to be here, too many bad memories… But I'm not scared. I am not panicked anymore." A ghost of a smile danced on her lips. "I am better. Not yet fully fine but as good as it can get under the circumstances, I think."

He nodded. "I did all the re-checks. We can present our findings to Poppy tomorrow." Draco changed the topic. He felt like he'd just ran a marathon - exhausted. All he wanted was to return to bed and sleep.

Her head raised in one sharp motion, her expression changed from sad and lost to hopeful. "Yes. Let's!"

"But first we need sleep." he offered and she nodded, unfolding from her curled up position, she stood.

He followed her example. Exiting the drawing-room, he noticed that she glanced back and whispered to, the now, empty room. "You don't scare me anymore, I'm not afraid of you."

Draco stayed quiet. Secretly he was happy: that meant that she won't protest much when he would set his plan into motion. For that, he'd need Potter's help. They were quiet. He escorted her to Severus's room and stayed at the door, lingering until she climbed to her bed and nodded to him.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

It was time. Severus took one long slow breath through the nose and equally slowly released it. Schooling his face in an unreadable cold mask, he opened the door with determination. And with a sharp and brisk pace, he approached the head of the table.
His eyes ran over the faces of gathered school staff. There were a few new faces but mostly his longtime colleagues were convened. Most of them he could even call friends, to a certain degree.

'Could have called - past tense.' He reminded himself while his heart constricted painfully.

Many of those faces looked at him with unhidden anger and hatred. He avoided looking at Poppy or Minerva. He hadn't just lived and worked with these people for years, he'd also grown up with them too. It was bloody hard to pretend at this moment. But, this was no time for weaknesses.

Among all those faces were the Carrows, the new addition to the staff, appointed by Dark Lord himself.

He cleared his throat and the sound echoed through the dead silence of the room.

"I will keep this meeting brief. The purpose of this gathering is to get you all familiar with the new rules and new staff members. These new rules are non-negotiable. Rule number one - no interruptions while I'm speaking." He raised his hand noticing that Minerva was preparing to speak. "Minerva McGonagall will stay in the position of Deputy Headmistress of the school. Alecto Carrow is our new Muggle Studies professor. Amycus Carrow is new Defence Against Dark Arts professor."

He paused, no one made a sound so he continued. "Also, Defense against Dark Arts will change into Dark Arts." he paused again.

Most faces were the picture of pure shook and refusal, but again, no one made a sound. He nodded and continued to speak.

"The punishment system will change accordingly. While taking off points will stay, each and every deduction along with detention won't be active until I give my approval. I and I alone will determine the nature of detention and who will conduct it. Any divergence or disobedience will be severely punished."

He paused again, gauging the effect his words were having. Shock and refusal melted into stubborn rejection. They were ready to fight him. Good, as long as it was not open rebellion. He would need to drive that to the point, effectively.

Alecto snickered. Ah!

"If anyone is in disagreement with new rules he or she may hand me a resignation letter and I'll see to it that an adequate replacement is found." He pointed at the Carrows.

Alecto snickered again.

"If you decide to stay, I will not tolerate any objections to my methods or disrespect. Again, each transgression will be punished."

Last words were a threatening hiss. Alecto was still snickering. Good. He raised his wand narrowing his eyes. "Starting now. Crucio."

Alecto shrieked and twitched, banging her head on the desk's flat surface before she sunk under the table. He didn't hold her for too long, but it did feel almost therapeutic, cathartic, in a way.

He wouldn't use this type of punishment on any of the old staff, but - a little intimidation and conditioning would go a long way. And serve to prove his point.
Releasing Alecto from the curse, he lowered his wand. He still held it visible as he gazed around the room. "Any questions?"

Deathly silence.

"This meeting is adjourned. I wish you all a pleasant day."

Turning on his heels, he left the room without a single glance back. Still, he managed to notice that Amycus was sinking down to help his sister but nobody else moved to assist.

A cruel smile twitched on his lips. Good.

In the quiet of the corridor, he felt a cold sweat running down his spine. Pain cut him, from the hollow of his heart to the knot in his gut. No time. There were things he had to do.

Severus's eyes opened. An almost painful grunt escaped from him before he could prevent it. No, no, no. Not my memories. Not again.

He felt a motion on the sofa. And a soft exclamation!

"Severus! You are back"

Shit.
He felt the bed dip as she slipped onto it. Forcing himself to breathe normally and keep his eyes closed. He didn't want to see her. He didn't want to see anyone. He wasn't ready or inclined to face the reality yet.

The warmth of her hand hovered briefly over his before it withdrew without touching him.

*Good.*

Apparently, happiness wasn't meant for him, not even a fabricated one. He wanted to return to that place where he existed with her - his Dream Lady. The peaceful, ordinary moments. No magic, at least not the kind of magic one can practise. The magical moments of long conversations and peaceful joined reading times. Even their passion.

He flinched at the soft sound of Hermione's voice.

"I-I can't even say how happy am I to see you again with us Severus. I guess you are not happy to be here…. You looked happy and at peace, wherever you were."

Silence.

"Well, I guess you're not up to talking. Rest, if you need it. I'll see you tomorrow."

He let the air slowly leave his lungs.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione's heart tried to rip open her ribcage and jump outside. She was beyond happy, just sitting next to him. Even if he pretended to sleep, ignoring her presence. She slipped off the bed and grabbed a thick bathing robe. Crossing the hallway, she banged on Draco's door, doing her best to suppress her own excitement.

After what seemed like an eternity the door finally opened to reveal Draco wrapped up in a bed sheet, wearing a grumpy look on his face. Seeing her, his features morphed into a smirk with one blonde eyebrow raised in curiosity. "Need something, Granger."

"He' awake!" she squealed, ignoring his jibe.

"What? Who?" Draco's face wore a mask of confusion "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"Severus!" She said, eyes wide. "I… He had a dream, a memory and I saw him opening his eyes."
"Tone it down, Granger, you won't like the consequences if you wake up my parents once again. Besides, he opens his eyes every morning…"

"But this is different. It-it feels different. And through all this time he didn't have memories."

**Why can't he understand?**

"All right, he had a memory but…” Draco mumbled through tiredness.

"I know you can be thick at times Ferret-face but do try to keep up," she huffed, annoyed at Draco's blase attitude. "It feels different. I can feel him. He's awake. Not willing to talk but…”

"Then how do you know he's awake?" Draco interjected, belligerently.

Rolling her eyes internally. "I told you, it feels like he's…” Flustered with his attitude, Hermione recomposed herself. "Look all these times, it felt like he was using Occlumency to guard himself, maybe from me. He was there and yet he wasn't…"

"You never mentioned that." Draco narrowed his eyes.

"Well, it's private. And I'm telling you now." She snapped. "Look, do you want me to finish explaining or not?" Hermione was aware that she sounded harsh, maybe harsher than she should - after all Draco had been helpful and nice to her earlier.

*Can I use the term *nice* to describe Draco?*

She frowned at that thought but didn't have much time to dwell on it.

Draco snorted in derision, motioning her to continue. Rather tired, he lost the grip on the bed covers and he fumbled to regain a firm handhold of the slippery material.

Hermione snickered, watching his antics in trying to preserve what little dignity he still had.

"Serves you right. Anyway," continued Hermione, ignoring his glare at her remark. "Now I can feel him fully, his mind...like he is finally at home. You know?"

"I am certain that I do not know," He said cocking his head. "But I'll take your word for it, if that means we can go back to sleep?" He mumbled.

*Does he even care? She frowned, glaring at him. Maybe he's right, not like she could do much until the morning came around again.*

"Fine. Be sure to bring everything in the room." Finally reaching an agreement with her own flustered mind, she nodded. "We'll give our findings to Poppy in the morning." With that, she turned on her heels and marched in silence back to her room.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco watched her as she returned to her room. Closing the door quietly behind her, he shook his head. Waddling so wouldn't trip over the bed cover and fall, Draco headed towards one of the high back cushioned chairs in front of the fireplace.

It seemed that Granger was apparently dead set on robbing him of what little rest he could get this night. There was no way in hell, that he could just get back in to bed and fall asleep - not after the information she'd just shared.

"Can I use the term *nice* to describe Draco?"
It was too big a thing to sleep on.

Running events from this evening, he first focused on Granger's reactions. It seemed that she was lost. That part was to be expected considering the emotional rollercoaster she'd dropped on his entire family.

He wondered how his mother had managed to calm father down in such a way. And on the subject of him, his father looked like he was on the brink of a stroke. Draco was sure that Granger would be soon to face his fathers' wrath and displeasure; no one should have been able to show Lucius at being this vulnerable or to feel shame. Least not without being punished for it.

He wasn't sure how people missed the fact that his mother was the pillar of the family. More so after the war. Even if he was sure that mother never said a word to father about his bad decisions in life, one look from her could tame Lucius into obedience nowadays.

But when they stayed alone Granger was...different. Not scared - she was thoughtful, honest. And that was something he had to get used to. Not many people in his life had a gal to tell him that they hated his father. At least not to his face.

She was - unsettled but determined. And that was so diametrically different from her flustered look, mere moments ago. She was cheeky and snappish, teetering on the edge of happiness.

Was she even aware how happy she was? Draco frowned looking at simmering fire. Why was she so happy?

Surely, she could have waited until morning to tell him or anyone, that Severus had awoken. It might be that she just realised how much Severus meant to him, but he could tell that it wasn't all. It could be the connection, but then again - there was something deeper than that.

Returning to all conversations he had with her, to all that he witnessed. Draco absentmindedly stroked his lower lip with a forefinger. Maybe there was something about fathers' teasing after all. He was sure that his father wasn't thinking that deep but … Grange did seem more…

Is fitting the correct phrase? They do seem to have and share more than a few similarities.

Considering the tramps his father compiled on that list, Granger appeared as shining jewel. But, father had his tactic all backwards - not that he will point out that again to father's face.

Draco leaned towards the dying fire, gazing at the coals in the heart, lost in thought. That bond they shared, it seemed to run deep. Deeper than it should. He did his share of reading, when he first time learned what she did. He infused some of it into his research. But…

For Granger to be attuned so much to Severus was unheard of.

Was that link mutual?

Or was it because she was the initiator?

The main problem was how to dig up how much of that joined attuning Severus felt? The man was known to be an enigma, shrouded in secrecy when he was the most open. Poking around Severus's private life, thoughts and feelings would be like throwing stones and insulting a wild, enraged Hippogriff.

There was always a possibility that he didn't have all the information. Simply because everybody around him seemed to keep secrets.
Draco tossed himself back into the chair with a loud groan.

"I do not care about your own petty insecurities, Lucius." The sharp female voice grated on Lucius's nerves.

He paced nervously back and forth, gritting his teeth to fight the never-ending pain. Why did I think this was a good idea?

"My petty insecurities may very well work in your favour at the end," he hissed, partially in annoyance and pain.

"Does that mean that they are going to move to the Manor, at least?"

"No." He replied, curtly. "And you may threaten and screech as much as you like at me. I am not letting him out of my sight nor vicinity as long as I'm not sure that he is on his way to healing."

"And you are willing to suffer the presence of that little Mudblood in your home, while he's recuperating?" taunted the woman.

"Yes. Yes, I am." Lucius nodded. "For him, bear in mind, most assuredly not for you."

"Your family owes me, not him," She admonished, scathingly. "You never should have…"

"Yes, yes - you and my father told me that time and time again. Well, I did. I do care for him. I do consider him my family."

A dark laugh fell from her mouth, dripping like poison. "And yet, you are going along with my plan for that little Mudblood?" The woman's eyebrow arched in a familiar and mildly irritating manner.

"As I recall correctly, I was the one who suggested her in the first place. If that wasn't the clue…" he left the rest of his jibe to hang in the thick air between the two. Lucius leaned heavily on the ornate oak desk. Crystals and various small objects clinked when the table shook under his not so soft leaning. The woman huffed. He felt a small pang of satisfaction to see her out of balance, even minutely.

"Besides, I am not the one who will suffer her intrusion as keenly as you will. After all, you are after her blood, not me."

"I have nothing against her blood."

"Ah, but can you say that for your entire line? As I do remember, your family wasn't above blood-purity, moreover, they were one of the strongest supporters of the Dark Lord. Shoulder to shoulder with my father." he smirked at the woman "Call it as you like, but her blood is as impure as it may come."

"I'm sure that her blood is a thorn in your side Lucius." the woman said, shooting a cruel mocking smile at him.

"It is, and it will be for as long as she lives… However, I can at least appreciate her skills as a witch. She has power in her core. Power, that can match only a handful of others scattered through history. And, she has a brain, a mind to match his own. And, you, my dear, might find her blood to be a bit too big for you to swallow."
"As long as you fulfil your end of the bargain, Lucius, there is no need for you to worry yourself
over what I can or cannot digest. Just see to it that I'm informed of his progress and the moving date
regularly." with that the woman vanished from his sight.

Once alone he exhaled deeply, letting his shoulders slump and curl to the front of his body. The pain
was exhausting.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco yawned and moonwalked into the room Severus shared with Granger. He was still unsure
whos room was that. It didn't reflect Severus and he doubted that was set to Granger's preferences
either.

Colliding with his father's back he stepped backwards and sleepily raised his eyes to fathers painful
and angry glare. It seemed like Lucius was about to say something but he just smirked at his son and
turned his head towards the bed.

His mother's shoulders were shaking lightly like she was suppressing the sobs.

What was going on?

Stepping around his parents, he glanced at the sofa where Granger was standing. One of her hands
balled in a fist over her heart, other covered her mouth. Alarmed, he glanced at the bed.

Severus was sitting in the bed, frowning. His eyes flickered to the spot where Draco stepped in and
back towards the window. Poppy was fussing around Severus, and the only indication that the man
was aware of his surroundings was an occasional growl.

Draco slowly walked to stand next to the Granger girl, he whispered in her ear, "I have the research
with me."

"Good, you will give it to her after she finishes with her check-up?" Granger nodded, her teary eyes
not leaving Severus even for a second.

He blinked at her, confused. Why should I give the research to Poppy? And why's she crying?

"Is Severus all right?" He whispered, leaning in to Granger side again.

"Yes, according to Poppy," she replied under her breath. Draco breathed out relaxing his shoulders.

"And, why I have to give…"

"Miss Granger," Poppy's sharp voice interrupted him. "He is well, at least as well as he can be under
the circumstances. I will assign him another therapy, to be added to his already existing ones. Each
evening, before his bath, I expect you to give him a massage. Arms, legs, back and shoulders - his
muscles are tense from atrophy."

"Yes, Matron. Anything else?"

"No, that would be all, I'll send an oil you can use. I believe that you know how to?"

She blushed slightly. "I-I know the basics and a bit of Shiatsu." Hermione stuttered.

Shi-what? What is she going to do to him?

"I'll send you the book as well." nodded Poppy "Well, I'll be on my way. Severus, stop acting like a
Granger giggled nervously, her eyes flickering from Poppy to Severus and back again. Draco's parents had unchanged expressions that contained happiness and Severus smirked, arching his brow. It seemed like he was to say something but instead he just shrugged and gazed out of the window once more.

He stumbled when Granger elbowed him, and glared at her. She motioned him to go to Poppy. He mouthed *No*, his mouth dry suddenly and his palms sweaty.

"Matron, Fer… Mal… Draco has something to say," Granger called to Poppy.

The Matron turned her eyes to them, but he was just staring at her, mouth dry as a dessert and mute like the words had dried up.

Poppy huffed at him impatiently. "Well, what is it? Speak up boy, I don't have all day."

"Uhm, Granger had an idea and...I…. here," he fumbled over his words, shoving the stack of rolled parchments into Poppy's open and waiting hand. With the corner of his eye he noticed the confused glances of his parents. Suddenly, he was unsure how to explain. What was there to explain, he'd just compiled data based on Granger's instructions.

"What is this?" Matron asked, her tone sharp.

"I noticed the connection between memories and post-cruciatus tremors. I told Draco about it and asked him to do the research. I didn't even read his findings, I know I'm banned…" Granger swallowed, but she was doing much better work with talking than he was. "Anyway, Draco compiled all the data he could, basing them on my observations. If you could - could give it a read or give it to someone at St.Mungo's then maybe they can...well base a new research, one that can help with a cure."

"And if I do, who should I sign under this?" She inquired.

"Well, Draco - he did all the work," Hermione stated.

"Draco but not you?" chuckled Poppy, quirking a brow.

"Well, I wouldn't complain to be signed as a second, but… if that leads to some real help… Well, it doesn't really matters then. Does it? I mean, Malfoy, ummm…. Sorry, Draco and Malfoy's family reputation may benefit from that research, if it turns out to be helpful. I'm not planning on being a medi-witch anyway."

Draco gaped at her, aware that his mouth was hanging open yet completely unable to command his muscles to close it. His mother, in his presence, had a gentle smile on her face. Fathers' face was a clash of emotions under the indifferent and slightly pretentious mask he wore. Snape was gazing through the window, still distant and wholly disinterested.

The sharp pang in his gut warned him that he should keep up his pretences. He was determined more than ever to save Granger form whatever plan his father had cooked up. After all, he wouldn't owe her a thing if he was successful.

"Very well." nodded Poppy with a mild smile, turning towards the fireplace.
Anger.

The first thing he felt was anger. Anger for being hauled out of that safe and warm place to the harsh coldness of reality. Anger for still being alive. Anger for… He was just angry.

That anger was still there when Poppy poked and probed. Asking questions he didn't give answers to. But when Gra...Hermione…

*I have to remember to call the little nuisance by her given name.*

When Hermione and Draco start talking about the cure for post-cruciatus, something changed. In the name of Salazar! He could understand why Draco was so invested in that, but Hermione? She healed. So why did she still linger on?

*Connection. Of all the idiotic, ludicrous things...Why was she so dead-set on keeping him alive?*

He was never even remotely nice to her. She annoyed him when he was her teacher and he had shown his displeasure with her openly. She annoyed him, not to mention enraged him after he woke up in the hospital - he showed his annoyance then.

After they came to the Manor that is when the lines started to blur. He tried to be *nice*, or as close to nice he could muster. To play her and find the best way to send her on her merry way, away from him.

He did his best to help her heal.

*Why did she have to do that?*

It wasn't that it was traumatic, it would take more than a little of below average sex to traumatised him. He had a problem with her being his stud…ex-student. But that was a moral dilemma, the question of personal ethics, but not a truly traumatising event.

It was, however, a problem. His own personal misery. Even when his body rebelled, he could still just focus on minor details and let the mechanics and biology do their own thing. But her actions forced him to remember. His dreams became more vivid. More real. More carnal. How could he forgive that?

It wasn't that her touch bothered him. Merlin knows he had to endure her constant touching since he woken up. He was forced to endure them so much that he got used to her touching him. Incomprehensible even to him, how or why he managed to get used to her touch - but he did. It was
Severus groaned quietly. It was fortunate that his groan came out at the same time Misty placed a tray with food on his lap. Glancing briefly at the food he sighed and directed his gaze to the sky framed by the window again. He wasn't hungry. His thoughts returned to where they stopped.

His skin tingled when she touched him. Even before...before. He couldn't trust his own body after....

*How long has it been?*

Frowning he blinked, endless planes of the sky was interrupted by the lazy flight of the bird. A black dot against pale blue.

*Salazar, she was correct!*

Not that he will ever admit to that, but she guessed correctly. The last time he had sex, well, before what she did, was that incident with Bellatrix. At the time he was disgusted. Disgusted with himself. With what he did. With whom he did... Not long after - Lily died. He died as well.

He forgot. Forgot how nice it felt to feel...

But that was not for him. Not anymore. Not after all he did. Never again. That kind of bliss wasn't meant for the likes of him. And that he couldn't forgive - to her and to himself.

*Why was her cruelty masked with kindness? Why did she have to remind me? There was nothing out there for me.*

The anger was gone. Even logic deserted him in a blink of an eye. Only grim reality remained.

Alone.

Outcast.

Shamed.

What was there for him now? Nothing. A life in seclusion, abandoned by all but the Malfoys.

He might have even convinced himself that that was the life he wanted if she didn't take it upon herself to remind him. Her actions merely emphasized his own situation. The bleakness of his soulless existence.

"Is Master is not hungry?" Misty's voice snapped him out of those grim thoughts.

He just shook his head slowly. Suddenly, he didn't feel like talking or looking at the elf. At anyone.

"Fine. Matron say not to push today. Misty will wait." Huffed the elf, obviously disgruntled with his reaction.

He didn't find the strength or will to feel anything.

Draco and Hermione were whispering somewhere to his right.

The tray vanished just as soon as it had appeared.

The door clicked.
"How are you feeling, Severus?" her voice softly floated towards him. He just directed his eyes at her. Narcissa smiled. "Well, I am sorry but you are still not excused from your daily exercises. Miss Granger, if you will..."

The familiar incantations. His body floated through the air.

"Just a few warm-up exercises Severus. Your muscle tone has improved significantly." Hermione notified him.

He had a need to flinch, to tug away from her, but at the same time, he had no strength or will to do so. So he let her push his limbs around, following her instructions to the best of his abilities, not paying attention to anything in particular.

The room felt too bright. He knew that his reactions were conditioned with years of pushing through undesired tasks more than his intention.

He was lifted and wedged between Hermione and Narcissa. Standing wasn't so taxing anymore, but he had no inclination to even try and lift his feet off the ground. Both women were quiet, the usual chatter missing. In fact, they barely said anything apart from giving him instructions.

Finally, they returned him to the bed.

"Rest now, Lucius will visit you later today. You gave us quite the scare, Severus." she tenderly removed a lock of his hair from his face.

He forced his face to contort in what he hoped was a smile. Narcissa just smiled at him sadly and left.

Bed bent. Turning his head to face Hermione, he frowned. She reached for his hand and he jerked it towards his chest.

Her face went from happy, morphing into deep sadness and regret. "Look, I'm..." she sighed. "I wasn't thinking straight at that moment. I know that that is no excuse. But... I... I didn't tell anyone what I did. Not-not because I'm afraid of consequences, but I didn't know if you would want..." She stopped talking looking like she was trying to compose herself.

It does not matter. What would that change? The thought floated around his mind but he didn't voice it.

"If you wish, I can call Harry or any Auror you wish - and you have full right to report me. But,... If-if you decide to remain silent, I have no other choice but to touch you." her voice quivered. "So, do you want me to call Harry...or someone else?"

Too bright. I don't want to talk about that. Forcing himself to speak he rasped. "I'm tired. Close the drapes to darken the room and let me rest."

She was staring at him, blinking. Emotions clashed in her eyes: relief, worry, sadness, regret, hope.... Hermione nodded.

"Right, sorry. You will let me know when you reach the decision then."

"There is no decision that has to be made. You did what you did, and you will have to live with that
choice and further knowledge. It is punishment ample enough. Now, darken the room and let. Me. Rest."

"Right. I… thank you." her voice trembled.

She slid off the bed. Soon enough the room was dark and he slid into lying position. He had an irresistible need to curl up.

*Wouldn't that be too much of a tell? As if it matters. As if anything matters. I have nothing to lose.*

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione returned to the table, observing Snape from the corner of her eye. He had been acting strange all morning. At first, she contributed that to the fact that he just snapped out of catatonia, but now she wasn't so sure.

She was dreading the moment of staying alone with him. She fully expected for him to hiss at her. To lacerate her with his words. To report her. This… she wasn't expecting.

With growing concern, she watched him turn his back to the window and curl up under the covers, burying his face in the crook of his arm.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As you may already notice, the time between chapters is longer than usually is. I apologize for that

And I have to announce that this story will be on halt until the end of May. :( 

My work schedule was intense but now and until the end of May will be beyond insane. Even with my best desire, I won't have time to devote to writing.

End of May, or the first week of June at the latest you may expect me to start posting again.

Again, I sincerely apologise.
Hermione sighed and squinted at the parchment, continuing to copy information. It was the middle of the day and outside was still bright but the room was darkened, so she and Draco used few jars of bluebell flames. Bluebell flame wasn’t, admittedly, the best source of light but lighting candles wasn’t an option. Opening the dark drapes or lighting candles caused Severus’s reaction, he wasn’t saying anything but he would cover his head and grunt. Finally, she and Draco settled with a low light of bluebell flames and gave their best to work under it.

She worked almost absentmindedly, her thoughts kept sliding to the man on the bed. He was still bundled up under the covers with his face hidden in the crook of his elbow.

*Why is acting so strange?*

She nearly jumped when Draco lightly kicked her under the table. They tried not to talk because the sound of talking also caused a reaction from Snape, he would put the pillow over his head each time they spoke. She glared at Draco, returning the kick, maybe stronger than a tap she received because Draco hissed and narrowed his eyes at her. With a scoff, Draco pushed a note to her.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

‘Severus is behaving oddly.’ she scribbled back

‘Stop obsessing, Granger. The man just snapped out of a condition he was in. This may be normal behaviour for all we know.’ Draco added under her reply

‘It is not! I read about it in the *Muggle books* you refused to read.’ she pushed the not with a smirk

‘Do you want us to stop working for today and focus on his problem then?’ asked Draco’s note and she groaned, frowning at Draco.

*He’s so eager not to do this. Oh no, Malfy, you are going to help me write this for the Minister.*

‘No! We need to finish this as soon as possible!’ she scrawled the words and angrily pushed the note to Draco.

Draco sighed and rolled his eyes, shaking his head. An odd look on his face, one she couldn’t quite
read. He was writing a reply to her note and she frowned again.

Is he going to write essay length note to me?

‘In that case, Granger, pay attention to what you do! I am fairly certain that you do not want to include that part in the new law. Or did you change your mind and do not want to help those beasts anymore?’ Draco pushed the note to her with an angry glare, tapping one finger over the passage she was copying.

‘Don’t call them beasts.’ she underlined word beasts three times and pushed the note to Draco focusing on the pointed passage.

A few moments later she grunted in frustration. Malfoy was right, she was copying the wrong and harmful to the werewolves part. Hermine flinches when the note slid to her eyesight, with an angry scrawl.

‘You never had to sit at the same table with Grayback. Do not try to tell me how to call them. Whatever word I use for them I certainly wasn’t trying to add the obligatory neutering. Even I think better of them than that.’

He has a point. She thought bitterly banging her forehead on the table in frustration. Draco tapped her on the head and she straightened to look at him. Draco pushed the new note to her.

‘Ok, we are taking a small break. What is going on?’

Hermione looked at motionless Severus then at Draco, chewing on her bottom lip. That was a valid question. If she was just worried about his behaviour, she would look for clues or asked Draco to do it. No, it was something else. . .

Draco leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest with a smirk on his face. But, he was patient, waiting for her to figure things out. Hermine closed her eyes, suppressing a sorrowful moan when she realised what was the source of her distraction. With a sigh, she started to write and Draco leaned back to the table.

‘Can I count on you to help stay for the pool exercises, massage and the bath?’

‘Why? He’s awake now, and I’m sure you won’t repeat the same mistake.’ Draco grinned at her with a glint in his eyes, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

‘I wouldn’t ask if he is all right, but in given situation. . . Please, Malfoy.’ it was painful to write those words. What other choice did she have? She couldn’t just explain the situation to Draco, and even if she had a liberty to do so she wouldn’t.

There is no shame in asking for help when you need one.

The problem was. . . She had to deal with her own guilt. Severus was correct, her own consciousness was the worst possible punishment. Her own feeling of guilt. If there was a time she questioned Snape’s motives, now she regained a perfect insight into them. And it wasn’t even about the sharing of the memories. No, it was about her own crime and her own feeling of guilt.

Snapping out of her thoughts she noticed that Draco is observing her carefully, his eyes narrowing. He whispered, earning a grunt from the bed.

“For this part, Granger, we have to go to the library. The referenced book can’t be taken from it. Misty!”
The elf popped in.

“Yes, young Master Malfoy.”

“Can you stay with Severus, we have to visit the library. Inbound law books section.”

“Misty can. Go.” The elf made a shoo motion with her hand.

Draco nodded to the elf. And that confused her for a moment. She never expected from Draco to be civil to an elf. She yelped quietly when Draco grabbed her hand and pulled her off the chair, ushering her out of the room and into the room she didn’t use since all this started.

Draco released her wrist and hissed. “What did you do, Granger?”

“Nothing.” she hissed back.

“Don’t lie.” Draco smiled very unpleasant smile at her and Hermione frowned.

“I am not.”

“Then why do you need me present for massage or pool?” now he had an all-knowing smirk that she wished to punch off his face.

Counting to ten she took a deep breath.

“He is always not too thrilled with our pool time and I never gave him a massage. It is - well - more personal and I don’t want him to think… Or accuse me of…”

“Oh, I’m sure that he accused you plenty of times before but you never asked for my presence, not before he…” Draco stopped his eyes narrowed “He may accuse you but why would he think. . . What did you do, Granger?”

“Nothing…” she replied maybe a bit too sharp and too fast, and of course Draco picked up on it. “It is your father and his barbs and. . .”

“My father may talk, that won’t influence Snape to think. . . Sweet Salazar, Granger!” Draco stopped talking in the middle of the line. Finally, he nodded “Very well.”

“Shall we return then?” she asked feeling the sweat clamming her skin.

That was close.

“You go, if you don’t mind I want to call Astoria and rearrange our time first.” Sighed Draco. She nodded, but when she was at the door he called her again. “And, Granger, you owe me for this.”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

When he stayed alone Draco released a sharp exhale. He slugged into the nearest chair while his mind worked furiously, piecing the puzzle into one picture.

Bloody hell, Granger, what did you do? I told him, told him that he is wrong! And now all this mess! Snape is going to. . . well, it is Severus. . . He won’t let her forget.

He stood up and started to pace, rubbing his hands over the face, occasionally ducking fingers into the hair.
And if the father gets any sniff of this... Merlin, what a mess. Ok, Draco - think. Snape won’t say a word. Her too. But that is not a guarantee... And come to think of it, Severus does behave oddly, but he is not fragile... No, he most definitely wouldn’t succumb to something like that. But it might have been part of it... Could it? I need to get her out of here.

He took his wand and conjure a patronus, smiling at its shape, he sent a message.

“Potter, we need to talk, but Hermione can’t know. Ask for Misty and tell her to call me out without mentioning your name. It is important, it is about Granger.”

Feeling slightly better he walked back to the room where Snape was still in the same position, which now worried him and Granger scribbling, tossing glances at Snape.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sighed, she tried to conceal the shaking of her hands but she worried her lower lip glancing at Draco. He was sitting on her sofa, reading a book. He was reading that bloody book while she was leading Severus through exercises in the pool.

Severus, on the other hand, followed her instructions meekly, almost unwillingly, shuddering from time to time but with no real effort on his part. It felt almost like he gave up even on trying. And she was out of idea how to jolt him into life once more.

Worse of all - even if she might think of something, given how her last idea wet...she was afraid to try.

But now, he was lying on the practise mat, covered with nothing more than a towel over his middle. He was on his back, eyes wide open with an indifferent stare towards the ceiling.

Taking a deep breath she started to speak.

“I’m going to use the oil Matron gave me. She assured me that it is something she requested for this purpose. She also left me exact order how to do this, and precisely what to do. I am following her idea. So I will start with your feet and legs.”

Taking another deep breath she poured a bit of oil from the flask and took his right foot, spreading it evenly over the sole. Using he knuckles she started to knead the soft tissue. She tried to focus on instruction and not on the fact that he had a soft skin, soft and smooth. Not what she would expect from someone who spent days on end standing in boots no less.

Snape huffed few times but otherwise, he was unresponsive. She switched to the other foot. After a while, she took another potion of oil and gilded her hands over his calf. His muscles still too slim and thin, but she could tell that the muscle tone started to build up slowly. She massaged tender circles into the muscle, frowning slightly at the feeling of long hairs unpleasantly mushy from oil.

She found a rock-hard spot and pressed it with her thumbs, circling them in attempt to break down the knot. His leg twitched and Severus hissed. Draco raised his head from the book.

“I am sorry, Severus, but you have a knot and I have to break it down before your leg cramps out.”

She tried hard not to pay attention to the scarred tissue, it was obvious that a dog bit him.

*Fluffy. This is a scar left from Fluffy’s bite.*

Working out the knots from the other calf, Hermione tried hard not to think. She worked on his
thighs muscles opting to kneel next to him and applying pressure. The thighs were weak as they looked, yes they were definitely lacking the firmness but she could feel their elasticity under the heels of her palms.

Severus growled, not looking at her when her hands slid to his inner thighs.

“I am sorry but I really don’t have another way to do this, and Matron specified that I massage that part as well.”

Low grunt was the only reply. That worried her. She could deal with hissing and threats, she even expected insults. But his silence and apathetic look on Severus’s face were something she didn’t expect.

Finally, she finished with his legs and started to massage his hands and arms. That was a familiar thing, she did that on occasion before so she was used to in, and so was he. She called Draco.

“Will you help me to turn him over?”

She would ask Severus in any other scenario, knowing that he could help, but with how he acted all day, Hermione figured it was a lost battle. Draco grumbled something but helped her, charming the towel not to slip, something she was grateful for.

Hermione purposely ignored small twinge in her belly, not really willing to explore what caused it. She was now staring at the expense of his back crisscrossed with a myriad of scars. . .
LXXXIX

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: In agreement with my beta – I’m posting this chapter unedited when she finishes with fixing the grammar and with me, I will re-post this chapter at a later date. At that time, I do expect that some parts will be enhanced and there will be no grammatical errors.
I leave it to you to read it now or wait some more.
When I upload edited chapter I’ll remove this note :)

Also, huge THANK YOU for all of you for helping me break through another milestone (12K+ hits) and for all kudos, subscriptions, bookmarks and comments <3

Why were they so set on tugging him around? Forcing him to go through all this? Severus starred at the powder-blue surface of the mat. There was a conflicting tingle on his skin, it clashed with the darkness gathered in his chest.

All he wanted, all he needed was to be left in peace. Why couldn’t they understand that? In the retrospect, he can’t go back among the wizarding population. He made himself a pariah twenty years ago and cemented that two years ago.

I wasn’t supposed to survive.

He survived. Worst of all, they freed him - that was his biggest crime. And if he would think on further consequences… Lucius placed him in even more perilous place. He could understand Lucius’s good intentions but - he was a half-blood, ex-Death Eater, Dumbledore’s murderer and now . . .

Now, on top of all that, he was a member of the pureblood elite.

The girl behind him couldn’t understand that. She was blind to the implications of him accepting the name Prince. Not even Potter’s word could wash that stain. And yet, she won’t let go. If he learned anything about her during his years as her teacher - she never let go of anything she sank her teeth in.

She didn’t even allow him to stay numb. Going out and above to . . .

To what end?

Pointless, it was all pointless in the long run. Even what little of his goodness, of what he can be proud of - she took it away.

He felt her hands on his skin and closed his eyes, resisting to flinch, to run away from the touch. That was goodness. It wasn’t for him. Never for him. He didn’t deserve it, even if someone would be insane enough to offer it. Apparently, she was.
If they wouldn’t let him perish at least they could leave him to stay where he could be at peace. That, as it turned out, was too much to ask. There was at least someone for him, unreal at it was but it was there.

Suppressing the shiver he forced his gloomy thoughts toward much brighter ones. His dream lady.

The pressure and kneading of his muscles felt good, pleasant. Or at least it would be if it was her instead of Hermione. Her touch is simultaneously firm and tender. And it hurts him, wounds him. Damaging him more that bloody snake ever could.

Worst of all was that feeling. Inner struggle. His insides splitting and dividing him in half, battling. In the process of that battle, he was the collateral damage. He was at odds with his body. He was at odds with the world at large.

His body reacted in the most appaling, embarrassing way. Soaking up the sensations transforming them into undesired stimuli. His mind rebelled against it with disgust. His only salvation, that emptiness and blackness in his chest kept things levelled and in the realm of decency.

Her hands reached his lower back and she pressed on the spot that wasn’t painful a moment ago. An involuntary grunt escaped him.

“I know, I’m sorry, but your muscles are cramping up. This will hurt a bit. Sorry.” She blurbed and pressed again. The pain hit him again, it spread like fire from the spot she pressed, one line leading all the way up under his shoulder blade. The other line shooting down his leg.

He hissed at her, but she continued to knead on that spot. Severus gritted his teeth, after all, what was more pain in his life? She switched to the other side with the same result and same pain.

“That’s enough.” he barked, his muscles tensing when her arms pressed his buttocks over the towel.

“Ummmm, I am sorry but Matron…”

“Poppy can go and…” He bit his tongue, he will deal with Poppy, but he had to stop this now.

“I...I have to. If you manage to persuade her that’s fine, but today...And you do have cramps in your...ummm...gluteus.”

He heard rustling. Draco was watching her with narrowed eyes, scrutinising.

“My...gluteus, was it? Or any other part of me is not your concern.” Growled Severus.

“Enjoying yourself, Granger?” Quipped Draco with a smirk.

“If you think this is. . . Well, if you have any objections feel free to replace me, Malfoy.” Replied Hermione.

They were talking about him like he wasn’t even in the room. I should have get used to it by now. Something deep inside him protested against how he felt, but he was too tired and too . . . flat to do anything about it. To stop it or accept it. All he wanted was to be left alone.

“Nooooo, Granger, you may continue to grope him. After all. . .”

“Draco!” He used the tone he preserved for his Slytherins when he was to deliver a message on obedience and proper behaviour. Draco stopped mid-sentence and looked at him, eyes wide. The boy nodded and slumped back.
“I’m sorry, Severus. I’ll clean my room and make my own bed.” Sighed Draco and called “Misty!”

Elf popped in an instant.

“Misty, notify elves that tonight and tomorrow morning I’m taking care of my room.”

“Misty will, young Master Malfoy.” With that elf disappeared with a plop.

Hermione used the moment of his distraction to continue with her massage. He hissed when pain cut through his lower back and in the back of his thighs. He couldn’t escape her. He could hear Draco’s frown in his voice.

“What are you looking at me like that? Do you honestly think we had a free pass with him? Everything we did wrong was corrected.”

“Corrected? You were barely in detention if some other professor didn’t punish any of the Slytherins...”

“Yes, Granger, corrected. We were rarely in the infirmary as well. Do you think Slytherins are healthy by nature or House allegiances? You’re so naive, Granger.”

“He always protected you, all of you.” She hissed.

Her hiss was accompanied with an increase in pressure on a very sore spot and he growled. “Silence.”

The bickering stopped. Massage didn’t. He could agree that his muscles did feel relaxed, but he wasn’t relaxed at all. The girl became too handsy with him, and he blamed Lucius for that. Lucius’s darts aimed to provoke him backfired and gave the ideas to the girl.

And with what she did... He wanted... No, his body wanted more. Given that only females around him were his ex-student - practically still a child, a married woman he respected and on occasion Poppy... Not to mention that he alone didn’t think that physical intimacy was what he needed at this moment or at all.

All he truly wanted is to be alone.

“That is enough.” he firmly said and hands stopped touching him “Misty, transfer me to the bathroom. Miss...Hermione, I’ll bathe myself - alone.”

“But...”

“A. L. O. N. E.” He growled turning to face her. She was crimson red and the relief clashed severely with few other feelings looking suspiciously like regret. “Misty!”

The elf was next to him in an instant.

“Take me to the bathroom, I’ll bathe alone today.”

“Yes, Missy will.”

“Missy.” Hermione’s voice was small and sad when she spoke. “Can you, please, stay with Severus and make sure he doesn’t need any help.”

He resisted the urge to groan, but Misty seemed satisfied with the request. “Misty will, Missy.”
In an instant, he was transferred in a tub full of steaming water. Finally, he could relax, even for a moment. Leaning the head in the edge of the tub he closed his eyes, his muscles didn’t feel sore, his head was empty of any thoughts and he was - alone.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco smirked. Granger looked like someone stole all the cookies from her cookie jar. He was on the verge to poke at her just a bit but the elf popped up handing him the note.

*I’m waiting for you in the drawing room. This better be as important as you said it is, Malfoy. H.P.*

Draco grinned, his plan was finally starting to unravel.

“I have to go, Granger.”

She looked at him, an expression of worry and pleading horror on her face. He felt a small stab like he was deserting her in the middle of the struggle, but he shook it off. *It’s your own mess, deal with it.*

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that he left the room, giving his best not to appear eager.

Once in a hallway, he rushed to the drawing room. It was imperative that no one notice Potter’s presence. He barged into the room, placing privacy wards behind him.

“What the bloody hell, Malfoy.” Potter was on his feet, wand in hand.

“Relax, Potter. I just want some privacy from any means of interruptions or eavesdropping.”

“Even the one your elves can do?” Asked Potter warily.

“Even that one. I’m surprised you know.”

“Well, yes. . .”

“I don’t want to know. This is about Granger.”

“What about Hermione? Is she ok?” There was a sharp jerk of Potters head.

“No, she is not ok, but she wasn’t ok from the moment they came here. She is… I want her out of here.” He didn’t want to explain all of what he thought he knew to Potter. No doubt that Potter would find a way to put blame on anyone but Granger.

“And that was so urgent?” Scrawled Potter

“No. But that is a short version.” He smirked.

“What would be the longer one? She stole your spotlight again?”

“She is in no position to do that, no matter how much she tries.” He smiled at Potter “Then again, she *isn’t trying* either.”

“And that bothers you?” Blinked Potter dumbly “Odd that you would protest that, given what’s she’s done for you.”

“Precisely, Potter. I do not like to be in debt, so consider this my repayment. It is not good for her to stay here.” He narrowed his eyes at Potter.
“On that, we agree, but you are talking to the wrong person. I was against her coming here from the start.” Potter sighed, slumping back on the settee “She won’t leave Snape, I don’t know if she can while they have that connection thing.”

“I know. It is not good for her to be so. . . focused on Severus. But, I have a plan and I’ll need your help.”

“To get her out of the house?” Asked Potter, the note of hope in his voice.

“Yes. Well, until they break the connection she is bound to come here at least on occasion. But I have a way to persuade her to leave the Manor. And for that, I need your assistance.” He focused on his nails, feigning to be more relaxed than he really was.

“If you could persuade her I wouldn’t be here. So what is it?” Asked Potter with a grin. Draco had a desire to wipe Potter’s grin with a nasty hex. Instead, he just smiled slyly.

“Face it, Potter, neither of us can. But, I saw her looking with longing at the article in the Prophet, the one that calls all students who didn’t finish last year at Hogwarts because of the war to enrol a non-compulsory finishing year.”

“Since when you became so observant?” Smirked Potter

“Since always. - if it benefits me.” Smiled Draco. “Are you interested to hear my plan or to argue?”

“So, she read the article, if she didn’t react on it…”

“Yes, but if you help, that is... you can’t help by talking to her, but you can talk to McGonagall and persuade her to talk with Granger.”

“So could you.” Frowned Potter.

“Yes, she would serve me tea and cookies.” Draco worked hard to hide the bitterness in his voice “I’d have to spend more time proving my motives than actually achieving anything. You, just talk to your Head of House and leave it to me to plant the idea into Granger's mind.”

“And what about Snape?” Potter asked, he seemed interested now.

“I can assure you, Potter, he wants her as far away as possible from him. He won’t complain, in fact, he might even thank you.” Draco smirked, he knew well that Severus would never thank Potter but if he needed to play on that card. . . well. . .

Potter looked appalled at the idea. “I didn’t ask what’s he’s going to say, Malfoy. And I’m sure he wouldn’t thank me. I meant - how are you going to make her separate from Snape?!”

“Ah, that’s the funny bit. I’ll negotiate - I’ll work the rest of my penance as her substitute, while she is in Hogwarts. Away from him and my home.” He gazed at Potter under his lashes, pretending to clean invisible lint from his robes.

“And spare your neck from public appearances.”

“I never claimed that my plan is altruistic.” Draco shrugged. “I told you I want her out of my home. I want my home Muggle free but more than that - Granger free.”

“She’s working you to the bone, bossing you around.” Grinned Potter.

“She is trying, but she is failing.” That was a bluff but Potter wasn’t all that bright.
The truth wasn’t for Potters ears anyway. But from his perspective, if the plan succeeds it was more than one victory. Granger would be safe from his father’s plans, whatever they might be and out of the Manson.

“You wish, Malfoy.” Potter barked the laugh.

_Not as dense as I thought him to be. Still, whatever it takes._ . .

Draco wanted to shove the truth down Potters' throat, but what good would that do? He had to preserve his family, not to mention what little of their family name was left.

It wasn't that he had any use of being the Malfoy now, not after Dark Lord failed. But, nonetheless, he had to live with that name and more smears on it wouldn’t help in a long run.

“What’s going to be, Potter?”

“Fine, I’ll help you but only because I think she shouldn’t be here or so fixated on him.” Nodded Potter, standing up. “Wait for my owl, Malfoy.”

“Yeah.” He just waved at departing Potter.

For better or for worse he set things at motion. Draco was sure that his father won’t be happy once the truth comes out. Dealing with Potter meant that others will find out, eventually. But at least, by that time Granger will be safe.
...He was standing behind the desk, leaning on its cold surface and giving his best not to grip the edge. Across him was Minerva, glaring cursed daggers at him. Battling the feeling of growing emptiness inside and nausea he narrowed his eyes.

“My decision is final, Minerva. Perpetrators will be punished.”

“For drawing?” she replied sharply and he shivered, that tone still affected him after so many years out of the school bench.

“For destroying the school property, for disrespecting the rules.” He replied firmly, his tone even.

“They are from my house, it was always - always - been a school rule that Head of House determines punishments for the students in their house.”

“The rules have changed, Minerva. After all, we wouldn’t want to reward such behaviour, wouldn’t we? Send them to my office.”

Minerva looked like she wanted to say something else but she decided against it. Without the word she turned and left his office. Once he was alone he fell back in the chair, breathing heavily.

“It is for the best, Severus.” Chimed in Albus’s portrait

“But talk to me, Albus. Not now. Phineas, do you have any news?”...

...Narcissa looked pale, worn off, but she still held herself royally. He offered her a seat and she accepted it with a soft smile of gratitude.

“What brings you here, Narcissa?”

“I have news, a message for you from our Lord...” she replied, her eyes darting over the portraits.

“And the message is?” He asked, her appearance worried him.
“He expects you at the Manor on Sunday, late noon.” She replied.

“Is that all? He could have just summoned me.”

“This is a private audition, he wants only you.”

“Very well, you may tell our Lord that I’ll be there in appointed time.” He replied.

She smiled and stood up. “My work here is done. Thank you for the reception Headmaster.”

“There is no need for formalities, Narcissa. How...how’s Lucius?” His heart shrank, plenty of rumours floated his way, mostly through Carrows - he didn’t trust them. He hoped they were false.

“We are fine. We are...faring. Lucius... The prison took its toll on him. Thank you for asking, Headmaster.” She replied, tone too polite, her eyes still roaming over the portraits.

“Send him my regards.”

“I will. I’ll see you on Sunday, Severus.” she tipped her head and walked out...

...Helpless anger bubbled inside him. How could they be so stupid? To allow themselves to be caught stealing - in his office no less! Now he has to punish them - but how? What to do?

He paced with agitation back and forth - thinking.

Scrubbing cauldrons? No, that was for those who left graffiti all over the place.

With Madam Pince? She already complains about 12 students serving detention in the library.

Minerva was out of the question.

Maybe to feed them with the potion that would keep them awake and alert and force them to listen to Bins talking about...anything actually? He wasn’t so keen on torturing the wretched loth.

Hagrid was... Maybe... Yes, Hagrid would do. Carrows hated being in the same space with Hagrid, they perceived him as wild and uncivilised and crude. They would see detention with Hagrid as ultimate punishment and little idiots will be safe with him.

He felt relieved, making a decision. He wished he could do something to punish Carrows like he desired, sadly most he could do was occasional Crucio for insubordination. He despised the fact that he couldn’t punish them for their teaching methods...

...His Occlumency shields reaffirmed enough to give him control over his nervousness did not calm him completely. It was never a good sign if Dark Lorded requested a private audience of his followers. He briefly wondered what was the accusation against him this time and who made it?

It had to be Bellatrix.

This time it wasn’t a question of would he survive, his position as a Headmaster secured that he would survive. But in what shape he will be when all is over - that was the real question.

Taking a long steadying breath he tapped his wand on the Manor’s door. Soon, elf opened the door.
and lead him to the big dining room, one usually reserved for celebrations.

“Ah, Severus - right on time.”

“My Lord.” He bowed low.

“Come, come, no need for such formalities. I am more than satisfied with you, Severus, and that is why I want to bestow a gift on you.”

“It is such an honour, my Lord.” he bowed once more, shortly.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was worried. At times Dark Lord’s “gifts” could be worse than his punishments.

“It is a matter of practicality as well. I need you to be available to me at the moment's notice without the constrictions of anti-apparition wards or floo networks.”

“My Lord?” He asked, taking care that he has a gratitude and question in equal measures in his voice. He will worry about the implications of such gift later.

“Unsupported flight, Severus.” there was a note of giddiness in Dark Lord’s voice but the annoyance overpowered it by far.

“Such a gift my Lord.” he whispered. It was a gift indeed, a useful one, that is if he wasn’t a guinea pig chosen to test if such thing was possible.

“Indeed...” replied Dark Lord and gave him a stack of parchments, the requirements for the spell. It was complicated, much more demanding than learning to be an animagus. He felt the cold sweat painfully glide down his spine - this would take months to learn and achieve - Dark Lord wasn’t known for his patience.

“How...when do I have to be proficient at the spell, my Lord?” he asked evenly, not letting any of his feelings sip through.

“This evening.” there was a dark amusement in Dark Lord’s voice.

“My Lord.” he intoned, sending a silent apology to Albus in the back of his mind behind his Occlumency walls.

“Do you doubt in me, Severus?”

“No, my Lord. If I have any doubts it is in myself. My ability to match your brilliance and learn such complex spell as fast as you did.” this was as close as it could get to the admission of guilt.

“I am well aware of that, Severus. There are faster ways to learn the spell…” Dark Lord turned to face him motioning to him to kneel.

He obeyed, lowering his head. Whatever happens next was out of his control. He relaxed his muscles as much as possible expecting at least one round of Crushiatus. Dark Lord’s hand lifted his head, he suppressed the shiver looking in the amusement in red eyes.

“...A faster way, indeed, though not pleasant.”

And then the pain split his vision, he felt Dark Lord’s presence in his mind, it felt like someone was using a heated poker to rut through his brain. He bit at his tongue hard, the taste of copper filling his mouth. He tried not to choke, to maintain his posture - to fill his painful brain with pictures of
The light stabbed his eyes. His head was pounding. His hip and shoulder screamed in pain as the hard stone pressed on them. He gasped.

“Ah, you’re awake, Severus. Good. Good.”

So he was still in the presence of the Dark Lord and alive. Struggling, he pushed back up to kneeling position. His knees protested with a loud crack.

“Stand, Severus. Sleep on the knowledge you received and practise whenever you can. You do not have an excuse not to come when I summon you, now.”

He pushed himself up leaning with both hands on the floor before straightening to standing. Pain rippled through him and at that point he wasn’t sure if it was caused by the Dark Lord’s actions or the floor. Most importantly - he was alive, which meant that still had a chance to help Potter. He bowed as much he could with words.

“I will, My Lord, thank you.”

He stumble to the hallway and leaned on the wall.

“Severus…” there was almost a whisper behind him, Narcissa was looking at him through the barely open door and mentioning him to come. He walked few unsteady steps to reach the door and she pulled him into the room.

Lucius was sleeping on the sofa and he gave her one concerned look. Lucius looked nothing like himself, from dishevelled unkempt hair to hollow cheeks and yellowish parlour with dark bags beneath his eyes.

“The prison didn’t agree with him.” mildly remarked Narcissa “How bad it is?”

“You know I can’t…”

“I asked if you have any injuries, Severus.” she smiled at him, softening the steel in her voice.

“Just an overzealous use of Legilimency, nothing a night of sleep won’t cure.” he sighed.

Narcissa offered him a chair and he took it gratefully. She poured them both a tea and handed him his cup.

“It is not much, but it will help.” she smiled

“An English cure-it-al…” he replied politely, wondering if there was a point under this too formal behaviour.

“In any other occasion - yes, but not at the moment. Drink your tea, Severus.”

“Cissa…?”

“Consider this my gratitude for taking care of my son, Severus. Drink your tea.” she smiled and sipped from her cup.

He snuffed the tea, sharp smell of invigoration draught blended with black tea and apricot leaves. He
smiled gratefully and nodded, taking a large gulp.

“Thank you, Cissa.”

“These are the...interesting...if not civil times we live in. A small indulgence in proper ethic with a dear and old friend in all we can afford. Which makes moments like this all the more precious, wouldn’t you agree.” Narcissa spoke quietly, as a reply to her words Lucius snorted few times and shifted on the sofa.

“I am inclined to agree, or rather I would if your husband wouldn’t exhibit such poor manners at the moment.”

She nodded. They shared few more cups, by his estimation enough draught to enable him to safely apparate to the Hogwarts gates. Misty was waiting for him to transport him directly to his office. He tiredly sat in the chair.

“My boy...”

“Not now, Albus.” he growled

“Severus...” tried Albus's portrait once more.

“I said not now, Old Man.”

“What happened, Severus?” asked Albus, but now his tone was cautious, more of a tone of meddling and annoyingly curious old man. He smiled at the portrait, nodding.

“You can’t stop pestering me even when dead. If I could peel you off that wall I know where would I put you!” he snapped.

“And where would that be?” Asked Albus

“In the room, I use the least of all others.” he hissed.

“Very well.” Albus sounded insulted, he stood up and walked out of his portrait.

“Finally!” he mumbled. The other portraits grumbled at his rudeness so he bellowed “Silence!!!” before retreating to his bedroom.

Once he was settled and near the sleep, Albus's voice whispered. “Just nod your head if you agree.”

He nodded.

“You visited the Dark Lord this evening?”

Nod.

“He did something to your head, used Legilimency or another kind of mind magic on you?”

Another nod.

“How long before you know what he did to you?”

He huffed and rolled in bed.

“Right, sorry my boy. Would you know tomorrow?
He tilted his head shrugging.

“Very well, let me know when you find out. Rest now, Severus.”....

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat in the bed gulping for air. Her head was pounding and she was sure that a headache wasn’t hers. She cast a *Lumos*, Severus was curled up in his bed, shaking. She reached to get up and... Changing her mind she carefully took notes and whispered *Nox*. 
Poppy stepped into the darkened room and frowned, it appeared to her that Hermione didn’t exaggerate in her note. She scanned the room with one swift look.

Hermione and Draco stood up from the table, covered with books and parchments. When she arrived they were hunched above the reading material, arguing about something in hushed voices. Few jars with blue flames provided too little reading light for her liking.

Severus was huddled under the covers. She was impressed by how much of mobility he regained. She was also concerned with his lack of reaction.

The kids approached her and she turned to them narrowing her eyes and asking them instead of greeting. “Why is so dark in here?”

They glanced at each other, Draco gulped and Hermione looked to the ground.

“Well? I’m waiting.” she prompted them to talk, loud enough for Severus to hear.

“Well, Severus is bothered by light, and we…” started Hermione in almost a whisper.

“And you allowed him to bully you into darkening the room and destroying your eyesight without proper reading light.” she huffed. “I won’t stand for that.”

With that declaration, she walked to the window and opened the heavy dark drapes. Light rushed into the room making the kids blink and Severus to groan and bark, not removing the covers from his head.

“Close the bloody drapes!”

“Close them yourself.” she turned to Snape and then looked at kids “These are to stay open until he walks to them himself and close them.”
Both kids nodded. Severus uncovered his head and glared at her, squinting at the light. She ignored his glare. He growled at her.

“Poppy, close the drapes or face the consequences,....”

“And what are you going to do? Stare me to death? Stop acting like the stubborn mule you are, Severus Snape. I won’t indulge your wallowing in self-pity.” she cut him off, sharply. She knew she shouldn’t talk to him like that, but first, she had to remind him with whom he was talking too.

There was a gasp, released from the kids at the way she talked to Severus. She turned to them.

“Girl, your assumption was spot on, so why did you indulge in his unhealthy requests? I left you the list…”

“But the list does not say what to do in these situations.” cried Hermione, looking like she is on the verge of tears. Poppy sighed silently, blowing through the nose.

“That is not an excuse, you have your brain, Miss Granger, I do expect from you to use it. You are stubborn enough not to succumb to his unreasonable demands. You didn’t so far, and I expect from you not to start now.”

There was a sarcastic snort to her right, coming from Severus. She sharply turned her head to him. Something didn’t add up. Poppy’s eyes roamed from Hermione to Severus and back.

He found something to hold over her head, stubborn mule. “Do you have anything to report, Severus? Anything that would require from me to remove Miss Granger from your side?” she asked and Severus took a breath to speak but she added briskly “I would need a legitimate reason, Severus, your annoyance with the girl is not a reason.”

Something was going on, she just didn’t know what. Hermione was red in face and she was looking at the floor, curling her shoulders to the front. Draco’s eyes widened, he was glancing at Hermione and Severus. Severus just shook his head with a blank expression. She nodded.

Maybe Potter was right in his assumption, I have to tell Minerva to visit the girl. A bit of separation may be good for both of them.

“Very well girl. Both of you, out, now.”

Hermione and Draco almost dashed out of the room. One would think I threatened to eat them alive.

She moved and sat at the edge of the bed. Severus was glaring at her again, but his glare lacked the customary coldness and sharpness. It was just an empty stare on frowning face.

“What is going on, Severus.”

“Did something supposed to happen?” he asked, defensive and prickly as ever.

“No, not to my knowledge. I am satisfied with how well you advancing...” she observed him, but couldn’t read anything on his face. He just snorted. “You are…”

“I am molested by that...child with your permission, Poppy.” he snapped.

“Physical therapy is not molestation.” she frowned at him, Severus was always one of the most difficult patients she had.

“She is...handsy.” he growled, “I do not need her...touching my....gluteus or-or anything else, for that
“She is not handsy, that is called massage, Severus, and it is part of therapy as much as exercises.” she replied evenly. His empty eyes filled with anger.

“And bathing? Is that part of therapy.”

“Can you bathe on your own?” she asked.

“Partially. I certainly do not allow her or anyone else to…” he paused briefly, “I had enough humiliations in my life, no more.”

“She bathed you while you were in a coma, how is this more humiliating….” she started and he snapped again.

“By Merlin and Salazar, woman! It is!”

“I see. Given your age and previous condition, one would think that you would be relieved if not happy.” this was a blatant provocation on her part, but she had to test him.

“And I assure you I am ecstatic, can’t you tell?” he drawled with an empty sound echoing in his voice. “I do not appreciate being touched, groped, exposed in any way and you know that. And especially now.”

“Why? What changed and to what extent?” she asked, another provocation mixed with her medical duty.

“You tell me…” he narrowed his bland eyes at her.

“It is harmless, Severus. As long…” she started

“For the love of… You daft biddy, the child is my ex-student!” the rage burst out of him in a gush of words almost choking him “I have no desire to...flaunt...my charms....to her. No matter of their state.”

“And the state of...arousal...happens during her massage?” she asked, unconcerned.

Poppy knew that this was possible even almost certainly expected. His body healed at much faster pace than his mind, it always did. What she didn’t predict was his lack of control. It seemed to her that he couldn’t control his body functions any more than he could control his memories. *Is it all connected somehow?*

“Even if you can’t control it, Severus, as you recall it is nothing that Miss Granger hasn’t deal with.”

“Yes, my memory serves me well, too well in fact.” he mumbled

“Is it a general condition or is it somehow connected to Miss Granger?” she asked - another provocation. He refused to answer, staring in the space behind her with a dignified look on his face.

“Fine. I have my answer anyway.” she smiled at him and he glared at her, it was almost heartbreaking how much he failed to do what was almost his trademark. “You knows what is happening to you, Severus, don’t you. You know what is wrong with you.”

“I have rather a good idea…” he replied, the hollow echo in his voice deepening.

“Severus, did you talked to anyone about … what are you going through.”
“I did, I complain every bloody time - it seems to have no effect.” he grumbled.

“I meant about your memories, about what you went through in war. Both of them.” she amended softly. She considered him to be her protege, and her heart bleeds for him.

“And whom would you suggest, Poppy? Who would be the suitable vessel for all the things I wouldn’t confess to even Albus or Dark Lord or Lucius?” his voice had another deeper note of emptiness.

“You can talk to me, or someone from St. Mungo’s.” He just continued to the spot behind her “Or you could talk about it to Miss Granger - she already has…”

“No.” it was angry low hiss

“She does lack a proper training, but you could still talk. She is already known…”

“She knows only what I can’t prevent her to know. I won’t be responsible for permanently damaging the girl, Poppy, and that is my final word.” he growled at her.

“Well, you have to talk to somebody and if you won’t talk to a stranger...then pick one of the people that Surround you.” she replied harshly.

“That child is rutting too much in my head. You gave her the permission to have almost unlimited access to my body. And I refuse to give to her what little of me is left!” he continued, talking over her words not hearing her at all.

_He is too comfortable for his own good, we do need to take the girl away from him, even if only temporarily. I have to talk to Minerva._

“A healer, and in your case Miss Granger,....”

“I said no !!!”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The sound of alarms startled Hermione so much that she nearly dropped her tea-cup. Narcissa seemed to be unphased by the ringing, the woman placed her teacup on the table with unrushed grace and glanced at her with a small smile.

“I was expecting this. Poppy does have a knack to unsettle him. Shall we?”

They raised from their seats and walked to the Severus’s room. Hermione felt like she could run or apparate just to be there and see that he is ok, that Poppy is fine, but Narcissa wasn't in a hurry. Fifteen to twenty paces, no more from Narcissa's quarters to Severus’s and it took them what seemed forever to get there.

The door of the room was open. Lucius was already in the room, and she could swear that he was doing his best not to laugh. Poppy was sitting on the bed, looking unharmed and unphased. Severus was in a half sitting position arm stretched, frowning at Matron.

The fine dust lingered in the air, the floor was covered in rubble. She could hear Narcissa sigh.

“You know, Severus, I think I’ll just forego the mantle until you are healed. Really there is no point in replacing it.”

Lucius roared in laughter, even Poppy chuckled. Severus flopped back on the bed, looking defeated
even if he was still glaring at Matron. His lips stretched in a tight, thin line.

“Well, you may act like a two-year-old, flaunting with wild magic, Severus… That, however, does not make my words any less truthful. Think about it.”

Matron stood up and approached Lucius, Narcissa and herself. Poppy gave one stern stare to Lucius and turned to Narcissa.

“I do apologize, my dear.”

“It is fine Poppy. Thank you for putting up with him.” smiled Narcissa.

“If I give up, no one else would manage to rein him.” sighed Matron. “Girl...” the Matron called and her heart started to beat faster “You will continue as you did so far. Where is the boy?”

Hermione wanted to say that Draco separated the moment they were out of the room, she was even surprised not to see him in the room when she arrived when he called from the hallway. She twirled to see him and gazed at the girl behind him.

The girl was tall, blond and with the royal stance. Hermione thought that the girl looked familiar to her, she must have seen her in the dining room or halls of Hogwarts. She was sure that the girl wasn’t in her year, but still, something in her features was too familiar.

Poppy cleared her throat. “Two of you, follow me.”

Matron lead them to the hallway again, and they followed while the girl was saying hello to Malfoys. Once in a hallway, Matron cast a privacy charm and cleared her throat.

“I’ve got the word from St. Mungo’s. They are sending you their gratitude, especially to you boy. They are working on the cure based on your findings. And I was assured that the full credits will be given to the two of you for the initial idea.”

Draco smiled, she felt like a huge stone rolled off her chest. “So, they will be able to help him?”

“Unfortunately no, not right away. First of all, they already developed few healing possibilities, they do show short-term results. But even that won’t be possible for Severus.” explained Matron with a grim face.

“But why?” she asked. Hermione felt like she was submerged under the deep water, she felt hard to breathe and like bursting.

“His case is...different. In order to help him, the healer would have to establish a connection with his mind - which is impossible Miss Granger, because of your connection with him.”

“Then I could...that is if they teach me how…” she felt hope bubbling in her chest.

“That is out of the question, girl.” sternly cut her off Matron “You two manage to make an even bigger mess each time you try, and I won’t be responsible for more troubles from the two of you. And you are still banned from learning about mind magic and practising it Miss Granger.”

Hermione felt like Matron just hit her with a curse. There was an odd emptiness inside her, that pressed on her chest from inside, in the most painful way. Matron’s face softened, and she smiled continuing to talk.

“But more than that. They couldn’t try even if you managed to break the connection, Miss Granger.
His magic isn’t stable enough for something like that. Not to mention that Severus would rather snap healers neck than allow him to poke around his head.”

She nodded, still feeling that emptiness pressing on her. It felt like she failed all her subjects at once - she felt lost and powerless. Matron continued.

“I just wanted to keep the two of you up to date. Now then, Mr Malfoy take Miss Greengrass and Miss Granger for a walk or whatever you kids do. I’ll stay with Severus until he calms down. Wait here, I’ll send Miss Greengrass out.”

She watched as Marton turned and went back to the room then turned to Draco.

“We did all that for nothing! Well, not for nothing, they will heal others and that is good but… Wait, ‘Miss Greengrass’ as in Daphne Greengrass? I didn’t recognize her at all.”

“That is because it is her sister, Bucktooth.” smirked Draco. She took the air to return the insult when a soft, measured voice from behind stopped her.

“That is no way to talk to a member of the Golden Trio, Draco.”

Hermione swirled on her heel to face a girl. Astoria smiled at her politely, her posture reminded Hermione of Narcissa.

“It is a privilege to meet you Miss Granger.” she tilted her head slightly in a greeting.

“I...I’m...It is nice...The honour is mine Miss Greengrass.” stuttered Hermione, wanting nothing more than to kick herself. It was like she forgot everything she learned so far.

“And we may get in the workroom before my mother catches us chatting in the hallway.” huffed Draco, his forehead was pink and Hermione found that amusing.

*So, this is his girl.* She thought trailing behind them.
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The July quietly slipped to August, the weather was warm with too few of rainy and gloomy days, he yearned for them. He wanted to escape the brightness of the sun. The cheerful weather that was so much at odds with his own inner gloom.

Narcissa and Hermione continued to exert their will, pushing him to do exercises, even and especially when he snarled and argued with them. He could feel his muscles returning to their strength. Not that it mattered. The day before he even managed to make a few shaky steps, leaning heavily on the shoulders of Narcissa and Hermione. Not that it mattered either.

Lucius came at least once a day, he talked about everything and nothing. Not that it mattered. He would listen to his old friend, annoyed and ashamed, nodding politely. Participating in the conversation as much as he could without snapping. It still didn’t matter.

Poppy was more than satisfied with his progress, with walking and his muscle recovery and… He stopped listening. Why were all of them so blind? It didn’t matter. Small things, insignificant… A grown man in his forties learning to walk again, hardly a newsworthy material.

A family of Death Eaters, one of the social elite, showing a mercy to a poor half-blood friend, the Dark Lord’s weapon, the right arm of darkness. Trying to integrate themselves and him into society once more. Not a front page material - not now at any rate. It didn't matter, not on a large scale of things.

A little Know-it-all, miss handsy, was still ruining her reputation - this time deliberately. She chose to stay, chose to taint her good name for his sake. Like that would have any effect - it didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered in a long run.

He could walk. He could reclaim his family last name and all their fortune, all their privileges… It didn’t matter at all. People were still the same. They will bow before him, they will lie their way to his good will and - they will still despise and hate him.

And even his “dream lady” abandoned him. Or at least that’s how it seemed to him. There are no dreams of her, she doesn’t show up - for a debate or as a seductress. But that…that is his fault. Yes, he knows what is going on with him, he just doesn’t have the strength to do anything about it.
The only marginally interesting thing, the only thing that can reach his num brain is Draco. The boy has an agenda, he has a plan. And if he isn’t too tired to get involved Severus would ask and offer his help. But not now. Still, he follows closely what is going on.

Oh, yes - Draco is leading Hermione to some still unseen goal. First, he left the papers for her, turned and folded on just the right page. He doesn’t know what was the article Draco aimed at, but he knew enough to know how looks like when someone setting the trap. After that, he informed Hermione about the fact that he already passed his NEWTs. The other day he voluntarily exposed Hermione to Daphne, after that Hermione was quiet and absent-minded for the most of the evening.

He wondered briefly should he be worried for the girl. And he most certainly would be if this was Lucius…but Draco… Draco was all bark and no bite. His Death Eater days took all the fight out of the boy. Besides, even if his parents gave their blessing, a political move no doubt even if Narcissa tried to negate it, the Greengrass family was always pro-Muggle lenient. So in retrospect, Hermione was safe whatever Draco planned.

But, what was the boy's endgame?

The day dragged on, same as previous ones. Nagging elf around meals times, two fussy females forcing him to suffer through a series of exercises… In retrospect, he should have known that sooner or later something was bound to happen. And it did.

Hades screeched loudly, ruffling his feathers at the brown owl, a common resident of Hogwarts owlery. He glanced at the raven with fondness, bloody owls from Hogwarts never managed to bring good news.

I don’t want to talk to her. He thought with a silent groan. Minerva sent him a note informing him that she is going to visit later that day. Maybe she wants funds for the Hogwarts, she did try to convince Albus to consider taking patrons for the school.

Severus sighed. He was aware that both Hermione and Draco watched him with poorly hidden curiosity. He took self-filling quill from the nightstand and scrawled his reply sending the owl back to Hogwarts. Hades glared at him, feather still ruffled - even the bird judged him.

Hours later Minerva walked into the room, with Longbottom and Lovegood trailing behind her. He groaned, forcing himself to glare at his former students and Minerva, she never mentioned that she will bring those two.

“It is nice to see you, Severus. You look better.”

“Good day Professor.” Lovegood girl smiled at him airly.

Merlin, she is still out of the touch with reality. “I wish I could say the same, Minerva.”

His words were lost in a happy cry from Hermione and annoyed huff from Draco. Hermione was hugging her friends, sending a polite hello to Minerva.

“We will go to the…”

“There is no need for that Miss Granger, I came to see Severus and you.” replied Minerva, he knew that tone.

What is she plotting now?

“By all means, Minerva. Do state your business so we could get over with this quickly and as
painlessly as possible.” he wished he could sound cross or acerbic as his old self did but even to his own ears he just sounded tired and deflated.

“This isn’t an official visit, Severus. But, I can make it one if you wish so.” Minerva glanced at him, sitting carefully on the edge of the bed to his right. She was positioned between him and four of their students.

So I am just an excuse, she is here for the girl.

He wasn’t sure should he feel relieved or insulted. He had nothing against Minerva, and she played her part perfectly if unknowingly in the last year of the war. She was one thing he could count on, her need to spite him and to protect students.

“I would prefer if you do so.”

“Very well. Do you plan on returning to teach at any point?”

“No. You very well know that teaching was never my goal, not when I started and not now.” he replied stiffly, this was too many information in too public setting, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. “I am now well off and have no need to earn my keep.”

Minerva sat quietly looking at him with sad eyes for a while before she nodded. “In that case…”

“I am sure we could work something out as long as you do not insist on me setting a foot in that cursed place - ever again, Minerva. That is one of my conditions.”

“One?” Minerva looked at him over the rims of her glasses perched on the tip of her nose, her face a fit stiff. “What would be other conditions?”

“We will discuss that in private, Minerva.”

“You may speak freely now. Neville is already a member of Hogwarts staff, in a year or two he will take over Pomona’s class. Miss Lovegood is very supportive towards Hogwarts. Malfoys already pledged their patronage.”

He looked at Minerva but kept a corner of the eye on the sofa. Hermione was changing colours, her face shifting emotions every few moments. Draco had a smug gleam in his eyes.

Slippery little weasel.

Now he understood Draco’s plan, maybe not the reason behind it, but reason didn’t matter either way. He would be the one to benefit from Draco’s plan. He will lend a helping hand to the boy. Leaving a long silence to fill the room he finally nodded.

“Very well, I will set a few funds - scholarship programs for Muggleborns and Half-bloods from poor families, tuition and obligatory school provisions. A separate fund for the same group sorted in Slytherin and scholarship for mastery in Potions under the condition that suggested candidate pass the test I devised.”

“Do you plan on offering a mastery course to the students?”

“No.” he had no will or inclination of teaching to the rest of his days, which may not be as long as everybody around him predicted. “I am done with teaching, with idiots.”

“If that is what you wish, Severus. However, if you change your mind…”
“I won’t.” he cut her off.

The conversation started to tire him, it took a lot of his strength to maintain at least a seemingly normal attitude. What he really wished for was to be left alone. Minerva seemed to sense as much, she didn’t move but she did turn to Hermione.

“And shall we see you in school this fall, Miss Granger?”

“Ummm, you see, Professor, I’d love to but…” Hermione started to stutter. He watched her covertly, suppressing the need to bark at the girl that she should go, consequences be damned.

“But what, Miss Granger?” Minerva looked the girl over the rims of her glasses.

“Well, I take care of Severu...ummm...Profes...amm...Mr. Sna...Prince, and I still do hold the capacity of his secretary…”

“I have no use of an uneducated secretary, Miss Granger. Your position is purely perfunctory at this moment due to the circumstances.” He replied in a flat matter-of-fact tone. Hermione’s head snapped in his direction, eyes big and almost scared.

What is she afraid of?

“Yes, I understand that, but… Matron left me in charge of Mr Prince’s therapy and…” Hermione tried again and this time Minerva stopped her from talking.

“Poppy informed me that Severus is progressing nicely, and for his needs, at this point, she can provide alternate help.” Minerva raised her hand to prevent Hermione from trying to speak and continued. “If you try to give that unfortunate lapse in judgement regarding the Occlumency, Miss Granger, I have to inform you that I talked with Albus about that.”

There was a collective gasp in the room. He felt like someone stabbed him or punched him hard under the ribs. Minerva just tightened her face more and gave a sigh, one she used when she was talking about particularly dense students.

“You do remember that we are in the wizarding world? Portraits can be overly talkative, but occasionally they can be of use.” Minerva had her lecturing tone of voice. “As Albus informed me, Miss Granger, your accident was avoided for a long time due to a careful research of practitioner of the art, and the fact that knowledge is transferred from teacher to pupil. It is not something you simply may read in books.”

Hermione blushed and bowed her hear mumbling and too quiet apology. Minerva nodded and continued to talk.

“You are not the first who made this mistake, maybe only luckier given that Severus does not suffer from any serious consequences.”

“I beg to differ, Minerva.” He grumbled.

“Oh, Severus, shush. As I was saying… Albus informed me that you two can be physically separated, only your metal connection will stay until Severus is well enough to dismantle it properly or allow the Mind Healer to do it. As long as neither of you is in a life-threatening danger or severely mentally damaged by the curse, you will be fine. Albus told me to look for references for the process in the Atlas of Unusual Healing Accidences.”

“Yes, but Severus has a very strict exercises regime and some of those are from the Muggle world,
who would…” Hermione tried again, this time Draco cut in.

“I will. That is if you arrange it with the Minister and Wizengamot. I may stay here still as your assistant and take care of Severus. I know all by heart. And you can teach me that massage…”

Lovegood girl giggled, Longbottom blushed to the roots of his hair but Hermione beamed at Draco.

“Would you?”

“It certainly beats returning to the Ministry for the remaining of my penance.” replied Draco.

“And you will be in the same year with me.” chimed in Lovegood

“Didn’t you already finished your schooling?” asked Hermione.

“No, Neville did. I had to retake exams from the sixth year. And I had to take over the editing of the Quibbler, dad is home finally but he is...he's not well. Headmistress allowed me to do that from school.” smiled Lovegood “And Neville is a teacher now…”

“Assistant teacher.” quietly corrected her Longbottom.

“Assistant teacher then. You won’t be alone. What do you say, Hermione?”

“Well, I want to finish my seventh year properly…” she glanced at Draco.

“Don’t look at me, I was homeschooled - properly.” sneered Draco at her.

“Draco,” Lovegood turned to him. “Could I bother you for the interview for Quibbler? We are gaining readership and becoming a sought-out and respected magazine now.”

“Very well, that's settled then, I wish to speak with Severus in private now.” Minerva cleared her throat. The kids stood up without a word.

“We could go to the…” offered Hermione.

“Rosarium! We could sit in the Rose garden.” Draco suggested.

“Misty will call you when the time comes.” He added, eager to get rid of them, so many people in the room started to tire and annoy him.
Chapter Notes

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Minerva watched as the young people left the room, then she turned back to Severus. Her heart quivered. It wasn’t that she...Well, that was just it. She was still indecisive. She couldn’t decide if she’s still angry at him or if she can trust him - she never did, not fully. He never was one of her own…

Then again, her own turned out to be not so trustworthy as well.

And her anger is divided, she is angry at Albus as well. Her teacher, her friend, her mentor. She has no reason to doubt Potter’s words, and if Severus really did only follow Albus’s instructions... Well, the whole scheme had Albus written all over it.

At the ball she wasn’t thinking, she just slipped into an old role and it felt good, comfortable. But now, she is here with an agenda. She has to judge the situation and act in the best interest of her students…

Problem is - he, also, is/was her student.

He never looked better. Not as a student and not later as her colleague. And he never looked worse. This...this shell in front of her, this defeated, lifeless husk wasn’t Severus she knew most of her and his life.

Once they stayed alone, he turned away from her, pulling his covers and tucking his hand over his face.

Was all that, only moments ago, just an act?

The window in the room is opened and the sound of the younger generation reached them. With a sigh, she turned to Severus, still and distant. She cleared her throat and addressed him in a bit harsh voice.

“I do hope that you instructed your students to behave in the accordance with at least basic protocol when one has visitors.”

His hand slid from his face, but a fraction or more than a fraction too slow. His features rearranged into a weak frown, one that lacked intent behind the mask. His eyes hollow, as hollow as his voice.
“I did not call you to visit me, Minerva. Yet I know why are you here.”

“Do you?” She raised her eyebrow, provoking him.

“Do me a favour, Minerva - take her with you. Now - would be preferable.” he hissed, or at least tried and failed at sounding….anything but tired.

Through the window, a laughter floated into the room. It was nice and slightly odd to hear them all laughing. New times...two Gryffindors, one Ravenclaw and one Slytherin sitting, chatting and laughing.

“I wonder if that is what is best for you? Miss Granger did an admirable job, you never looked better.” She smiled at him with a tight calculated smile. “Poppy informs me that your recovery is progressing nicely. At least your physical recovery. By the looks of things, you should be grateful to have Miss Granger’s assistance.”

She noticed the swift shift of emotions on his face, too many emotions and too fast for her to read them all. It appeared to her that he was leading some sort of inner struggle, finally setting a blank expression he grumbled.

“Yes, the girl is a gift for any witch or a wizard which life’s goal is to be poked, molested, force-fed, tortured, touched, forced to suffer through her know-it-all blunders, have her poke inside his or her’s head… Shall I continue, or are you ready to take her away?”

Minerva chuckled. She would never claim that she knew Severus - he was all cloak and daggers, she doubted that anyone knew him really. Granger was curious by nature, she probably did invade on his privacy to the degree he wasn’t comfortable with.

“Oh, I’m sure it’s not that bad, Severus.”

“Minerva, your precious pupil insists on bathing me.” He smiled at her with vicious satisfaction.

“I am fully aware of that, Poppy told me.” She replied evenly, if he was trying to provoke a reaction from her he was doing a poor job. “And, she is neither a girl nor my pupil. Technically, not yet. She is of age, Severus - you do remember that?”

He just huffed and turned his face from her.

“Severus, you do remember that Miss Granger is a year older than her peers, add to that all the hours she doubled in her third year… well, the girl is technically in her early twenties.”

“A child.” He exclaimed. “She will be twenty in September, Minerva, if you want to play that game.” he replied in the cold but still empty voice. “And she is a pest I can’t get rid off.”

“Do you really want to get rid of her so much?” she asked, something didn’t add up...something was off but she couldn’t put her finger on it. There was a shadow of stubborn almost childish resolution on his face.

_Time to poke the sleeping snake._ She thought and smiled warmly. “I think that Miss Granger started to develop feelings for you, a crush of sorts.”

He replied with an annoyed huff.

“It is harmless, Severus.” She turned her back to him, pretending to watch in the yard but looking at his window reflection.
“Nothing is ever harmless with your lot, Minerva. Unthinking, rash....” he started and she stopped him mid-sentence.

“As I recall, you were not above rash as well.”

“Yes, and look where it got me. Rash behaviour is forgiven... criminal behaviour is forgiven to your lot - but never, never to the likes of me.” There was a deep bitterness in his voice now.

She remained silent. Poppy, Harry even Draco - they all judged the situation correctly, each of them from their own angle. Minerva suppressed the sigh - she couldn’t say that even her perception wasn’t bias, coloured by her own anger and sadness and guilt. She had to make a decision, one that will be beneficial to both Severus and Hermione alike.

_A time apart will do them a world of good._

She briefly wondered should she interfere more. After all, some customs were archaic but not bad on their own. Was she willing to allow one of her own to be subjected to them? Did she have to right to interfere? She did once, with the disastrous results - and magic had its own way of setting thing straight.

If it’s meant to be...who am I to prevent what is about to happen? I will have to discuss this with Lucius before I make my final decision, and I’ll have a year to observe and make my own conclusions. There is no need to be rash.

As summoned by her thoughts, there was a light knock on the door and Narcissa entered the room, followed by Lucius. Malfoy senior was hobbled, heavily leaning on the cane, she didn’t notice that at the party.

“Headmistress.” Narcissa bowed her head lightly. “Would you mind if we join you for a bit?”

“Mrs Malfoy, Mr Malfoy, I will welcome your company if Severus doesn’t mind.” she replied turning to face her hosts.

Severus still had a blank expression, he was staring at the ceiling. At her words, he groaned. Through the window, they could hear a lively but friendly conversation in the garden, noisy and followed by occasional laughter. To her, it almost sounded like a promise, a promise for a better future.

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Luna was talking about...something, but Hermione barely heard the word Luna said. She was lost in her own thoughts. She glanced at Draco. He was sitting in one of the few ornamental iron garden chairs, royal in posture and manners.

_Will he be able to take care of him?_

She nearly jumped when Luna placed a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Hermione, I’m absolutely convinced that Draco can take a good care of Professor.”

“No offence Luna, but you are also convinced that Wrackspurts are a real thing.” she sighed. “Not that I doubt but...”

“I can follow the instructions, and even do things without magic if I want to, Bucktooth.” sneered Draco.
“Can you and for how long, Ferretface?” She narrowed her eyes at Draco.

“I wouldn’t do it for you, or any of present - but I would do it for Severus and you know it, Granger. Why do you think I’m working with you now?” Draco grinned.

Luna and Neville were quiet, their heads turning like they were observing tennis match. Not that any of them would know what a tennis match is. Hermione rolled her eyes to hide the feeling of not belonging. She was surprised, she didn’t felt it since the end of the war.

“To save your own skin?” She narrowed her eyes at him in the challenge.

“Well, my skin wouldn’t need saving if you didn’t interfere in the first place. I worked on that Werewolf law to save my skin, Bucktooth - I help you with Severus because I want to help him.” Draco had a smug face while talking. “For him, I’d even agree to work in the team with Longbottom.”

“No, thank you.” was Neville's instant and a bit absent-minded reply.

That broke the tension and they laughed. Even Neville, blushing to the tips of his ears.

“But, you do want to finish your education - don’t you?” chimed Luna again.

“Of course I do!” she replied.

“And, if you come I won’t be alone.” Luna continued like she didn’t even hear Hermione's reply. Luna was gazing at the rose bush, but she shook her head, and Hermione suppressed the need to roll her eyes. She wondered if Luna is talking to her or to the bush. “You need to cleanse your roses from Rumples, Draco.”

“From wha….?” Draco waved his hand and they laughed again at Malfoy’s face.

“Please Hermione.” Neville leaned to her and whispered in her ear “I need help with her.”

She turned to Neville wondering with what he exactly needed help. She remembered that Nevill had a crush on Luna in the fifth and sixth year.

“Are you two dating?” She asked suddenly.

“No, we tried, it didn’t work out.” Smiled Luna airily. “Neville is with Hannah now.”

“Hannah?” She asked, the name did ring a bell but only faintly.


“Hannah likes to spend time outside the Glasshouses with him.” Luna wrinkled her nose. “They are good together.”

“You liked to linger in them.” Replied Neville to Luna somewhat reproachfully, and then turned to all. “And that wasn’t such a good thing.”

“He was just a pup, Nev.” Luna frowned and Hermione wondered if she ever saw Luna frown before.

“Hermione, do you remember Fluffy?” asked Neville and she bulged her eyes at him then turned to Luna.
“Don’t tell me you got yourself a Cerberus!”

“No, nothing like that. This one isn’t dangerous at all.” Smiled Luna.

“Not dangerous?!” exclaimed Neville. “Luna it's a Gytrash! He dug through entire Greenhouse, destroyed months of work and galleons worth of herbs. He attacked you on numerous occasions, not to mention that Devilles Snare nearly killed you when you were rescuing the beast!”

“Well, I returned it to his mum.” Smiled Luna.

“Hagrid did, he had enough mind to know that they can’t be tamed.” Grumbled Neville.

“And that plant of yours needs love, Neville.” Luna replied a bit sharply.

“Please, please, don’t go again trying to hug her, Luna.” Whined Neville.

“Hugh what?” asked Draco, obviously amused. Hermione wasn’t so amused, knowing Luna she probably aimed at something dangerous.

“Venomous Tentacula” groused Neville and they laughed again.

“I told you she is infested and grumpy, but if you clear her out of…”

Nevil groaned at Luna and they all laughed. Hermione suddenly realised how much she missed all this. She forgot how annoyingly good can be just sitting with friends and laugh.

“And if you get back to school, I won’t be alone in the room.” Luna turned to her.

“I’m not a Ravenclaw, Luna.” Well, talking with Luna had its moments most of the time. Even if Luna was changed by the war, it seemed to her that she wasn’t affected as much.

“All returnees are placed in the special wing - together. But, most of them finished their schooling last year.” Explained Neville

“We would have an entire wing to ourselves.” Luna's eyes twinkled happily.

“Ok, if... IF I return, Luna you have to promise me - no odd pets or necklaces or… whatever.” She glared at Luna. When did I decide to go back?

“Ok, I’ll just keep them in empty Greenhouse, the one you still didn’t fix.” Nodded Luna and Neville just groaned again.

“And, I’ll send you daily reports of Severus’s progress.” Added Draco and she glared at him.

“You are awfully keen to see my back, Ferretface.”

“And that surprises you, Bucktooth?” Lazily replied Draco, raising an eyebrow.

Elf popped up. “Young Master, Missy Big Mouth and guests, Madam is calling you for tea with them.”
Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: In agreement with my beta – I’m posting this chapter unedited when she finishes with fixing the grammar and with me, I will re-post this chapter at a later date. At that time, I do expect that some parts will be enhanced and there will be no grammatical errors. I leave it to you to read it now or wait some more. When I upload edited chapter I’ll remove this note :)

Severus tightened the grip on his cup of tea. He glanced around the room with a solemn frown. Too many - too many people surrounded him when all he wanted were peace and quiet. And solitude. He felt disjointed, separated from the loth in his room. That was the only way he could cope with all of them cramped around him.

Not listening on the conversation he grunted in reply when Minerva addressed him. He was near the point where he would shout his throat raw or hex or even kill for the solitude.

The anger and annoyance battled the feeling of despair. If he could he would toss them out of the room. Even the bird could feel his distress. Hades took upon himself to settle on his shoulder, not touching still sensitive wound on his neck but from time to time pecking on his hair.

“You are not listening, Severus.” Minerva cleared her throat and he blinked at her.

No, he wasn’t listening. There was no point in that and he felt tired and deflated, the little strength he had he put into sitting quietly, trying to look as he always did. Another in a long line of deceits, acting was a skill he honed in the past years. That effort drained him faster than anything so far.

Minerva clucked her tongue with a stern frown, smoothing her features she turned to Narcissa. “Did you re-decorate? As I recall, that fireplace had a mantle.”

“We found that this is more suitable look under the circumstances. In time we will give this room a new look.” politely smiled Narcissa, glancing at him under the eye.

“Misty is grateful for new room Madam.” huffed an elf, she was popping in and out of the room, refiling plate with cookies.

“Traitor”, he thought gruffly.

Draco and Hermione snickered soundlessly. They both had at least enough presence of mind or decency to hide their smiles behind sips of tea. Lucius, on the other hand, had a smug face. He growled in his friend’s direction.

“Wild magic, I presume. Poppy informed me to be on alert.” Nodded Minerva, he frowned, that woman was quick on the uptake when it suited her. Minerva turned to him again. “Not to forget,
Filius, Pomona, Rolanda and Albus send you their regards."

He grunted, the sound between annoyance and disgust escaping from his partially constricted throat, breath slightly hitching at the mention of Albus’ name.

“He asked me to extend you an invitation, once you are better, to visit Hogwarts and talk to him,” said Minerva, her voice a bit stiff. Even if he wasn’t looking, Severus could tell that she disapproved of that request.

“I won’t set a foot to that place, Minerva - ever again...” he replied with all contempt he could muster, which wasn’t much.

“I do not understand you, Severus. You want to parton the school but you refuse to even visit the place. If you have a problem to talk to Albus, I can understand the sentiment, after all that he asked of you… But, surely…” she started.

*Merlin, the woman is a dog with the bone.*

He had no desire to explain to Minerva, of all people, why he wanted to leave that place behind, that prison, full of misfortune and misery - never to return. She wouldn’t, she couldn’t understand. Why don’t they leave him alone?

“Minerva, I have no problem with Albus. He was my confidant.” He attempted to pick his words carefully, not to raise the suspicion and maybe to force her to back down in disgust toward his callous nature. “I had full support from Albus, and I can assure you that he never asked of me more than I could handle. He never…”

“A lie. Don’t.” Hermione whispered and he stopped talking in favour of glaring at her with the warning.

She wasn’t looking at him, her eyes were firmly focused on her tea. Hermione shook her head, placing the teacup in Draco’s hand, the boy had a bemused look on his face. She sharply raised her head to look at him and repeated, much louder.

“Why do you lie? Why do you protect him?”

“Learn your place, Granger. And some manners.” He barked at her, but she ignored him. Her eyes furious and full of deep pain. His chest tightened. She shook her head, the moist gathered in her eyes, her voice vibrated with anger.

“He was not on your side. He used you, manipulated you, he was your worst enemy!”

Severus flinched, taking her words like a slap over the face. She had no right - no right to share his secrets, to shame him like that. He eyed the faces around the room, gauging the effect her words caused. Narcissa was sipping her tea like nothing happened, Lucius had a sly smile on his lips. His ex-students looked stricken and intimidated by her outburst. Minerva was shocked to silence. There was no help coming his way.

*How typical.*

Wasn’t it enough that she rutted around his head, his memories. Why did she felt urged to share them, to share his misery for everyone to see?

“*Granger!* ” He bellowed in the desperate hope that calling her by her last name will shake her into proper, or at least suitable to him, behaviour. Shocked her or sting her in the same way she did
wound him.

“I don’t care.” She glared at him, large tears rolling from her eyes. “Call me as you please, it won’t change the fact - Dumbledore was never nice to you. Never! So stop protecting him, he does not deserve your protection!” She was nearly screaming now.

Tightness in his chest intensified, sending bursts of pain down his back.

“Miss Granger.” Minerva called her sharply, but the girl was still focused on him, he wasn’t even sure if Hermione heard Minerva’s voice.

“He…” She started again and he interrupted her harshly.

“He did what needed to be done, and so did I.”

She watched him, blinking. Moments dragged to infinity. He was so tired, too tired to fight the willful girl. She started to walk towards him, shaking her head.

“Stop. Just stop. Stop lying, stop pretending. Stop demeaning all that you did, all that you would never do if it wasn’t for him.” Her voice was a mixture of pleading and anger. He wasn’t strong enough to deal with this, with her words, with her tears. He wouldn’t be ready if they were alone, even less so in a room full of people.

If she is so keen on jabbing the rusty dagger in my guts and twisting until I’m dead, then why doesn’t she let me die? Why is she so eager to drag on my misery?

His throat tight, too much for him to speak. Hades joined in, loudly voicing his opinion, digging his talons into his shoulder. He felt helpless, deserted once more by those who surrounded him. The need to run - run and hide, to give in to his pain at least once in his life was overwhelming.

Why don’t they just leave me be? The air around him crackled with static.

She stopped, gave him one look before she sobbed. “Fine, suit yourself. See if I care.”

With that, she dashed out of the room. Narcissa stood up and smiled at him in a relaxing manner. Hades continued to screech and flapped his wings, hitting and scratching him with them. He hissed at the bird and Hades fly to his perch, turning his back to him.

He was tired, too tired.

Narcissa directed her worried eyes to his face, she nodded to him and smiled. “I do not wish to sound rude, but I do think that this visit is over.”

Her soft voice snapped others from the stunned stupor.

“Miss Granger…” Started Minerva.

“Will be fine, I’ll talk with the girl, Headmistress.” Replied Narcissa mildly.

Lucius was already shuffling out of the room, the threat of yet another magical burst wasn’t so appealing to his friend - he presumed. Draco placed both teacups on the table and reluctantly followed his father. Minerva stood up, her face pale and thigh.

“Well then, I’ll visit you some other time.” She nodded a bit stiffly.

“There is no need for that, Minerva. You got what you wanted, you needn't expose yourself to my
company any longer.” He admonished, the last drops of his strength were giving out and he had to
force them to leave him be, to live him alone before he crumbles. “Professor Longbottom. Miss
Lovegood.”

Neville just nodded, pale-faced, and slipped out of the room. The idiot boy was still afraid of him.
Narcissa gently urged Minerva with a friendly gesture, hooking her hand to Minerva’s and leading
her out of the room. Lovegood still lingered on and he glared at her. She smiled her loose smile at
him and tilted her head.

“Thank you for having us, Professor. Don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul like I promised. Everything
will be fine, you’ll see.”

The Lovegood girl left the room and he fell down on his back, rolling to his side and curling
instantly. The thrum of magic dissipated into thin air. He plunged his hand under the pillow and
twisted his fingers around the warm, smooth wood. Lovegood’s parting words, that small act of
kindness cut him deep.

Alone, he was finally alone.

His chest painfully tight, he gulped for air, curling on himself, even more, pulling his legs and
bending his head until his forehead touched the knees. His back screamed in pain, and he welcomed
it. There was familiarity in it, an outlet for a different kind of pain - the kind he couldn’t control.
Emptiness in his soul burned like acid.

Hades landed on his pillow and pecked the strand of his hair, crooning.

Severus didn’t know how long he was in this position, he was too tired to care. The door opened,
soft whispers floated through the air, bed bent. He didn’t care. One small part of his brain screamed
in alarm, he ignored it. Warm, soft hand caressed his face, smearing liquid over it. Was he crying?

It didn’t matter, he couldn’t muster enough strength to care.

Hand moved from his cheek to his hair. Severus just tried to curl more. Blessedly, he was left alone.
Whispers continued to fill the room, but after some time they either stopped or he couldn’t hear them
anymore. He didn’t care either way.

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...”They cannot see you, Severus.” droned the portrait, grating on his nerves.

“I know, Albus.” he replied, placing his signature on yet another in the seemingly endless line of
detentions. He could swear that this school never saw more detentions than during this year, there
wasn’t a student who didn’t have had at least one detention.

“ It is of utmost importance that they get that sword, Severus.” continued Albus.

“I know, Albus.” he answered almost not listening.

“That sword is the only... What are you doing, Severus?” He stood up, annoyed and started to
prepare himself for departure.

“Taking the bloody sword to them, if that will make you shut up and let me work.” he snapped.

“And how do you think of doing that? The Carrows...”
He ignored the ever-chattering portrait and took the sword, fastening it to his back. He took his travelling robe, gloves and shawl.

“Severus?” yapped Albus

“I’m going to practice flying. After all, I have his explicit order to do so.” he informed Albus, talking to the front door in the direction where one of the extendable ears were hidden. Nowadays he kept portraits under permanent Muffliato, he could hear them - they could hear him, courtesy to the modification he made in the spell. No one else could - if he didn’t wish so…

....Landing in an ankle-deep snow, Severus swore. He untangled the sword and tossed it into the lake. Shivering from cold, he cast a spell and when a small ball of light appeared he followed it to the forest clearing. The frozen ground was empty but he could feel a thrum of magic.

Twirling his wand he placed all his hopes that his patronus would find Potter. Idiot boy will follow it. Still, he stayed, Disillusioned under the tree, suppressing the need to stomp his feet. It was bloody cold outside.

A few moments later he saw his Doe and Potter meandering through the trees. He followed silently. Potter squinted at the frozen water and then jumped into the lake. Fear, much colder than frozen night grabbed him.

‘Idiot, why didn’t he used his wand?’ he thought disgruntled.

He had no chance of saving the foolish boy and staying hidden. Closing his eyes he felt cold sweat running down his back. When he opened his eyes, prepared to blow his cover Ronald Weasley appeared out of nowhere. After struggle and lot of splashing, bot boys crawled out of the water. He breathed out and swirled into a black mist.
XCV

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: Still, not beta-edited.

...The rush of air hit her face; she tightened her grip around Kingsley's middle. Her throat painfully tight, but she didn’t dare to close her eyes. Death Eaters were around them, curses buzzing through the darkness of the night.

Loosening her grip, she tried to fight, aware that Kingsley was doing a much better job at it and still leading the beast. Hermione felt slightly dizzy, pure undiluted fear ran through her veins and she did her best to suppress it, fighting with all her might not to gaze at the darkness below...

...The darkness morphed...

...She was clinging to the dragon, a dragon of all creatures! The poor beast was enraged, carrying them away from the Gringotts. When she could think, through waves of fear, the only thought that came to mind was ‘I robbed the bank, I’m a criminal’...

...Her hand trembled as she watched at the wanted poster, her own face looking back at her from the paper. She was officially “Undesirable No.3”. Hermione wondered should she be afraid or insulted, but she had no time to contemplate, not in this situation. She left her hideout and rushed to catch up with the boys.

Ron messed up, of course, he did, - that was what Ron would do if he weren’t given enough time to plan and think. At least they had the bloody thing, but now they had a ministry, Death Eaters and Dementors on their heels.

The potion started to wear off, and Hermione swore that she’d scold both of the boys if they survive this...

...Space was claustrophobic, cramped up and smelly. Boards crashed behind them and they doubled their efforts to run. She reacted, more on instinct than anything else. The old lady morphed into a snake - worse even, the snake shed old lady’s skin.

She turned; Harry wasn’t beside her - a new wave of fear slammed at her chest like a cannonball. The snake was pressing on Harry, her teeth sinking into Harry’s arm... She felt the rush of fear, the memory of Arthur Weasley and his stay in the hospital, the wound that wouldn’t close and wouldn’t stop bleeding. She had to help Harry now, and worry about it later...

...Whispering voices drove her mad, words circled around her head ‘undesirable No 3’, ‘Dumbledore never said one word of praise to you’, ‘they don’t respect you, and they are only using you’.

On and on, whispers listing all that she did for Ron and Harry, for the wizarding community, and no
one ever even acknowledged it.

Even now, she cooked, and still, Ron complained...

Ron chose Lavender Brown over her last year...

Harry siding with Ron on more than one occasion...

Harry taking Luna to Slughorn's party, leaving her to deal with McCormack...

Everyone ridiculing her S.P.E.W....

‘You know why is that, you are not worthy.’, ‘Your blood is impure, and they know it.’, ‘You’ll never be recognized for your achievements.’, ‘He left, he left both of you because you are unworthy of him, and he knows it.’

Voice kept on whispering and Hermione shook her head murmuring to her chin.

“It is this cursed thing, don’t trust it, Hermione.”...

...Curses flying left and right, she dodged them to the best of her ability. Hogwarts was in ruins, dead bodies all around her. She found Ron and grabbed his arm, yelling over the all-present noises.

“Where is Harry?”

“Don’t know, he just left!” replied Ron with a worried face and hurled a hex behind her back.

She swirled and continued to cast spells. The sounds of crashing, the screams, and the shouts - spells cast by both friends and enemies alike zoomed through the air. She tried not to look at dead bodies, at this point, she was beyond fear, - and she just fought to survive...

...Ron held her tight, his grip biting into her skin and her bone, pain and sadness ripping her insides. She wanted not to look but she couldn’t divert her eyes from the limp body in Hagrid’s hands...

...They were sitting at the gala, all dressed up, surrounded by smiling faces. The glass placket heavy in her hands and cold, so cold, she couldn’t understand how they all managed to smile; Hermione couldn't smile if her life depended on it.

Someone shook her hand. “Impressive, Miss Granger, praiseworthy but you had no business running with the boys.”

She returned the handshake, mumbled ‘thank you’, she felt detached from all that. It isn’t that they didn’t recognize her effort, but every single praise came with the same sort of comment that she was a girl, or too young, or...whatever.

She had the need to scream, to shout from the top of her lungs, to ask them where were they while she was fighting for their freedom? Who are they to tell her anything now, when everything was safe?

The sound of shattered glass came from behind her and she flinched, making an excuse she hastily walked to an empty corridor. Sliding against the marble wall, he took one shuddery breath, fighting the tears - frightened, self-derisive tears of a person who had no right to be alive and celebrate. And to celebrate what - so many deaths?

She glanced at the heavy glass placket in her hands. She didn’t deserve it, why did they give it to her? What did she do? She broke into the Ministry and caused havoc; she broke into the bank and
stole. Out of necessity, but still…

I am a criminal with the award for it, where do we go. She thought with bitterness.

Hermione jumped when a hand touched her shoulder. Harry was looming above her.

“Are you alright, Hermione?”

“Yeah. Yes, I’m fine.” she nodded “It’s just…” she raised her eyes to meet his.

“Too many people at once. I know.” Harry nodded and sat next to her, taking her hand into his. She watched him lean against the wall and closed his eyes, he looked tired.

“Do you sleep, Harry?” she asked.

“Sometimes. You?” he replied, not opening his eyes.

“If I don’t dream,” she replied vaguely.

“Hermione, I have a favour to ask of you.” Harry cleared his throat and opened his eyes, turning to look at her...

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Severus opened his eyes, gulping for air, he felt like someone, or something was pressing on his lungs. Soft sobs came from the direction of the sofa. He clenched his fists, his throat tight; there was a distinctive sting in his eyes.

I should never have survived. What have we done…?

The gilt twisted on his insides, gutting him, tightening his airways. Was this his true punishment? To witness the ramifications of their collective action first hand. Her sorrow, her fear, and her tears - it was on his head. His and all of them - Dark Lord’s, Malfoy’s, Albus’s, all of them… He sighed.

“Hermione…” He called, sniffling and sobbing halted for a few moments. In the darkness of the room, he could barely see her shape but he could tell that she stilled.

“I...I’m sorry for waking you.” came her shrudery whisper, his insides contorted at the sound of her voice, the apologetic sorrow, as if it was somehow her fault.

“As you undoubtedly noticed by now, sleep isn’t my favourite activity as of lately.” He replied, in a weak attempt to alleviate her dread.

Not that it ever was, to begin with, he added in his head.

She sniffled again.

Closing his eyes, he debated what to do. He knew what would help but… Another muffled sob solved the dilemma; he couldn’t allow her to regress, not now, not when...

“Hermione, come here.” he called her softly, the sniffling and sobs stopped again.

“Ummm, I…” she tried to say something but it was lost in a whimpering inhale of breath.

“I would...appreciate - if you come closer.” He nearly choked on those words, but he forced himself to say them.

“But, we are alone and I don’t…” She sniffled again and he suppressed the groan. Was it bad or good that he forgot on rules he imposed? But, just like during the war, this wasn’t about what he felt...
comfortable - it was what needed to be done.

“Are you planning on molesting my person again if you are near me?” he asked, not harshly but not in a soft voice he used so far.

“N...no. But...” she stuttered, hiccupping.

“Then let me be the judge of what is acceptable by me and what is not.” Her reluctance grated on his raw nerves, this demanded too much of him.

However, that seemed to be enough for Hermione, he could hear her shuffling and soon bed flexed under her weight. She came near him but not touching him, in the pale moonlight he could see her red-rimmed eyes. Suppressing the sigh, he reached for her hand.

She was clutching her hands in her lap, and he covered both of her hands, squeezing them lightly. He could feel her shivering. She was shaken for a reason even he was shaken... This was the first time he got a glimpse of Hogwarts during the battle.

The images left him rattled. He wanted to see more - he needed to know more. It was similar to the tooth that hurts when you keep poking it with your tongue in spite or maybe because of the pain. However, more pressing necessity was to pull her mind away from those memories, not to dig through them.

“So, Hermione, what did you decide regarding Minerva’s offer?” he asked finally.

“Well, that depends on what Minister and Wizengamot say.” She replied slowly. “If they agree to let Draco be my temporary replacement - I will go to finish my education. If all goes well, you’ll get rid of me at least for short time.” her voice quivered.

*This is going to cost me. Bad, bad deal, Severus*, he groaned inwardly but tried to maintain light and soft voice. “Well, I won’t lie - you are not the company I would choose given the option, but all things considered - I could do far worse.”

“How can you say that?” came a sniffle from her, he was about to answer when she continued. “I...I...oh Gods! What did I do...?” she whimpered, and not in a good way.

The entire conversation was on a fast slide down. He tried again, gathering what strength he had.

“Hermione....”

“Gods! They call you a criminal when all you did - you did to save us! And me! I’m called a hero but look what I did. I break into the Ministry and bank, I stole… I...even after the war! I attacked you, forced...” Sobs cut her panicked words and he gently tightened his hold over her hands.

“To my knowledge...” He tried, but another burst of words from her stopped him.

“I should be the one locked in Azkaban!” She was shaking now.

“Miss Granger.” He called her, using the tone he’d use in the classroom, as much as his thorn throat permitted, it worked, - she stilled. “Like I was saying before the interruption, I do not think that you deserve to even think about yourself as criminal.”

“But I...” she sobbed.

“You, Hermione, have a rather flexible idea of “right and wrong”, I believe a Machiavellian one, as we pre-established. For you, the cause justifies the means - and it’s not all that bad as you may think.
Now,” he raised the other hand to stop her from talking. “If my memory serves me... The first year - you set me on fire. The second year - you, stole from me, not to mention endangered the health of your classmates.”

“I didn’t?” she protested.

“You didn’t steal from me?” he asked, his tone reflecting the irritation to both her protest and her constant interruptions.

“No, you know I did that - stolen from your supplies, I mean. I didn’t endanger…” she started.

“Do you want to tell me how Potter and Weasley came up with the fireworks distraction? I was your teacher and I knew they couldn’t plan something so elaborate in the second year. Or are you trying to convince me how I imagined dousing half of the class with the antidote to the Swelling Solution?” he allowed himself to sound incredules. She hiccupped the chuckle.

*Good.*

“No, I...well, I guess I’m guilty of that too.” her voice hitched.

*Oh, bollocks! This is going in circles.*

“You were in the war, Hermione. There was no legal way, no other more socially acceptable means to fight. The government was corrupt. You were named an outlaw. Do you have any idea what would happen to you if they managed to catch you, to bring you in front of *his* feet?”

She inhaled sharply and twitched her scarred hand.

“Oh, do not delude yourself, little girl. What Bella did to you was just a warm-up. And believe me when I say - you do not want a point by point details. Enough to say, in the end, you’d desire death more than anything else, and be lucky if he grants you the same.” He admonished bitterly.

Images of carnage he witnessed made him sic, forcing the bile up his throat. Without his protection, he wasn’t able to deal with those memories.

“You - he would give me to you?” she asked shakily.

“No. He kept me for Death Eaters who angered him.” He replied softly and continued even softer. “But you would wish it was me. In my hands, at least you’d find some mercy. You see, Hermione, those like you had a tendency to die to son in my hands, I was - not invited to participate in the handling of the war prisoners, just to watch.” He had no desire to talk about that. “But, the point is - you did all you supposed to, all I see is a competent young witch who used her brain and skill to survive. More than that - - where you see a criminal I see very skilful and talented which, worthy of Slytherin house.”

“I’m a Gryffindor.” she complained.

*Of all I said…* He swallowed the growl “In my eyes that is a compliment, Hermione. Take it while I’m in the mood to give you one.”

She nodded, smile fought its way on her face, and her eyes glimmered through their watery surface. Severus forced himself not to growl or roll his eyes or sneer.

*Dear Salazar, she is still the same. Merlin help me, I have to de-tangle myself from this conversation before she starts imagining that I’m courting her.* “Now if we solved that, are you up for more
sleeping?” he asked.

The girl was quiet for a long time, but her hands stopped shaking and he slowly removed his hand from hers. Finally, she sighed.

“I am.” she didn’t sound too sure to him.

*I’m going to regret this tomorrow.* “Good, you may stay here tonight.” he replied somewhat restrained. In the dark, he could see the whites of her eyes growing larger. “Ummm, wouldn’t that be inappropriate?” She whispered.

*Oh, I am going to regret this.* “Propriety has a very blurry line in our case.” He carefully phrased the words. “Stay here if it will make you feel better. Stay on the covers, and refrain from touching me....” before he could finish she was curled up next to him, clutching his hand in both hers, and already sinking into a slumber.

*I am going to regret this.*
Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: In agreement with my beta – I’m posting this chapter unedited when she finishes with fixing the grammar and with me, I will re-post this chapter at a later date. At that time, I do expect that some parts will be enhanced and there will be no grammatical errors. I leave it to you to read it now or wait some more. When I upload edited chapter I’ll remove this note :)

Hermione folded another long sleeve shirt and sighed, it is not like she’ll need all that clothes, in fact, she wondered if she will need any besides her school robes. The sound of soft snoring could be heard from behind, she placed the shirt in a trunk and glanced over the bundles of clothes, books and toiletries scattered on the sofa. Never before, as long as she could remember, was so complicated to pack her school trunk, it was almost like she was procrastinating.

What is wrong with me?

This was the fifth or maybe sixth time she packed, unpacked and packed again, and not just today - she was doing that for days. On the bottom of her trunk, she already had her school robes, two sets of summer and winter Muggle clothes, all that she would need from socks and undergarments, shoes, books and basic toiletries. But for some reason she still had a need to pack more, unpack and then repeat the process. Only a few more days before her departure and Hermione still wasn’t ready.

It wasn’t like her. She would be packed and ready weeks before the day, certain in her choices, now she wasn’t either certain or ready. And it wasn’t just packing - she would question her decision to go to Hogwarts at least three or four times a day for weeks. Severus wasn’t helping either if anything his behaviour prompted her to revise her decision more than anything less. He was - well, the same as he always was - acerbic and difficult. But, at the same time, he was more - polite - at least what could be considered polite in his case. He gave his best to support her decision and not to provoke her. Of course, Severus still had the same disposition which he tried to mask.

And it all started that day, after that awful night and his permission to stay on his bed. Hermione shook her head at the memories and flopped on the sofa looking at the sleeping form of Severus, her cheeks still burning at the memory of the next morning...

...The low whistle coming from the direction of the door and harsh whisper from her bedmate woke her up. Her fuzzy head and heavy eyelids saved her from instant jumping at the sounds. Odd it may be but she felt safe and secure, protected - safe enough to stay in the position she was when reality caught up with her.

She was once more curled up around his arm, using his forearm as a pillow, clenching his hand with both of hers. Over the night someone - and she suspected Misty on Severus’ order, covered her
with a blanket. She stirred, mashing her face at his skin, it was warm and comforting, sheltering her from Draco’s low chuckles.

“You are lucky it’s me and not my father or my mother, not to mention Madam Pomfrey.” she could hear Draco speaking, not even trying to hide the laughter from his voice.

“Do try to behave as becomes someone of your status, Draco.” whispered Snape harshly. “You of all others in this house know how difficult nights can be in this room.”

Hermione forced herself not to frown, sometimes she hated Slytherins with all her passion - this was a nice way for Severus to let Draco knows that she was the one who had difficult night and not him. Draco decided to ignore that fact, not a smart move if anyone asked her - no one did, and Draco kept on pushing.

“So, is this regular occurrence or just - occasional?” She could hear the change in Severus’ breathing, the change in his demeanour spread around him like fog, she suppressed the shivers but Draco was still unaware. “Please, tell me that the same services are not expected from me. You know that I do respect you but there are lines…” Draco continued, obviously amused.

“Draco!” ground Severus through clenched teeth, from her vantage point she could see the muscles on his jaw dancing in anger.

“...Are you even sure you want her to go to school, it seems to me that you have a rather sweet deal....” Draco ignored the warning and Hermione hitched her breath. There was a change in Severus, from vibrant anger he went very, very still.

“Draco Malfoy, I advise you to measure carefully what will come out of your mouth next.” Severus’ voice was barely a whisper, but Hermione had the desire to run and hide, she could feel the magic crackling over his skin like electricity. She nearly jumped when he addressed her. “You Miss - Hermione, can remove yourself from me now.”

She nodded and obeyed him without a word, almost tripping and falling when she was getting out of the bed. Draco had a serious and a bit pale face. Not a trace of amusement she could hear in his voice just moments ago.

“Ummm, good morning.” She mumbled unsure if it was smart to talk at all....

Hermione sighed, shaking the memory out of her head, Draco didn’t miss the opportunity to make fun of her later, but only when he was sure that Severus won’t hear him. Hermione expected that Draco will tell his parents - but for some reason, he didn’t. She couldn’t decide if Draco was afraid of Severus’s reaction or not.

Maybe it’s a Head of House thing? Like when McGonagall is angry at us.

But even that wouldn’t fit into what she learned about Severus or how he lead the Slytherin house... From all that she saw in his memories - he was kind and patient towards Slytherins, obviously, there was the other side of that kindness but nothing harsher than her own Head of house - if anything, he was more lenient than Minerva ever was to them.

Maybe it was a Death Eater thing?

But even that somehow didn’t fit. Sure, Severus was scary as hell and deadly if he wanted to be, but he was always protective over Draco, protective of all Malfoys. From everything she learned of him, Severus was ready to take the burn for Malfoys and especially Draco, the same way he was taking the burnt for the action of Harry, Ron and her.
Standing up from the bed she turned her back to Severus and flicked her wand sending the content of both trunks to pile up on the sofa. Looking at her possessions she shook her head.

_Someone might think I moved into the Manor with all these._

There was a substantial pile on the sofa. Hermione briefly wondered if she healed completely? She was able to move around the house freely if she felt inclined - which she still didn’t. And it didn’t appear that she had a problem with going into the public space, she had to pass that test in previous weeks.

To ensure that Draco acts as her assistant and substitute in taking care of Severus while she goes to Hogwarts demanded of her not only to show up in front of Wizengamot but also to speak before them. Convincing them wasn’t easy, and it didn’t improve her opinion about this “new and open-minded wizarding society”, they were still the same old prejudicial bunch.

Kingsley was fighting difficult battle still, and he along with Harry, McGonagall and Matron had to assist her in order to secure that Draco could continue serving his correction in a capacity of her assistant. But in order to achieve that she had to go to the Ministry, an experience she wasn’t too fond off given that the public opinion wasn’t in her favour at this moment.

In retrospect, that wasn’t anything new - public opinion was never all that good about her.

But, the most important thing was that she handled that one well, without breakdowns and following nightmares. She was able to raise her head high and glare at those who tried to slander or shame her. Snape’s words and Harry repeating that she is a War hero became her mantra.

_So why am I so reluctant to go? Do I still think that Feretface won’t be able to take care of Severus properly?_

No, that wasn’t it - Draco did possess an ability to learn quickly, something she privately saw as a waste of potential given Draco’s habit to slither out of obligations whenever possible. Draco was motivated to help Severus, in the past few weeks, Draco read all the Muggle medicine books she gave him, learned all massage techniques - she was confident that he will take good care of Severus in her absence. More than that, Severus alone was more inclined to follow Draco’s instructions than hers, to offer less resistance to Draco.

Hermione huffed, sorting the pile on the sofa - clothes in one corner, books in the other, everything else in the middle. She took her belt pouch and frowned at it. Does she still need it? She was certain that she wouldn’t need a tent or extra healing potions - books, maybe… Again, most definitely not the books she was carrying around during the war.

Making a decision, she turned the pouch to shake out things from it on the sofa before she had a chance to change her mind. Focusing on sorting for a brief time, before he mind wandered back to question her approaching departure. Can she be that selfish and leave knowing that Severus still wasn’t anywhere near healed. His physical health improved by the day, he was able to move, even making a few steps on his own - one or two more each day.

Mentally, Severus was still a mess, there were sparks of his usual acerbic self here and there, but for the largest part, he was still passive, barely responsive and… Hermione thought he reminded her of the rock sinking to the bottom of the lake.

_And there is the question of our link, how that will work on distance?_

In all fairness, Matron did come to talk to her and Severus about that, informing them of new
findings of her and Minerva, with the help of Albus’s portrait - Hermione didn’t doubt that even if Matron didn’t mention him. It wasn’t impossible but it won’t be easy either. Still, the question of Severus’ behaviour worried her, and strangely - she felt comforted by the fact that she will be connected to him, even at Hogwarts. His memories rushed towards the end, towards the day of the Final battle, making her feel dizzy and disoriented after they would wake up.

They were just a myriad of moments, small hidden moments and feelings - sad, and gloomy, the most dominant feelings were loneliness and dread.

...Severus ordering Hogwarts elves to bring food and keep guard, to assist student rebellion in any means possible without making it obvious that they are helping, even instructing them to go against him if need be, to protect the students, but keep it secret from other staff members...

...Dumbledore arguing with Severus, Dumbledore giving Severus instruction he opposed but still carried on, Dumbledore not giving him a time to rest even a bit...

Hermione wondered if Severus even managed to sleep or eat during those last months of the war, pulled in different directions by his obligations, Dumbledore, Voldemort, Hogwarts staff,... She noticed that he took more potions to keep a migraine at bay, to fight the need to stay in bed every morning, to be able to push through the day. At nights he would meditate more than sleep just to manage to keep his Occlumency walls strong and intact...

...Severus suppressing shivers and fighting to keep his breathing and heart rate under control when he found out that they were captured by snatchers. Flying to the camp and packing all their things, giving them to Doby. Severus instructing Dobby to find them and rescue them...

...Severus vomiting after only a cup of tea, literally worried sick from fear hours after they were saved, something he didn’t know at the time. Sitting on the toilet floor and glaring at the mark, begging silently to be summoned - to find out...

...Voldemort furious, punishing Malfoy’s - all of them... Severus couldn’t do anything but stand and watch while the Dark Lord ....crucioed Lucius - still sickly and tattered looking, Narcissa and Draco. He felt so powerless and angry, he felt like he betrayed the only family he ever had, that evening he nearly destroyed the Headmaster’s office forcing portraits to run and hide and shiver, even Dumbledore was silent. The only speck of satisfaction he had when Dark Lord punished Bellatrix and Fenrir...

...Severus crumpling the Prophet, burning it in the fireplace, boiling from anger after the news of their break in the Gringotts vaults...

...Severus sitting on the meeting with Voldemort - noticing that towards the end, plenty of Death Eaters was there out of the pure fear, only a few were still honestly supporting Voldemort. Many of them stopped Severus, asked him about their children and every time he answered that Slughorn is Head of House - that answer made plenty of them looking worried and uneasy...

Can she leave him? Now, with all these memories emerging - she had a feeling that under all that hissing and ignoring he found comfort in her presence and Harry’s visits. Every time she would think of leaving him she felt like crying, her heart fluttered painfully. Hermione shook her head to clear it out from confusing thoughts and looked at the content of the trunk she was packing.

*Why do I have so much muggle clothes? I’ll wear mostly my school robes anyway.*

With an annoyed hiss, she flicked her wand and clothes piled up on the sofa again. Behind her, Severus groaned.
“You will need sets of school robes and maybe two sets of summer and winter Muggle clothes for Hogsmeade.” at that moment he sounded like her old teacher.

“I know,” she nodded trying to keep all of her emotions at bay.

“If you know, then pack what you need and stop huffing like Hogwarts express,...” he grumbled. 

*Why am I so testy?* “You will get rid of me soon,” Hermione replied evenly, fighting tears. *Why is it so hard to leave, I should be happy to leave the Manor.*

“Not nearly soon enough...” he grumbled and Hermione turned to gaze at him, unsure why she felt so hurt by those words.

*What is wrong with me?*
He was pacing, not sleeping when the sound of distant alarms floated on the cold wind - he barely slept these days. He took a deep breath and turned to a portrait.

"It is starting."

“Yes, it seems so. Arianna informed me that she opened the passage to the castle. You know what you have to do...”

“I may do what is necessary, Albus - that still doesn’t mean I agree with you.” he sighed, his chest felt like a huge black hole.

“Don’t you trust me Severus?” asked Albus not sounding too interested by the reply, he glared at the portrait.

“I did - once, and look how that turned out.”

His heart beat like a drum, no he wasn't expected to be easy but he didn’t expect to be this complicated reaching the damn brat either. Standing on the edge of the forest, his mind worked fast - it wouldn’t be smart to return to the school. Then again, Potter was in the school.

He could feel the summons, and he could see the Dark Lord's troupes gathering on the edge of the compound. Well, not “see” - he could feel them. He was standing in the shade when he felt professors started to raise protective barrier and he silently added to that, giving in his own magic to the mix through Hogwarts protective wards.

No, it won’t help, it won’t stop the Dark Lord for long, but at that point, every bit helped.

The summon came, a summon to him and his heart pruned, the Dark Lord was unpredictable but he knew that at least he was safe. The Dark Lord was in the Shrieking Shack and he shivered, the hate he held for that place was still live inside him.

He felt sorrow, seeing Lucius after so much time, a stab in the chest - Lucius was only a mere
shadow of his former self. Fighting the need to run to his friend he focused on the Dark Lord, and he almost allowed himself to breathe out when Voldemort send Lucius away. Hopefully, Lucius will find Draco and Narcissa and save them before everything explodes in their faces.

A moment of distraction and he was begging the Dark Lord to let him find the boy, that final act before his life ends - to give the power and the condemning verdict to the boy. How he hated Albus at this moment.

His mind and his mouth worked separately.

And that was his mistake, he noticed only too late that he was the one condemned as well.

No, no! It’s too early! I didn’t complete my task, the Potter is the one that should end my life. Oh, the irony.

The pain!

Blinding, burning, agonising pain!

And failure…

He failed in his task, the boy will never know.

Lost-- All was lost now.

Damn you Albus for placing this burden on my shoulders.

The only comforting thought was that the power of Elderwand was neither in Dark Lord’s or Harry’s hands, the secret will die with him - a small comfort.

Green eyes, Potter! He’s trying to help him…

You fool, stop saving me! Take the memories, take them!

Thank Merlin that the Granger girl is never far behind or everything would be lost. He felt lightheaded - the blood lose, his lung constricted in painful gasps - the poison is paralyzing him.

“Look at me!”

What did he want to say with that? Nothing and everything, most of all he wanted to die looking into her eyes.

Lily!

He failed her, he just sent her son into a certain death-- There were no words of apology he could say, no atonement for his crime, no more soul left in him. That one last act obliterated him.

I’m sorry, Lily - I failed you.

The last thoughts before darkness swallowed him.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione sat in her bed, gulping air - she could feel his near death, his agony derived not form the fact that he’s dying but that he failed. Her heat was trying to break from the cage of her chest and escape. She blinked to chase away the tears.
In the light of the nearly full moon, she could see him, curled up with his knees tightly pressed to his forehead. He was facing away from her, his entire frame shaking. The gut-wrenching sound, muffled wailing, coming from him.

Hermione slipped from her bed and climbed to his, she touched him and nothing changed, it was like he didn’t care whether she sees his sorrow, his pain or not. That hit her, like a fist in full swing straight to her gut, she called him softly.

“Severus-- Severus it’s fine, Harry is alive, you made it, you saved him - us - all of us.”

Just more sobs came from him, she felt tears filling her eyes.

“Severus, you didn’t fail her - you saved her son.” she tried again to no avail.

Finally, not knowing what else to do she lowered herself on the covers, spooning as much as she could to his back and hugging him, Narcissa’s words echoing in her mind how he needed to be touched and hugged.

“I know that you don’t see yourself in that light - but I see you as a hero. I see you as the most trustworthy person I ever met, and I am proud - proud to be one of your students and the one you protected. Harry is too, I know it. Back then-- We were just kids, stupid, naive kids and without you - we wouldn’t make it. All that you’ve done wasn’t for nothing, it was from the heart and that is what matters.”

She kept on talking, whispering into his hair, ignoring the pain in her neck and uncomfortable position. Feeling his shivers and shakes, still listening to inconsolable sobs, her brain sleepy and fuzzy, but there was also a sort of clarity - like all of the missing pieces suddenly fell into peace.

She knew how to break the connection, it was easy, so simple - it was glaring at her for months and she refused to see it, to acknowledge it. She wanted to know-- She liked that man she saw in those memories.

At first.

Yes, at first she liked him, she could see him and feel him but now-now she feels for him. He heart fluttered then drummed strong enough that he probably could feel it too, it wasn’t a happy, liberating feeling, far from it. It was a sort of compressed pain, one that came with the knowledge that he could never return even the fraction of her emotions.

“And I know this is selfish of me but, I am happy that you are alive. I care enough to know that you still can be happy, you don’t see it right now, but I’ll do everything, everything in my power to show you.”

She kept talking, holding not him but to him, even when the sleep slowly crept in, even when she started to dream floating in some semi-awake state of mind.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

The bed was uneven and bumpy, not soft as he knew it should be, the bed also groaned and mumbled something in a muffled voice. That couldn’t be right, beds didn’t mumble, not even the ones in the Wizarding world. The bed was pushing him now and he rolled to his side wondering if he still dreaming.

He spent the night in a haze of his own pain, not sleeping but not awake either.
His head was pounding, through most of the night he could hear her murmur - close so very close to him. He opened his eyes, turning sharply, his elbow hit something and there was a small cry.

“You could have just woke me up nicely, or not so nice but at least not hitting me--” she complained.

“What are you doing here?” he barked, his head feeling heavy. “Whatever you think you’re doing - stop it and kindly remove yourself from my bed .”

“Fine, fine - I wasn’t planning on falling asleep. I just wanted to calm you down.” she grumbled rolling out of the bed, her warmth gone he shivered.

He grunted turning away from her again, so, he wasn’t imagining things - she did whisper in his ear almost the whole night. He tried to judge if that memory was good or the bad thing, his senses still felt dull, somehow veiled, his limbs heavy.

At least now memories should stop.

Yes, that was good, but - the question was, what now?

He had no idea with what form of torture his brain going to attack him now, and that was nerve-wracking. If he could end it all now, surely no one could want anything more from him-- All his secrets were out on the open, she knew them, she could do whatever she wanted with them.

And yet - her murmur, the words she said to him, they felt like a balm on his soul, he fought them but they drilled through his mind with persistence. The sole fact that she was grateful and proud to be part of his efforts was like a cure to his sore soul.

It is a good thing that she’s going, she won’t be able to poison me with her kindness-- No, her pity anymore.

All he wanted for almost a year and more now was to fade away, to return to the darkness, to… Her persistence, her kind words, even her blunders eroded his will, weakening it. She was like a poison that slowly drained his resolve, forcing him to waver.

Poppy came, she poked and probed and asked the same questions - he let her do what she wants, giving her the same answers as always. Poppy gave him one of her looks and pulled the girl to discuss something with the girl.

He watched as the girl first nodded, serious and quiet then lurched into a negation and explanation. Whatever she was refusing didn’t sit well with Poppy but she wasn’t too surprised either. Finally, Poppy relented and nodded her approval, breaking the privacy barrier.

“Well, it’s on your head, Miss Granger, I’ll see you in school in a few days. And I’ll see you next week, Severus - try not to drive young Mister Malfoy into insanity on the first week.”

He sighed, what good would that do? At present time it seemed that Draco was more inclined to follow Hermione’s instructions than his own, he couldn’t blame the boy, from her word depended on how his sentence was served. At least now he will have his peace and his solitude, all he had to do was to endure two more days.
The train rocked steadily, lulling Hermione into a state of stupor. She tried to focus on the nature that zoomed against the window. A huge ball of emptiness and the feeling like something heavy was pressing her chest didn’t left her no matter what she did to distract herself. In the end, she surrendered to it, hoping that it will pass with time, but with each cling-cling of the tracks, the emptiness grew bigger.

The only sliver of peace she found was in the growing awareness of the link she shared with Severus. With each landmark the train passed she became more and more aware of it, she could tap into his feelings, even get the glimpses of images if he focused on something hard enough. Too bad he only focused intensely on annoyance with something Draco did or rather didn’t do to Severus’ satisfaction.

Hermione realised that this year will be hard and difficult, not because she couldn’t fit in or return to learning mode, but because she will have to learn not to focus on this newly gained insight.

Apparating should prove interesting in this mind-frame.

The door of the compartment slid open and Luna strolled in, looking more like she was moonwalking than anything else. Luna had her eyes locked on some papers, Hermione watched the girl sit not even raising her eyes or muttering the words of greeting.

Is she in this compartment by accident?

Luna tilted her head up and gazed at her briefly, a small smile dancing on her lips. “I’m sorry Hermione, I have to review these articles for the latest edition. You won’t mind if we don’t talk?”

“No, go ahead, I’m not in the talking mood.” she forced her face to rearrange into a smile.

Luna just widened her smile, hummed and returned to her papers, Hermione returned to staring through the window, hoping that this feeling would go away or at least dim a bit.

“Nice to see ya, ‘Ermione.” Hagrid greeted her with a big grin and a bear hug. “How are ya? How’s the Professor? You have to visit me for a tea and a talk.”
“Nice to see you, Hagrid. And I’ll come to the tea first chance I get.” she smiled at him. Hagrid just nodded and lumbered away calling for first-years together up and follow him.

Luna pulled her sleeve. “Hermione, we may sit in this carriage.”

She followed Luna absentmindedly, the long lines of carriages with patiently waiting Thestrals stretched seemingly indefinitely.

“Luna…” she started but stopped, her thoughts were more jumbled than usual.

“Hm?” Luna looked at her.

“Do you think that everyone can see them?

“See what?” Luna blinked at her.

“Thesetrals?” she explained, shivering at the memory of her flight on the at the time still invisible breast.

“I hope not, but most can now - I think.” Luna’s voice sounded sad. “Too bad, Hogwarts lost some it’s magic with that.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I always knew they were there, but no one else did. It was fun to listen students wonder how carriage is moving on its own.”

“I guess you’re right.” she sighed.

The carriage tugged and Hermione closed her eyes, she wasn’t ready to face the familiar sights again. The pressure in her chest was now enriched with a tight squeeze.

Will I ever be ready? Will I ever again be able to see the beauty of Hogwarts, without the memories of death and destruction? Clenching her hands tightly she focused on her breathing. If you could live in the Manor, you can live in Hogwarts as well.

Hogwarts looked the same as she remembered him from her first year, with the addition of one new tower looming over the lake that glistened on the pale moonlight. Inside it appeared as nothing happened, nothing changed, well - mostly. In the Great Hall, Luna pulled her to a fifth table, much smaller in size, it still couldn’t accommodate more than a dozen people, and that table looked sorrowfully empty.

By the time the Sorting started, beside her and Luna, only seven more students joined at their table - one Ravenclaw that Hermione remembered vaguely, two Hufflepuffs and four Slytherins.

Hermione couldn’t focus on Sorting, the sound of a heartbeat in her ears loud, she could feel the pulse under her tongue that was somehow too dry and tick in her mouth. Her pams kept getting slippery and sweaty no matter how many times she tried to dry them, swiping them over her things. Chatter and noise in the hall, the normal and expected noise set her in a state of high alert.

She closed her eyes to escape images of the last battle and gathering in this same place afterwards. They pressed even harder, burning behind her closed eyelids. With a shudery breath, she opened them again, sadness lingering around her like fog.
Hermione could feel the eyes of other students, not on her but on their table, she couldn’t sense any
danger but she also couldn’t resist checking on her wand every few moments.

“We have a table here, but we are in obligation to eat here only during the official events,
Headmistress told me that we will have a small dining area in our wing,” Luna mumbled between
two spoonfuls of pudding.

“That is all nice, Luna, but I’m not a Ravenclaw,” she replied bitterly, wishing that she is
Ravenclaw at this moment.

“All returnees are placed in a separate tower, the new one over the Lake. We are not part of the
House system anymore.” Luna sighed with satisfaction.

Hermione glanced around the room, one single four poster bed, one chest of drawers and one writing
table with an empty bookshelf. The room had a small adjoined en-suite.

The pain in her palms reminded her that she is clenching her fists.

Alone--

Hermione couldn’t remember when was the last time she slept alone in the room - when was the last
time she was alone - truly alone. The prospect of having her own room didn’t make her feel good or
special, she flexed her fists again.

I guess the bluebell flames will do the trick.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco leaned on the wall and released a puff of air, he felt like he was digging the whole day. Not
that he knew how would it look like if he was digging, but that was an expression that Granger used
and he felt that it is appropriate to his state.

His muscles screamed in pain from exercises. He had to work actively with Severus, not to mention
to force Severus into doing his exercises from time to time. He expected that Severus would be more
inclined to get better now that Granger wasn’t around, he was mistaken.

Never before he realised how much work was around Severus, not to mention the man’s mood.
Either Granger had some sort of spell to deal with Severus’ moods or infinite patience and nerves of
steel. He was ready to jump out of his skin after only few days.

The first two days were no indication for what followed, Severus was more or less compliant if not
pleasant. But on the third day all his hopes that he’ll have an easy task shattered. Draco did expect
some struggle, what he couldn’t imagine was to be treated worse than Misty.

Snape apparently didn’t appreciate the relative freedom from chatting and being pestered by Granger.
At least not enough to spare Draco off his moodiness.

I hope you are having equally lousy time Granger.

Pushing off the wall he continued towards the library, he managed to hassle Misty into sitting with
Severus while he went to look for some books in the library. It was excuse as good as any. From the
side corridor he could hear the voices, he tilted his head in that direction, his ear twitching.
Making a quick decision, Draco rushed as quietly as he could. The male and female voice came from his father’s workroom and private library. He knew who the woman is, well he knew her voice - and it would be advantageous to know if they planned something while Granger was in school. He sneakad to the door and pulled the extendable ear from his pocket, he found it earlier that day in the bathroom and forgot to take it out of the pocket - now it came handy.

“...explain to me?” female’s voice sounded angry.

“I have nothing to explain to you.” hissed his father.

“You allowed the girl to leave.”

“She didn’t leave, she went for school and with the deepest regret I have to say - she'll be back here once her schooling is over. I can’t say I feel sad for having my home Mudblood free.”

“If you transferred them to the Estate as I asked of you--”

“Severus would be dead and Malfoy debt wouldn’t be repaid.”

“You think so little of me if you think that I would allow him to die.” woman’s voice sounded offended.

“And what would you do to make him turn to the girl?”

“You said yourself, you found her in his bed, next to him on more than one occasion--”

“Yes, sleeping on the covers like a dog. Do not worry yourself and stop pestering me, she will return.” His father sounded angry and tired.

“You can’t be sure--”

“Yes, I can. The girl fancies him, she will return. This may be a good thing after all.”

“How can you be so sure of it?”

“I am not blind, anyone with a bit of experience would notice. I was wrong, however, there is one family trait Severus did inherit - stubbornness, the wrong kind of it. He is as stubborn as you are, if not more so. Yes, I could have moved them to the Estate, I could have sealed them in the bloody house like in a tomb - and it would accomplish nothing.” Lucius’ voice vibrated with anger.

“My influence there is stronger.” the woman repeated with determination. “I would--”

“What? Prevent him from killing himself? Push him deeper into that self-destructive state he’s in? Charm him into fancying the girl? And how long that would last?”

“My line, Malfoy. Your debt will be repaid after he continues my line. No one asked of you to get so emotionally involved, just to prepare him and to match him up with--”

“I did what I had to do, woman. I kept him alive! Did you stop for a moment to think where your precious line would be if I didn’t do what I did? Did you ever stop to think that Voldemort’s test didn’t have much with loyalty?”

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“He had to be a recognized member of the pureblood family in order to be marked.” sneered Lucius. “I did everything- everything in my power to keep him alive. And yes - I do consider him my
friend, more than that he is my brother. And I will die before allowing any of mine to die needlessly, and that includes Severus."

“You told me that the girl is what stands between him and his untimely death, and yet you let her leave.” accused woman.

“I tell you again, Estelle, the girl going to school may be a good thing.” sighed Lucius.

“I don’t see how--”

“Your grandson thought the girl for six bloody years, he thinks about himself as her teacher. Now tell me, how he would react if I go to him and tell him that we did the test and choose the potential breeding mare for him? Or better yet, that his student is a said mare?”

“It is his duty--”

“Duty to whom? The Prince family? The family that disowned his mother, never recognised him?” mocked Lucius. “The family--”

Draco widened his eyes, his brain working fast, he had a need to bang his head at the wall. Of course, fresh blood - a new blood in the family line. Idiot, I was such an idiot. Estelle Prince, Severus’s grandmother, father has her portrait in his study room.

Unintentionally, he placed his father in an awkward position with his meddling. His father stopped with his hissing and he focused on the conversation in the room.

“He accepted the name, with it he accepted his duty.”

“I tricked him into accepting the Prince name, you daft biddy!” roared Lucius.

Draco blinked, he never heard his father use this tone of voice or these expressions.

“Fine, let us say that you are correct, just for the argument's sake.” huffed Estelle with a note of indignation in her voice. “How you plan on directing him towards the girl if she’s not here?”

“I won’t.” replied Lucius smugly.

“Lucius Malfoy--”

“Oh, just stop yapping. I’ll keep introducing him to the ladies I know he won’t like, and let him - discover, shall we say - what a gem little Mudblood is.”

“And is she?” asked Estelle.

“Is she - what?”

“Such a gem to rise above all those - ladies?”

“Oh, she is. She may be a Mudblood, but she is highly intelligent and talented witch with strong magic. Maybe too opinionated and headstrong for my taste, but it would serve her well with Severus. She is fairly easy on the eye if she put a bit of effort to look remotely human.”

“Sounds like a handful.” Estell sounded pleased and disgruntled at the same time.

“Oh, I assure you - she is.” groused Lucius. “Narcissa took on herself to educate the girl, prepare
her for her role."

“Are you sure that there is no other?” Estelle didn’t sound too thrilled with what she heard.

“She is a 98% match, next good match is on 43% - and nothing in between.”

“Very well, do what you think is the best, but get it done.” hissed Estelle.

Draco pulled back the extendable ear and hastily retreated to the Library. He honestly wanted to kick himself.
Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: My apology, this chapter should have been posted 2 weeks ago, but in all the confusion around enrollment on my Master studies, work and rl - I didn't post it. I was convinced that I did, but obviously, I was wrong.

In agreement with my beta – I’m posting this chapter unedited when she finishes with fixing the grammar and with me, I will re-post this chapter at a later date.

At that time, I do expect that some parts will be enhanced and there will be no grammatical errors.

I leave it to you to read it now or wait some more.

When I upload edited chapter I’ll remove this note :)

The pain of cruciatus twisting the body sending flair after flair ricocheting and contorting the bone and the muscles.

The stone and the dust and curses flying everywhere.

Screams and dead bodies and the stench like something is badly burned and still burning.

The fear and guilt and uncontrollable shaking of the hands while her legs screamed in pain. She slipped, get up and kept on running through the dark tunnel, her name echoed while Harry ran after her calling her to slow down. Wet trail of tears cooling her overheated skin in an unpleasant way.

Pushing through the door her senses assaulted with a smell of copper, sickeningly sweet and sharp at the same time. She gasped for air, coughing. Her vision blurry, eyes full of water but she can see a distorted image of elf waving an angry arm at her.

“It is ok, I came to collect the body.” she croaked “He deserves a decent burial.”

“You no bury Master Snape, he lives.” she heard the words coming to her like from a large distance.

The door banged behind her and Harry panted out. “Are you insane? He’s dead, we could collect his body at slower pace.”

“Master Snape is no dead you foul boy.” hissed the elf.

Harry came to stand next to her, her brain struggled with the information elf gave them, Harry
looked at her questioningly and she shook her head.

“The elf keeps repeating that.” she managed to say through unpleasantly dry throat.

“What?” asked Harry confused, more likely with her own confusion. After all, Harry was used that she would give him information or at least well-aimed question at any given moment, but now her brain refused to function.

Her brain finally caught up with the information she was given, she turned to grab Harry by the forearm, a bit too tight judging by the sudden twist of his face.

“He’s alive.” she whispered and moved towards the still blurry shape of the body.

People, so many people surrounding her, suffocating her, invading her personal space. She had to fight the urge and not to release her own magic to push them away.

The hospital wing is peaceful, only the cries of the skeletal-like person on the bed, her Professor, disrupt the silence. Tears well up and spilt from her eyes - he was the last person who deserved this much suffering. He saved her life so many times and now he was dying, in agony by the sound of it. So many good people died, they lost so much. She had to save him.

He gained weight, he’s awake, and still, he’s all about dad man breathing. She feels so much better now, the fog that pressed on her brain and lungs finally gone leaving her with raw pain to process slowly.

No, she didn’t change her mind - she still had the need to help him. No, not to save him, but to truly help him. To enable him to live his life however he chooses, maybe even to find love once more. His personality aside, his mind was brilliant and in his core, he was a noble person. True, he was fallible and had a selfish streak, but didn’t they all? He is a human after all. A talented wizard, and they would fail him, disrespect everything he did if they allow him to perish.

She tilted her head, watching the moonlight shadow changing and softening the sharp features.

He will never know how grateful she was for everything he did, how much she wanted for him just to be happy and in peace - alive.

Severus blinked his eyes open, staring at the ceiling above him. He felt disoriented.

Her memories, I see her memories, it wasn’t a dream.

He blinked again, confused. It was odd, almost bizarre feeling seeing himself through her eyes. It was so disarming to realise that someone cared whether he lived or died, someone other than Malfoys, someone who had nothing to gain from him. Someone who saw him worth even when he couldn’t.

Hades crooned softly and landed from his perch to the bed, pecking on strands of his hair. He turned his head toward the bird.
“That would be four, Hades.” he whispered.

Hades tilted his head and squawked, ruffling his feathers. Severus forced his lips to twist in a smile, warmth spreading through his chest.

“All right, five. Even six if I count in Potter. Does he seems genuine to you?”

Hades squawked and pecked on his hair again.

“Seven with Lovegood loon. That is more than I ever had, in my entire life.”

“Master don’t count Misty? Master is not satisfied with Misty? Misty cares.” grumbled elf from her place, he didn’t even turned his head to know that during the nights Misty occupied Hermione’s sofa.

“I was always satisfied and grateful to you Misty. Eight then. What do you think, Hades - is there a hope?” he raised a hand to caress the feathers and Hades leaned into his touch.

His chest, however, constricted forcing the air to hitch in his lungs. Hope wasn’t a word he connected with himself. The thought that formed in his mind pressed on his chest like an anvil, but then dissipated leaving an odd sense of light emptiness.

Maybe he didn’t have to hold on to old reasons, maybe everything he did had a much deeper meaning than atoning, fulfilling an old promise. The guilt was still there, the reason why was still the same but the impact of his actions unwound in front of his eyes.

Maybe, just maybe there was hope, no matter how small it was. He caressed the feathers once more, gently nudging the bird.

“Well, that is a thought for a day, and I’d like to catch a bit more sleep, Draco is not quite as my other keeper was. Go on, go to your perch, let me sleep you feathery beast.”

Hades squawked at his face this time, ruffling his feathers and shaking them before flying away. He chuckled and closed his eyes, sinking back to sleep fast.

The sun was flickering through the leaves, soft summer breeze moved the warm air around him. He was leaning his back against the wide tree. His legs bended to support the book he was reading.

His left arm, shoulder and the left side of his chest supported her weight - his Dream Lady, she chose to lean on him rather than on the tree. She was reading as well. They sat in the companionable silence, each emerged in their own material.

No words were necessary to be exchanged, the physical contact was enough. He raised his head, looking over the neatly trimmed grass to the shimmering surface of the water.

He wanted to ask her where she’d been? Why she deserted him for so long? Why was she still hiding in the shadow? But most importantly - how much he missed her, the peace she brought with her.

Not willing to disrupt this moment of tranquillity, he directed his eyes to the book once more, keenly aware of her presence, of the soft lock of her hair tickling his neck. He didn’t know why or how, but she was back and in that moment that was all that mattered.

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Draco wandered the halls, he was aware of the grin that he couldn’t erase. Mother and father were with Severus, and he went to his room to talk with Astoria. He was probably grinning like an idiot,
but it didn’t bother him.

He passed the fathers library, still floating on his cloud. Stopped and frowned. Pacing back he blinked at the ajar door.

*Could I? Should I?*

It was no use talking to father, so maybe he could-- But if his father ever finds out…

He could use someone to talk to, he did send daily letters with reports of Snape’s progress to Granger and received answers, but that wasn’t the same. Besides, he couldn’t talk to her about what he discovered. He couldn’t talk to anyone.

*But what if--*

Mother and father will be with Severus for at least an hour, if not longer, it would be fairly safe. And the talk might help him shake off the growing feeling of fear. He didn’t write about it to Granger today, and he won’t - but…

Severus that zoned out in the middle of a sentence. Severus that was lost in his thoughts and silent, like he is contemplating something big. Severus that didn’t snap, and bite and complained scared him more than Severus that threatened his life or his privates.

Pushing the door he tiptoed into the room. *Why am I sneaking in?*

The room looked familiar, nothing was changed or moved for decades, including the big empty portrait above the fireplace mantle. For as long as he remembered that frame was dark grey and empty, like the resident didn’t like to dwell in it.

Draco cleared his throat. “I know who you are.” There was no response, he frowned. “Fine, but my father is mistaken. If you want Severus back home you better talk to me.”

No response.

He shrugged and turned to walk out when he was nearly at the door the rustling sound made him stop. Glancing back he saw the corner of the black robe emerging in the frame. With a satisfied smirk he traced back to the chair he occupied last time he was in this room and sat in it.

The woman, elderly and elegant walked slowly into the frame. Her features sharp and so familiar, she might pass as older female Severus for all he knew. There was no doubt in his mind that she was related to Severus.

“Young Mister Malfoy, your father wouldn’t approve you being here.” she said in a voice that he would recognize everywhere.

“No, he wouldn’t. But you are here Lady, so it must be that you do approve.” he replied wondering if his cheekiness would cost him. He heard so many times how she talked to his father and had no inclination to jump through hoops as his father did.

“I see that your manners are somewhat lacking.” her face was stony.

“Severus taught me that respect is earned not given.” Draco smirked, woman’s eyes narrowed in a familiar line.

“You wanted to talk, now - talk.” she grumbled.
“Talk - yes. But first, tell me what is my family’s debt to your family?” it occurred to him that might find out more than if asking his father, it wouldn’t hurt to try.

She contemplated his question for a bit. “Talk about it with your father.”

“If I could trust the answer my father would give me I would. However, I’m asking you, and before you decided to haggle with me, may I remind you Lady Price that I can help you.”

She raised an eyebrow and tighten her lips in a thin line, before giving one sharp nod. “Your father could learn a thing or two from you. Very well, my father helped your grandfather at one point.”

“Helped how?” he will not allow her to give him half-hearted information, and dealing with Granger he learned how to drag out information from strong-headed women.

“You really are stubborn.” she huffed. “Your grandfather had some wrong investments, your family could have lost everything they had if my father didn’t help. No, we didn’t give your family the money, we used our influence. So you see young Master Malfoy - your family has a debt to repay.”

“Agreed.” he nodded. “Still I stand by my claim, I can help you to achieve your goal.”

“I thought that your father--” she started with a condescending tone and he interrupted her.

“True, Severus and my father are friends since Severus was 11, however - my father does not know him now. Not really, not after he woke up. Severus tries to act his usual around my father and my mother. They can’t see the extent to what he is changed.” He paused, considering his next words carefully. “Granger and me - we took care of him, day in and day out.”

“Granger? The muggleborn?” she asked, her interest peaked. Draco silently congratulated himself.

“Yes. The girl who did everything to save his life and nurse him back to health.”

“The one that your father suggested?”

“I presume so, though I’m not sure why?” he shrugged.

“Your father made it possible to be informed if the suitable bride by old customs--”

“Oh, that antique thing.” He cut her off again with a smirk. “Yes, I think they are a good match, but not because of that.”

“And why do you think they are a good match?” she sounded annoyed.

Good. He thought. “For one thing whether she knows or not - she is head over heels for him. Don’t ask me why, Merlin knows it is not for his actions.”

“The girl left.” she replied bitterly. “That doesn’t sound head over heels to me.”

“She will return, besides they are still connected--”

“Connected?” she asked

“My father didn’t tell you?” he replied with a question.

“Your father is- well, your father.” She didn’t sound too happy.

“Hmh. Well, Granger had that idea to wake him up from coma combining Occlumency, Mind-
healing and Muggle medicine. It wasn’t as successful as she planned, he did wake up but they are connected mind-to-mind.”

“I see--”

“No, you don’t. Severus - my Head of House, my Professor, Severus the War Hero wouldn’t do anything to put his student even disliked one into a danger. He is a straight bastard and you do not want to be on his bad side but he won’t harm you if he can avoid it.”

“I still don’t see--”

“Love or not - she has to return. But more importantly, as long as they share that connection they are not apart no matter the distance. To what she will return - now, that is the question.”

“Severus has a title, a wealth, a--”

“Severus is broken. What he has to offer? Do you know that he suffers from Post-crushiatus tremors?”

“No, I did not have that information.”

“Well - yes. He can’t perform magic, he is on a fast track to become a useless shivering lump. And - he is a Potions master.” He made a pause, hoping that his father didn’t talk too much and that she does not know that he is the one of those who found the way to stop the tremors and tissue degradation. ”He was a Potions master, the best in the country, maybe even further. At the moment he is a broken man - not too much open for romance…”

“I still don’t see--”

“I am not my father, and I’m not ignorant Madam Prince. If you want your grandson to open up, to deem himself worthy to be on the receiving end of anyone’s affections, to-- Stop meddling.” He stood up and frowned at her. “I know all about inherited blood magic, and how it can be manipulated. Allow him to heal, let him recuperate and regain the grasp on his magic.” that was a shot in the dark but by her reaction he guessed that is aim wasn’t too far of the truth.

“You dare to speak that way to me, you owe me!” she hissed, her face twisting.

“I don’t owe you anything, more importantly - I couldn’t care less about the debt. But if you want your precious family line to continue it would be advisable to take my request into consideration. I don’t care for you, but I do care for the man who saved my life, and I am determined to help him, even if that means to burn every portrait you have.”

“Are you threatening me?” she raised one eyebrow at him.

“Your grandson is much better at that, he actually manages to intimidate.” Draco smirked at her, she annoyed him.

The woman gazed at him, the same unnerving gaze that Severus had, for a few seemingly neverending moments they just stared at each other. Finally, she laughed, that throw him off balance.

Maybe she’s made wrong, or maybe she was batty when the portrait was made?

The woman laughed for a long time before she turned to him. “There is a much of your great-grandfather in you, young Mister Malfoy. And a lot of a Blacks as well. I like you. Very well, I will
take your suggestion under advisement - but not because of your threat.”

“As long as Severus can recover, I really do not care for the reason.” he feigned the aloofness, trying to figure out was she insulted him or pay him a compliment?

“If that was all, young Mister Malfoy.” she tilted her head.

“Thank you for your time Lady Prince.” he nodded.

She left the portrait chuckling and he continued to gaze wondering will this retaliate in some way?

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Estelle waited for the boy to leave the room before returning to the portrait. She did like the gall young man showed, he really reminded her of his great-grandfather.

*The last Malfoy with the strong enough backbone before this kid.*

But, could she put her hopes in the hands of this youth? He was sure in himself when he talked to her, but self-confidence, even a fake one, was a Malfoy trait. However, the young Malfoy did seem genuinely worried about her grandson, and he did confirm some of Lucius’ claims.

*Is my grandson really that much damaged? Can that Muggleborn really help him?*

Estelle sighed, portrait or not she still could feel pain and regret, one of the biggest was support she gave to her husband when he disowned Eileen. Her grandson grew up and she never even met him.

Lucius wasn’t stingy with words, telling her about Severus’ childhood, making all more difficult. The choice to support her husband she regretted greatly once she died. And regardless of her looks, she died fairly young, before Severus enrolled into Hogwarts.

*The death does put things into perspective.*

She couldn’t care less about blood purity anymore. She did, however, cared for the Severus, she wanted him to take his rightful name and to continue the family line. She also wanted him happy.

*Is he beyond that, am I late?*

Her biggest worry was the girl - uneducated in their ways, too young, too stubborn by the looks of things. And yet, both Malfoys claimed that she is in loved with her grandson, that problem was in him, in his sense of morality and self-doubt.

She had to find out more about the girl before making the decision. *Where is the girl now, ah yes in Hogwarts.* Estelle frowned, she didn’t have any portraits there, but she knew resident portraits that resided in the school.

With new determination she left her portrait, she had some old friends to reach and talk to them.
Hermione sat at the long-separated table in the Great Hall and reading, she would mainly opt to study in the library or their common room, but today she was here. Luna asked her to wait for her. Her quill drew the unsteady line across the parchment when someone bumped at her. Turning to glare and give a warning she faced a group of seven years frowning at her.

“You should be more careful where you are going, I’ll have to redo this now.” She told the girl nearest to her.

“And you shouldn’t even be here.” The girl snapped at her.

Hermione rose from her seat, crossing her arms over chest, angry at the rude retort.

“I remember you, you were the fifth year at the time of the Battle. Why would you have more right to be here than I have?”

“I’m not the one fraternising with the enemy.” The girl replied, there was an ugly gleam in her eyes, few of her followers nodded in agreement.

“Neither do I. I did, however, face the enemy, unlike you.” She couldn’t resist, even if somewhere in the back of her mind she realised that it wasn’t smart to start an argument. Not here and not while outnumbered in such sever numbers.

“And what? You think you are above us all because you are the part of the Golden Trio? The only reason you are famous at all is because Harry Potter took pity on you and befriended you. You are charity chase, and certainly not a hero.”

“And what would you know about that?” She tightened her fists.

The words hurt her, pained her more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. She was an inch
for calling the girl to a duel. *Think what Severus would do? He wouldn’t rise to the bait, he lived with this all his life.* She tilted her head, plastering a smile over her face. *And look where it got him.*

She missed him. Missed him severely. Missed him so much that she was even afraid to go to sleep - as of lately her dreams shifted between nightmares and her memories of time spent with him. And the last thing she needed was for him to see her dreams.

This, however, wasn’t a time to contemplate on the futility of her feelings for Severus Snape. Thinking fast, calculating, she tried to plot the fastest, and the least damaging path out of this argument.

The gathered crowd started to murmur, glancing somewhere over her shoulder. *Good, Luna to the rescue.* She nearly grinned, but the crowd backed away. *Not Luna then. Some of the professors perhaps.*

Hermione resisted the urge to glance behind and see who is it, the time she spent in the war taught her well - never turn your back to the enemy. Fighting the need to take a deep breath or crumble under the weight of realisation that group in front of her shouldn’t be an enemy.

“You are even defended by *them*.” Spat the girl.

Now she did toss a quick glance over her shoulder, slipping quietly her wand, just in case. The four Slytherins that returned were behind her, separated by the table, but ready to fight.

*“Them who?”* The voice to her left was belonging to the Hufflepuff from their group. *“Are you going to call me a traitor Goshawk?”*

Before the girl managed to answer another voice joined in, this time the voice belonged to Neville Longbottom.

“What is going on here? You all right, Hermione?”

“Yes, thank you, Neville - ummm, sorry, Professor.” She corrected herself resisting the urge to giggle. She still couldn’t get used to call him Professor.

“Neville is fine out of the class.” He grinned at her. “Now, who will tell me what is going on here?”

“Nothing Professor, just a difference on the opinions.” Peeped in someone from the background.

“Mhm, and that requires drawn wands. Should I remind you all of the school rules?” Neville asked, his tone soft but firm.

“No, Professor but we had to protect ourselves.” The Goshawk girl glared at her.

“From whom?”

“Them.” The girl motioned her head toward the group of Slytherins.

“Stop lying Hilly.” Sighed the Hufflepuff. “Sorry, Professor, this won’t happen again.”

“I hope not. May I remind you all that *all* students are welcomed in Hogwarts equally. The real enemy is dead and we do not need to create new ones among ourselves.”

“But Professor! They are evil, and she-she supports them?” Cried one Ravenclaw from the back.

“I see that we need one class about recent history, I didn’t think we will need it this fast.” Neville
straightened his back, stern and regal in his teacher's robes. “Without Slytherins, the outcome of the war would be much different. No matter what their motives were, but Without Professor Snape - Harry wouldn’t know what to do, we wouldn’t have information about the enemy. Narcissa Malfoy lied Voldemort to save her son, yes - but, she saved Harry’s life. Draco Malfoy lied and saved Harry. Professor Slughorn fought to protect Hogwarts. The portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black aided Harry, Hermione and Ron while they were on the hunt to destroy Voldemort.” Neville stopped, glancing around the group, Hermione shifted from leg to leg, this was a new face of Neville, one she never saw before. “All of them - Slytherins.”

The silence was astounding, most of the students looked at the ground. She understood, the war was still a fresh wound for many of them, there wasn’t a family that didn’t suffer a loss. With still blatant disregard for treating mental traumas, Wizarding world was vulnerable. Lost and scared people demanded the blood, seeking to chase away their demons by enforcing their own vision of justice.

*I was like that, I'd still be like that if I hadn't had Severus to help me.*

“Now, this is time for studying, and I urge you to return to your homework before I’m forced to take away house points.”

The crowd started to move reluctantly towards their seats, only then she felt the trickle of sweat gliding down her back. She glanced at Neville and turned to her housemates.

“Thank you.”

“You are one of us, not Slytherin - returnees. We take care of our own.” Nodded Daniell, a boy year below her originally.

“Don’t worry, Hermione. None of us is overly warmly welcomed.” Smiled Irene, a Hufflepuff. “Join us for a study group later?”

“I will, I’m waiting for Luna--”

“That is why I came looking for you.” Neville joined in the conversation.

“We’ll be in the common room, Hermione.” Daniell motioned to the group to leave them alone. She smiled at them warmly, unlikely as it seemed at the start of the year, their small group became a solid support system.

She and Neville watched them go. Hermione turned to gather her things. “Can we talk somewhere else?”

“It would be smart. I shouldn’t socialise with the students.” Neville smiled sheepishly reminding her of the boy she once shared the House with.

“I’m sorry if I caused you any--”

“You didn’t, and you are my friend. We have been through too much, I can’t think of you or Luna or Ginny or others that were here in the final year as ordinary students. And Headmistress does not demands that of me.”

Neville was a balm to the sore wound, his presence made thing so much more - familiar. She walked out following him. Once in the hallway, they burst into laughter. It felt good.

“What did Luna do now? Is she rescuing your plants again?”
“No, she is waiting for us at Hagrid’s and I think we should rescue him.” Neville tried to talk through laughter but words burst out of him in a fast exhales between the fit of chuckles and hiccups. “Besides, I refuse to be the only wizard with broken teeth.”

Hermione blinked at him, her eyes zeroing on his mouth almost automatically.

“Hagrid made a batch of his famous cookies.”

They dissolved into another fit of giggles, walking hastily towards the door and in the direction of newly built Hagrid’s hut.

It was late afternoon when Hermione finally entered her room. She flopped on the bed still grinning. This was the first time she felt normal since the war. Loud and somewhat annoyed WHOOT sent her heart racing up to her throat and wand in her hand.

On the work table was Draco’s owl, grumpy and overly unfitting with her royal posture.

“Pompous Ferret has to have a pompous owl.” She grumbled and walked to the owl to take the letter, she offered an owl treat and the bird turned its head away from her.

“Do you have to wait for my reply?” She asked, hoping that the bird will fly away. When owl hooted at her spreading its wings, she moved to give her space.

“I should have sent the note to use Hades next time.” Hermione grumbled into her chin, the bird irked her. Too late she realised that the bird was here with the letter, in the evening and that she already received his report about Severus this morning.

With shaking hands and a twist in her stomach, he unrolled the parchment, eyes flying over the blurry letters.

“ When will you come back? This is starting to get unbearable, so much so that I’m thinking about taking my chances with the Ministry. I had to resort to unthinkable and call Potter. Potter of all people…”

She stopped reading, feeling like the air was sucked out of the room. Summoning her wand she twirled it and tried to think about something that made her happy, but nothing came to her panicked mind.

“Bloody hell, think Hermione, think.” Her voice was shaking, she was shaking.

She closed her eyes and focused, the image of Severus holding her hands, talking to her, complimenting and encouraging her came to mind. Hermione felt the surge of magic, opening her eyes she nearly dropped her wand.

On the ground, there was an ethereal bird that reminded her of Hades. Taking a deep breath, Hermione started to rapid-fire the questions.

“What is going on? Is Severus all right? What did you do now? Why Harry had to come? Should I send Matron?” Pausing to take a breath she closed her eyes. “I’m expecting an answer.”

With another twist of the wrist, she sent her Patronus.

She couldn’t sit, thoughts rushed through her head, each darker and blacker than previous. Why
would he call Harry? What Severus did that demanded Harry’s presence? Did someone attack them? Is he injured? I can’t feel anything… Gods, is he alive?

The image of the rat shimmered into the room and she frowned at the unfamiliar Patronus. Draco Malfoy’s voice mocked once the creature’s image opened its mouth.

“Nice tweety-bird, Granger. I liked the blob better.”

The stag bounded into the room following the rat. “…idiot Malfoy. Hermione, there is no need for you to worry. This is just Malfoy being a lazy-ass Malfoy. Professor Snape is fine, better than fine. We are just talking so that Malfoy could play kissy-face with the Greengrass.”

Hermione finally stopped shaking, pressing one hand on her chest, feeling the beats of her manic heart. For a few moments, everything felt quiet and still. She let out one shuddering breath. Sitting on the bed again, she focused on the link they shared.

A bit of annoyance, boredom and the desire to hex.

Taking a deep breath she rolled to her back and started to laugh. All in all, today was a good day.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“What? I still stand by my claim, the blob was better, more interesting.” Draco laughed and Harry wished that he is better in wordless and wandless magic, then he could hex Malfoy.

“I am glad to see that she can produce corporeal Patronus again. I did hope that she will keep her otter.” He glared at Malfoy.

“Otter.” Snorted Draco and Astoria gave him one horrified glace.

“Yes, otter. Mister Rat.” Harry grinned at Malfoy whose face suddenly became serious.

“Rats are smart.” Frowned Draco straightening his back.

“Yes, they are also pests.” Harry replied flatly.

“I’m do not know Miss Granger all that well, but I’m not sure that the crow suits her.” Astoria wrinkled her nose.

“I don’t think it is a crow.” Harry turned to her. Shure the bird did resembled the crow or the raven but it seemed smaller.

“The only conclusion I can draw from this conversation is that education failed you. All of you.” Snape sighed sounding snide and disappointed at the same time. “Miss Granger’s Patronus is a Magpie. More precisely Eurasian magpie.”

Harry blinked at Snape, Draco widened his eyes, Astoria directed her eyes to the floor, blushing.

“Well, maybe it is my time to go and--” Harry started to rise from his seat.

“When we can expect you again, Potter?” Draco sounded enthusiastic, he opened his mouth answer but Snape cut him off.

“Do take your time, Potter, don’t hurry back.”

“I-- Yes. Thank you for your hospitality, Professor. I’ll see you around Malfoy, Miss Greengrass.”
Astorija smiled, blushing lightly, she offered him her hand and he shook it. There was a joined groan from both Snape and Draco behind his back.

He was still confused by Malfoy’s invitation, but even more so by Snape’s willingness to talk with him and give him few details about his mother. With firm determination to write to Hermione as soon as he gets home, Harry apparated.

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He was on the meadow, under the tree again. Large tree top enabling him to pace back and forth still sheltering him from the sun. She was on the edge of the lake, looking at the glimmering water.

His first notion was to call her to join him, but he changed his mind. For some unexplainable reason, she belonged there, on the sun. He walked to the tree trunk and sat on the ground. She will come to join him when she’s done looking at the water.

He soaked his eyes with her beauty. She was athletic, slim and elegant but not in that ladylike manner. Her body had strength. White summer dress fitted her perfectly, displaying a good part of her back through the V-shaped opening. Herhed was covered with a sun hat with the ridiculously large rim.

It struck him that she wasn’t obscured with the shadow anymore. He could see her, and he fought the need to call her, to provoke her to turn around and show him her face. But he was afraid if he warned her, tell her how much she unravelled that the shadow will return.

“Won’t you come and join me?” She called.

“Thank you, I’m fine here.” He just wanted to sit and enjoy the view while he still had a chance. Good things didn’t last for long in his life as a rule, and he wanted to remember every detail, just in case. For him, she was the ray of brightness, one that he wanted to hold on to for as long as it was possible.

“The sun is not hot, it is pleasantly warm.” She tried again.

“I can admire the view from here just fine.”

“You know, if you persist in that, you are going to lose me. I can’t dwell in the darkness and shadows anymore.” Her voice sounded sad. Her head fell forward.

His heart fluttered painfully in his chest. He leaned forward wondering should he extend his arm and pull her back in the shade. But she so belonged there, on the sun.

“I can’t lose something I do not possess.” He replied through the too dry throat.

“So blind. You look but you don’t see.”

“I don’t even know who you are, how do you look like--” He started.

“Yes, you do. You are just too stubborn to allow yourself to see.” The sadness in her voice was predominating now over all other emotions. “Not that it matters. Even if you could see, you would turn around and left.”

“Do not presume that you know me that much. I was never one to hide or back away when things are tough. But you are not an obstacle.”
“Yes--” Her voice faded. “Yes, I am. I am the obstacle you won’t be willing to face.”

Her head was low now, so low that he could see her neck under the rim of her ridiculous heat. He stood up determined to go to her and console her. She was never sad, not once in all this time and it pained him to see her like this.

Her hand went up and pulled the hat off, hair spilling over her shoulders and back. He stopped, frozen. Words left his mouth before he was able to stop them.

“No!!!”

Severus sat in bed, shaking. To his right Draco jumped from the sofa, startled. The boy fell asleep curled on the sofa with the book in his lap. The book was lying on the floor and the tip of Draco’s wand flickered with light.

He fell back, not looking at Draco, or scratching Hades. In front of his eyes still was the image of her, his DreamLady.

“Oh, bollocks,”

He pressed his balled hands over his eyes, uncertain whether he wanted to preserve the image or erase it. He pressed so hard that his eyes started to hurt.

“Severus, what is going on?” Draco sounded a bit panicked, urgent.

“Nothing, just a bad dream. Go to your bed and rest, Draco. I’ll be fine.” He managed to sound normal as if nothing was going on as if the world wasn’t crumbling around him.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, just let me back to sleep if you have no desire to do so.”

The light was gone and he could hear footsteps moving towards the door.

How did I manage to get myself into this mess?
Lucius entered the room, taking in one glance the situation. Draco looked like he ran into the Hogwarts Express, hair tousled in every direction, on the right cheekbone reddish swell already shifting into a darker shade, one arm sporting a burn. He looked like a dark cloud.

Severus appeared worse than he did all these previous months. It wasn’t in the dark circles lingering around Severus’ bloodshed eyes that spoke volumes about the restless night his friend had. It wasn’t even in the tightly curled fists or singed edge of the comforter. Not even in the Hades who took refuge on the perch for drapes above the window.

No.

It was in the too tightly clenched jaw and the shoulders, tipped just a fraction towards the inside giving the impression that Severus tried to curl up. It was in the dullness hidden behind the glare. The glare that was more of a facial expression if one knew how to look.

“And what happened here?” he turned to Draco.

His son flinched and looked him in the eyes, stubbornness colouring his cheeks in pale pink. “Nothing special, some uncontrolled magic and my clumsy attempt of controlling it.”

“Hmh.” Lucius hummed and glanced at Severus again “Leave us.”

Draco didn’t argue, didn’t even utter a word. His son dashed out of the room, taking the part of the gloom with him. Lucius directed his attention to Severus, who still looked like he was about to spontaneously combust or shrink on itself.

He frowned, partially from the pain that was stronger these days, and partially because he was worried. Ever since that Mudblood menace left Severus was worse for the wear. Lucius could bet on all his fortune that his friend didn’t even notice, then again Severus for all his intelligence was never particularly adapted at recognizing feeling- his or from others.

*Such a shame, the one capable of so much love can't even recognize it...*
If Severus had that capacity, he would see through the other Mudblood in his life and save himself from so much pain. His friend wouldn’t waste his life. Lucius sighed, Severus might not even join Death Eaters, or if he did, he wouldn’t betray them. Lucius was still debating with himself, was Severus’ betrayal a good or a bad thing?

Voldemort could be destroyed only from the inside, and no matter how much the rest of the world glorified Dumbledore and Potter, Lucius, as well as the rest of the Death Eaters, knew better. They all knew how pivotal was Severus’ role in all of it. If Severus stayed on their side, the things would be so much different. Not better for anyone but different.

“What?” Severus snapped at him and he smiled.

Leaning heavily on the cane and resisting the need to groan every time he leaned on his bad side, refusing to voice his discomfort, Lucius slowly made progress until he was next to the bed.

“I bear gifts.” he replied lightly, and flicked his wand, another cane came floating through the air. “I made you one to match my own.”

Severus glared at him, and he chuckled, this was a glare.

“I thought that you might be bored of leaning on the shoulders of children and women” he added with a slight tease in his voice.

Severus growled but moved to uncover himself. Lucius waited until Severus’s feet touched the ground to hand him the cane. He watched as Severus inspected the cane. Cane’s head was made of silver and it resembled the raven, the cane alone was ebony.

“I’d like to see you say that in front of the named children or a woman.” Severus smirked.

“Yes, well, I do not have a death wish, not yet. I took the liberty of not making the space for the wand, I do remember that you prefer having yours in the sleeve.”

“The wand is not a crutch, Lucius, it is a part of you.” Severus grumbled standing up. Lucius moved a bit closer, observing Severus’ unsteady rise and first unstable steps. “The waste of good Galleons if you ask me, I won’t be needing this forever.”

“I know, but any Lord does need a cane.” Lucius chuckled again, he knew a “thank you” when it came from Severus. “Will you tell me what is bothering you?”

“Apart for being crippled and reduced to a Squib? Nothing much.” Severus smirked making a slow circle around the room.

“Oh, I’d say there is at least one more thing.”

“Enlighten me then.” the sarcasm dripped heavily in the Severus’ baritone.

“Oh, shall we say- one Hermione Granger, or lack of her?” and even if he kept his voice light there was a heaviness in his chest and abdomen.

Severus stopped, shoulders squaring, voice gruff. “If this is your idea of joking, Lucius, I have to say- it is a poor one.”

“I do have eyes my friend, and by the look of things, you do miss her. Admit it if you like or deny, but it is obvious.”
“And what might be so obvious that even you managed to see?” growled Severus pivoting on the spot, faster than would be reasonable, resulting in loss of balance.

Lucius dropped his cane and made an effort to catch Severus. They both ended up on the ground, Severus with a string of curse words and he with a painful groan. Misty popped into the room.

“Masters are not careful. Masters can injure themselves.” grumbled elf, and with a snap of her bony fingers, they were on the bed.

“Misty…” hissed Severus.

“Misty won’t help. Misty will prevent Master Snape for injuring himself again.”

And just like that Misty vanished, leaving them lying like two turtles on their back. The bed started to shake, soon after the barking sound came from Severus. He joined him in his laughter.

“Well, we are at the prime of our lives, I must say.” Severus barely managed the words through gasps of laughter.

“Indeed we are, my friend. Indeed we are.”

Severus sat in bed and he followed, he glanced at him. “But I was correct in my assumption.”

Severus stopped laughing. “Lucius, that is not a joking matter.”

“What? That you miss her? I’m not joking. I’m… Well, happy and not happy for you I suppose.” He rolled from the bed and hobbled to reach their canes. “I’m not happy because you tied yourself, once more, to the person so much below you, so unworthy of you. Then again, that might be an acquired taste do-- who am I to judge? And I’m happy, in my opinion, Miss Granger is, more manageable, stubborn but also could be manipulated. A trait I do know to appreciate.”

“Lucius…”

“With a bit of help she can be easy on the eye, and most importantly- she does possess some brain and affection towards you.”

“Lucius!” Severus whispered, but the strength he put behind his voice was as good as shouting.

“Do control yourself, Severus. I am not my son, I will pour water on you or reflect any magic coming in my direction.” he glared at his friend’s thunderous face.

Lucius was sick of playing games. Between them there were no lies, well almost no lies- they were for the biggest part honest to each other. And he refused to allow his friend to keep his eyes closed. There was also the matter of very nagging portrait in his library, this wasn’t something he could just let it pass to Draco. His son would probably burn the portrait and bring shame to the family.

Severus snatched his cane and stood up in a threatening position, or what would be threatening position if Severus wasn’t shaking. “May I remind you that we had this conversation before?”

“I remember, I also didn’t agree with you.”

“So, you are going to pester me… Nag me like an old spinster until I consent?” Severus snarled at him.

“Until you…” he started.
“She is—was my student, she is half my age. She is convinced that she knows everything, she is… You have no idea to what extent her misplaced self-confidence is going, you can’t even dream of what she’s…” Severus stopped, angry, his voice cracking.

It wasn’t just anger in his voice, there were bitterness and longing and something else, something Lucius couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Severus had a mask of anger, but beneath there was fear—genuine and honest fear.

“What did she do?” Lucius dragged the question. What could have she done? What could little goody-two-shoes do to make you so off balance? Whatever little Mudblood did it did seem to go along with his plans or attempts. She certainly did shake up Severus. Or was it all her doing? No, I’m not that lucky. Lucius dismissed the idea that pecked on the edges of his mind.

“She… She’s… Insufferable. Know-it-all. And for once in my life I had some luck coming my way. And that, my friend…” Severus slid from stuttering, so uncharacteristic to him, to a more common dangerous whisper “And that, my friend, was the day she left.”

“Yes. I heard that song before, Severus. You might want to—oh, I don’t know, widen the repertoire, perhaps?” he smiled politely, still wondering what that bit of a girl could do to Severus. Severus huffed, anger etching in his features. “Fine.” Lucius faked one bored huff. “I won’t mention little Mud…”

“Lucius!”

“Merlin. Right, Miss Granger anymore. I will, however, talk to you about your obligations as a Lord of a house.”

“My line dies with me, Lucius.” Severus waved his free hand and made a sluggish walk towards the window.

“I disagree. Do not mix up attraction or love with obligation. You have a duty to continue your family name,” he allowed a bit of harshness to sip in his tone. “I’ll admit it is much more pleasurable if there is love or at least some sort of compatibility, but it is not a requirement. You do not have to love or like her, just to produce an heir.”

“And pray tell, how do you suggest that to happen?” asked Severus, the sarcasm could be cut with the knife but Lucius decided to ignore it and play naïve.

“The usual way I suppose. You do remember how to…”

“Sometimes I wonder, do you have a death wish, Lucius?” hissed Severus.

“No, not in particular, I prefer slow and agonizing one, as you may imagine.” he replied in the same light tone.

Severus glanced at him, frowning. “That is not a joking matter.”

“And I’m not joking. I do want to live for as long as it is possible for me. And I do think that you have to start thinking about future Lady Prince.” He raised a hand to silence Severus who opened his mouth to protest. “As I said, any sort of affection is not a requirement. She doesn’t have to be to your liking, not even to your taste, not your prefered gender or species - she just has to give you an heir.”

He hobbled to the sofa and sat on the edge, the pain in his leg crept up his spine weakening the hand he used to lean on the cane.
“I swore to myself that I won’t be with the woman I do not like.” Severus sounded tired, determined but somehow also defeated.

“That- might prove difficult my friend, given that she is not among living anymore.”

“No.” Severus shook his head, looking through the window again. “Not L- her. Later. After... “

“Do you think it will be possible for you to, find a woman you might like?” taking a great pain to keep his voice light Lucius teetered on the edge of excitement, this conversation sounded promising. He prayed that Severus won’t name anyone- that could ruin his plans.

“I am certain of it…” Severus trailed and Lucius felt his curiosity reaching its peak.

_Slow down, let him come to you, then you can plot... “Who?” _ the question left his mouth before he was aware of it. _Idiot!_

“My Dream Lady.” there was a shade to tremor in Severus’ voice.

“Who?” if his eyes could roll out they would. _Who in the name of Salazar is that now?_

“It was… It is insane, it will sound insane, but I started to dream her, not too long after I wake up from the coma. She is- perfection. Everything I could wish and more.”

“She also isn’t real.” Lucius felt cold anger filling him. _I might just convince a little Mudblood to marry him, knock him out and arrange for a marriage while he is unconscious._

“She is, a therein lies the problem. She is real and unattainable. She is... She’s not for me.” there was a definite note of defeat in Severus’ voice.

“Are you certain of that? Do you know who she is?”

“I do.”

“Would you be willing to share that information perhaps?”

“No, and I’d prefer if we stop talking about it.” Severus sighed. “I didn’t know who she is until last night, and now that I do - it is ten times worse. _I was_ perfectly happy just dreaming of her, not knowing.”

“Is she married?” he tried again, but asking outright questions never yielded results with Severus.

“No. Change the subject, Lucius.”

“All right, I’ll drop it, for now. But I will leave you with the thought - if she isn’t married, deal with whatever problem you have and think about her seriously or prepare yourself to marry another. _Any other._”

He watched as Severus’ shoulders hunched.

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After he spent a sleepless night and his outburst of wild magic this morning, this was the last thing he needed. He couldn’t think of anything more dangerous than Lucius sniffing around.

Most of the night he spent trying to figure out how he ended up getting so attached to the most unlikely person. He tried to place the blame on Hermione’ misguided attempt to _help_ him, but he
couldn’t lie to himself- his Dream Lady appeared before that. True the physical aspect didn’t help his own moral code, skewed as it was.

He knew himself well enough, but this was the one thing where he couldn’t force himself to dig his head in the sand, his biggest weakness - his heart. That traitorous thing that never could choose wisely, only this time it went straight to impossible.

Even if the girl would prove willing, he couldn’t force himself to… He couldn’t condemn her to himself. He couldn’t even accept the fact that allowed himself to develop feelings, any sort of feeling little less these for a - student.

Apparently, his moral compass was off more than even he believed.

Severus had the feeling that his head was splitting in two, his fingers twitched ever so often and he tried to control these outbursts of wild magic to the best of his ability, which at this point wasn’t much.

Lucius’ words echoed through his head long after his friend left the room and after Draco returned. He wasn’t in the state which enabled him to consider himself suitable marriage material. Not to anyone really, the least of all her. Not that he was willing to even consider her.

How could he with the age difference and all the history, not to mention his own messed up history.

But she will return, and having her near will be a new kind of torture for him, he had to do something to send her away. As far away as possible, while he still had reason and strength. With a troubled sigh, he slowly walked back to the bed, he’ll have to submit himself to the healers. He has to find a way to get better - that was the only reason for her to go. Go before the damage was irreparable.

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There was sound, not one that could be heard by mortal ear, but Estelle wasn’t mortal- not anymore. She raised her head glancing around the darkened room, cold and covered with layers of fine dust. The walls were covered with frames, many of habitants snored.

Estelle hated this room, one of many reasons she tended to linger and nag to Malfoy. With the corner of her eye, she noticed the motion and smiled. She moved quickly, passing through other portraits until she reached the one she wanted.

An elderly lady in Mediwitch uniform heavily sat on the stool.

“And? Did you managed to find out anything about the girl?” asked Estelle.

“I did. Quite a bit until the girl spotted me.” huffed the woman, her pale face tight even as a painting.

“And?”

“She is a strong and capable witch, very determined and strong-willed young girl. She does lack in manners, but she could easily fit into the family line. She spends a lot of time in the company of one of the male professors, her old school-mate, so I do not question her ability to fit in but her willingness to do so.”

“I was assured by a trusted source that the girl is positively in love with him.” Estelle frowned.

“Don’t be naive Ellie, no woman would wait forever until he makes up his mind. If you think they
should marry, see that it happens. We need a strong heir in these halls.”

“I am doing the best a portrait could do. I do however think that I’ll rely on my new ally, he does seem to have a better grasp of the situation and the girl.” Estelle smirked.

“New ally?”

“The youngest Malfoy. He cares for Severus as much as the older one does, but the young one is at least convinced that the girl is suitable for Severus. Lucius can’t forgive the girl her heritage.”

“This is no time for details, the matter is urgent enough that heritage does not play the part.” Male voice joined the conversation. “Even the watered down blood is better than no blood at all.”

“If we listened a little less to you, we wouldn’t have this problem now.” Hissed Estelle. “I’ll keep you all informed.”

With those words, she returned to her frame and vanished, headed to the portrait in cosy Malfoy Manor. She had to find the way and talk to youngest Malfoy male again.
Hermione’s eye caught the movement and her hand twitched, she was walking down the long corridor with Caleb and Deidre. Caleb chuckled, shaking his head.

“It is fine, I won’t do anything- rash.” she mumbled with annoyance.

“Oh, I am not concerned.” Caleb said.

“And yet you are here, escorting me.” She huffed.

“If you managed to forget we were in Library together.” Calen chuckled again.

“And it is safer to walk in groups.” chimed in Deidre.

She didn’t reply, it was safer to go in groups these days, and they often did. Along the walls, portrait inhabitants scurried to move out the frames as she walked by. At least that gave her a small amount of satisfaction.

“Hermione!” came a call behind her back and they stopped. She turned to greet Neville.

“Professor,” replied Caleb and Deidre and pulled few paces back.

“Neville.” she gave him a tight smile.

“Hey, Hermione, when are you leaving?” Neville said, his face battling with few different emotions at the same time.

“Why are you so convinced that I’m going?” she raised an eyebrow, suddenly ticked off. She was leaving and that wasn’t the point, she could even choose where to go, Molly sent her invitation to spend holidays at the Burrow. She already refused politely. All she wanted for weeks was to be back at the Manor, it had to be a new form of madness. Nevertheless, Neville’s question still hurt. Are they all so keen to see my back?
“Because Snape is all you talked in these past months, I know you well enough to know that you won’t miss the chance.” Neville smiled at her. “Come, I’ll escort all of you to your dorms, you’ll be safer with me, now that Luna had to go early.”

“If you want to protect someone, first and second year Slytherins could benefit from your generosity…” Hermione smirked at him.

“Hermione–”

“Oh, so you are not escorting us, you are making sure that I’m gone.” she rolled her eyes.

“Hermione–”

“You know, there wouldn’t be any need for your protection Professor if you didn’t ban me from using magic outside the class.” she narrowed her eyes.

“You tried to destroy school property, you were lucky.” Neville started and she huffed.

“Nonsense, I am not dangerous.”

“Hermione,” Neville sounded serious. “You are my friend, if I could choose a sister it would be you, but… I do remember Marietta and Rita, you can be scary if someone is on your way. I also remember S.P.E.W.- you can be blind to all others when you have a goal.”

“Fine, so I climbed the ladder, I’m not Undesirable No3 anymore I jumped to Undesirable No1. Maybe someone should notify Harry.” Hermione frowned. “It is not like I’m at war with portraits you know?”

“You tried to burn the portrait of Mediwitch Patricia, you threatened Dumbledore’ portrait with turpentine, in front of McGonagall.” Neville said.

“Well, one would presume that students can be safe in school, at least now. The excuse of portraits being semi-sentient entities gives me full right to defend myself!” Hermione raised her voice.

“Patricia didn’t endanger you, Hermione–”

“She followed me around, she spied on me. I don’t know what deluded family believed that I’ll succumb to that archaic law and marry someone solely based on my magical powers index.”

“There is more to that than just…” Neville started to explain but she cut him off.

“I. Don’t. Care. If, if I ever marry it will be from love. It will be on my terms, not because someone decided that I’m suitable breeding mare based on my magical strength.” Hermione hissed, angry at the unknown family.

“And what if you wouldn’t object to the family or potential groom in question? What if you actually diminished your chances?”

“Bwah, There is no one I’d even consider.” she huffed. At least no one that would consider me back.

“How can you be so sure?” Neville tilted his head.

“First of all…” She narrowed her eyes then stopped, realising suddenly. “You know who it is.”

“I do, and no I won’t tell you. Not because I’m forbidden, which I am as well- but because you are so stubborn. If you want to find out, you’ll have to learn to ask questions before hexing.” Neville’s
voice was sharp, but he was talking to her as her friend.

Hermione’s eyes widened. Neville did look a bit angry at her. She wasn’t too concerned that teacher is angry at her, but it did hurt that her dear friend is.

Neville sighed. “Now, allow me to escort you, it really isn’t smart to let you roam around the castle so defenceless.”

The train rocked with the clickety-clack, meadows and forests exchanging fast. Hermione looked through the window, not seeing, not really. She made some decisions, and she hoped that Severus will go along with her plan. Matron certainly approved. The fear gripped her heart but she just had to know, she was ready to take that risk. Draco’s letters gave her hope that Severus was finally on the good road to recovery.

*Maybe I was the one preventing his recovery all that time.*

At that thought, her heart fluttered painfully. Well, at least after this holiday she’ll...

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Severus groaned. *Why is this wretched creature still here?* He glared, none too friendly at the woman seated across him.

“Isn’t your time to go?” He asked.

“Our session is almost over. I just wanted to make sure how are you feeling in regard to Miss Granger’s return? She is arriving today…” the woman smiled bleakly at him, her brown eyes closed off and unreadable.

“Same as I did before, I have no particular feelings towards her return, one way or the other. She’s a nuisance, a necessary evil, much like you.” he grumbled, and woman scribbled something in her notes.

“I don’t think you are completely honest with yourself Mr Prince, you *do* have feelings towards her.”

“Shall I name them for you?” he hissed “Annoyance, animosity, irritation,…”

“And yet you tolerate her by your side.” the women's professional smile never faded.

“I tolerate you as well. Come to think of it, the two of you both have something in common—you both have uncanny desire to root around my head.”

“We talked about this, I couldn’t care less about your head, there is nothing wrong with it. I do, however, care about your feelings.” She replied mildly. “But I will end our session here today. We will continue after the holidays.”

“Yes. Well, do feel free not to return.” He grumbled and glanced at Hades, he was sleeping on the perch, head under the wing. *Traitor*.

Draco barged into the room, he was huffing like a Hogwarts Express. “Thank you Madam Rutledge and happy holidays, please give our best wishes to your family.”

“I will Draco, and you give mine to your family and to Astoria.” The woman smiled.
Severus was already on his feet, gazing into the snow-covered garden. All he wanted was to be alone. He needed time to collect himself, to prepare himself for her return. He did everything humanly or wizardly possible to reach the point where he won’t need her anymore. Where Hermione would be free to walk away.

Over the past months, he continued his therapy, gaining more and more strength. And even if he still walked with the cane, he didn’t need it unless he was going for long walks. Placing a hand in the pocket of the house robe he curled the fingers around his wand. Even his magic started to return, slowly but it was there, stronger every day.

“Severus,” the woman called and he grunted not turning to look at her. “Send me a note if holidays turn out to be too much for you. I’d hate to see the progress we made destroyed.”

“I will not. Not to worry, doctor, I’ll have no time to feel lonely or to regress, regrettably.”

“This way Madam Rutledge, I’ll see you out.” offered Draco, and he sighed in relief when the door closed behind them.

He even accepted the offer from Astoria and St. Mungo’s to see a Muggle head doctor, a psychiatrist no less. He did think that Lucius will put the damper on that insane idea, but his friend chose to allow the woman to come to his home three times a week, Lucius himself would be locked in his study. If anything Severus wasn’t suicidal anymore. The doctor was a wife of a wizard, and she was good at her job, leading him to make peace with some more gruesome moments from his past. That, however, still didn’t make him more pleasant.

*Joke on all who thought that it might.*

Oddly, the doctor didn’t mind his jabs and barbs. She accepted his nature and his gruffness, something that annoyed him to no end. It was a rough road, but they did muddle through.

His Dream Lady didn’t return after *that* dream. That, however, didn’t mean that he didn’t dream. His dreams usually forced him to jump out of the bed, in the middle of the night- aroused and disgusted with himself, terrified with the prospect of future. Fear was something new, not the paralyzing one, accompanied by the adrenaline of survival instinct. No, this was a new kind of fear, *normal* as the doctor would call it. He hated it.

It was one thing to admit his own madness and lack of any semblance of decency and reason. After all, without his occlumency walls, he was defenceless against his own pesky feelings. Still, the fact that he was willing to face the truth, didn’t mean that he was willing to act on it.

*No, that won’t do. I have to get rid of her. Soon. Fast. Before…*

He shook his head. The door opened again.

“Severus, would you mind returning to bed?” Draco still sounded like he was running a marathon.

“I prefer to stand.” he said.

“Yes, I know...Uh, you see, I sort off skipped writing about that to Bucktooth and…”

“And that is not my problem, Draco.” He glanced over the shoulder at Draco. The boy looked ready to burst. *What is up with him?* “Would you mind telling me what is wrong?”

“I can’t believe I’ll say this, but I am glad to see her back.” Mumbled Draco.
Severus raised an eyebrow, intrigued. Draco huffed. “Now, don’t get any ideas. While she’s here I’ll have more free time. I am not created and raised to be anybody’s errand boy.”

Severus smirked. He did give Draco a run for his money. He still loved the boy, he would still protect the boy. That didn’t mean that he would go easy on Draco. On anyone, considering… Half groan, a half growl escaped his lips.

“Potter will be here more than he was in these past months…” He suddenly realised.

“Yes, I think so. She is his friend after all.” Draco nodded.

“Funny, I’d say the two of you became rather good friends.” Severus said he’d seen Potter more than he cared for as of lately.

“Well, it is smart to be friend with the Chosen one, same way it is smart to have Granger in the home and to have Dr Rutledge here. Positive publicity and all.” Draco shrugged.

“Yes. Well, do try not to sound like your father too much.”

Elf popped in. “Missy Hermione is here.” Misty announced, she also looked more flustered than annoyed. Hades gave a happy squawk. I’m surrounded by traitors.

They could hear the voices and Narcissa’s laughter from the hallway, before the door opened once more. Severus turned to glare at her. “You returned.” But even if his voice sounded dry and ruff, his eyes took an image of her. Hair sticking in all direction, skin rosy from the cold, lips slightly parted in surprise, eyes wide in wonder. She stood there, looking at him, her body twitching as if she was battling to keep it in place. Hades screeched and flew to land on her shoulder.

“It is nice to see you, Severus.” she sounded a bit breathless. “Hello, Hades. I brought you some treats. You didn’t tell me.” the last remark was harsh and directed to Draco.

“Surprise, and you welcome.” Draco smirked, moving towards the door. “Will you move, I have to get ready, Astoria is waiting for me.”

“Draco!” Narcissa sharply called her son, and then spoke in much softer tones. “I’ll see you bot at dinner. We dine at the dining room again, Severus will show you the way.”

“Well, Hermione you may close your mouth unless you wish to catch flies, eh?” he smirked.

“You, you look much better…” she finally said to him, turning to place her things on the sofa.

“You have your own room, no need to…” he started.

“I’ll stay here if it’s all the same to you. Besides, Malfoy Manor isn’t the place I’d choose to have my room.” Hermione replied coldly, turning to him. “You do look better, healthier....” she paused, taking a breath and he frowned. “I have a gift of sorts for you, and a blessing…”

“We had this conversation before, I do not need nor wish gifts, and I most certainly do not provide ones in return.”

“Oh, I think you’d want this one.” She smirked at him handing him a roll of parchment.

He made a few paces and took the paper, reading it. His heart accelerated. It was approval from Poppy and St Mungo’s- Freedom.

“So, when did you plan to… Provided that I do allow you to…” he said, not finishing his thoughts.
partially to throw her off balance, and partially to hide his own excitement.

“In fact, I can do it now. Do you want to?” she smiled at him.

“Do I want you out of my head?” He asked raising an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“Very well. Please, sit down.” Hermione pointed at the sofa and he sat, just as well, his legs would give out anyway. He could finally dream freely, think and feel freely without danger of her knowing it. This was one way out he didn’t count on or anticipated, he welcomed it nonetheless.

She sat across him, taking her wand out. “Clear….” she started and stopped when he gave her his patented glare. “Right, you know. Just tell me when you are ready.”

“You may proceed. But, if you…” he hissed, his heart ticking in the throat.

“Yes, I know. You’ll hex me into last year.” she rolled her eyes.


“Right.” She sighed.

Severus took a deep breath to clear his mind. Her face was too close for his liking. He allowed her to lock her eyes with his and slip in his mind. Her presence was familiar, soft, unobtrusive. His palms slickened, his heart drummed in his ears.

“Do you need any guidance?” he asked more to distract himself than anything else.

“No, thank you.”

He felt a small pressure, like a pebble in his mind, not sharp and rough but soft. He could feel her, she was confident in what she was doing. She also felt like a ray of light or summer breeze. Severus doubled his effort to suppress the images that her presence threatened to draw up. He could feel her pulling back.

Severus blinked.

She was looking at him smiling shyly. “Happy Holidays, Severus.” she whispered, her voice sounding a bit shaky.

He checked the feeling in his head. The link was gone. Surprisingly, or maybe not so much, emptiness was almost terrifying. The lack of her presence left an odd sense of coldness. He cleared his throat.

“Good riddance.” He mumbled dryly, not wanting to show any sign of weakness.

Her eyes darkened, a shine of weakness drew over them. Hermione swallowed and nodded. “Well, I’ll be on my way then…” she stood up fast, picking up her purse.

“And where do you think you’re going?” he asked sharply. The nerve of her.

“You…” her voice snapped and she let her chin fall to her chest. “You are finally free of me. Draco told me about your progress and now that mess is taken care off… Technically, you do not need my help…”

It was painful to see her like that, looking like a ball of fur thrown out on the cold, sad. She moved fast towards the door. His insides tighten. Let her go, idiot.
“Correct me if I’m mistaken, Hermione, but you do not have anywhere to go.” his voice cracked like a whip in the room.

“Well, I can still tell Molly that I changed my mind.” she didn’t turn.

“Yes, well, do give my warm regards to Ronald Weasley then.” he quipped, anger rising like a sturdy wall inside him. That stopped her, she glanced at him, her eyes full of helpless anger.

“What do you want? I gave you what you wanted, you are free of me. No more unwanted bonds, no more need to suffer my presence, no more me. Isn’t that what you wanted?” Even if she was whispering it sounded like she’s yelling at him.

The wall of anger slammed at him with full force. Who does she think she is. I should just turn around, it is what I want after all. It is so much safer to let her leave. However, his mind somehow lost connection to his brain. What came out of his mouth surprised him as much as it shocked her.

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“Actions do have consequences, Hermione. Or may I remind you that you are still in the capacity of my secretary? Not to mention that this,” He levitated the parchment she gave him into her hands. “Gives you permission to break the link, not to abandon your post as my nurse.”

“I don’t understand you. I thought that you would welcome the opportunity to see me gone.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“And I would. However, I am in need of the secretary tomorrow evening.” he hissed. “You and you alone are to blame for my present state. You are the one that is in fault for the fact that tomorrow I have to make my appearances at the Malfoy Ball. So if I have to suffer, so will you.”

“So, you want me gone after the ball tomorrow?” she asked.

“No. I want you gone when Poppy gives her blessing, and not a moment sooner. I am done with taking the blame for the actions of others. Taking a scolding in others name. You made your own bed, now- you will bloody stay in it until the end.”

“Are you telling me that you don’t want me to leave?” Hermione asked again, her voice vibrating, muscles on her face twitching, fighting the expression of hope.

Severus sighed, stealing his voice he shaped his face into a disgruntled mask. “I’m telling you that I do want you gone when I’m certain that no one will blame me for your departure. Now, rest a bit, Narcissa expect us for dinner at six. And you’ll have to look proper.”

Everything in his head screamed at him, this was pure madness. He heard the sound, muffled squeal accompanied by the loud and rather happy screech from Hades. Severus walked to the armchair and sat picking up the book, not looking at the girl, but also not reading. Emptiness in his head terrified him. Holidays were always hard for him, he didn’t want to stay alone.

Freedom was welcomed. The pressing emptiness, that cold hand squeezing at his chest at the thought of her gone, that wasn’t- welcome, but it was there. He will find the way to separate himself from her, or at least to keep her at the arm’s length. He wasn’t ready to see her leave. The good doctor left too many wounds open, still bleeding and he couldn’t deal with...Not yet at any rate.

You spineless wanker. He thought bitterly.
Hermione rummaged through her trunk, her heart still beat fast. Severus was different. She was twice now in his head, but this time it was different. He still didn’t let her see anything but there were pockets of warmth in his mind and pockets of icy cold almost crushing grief. And still, he was different, better, more like she would imagine him be.

He looked different as well. Not so haunted. Sure he was still grim and he was still as cuddly as angry porcupine but she never expected for that to change, it was who he is. Oddly, that air of gruffness suited him, she could never imagine him behaving like Harry or Hagrid or even Draco.

She chanced a glance at him, he was sitting in the chair, the book opened in his lap but he was gazing at the fire. He had a healthy complexion, he still looked whip-thin but he wasn’t malnourished, his hair a bit longer, falling over his shoulders. Her heart climbed to his throat. Picking up a bundled robes she cleared her throat and headed to the bathroom.

She should have counted her blessings really. Hermione still couldn’t decide what made her change her decision to free him after holidays. Just seeing him there, standing, back straight and his posture same as she remembered- it was enough incentive for her to reconsider her decision. He deserved to be whole, returned to what he once was. No! Even better, unburdened by guilt and self-loathing. The reality was that she didn’t have any right or any chance. She also didn’t want him to be the target of that deluded family that had her in mind as a bride.

Severus might know how to...

The thought propelled her to action, she burst in the room forcing him to gaze at her with disapproval.

“I see that only a few months in that school robbed you of all you learned here.” he quipped.

“I need your help.” She blurted and his head tilted in question, eyebrows arching. “You are maybe the only person who can understand my point of view and also the only person who might know how I can get out of this. Well, maybe not the only one, but certainly the only one willing to share that knowledge with me.”
“Pray tell, Hermione, what made you think that I’d be willing to share that alleged knowledge?” he asked, voice flat.

“Because you hate when someone is forced to do something against his or her will. And I can’t stress enough how much I don’t want this.” she crossed hands over her chest, resisting a need to hug herself.

“I believe I was clear when I informed you that I’m done playing a patsy or rescuer of the lost.” Severus frowned.

“All I ask is to tell me if you know how I can get myself out of my predicament, there are no books on the matter so I need someone willing to share what is considered common knowledge. Well, I grew up in Muggle world, the knowledge is anything by common for me.” Hermione said, her heart beating in her throat. She bunched the robe in her hands, letting material to soak the sweat from her palms.

“Very well, what is the predicament that you need my advice for? And I’m not saying I’ll help before I know…” he started.

Fear grabbed her, unreasonable fear. She had the need to run and hid, like it wasn’t enough that she had to deal with unrequired love, now she had to tell the man she loved that another family want her as the bride to be… But what other option she had?

“Well, during my time in Hogwarts I noticed that certain portrait is following me. Finally, I found out that she was checking up on me for the family that decided I’m a perfect match for their son.” She said almost breathless, words flow fast and a bit jumbled, but she kept talking afraid that if she stops or slows down she’ll lose her courage. “They based that on Magic index compatibility, now I don’t know how anyone could find what my index is, but I do suspect it is one of the families with board members. They are the only ones that could see my…”

“Or one of the portraits could tell them. Did you try to get information from the portrait they used?” he asked, nodding.

“I did, it… It didn’t end well.” Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Let’s just say it involved Incendio and me being banned from use of magic outside class on school grounds.” Hermione blinked. Is he laughing at me? She could swear that the corners of Severus’ lips tugged up. “Anyway, I got nothing. And I don’t care who the family is. I just want to know how to say no and in an acceptable way.”

Severus nodded, his face unchanged. A long silence stretched between them. She lowered her hand in the lap, kneading them.

“Did you ever consider the possibility of accepting the offer?” he raised his hand to stop her words. “Compatibility with the magic index is more than just- as Muggles would say the question of compatible genetics. It is not a soulmate thing or anything that idiotic, but… It is very hard to explain, there are no proper words, however, it is more. Lucius and Narcissa, Weasley’s, many of your friends’ families are matched based on that. The good example of a person who rejected that custom is Mrs Zabini, or however she is called now.”

“But…” she tried.

“I am still talking, Hermione.” He cut her off sharply. “Not everyone is blessed with a good match. From what you described, it sounds that you have a nearly perfect match. Considering your history, and still present sub-current in the question about Muggleborns… In one thing you are correct, it has
to be one of the Pureblood families, only they have enough connections with Hogwarts portraits.”

“I do not want that. Not…” he voice cracked, tears pricking her eyes.

“I see, so there is someone else.” He said with a confident tone and she widened her eyes, trying to push back the fear, but her heart quivered. “Come now, Hermione, I was a teacher and Head of House for almost twenty years. It is hard for me not to see through the real reason why you refuse to even reconsider. I know that you have your own misguided set of moral rules and that this goes against them. Still, your repulsiveness and eagerness to avoid it at any cost is a tell.” he smirked. “Don’t tell me it is Weasley.”

She flinched. “No, of course, it isn’t. How-how can you even think of it.”

“Love is not rational…” he directed his gaze to the flames. “A simple no will suffice. No one can force you, and their pursue isn’t binding. But I would advise you to reconsider.”

“Thank you, but I made my decision.” she lowered her eyes to the floor.

Snape suddenly stood up. “It is time. Follow me.”

She almost forgot about the dinner. With the sense of dread, she followed Snape through the maze of corridors and down, until they ended up in a posh dining room. The long table could fit a dozen people easily. Hermione frowned, she could never live like this, the rich space of dining room was cold and impersonal.

The door clicked and Narcissa entered, her hand casually curled around Lucius’.

“Ah, you are already here. Let us sit.” Narcissa smiled politely.

Severus pulled out the chair for her and Hermione had a need to scream, not to mention choke, this was more than she expected of him. Then again, she never had a chance to observe him in the social surroundings, somehow she had the feeling that Hogwarts didn’t count. A sudden appearance of food snapped her to reality.

“Are we waiting for Draco?” she asked.


Everyone started eating, silence plucked on her nerves as she tried to force the soup down her throat, it seemed like the liquid was full of needles. Or maybe it was just a sitting arrangement, placing Narcissa and Lucius across Severus and her.

“How is school, Miss Granger?” Lucius asked, his tone casual.

“Still standing…” she replied, unsure why is she so mad at that question coming from Malfoy.

“I hear that you had some-mishaps, shall we say…” Lucius continued.

“Nothing I couldn’t deal with.” she smiled, trying not to show too many of her teeth. Ah, I knew I had a reason.

“Hmh.” hummed Lucius, with the corner of her eyes she noticed that Narcissa and Severus exchanged glances. “You have only a few more months, did you considered what will you do after?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that it isn’t his place to ask such question, remembering the
book on etiquette she bit her inner cheek. Lucius was obviously trying to provoke her, masking a provocation in benign small talk. She lowered her spoon, clearing her throat.

“I do have a few options I’m thinking off. Law seems like the most interesting, that would include working at the Ministry.” She replied politely but flatly.

“Interesting, I would advise against it, however.” Lucius said he didn’t even do as much to glance at her.

Anger boiled inside. Who does he think he is? But before she managed to reply, her entire body stiffened. The place where Severus touched her leg burned, heart-stopping then resuming in double speed. His voice send sparks down her back, a cold ball settled in her stomach.

“Indeed.” Severus agreed.

“Why?” she turned to look at Severus’ blank face.

“You lack connections and wealth. Then there is a matter of your blood status…” started Lucius and she cut him off.

“I have connections, I am fiend with the Minister, in case you have forgotten, as well as with a few high officials. I also have my reward gold and my status as a War Hero. I also helped Draco, I even have a few favours I can call on.” she glared at Malfoy.

“Is that so?” Lucius smirked in his soup. “As admirable as your political tendencies are, Miss Granger, you are far off. Your War Hero status won’t last for long, and only the Boy Menace will be able to milk it the longest. Calling on favours is admirable Slytherin way of thinking, with one slight flaw, Malfoys lost their footing. And in case you haven’t noticed even our dear Minister so open-minded is still a Pureblood, most of the high officials are. You are not nearly enough old or accomplished to earn your single vote in Wizengamot.”

“Before Hermione hex you, Lucius,” Snape interjected in Lucius’ speech. “Hermione, I advise you to observe Harry and Minister tomorrow. I do not think that you would be as amenable as Mr Potter is to play a trained monkey.”

“Fine, I’ll observe.” she hissed, still angry but mellowed wit’s Snape’ words, after all, he gave her a choice and opportunity to see and deduce on her own. The oddity of the situation gnawed on the corners of her mind but anger jarred her to keep on arguing her point. Hermione was sick and tired of Lucius’ high-and-mighty ways. “For your information Mr Malfoy, things are changing. That Pureblood supremacy idea you nurture is crumbling…”

“Is it?” Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Stand me corrected, but didn’t you destroy a school property because that idea still lives?”

“I did not.” she raised her chin. “The painting and the frame are impervious to fire, I only singed it a bit.”

All heads turned to her, Hermione could swear that she heard Snape chuckle under his breath.

“Be that as it may, you can tell that ideas of keeping it in the close circle are still alive.” menacing smile danced around Lucius’ lips.

“What does one archaic custom has to do with your paranoid and corrupted ideas? In case you forgot I am Muggleborn.” She glared at Lucius.
“Don’t remind me.” Lucius rolled his eyes. “But pureblood dogma as you called it is in its core what is happening to you. The fact is that it was corrupted over the years, and yes- a paranoia of the XVI century did contribute to it through the Salazar’ ideas. In its core, Miss Ignoramus the pure-blooded was used to all magical humans. After all, we all have roots in Muggle descendants.”

Hermione gasped, how was that she didn’t know this? And how they came from all magical humans to only those with magical parents?

“I...I don’t understand. If you know all this then how…?”

“How can I dislike your kind?” Lucius raised an eyebrow and she flinched. “Easy. You, Muggleborns, disrespect our customs, you bring your skewed ideas and think that we are the ones who have to change. I do believe that a small history lesson is in order, you see Dark Ages sent magical humans into hiding. The intermarriages were safe, over the time they became valued. Every outsider could bring doom to the community, outsiders, especially non-magical, or those raised in Muggle households and with Muggle ideas were a danger to us.”

“But we are not in Dark Ages anymore!” she exclaimed.

“No, we are not. And during the first war, there was more leniency towards Muggleborns, they just proved to be more resilient and willing to oppose Dark Lord’s ideas. He hated Muggles, not those with magical blood, regardless of their parentage. Furthermore, yes the families who maintained the old customs of intermarriage to only proven magical lineages saw the opportunity in this.”

“Opportunity?” she gaped at Lucius.

“You see if you cast out or demoted to a lesser status all those who can’t prove their Magical purity they lose their right to the vaults. The loot was divided among those more-deserving. We gained more wealth and most of the power positions. It is nothing personal, Miss Granger, it is simply a matter of economics.”

Hermione choked on air. “You, you vile, sleazy… No, no, I won’t, I can’t sit at the same table with you.” She jumped, tumbling the chair and dashed out. She could hear Narcissa’ sharp reprimand and Severus laughing at Lucius.

Emotions stirred inside her, she had a need to blast something. She was appalled with what Lucius told her. She was more than confused with how Severus behaved, so much unlike himself.

He’s in therapy now, you don’t know how he is. I wonder if anyone knows?

“So you tried to burn the Hogwarts portrait?” Draco’ voice behind her made her jump. Draco narrowed his eyes. “Dinner went that well, huh?”

“Yes, I got in-depth insight into pureblood dogma history.” she hissed, Malfoy really weren’t her favourite people right now.

Draco chuckled. “Oh, dad managed to distract mum from badgering him about Ball. Way to go, dad.”

“You meant to say…” she gaped, it never occurred to her that Lucius was intentional and that conversation didn’t just happen. I should have known.

“So, will you give my father a free pass, or are you going to return and give him what he deserves?” Draco raised an eyebrow and she smirked at him.
“Since when you want to make it difficult for your father?”

“Since always.” Draco winked, leading her back to the dining room.

“Look whom I found steaming up the portrait frames,” Draco said cheerfully and Severus stood up to pull her chair again.

“Nice to see you joining us, I would, however, apologize to Narcissa.” there was a note of sarcasm in Severus’ voice while he whispered those words to her. Hermione nodded, not so much to thank Severus as to let him know that she accepts his advice.

“My apologies for the outburst.” she said to all looking at Narcissa who smiled at her.

“So, what was the topic that drove our resident Muggleborn out of the dining room?” Draco asked cheerily, he looked overly happy. Too happy, in fact.

“Miss Granger's future occupation. I advised her against politics, she didn’t take it well.” Lucius said smoothly.

Hermione frowned but she refused to take the bait for the second time that evening. Draco grinned at his father.

“I agree unless hexing is a part of the job she wouldn’t do well. Hey, Granger, why not Potions?” Draco turned to her and she tilted her head.

What is he up to now?

“Hermione is a competent brewer but she does lack creativity…” Severus started and she had to swallow her anger again.

“I would be interested in Potions or Arithmancy…” she nodded with less enthusiasm.

Draco smirked at Snape, ignoring her attempt to talk. “Are you sure, I’d say she’s plenty imaginative, and besides, you could be her Master, teach her…”

“Draco, I can’t teach intuition. And with my problem, I can’t be much of a Master to anyone. If memory serves I refused you.” Severus gave one sharp glance to Draco who squirmed on his seat.

“True, but there is a cure now, and sooner or later you will be free of the post-crushiatius stress, your problem won't progress enough to incapacitate you.” Draco nodded, his smile did look a tad bit uncomfortable but he kept on talking. “Besides, I finally decided what I’m going to do.”

“Continue the Malfoy tradition, naturally.” Lucius injected.

“No. I’m going to be a healer.” Draco smiled.

Severus nodded approvingly, Narcissa clapped her hands in delight, Hermione held her breath while Lucius had a shocked face.

Sitting on her other side Draco leaned to whisper to her. “Oh, Granger, you may say thank you to me, I managed to convince mother- Astoria and I choose your attire for tomorrow’s Ball.”

Her mouth fell open, she turned to gape at Draco, not angry or confused but truly worried.
Severus frowned, Draco took precautions to avoid him after that dinner. As it turned out the boy was adapted at misdirection and slithering out before he could pull him to the side and ask him what is he playing at?

The image in the mirror nodded approvingly, and he frowned at it. Narcissa’ choice of robes was impeccable as always. The material was rich and followed his line perfectly, and yet not too tight giving him freedom of movement. The finest wool, soft and black was done with rich embroidery done in black silk. The effect was amazing, and only when he moved the patterns revealed in a slight shine, creating almost an illusion.

A deep growl escaped him, he argued that his old robes will suffice; he argued for days. But stubborn as he is, Narcissa finally won. Tonight is his first public appearance since the war, and Narcissa insisted that he has to look the part.

I wonder if she will insist for me to assume my grandfather's role as a resident tyrant as well?

“Severus, will you get out from behind that screen so I can see you? I am sure it doesn’t look half as bad as you make it sound.” Narcissa called.

With a deep sigh, he stepped to her view. Her eyes shined and a bright smile spread across Narcissa’ face, she tilted her head.

“Fantastic! You look amazing, a true Lord.” she whispered.

“You do not have to congratulate yourself, Cissa.” he said, frowning at her.

“Just one more detail and I won’t bother you anymore. But for the last living member of one of the oldest families, your appearance is as royal as it can get.” she nodded, pacing to him. “Please, sit down.”

“What sort of torture you plan for me?” Severus growled but sat down.

He could argue, but he knew, the battle would be lost before it even starts. Narcissa, for all her looks, was as tough as they come. Stubborn to the core. No one could stop her if she wanted something.

Now, apparently, she wanted to tinker with his hair. She summoned one of her elves and she gave it an instruction. With a little luck, I won't end up with one of the elaborate hair pieces she likes to wear.

“Stop frowning, Severus.” Narcissa said.
“Have you grown eyes on the wall?” he smirked.

“No, and I don’t need to. I know you all too well.” she replied, a tone of amusement in her voice.

The elf tugged on his hair and he hissed in warning. He hated it. But the elf ignored him. She pulled his hair back and tied it with a silken ribbon, a tingle of magic told him that the ribbon will hold no matter what.

“Now, Lucius and I may be mistaken for a pair of unhappy siblings.” He grumbled.

“You act like it. Merlin, you two give me more trouble than all the children in this home.” the sharpness in Narcissa’ voice warned him that he is now testing her patience. “Hermione, do you need help with your robes?”

“Ummmm... No...” came an uncertain answer from behind the bathroom door.

“What did you get her?” he turned to Narcissa with a smirk, finding small comfort in the fact that he isn’t the only one unsatisfied with Narcissa’ choice of attire.

“Draco and Astoria chose her robes, I didn’t even see it. I hope that they didn’t choose something ghastly or he will attend the Ball with his head clean-shaven, both will.” threatening cold in Narcissa’ voice made him smirk.

Severus could envision Draco and Astoria head-shaven already. Salazar knew the boy did deserve it. Especially after the last night. *What was he thinking, pushing Hermione to become my apprentice?*

He wanted the girl to slowly separate and drift away from him. That was his plan. Mostly, he wanted her gone but in time. However, if he could convince her to at least reconsider that proposal, whoever the family was, that could be a neat solution to his problems.

The girl was, after all, meticulous, knowledgeable and quite competent brewer. And he could use an assistant. She would never be an inventor, but she could be one of the best brewers in the country. and, if she is to be married, she would stop pestering him, she would work and at the end of the day go to pester someone else.

The door clicked and opened, Hermione stepped into the room, her steps slow and uncertain like she was entering the cage with Nundu. He wanted to say something, anything that would make him sound like his old self, but he couldn’t. His heart lurched into his throat and stayed there logged. The best he could do is to keep the sombre look on his face.

“You look stunning, Hermione.” Narcissa smiled warmly, stepping to the girl and making her turn in a circle.

Deep, forest green, brocade silk trimmed with leaves in the colour of the old gold shimmering with her every move. The cut of the robes is modern, leaving a wide breadth of skin and just enough of cleavage to let you know it’s there. The upper part snug and a golden band running under her chest put a nice focus on that part of her body. From that ribbon the robe is widening falling in rich folds and still revealing her shape, making the body more pronounced and visible.

Her hair was once more piled up in an artistically messy nest with only a few curls falling down her neck and over her shoulders towards cleavage.

Hades flapped his wings squawking with appreciation. He turned to glare at the bird, giving himself time to get the rein over the expression of shock that threatened to emerge. He turned to the girl again, narrowing his eyes and tilting his head.
“Yes, passable. That will do.” he managed through the clenched throat.

Last year she looked lovely but this year- she transformed. In front of him was a young woman, with everything she had to offer displayed in a tasteful package.

_Maybe Draco joined in on Lucius’ insane idea. He did after all wanted to push the idea… Nonsense, Draco is, and always was a self-absorbed little weasel. He wanted to redirect his father's ire._

Hermione blushed at his words, and Narcissa frowned.

“You, Severus, are incorrigible. Well, I say, prepare to fight for the company of your escort this evening.” Narcissa said. “Hermione we will see each other down in ballroom later. Now I have to help my husband before he does make a mess.”

“Hmh.” it was all that Severus replied.

Once they were alone, he forced a frown. “Hermione, I expect you to act in the capacity you are employed. Do not forget that you are still my Secretary and as such you are here to ensure that the protocol is followed.”

“Of course.” Hermione nodded, her face flushed but serious.

“As you were not only my secretary but my escort for the evening, I expect of you to spare me of various vultures who would try to dance with me. I believe you will dance with your friends…”

“Oh, no. I won’t leave my duty…” Hermione interrupted him and he glared at her.

“Yes, you will. Contrary to your rose coloured opinion of the goodness of the wizarding world, tonight all eyes will be not only on you and me but also Malfoys.” His voice was a tad too sharp, but that was good. “You will behave in a manner you would behave in this situation normally.”

“But…” she tried again.

“Hermione, the last thing I want is for you to leave the impression that you are Impiroed or a prisoner. You will act according to the event _and_ to your role as my Secretary.” he hissed.

“Fine.” She finally nodded. “And what about the press?”

“I do not wish to talk with them.”

She nodded again, one sharp motion of the head that send tremors through her hair, loose curls rolling over the exposed part of her collarbone. He watched her as she stood there, uncertain and confused.

Misty popped up, holding a few boxes in her hands. “Lady Narcissa sends Misty with these. Madam say Missy big mouth need jewellery.”

“Oh, thank you Misty, but there is really no need…” Hermione tried but elf ignored her.

“Madam say Master took it from family home.” Misty confirmed the statement with a wobble of her head and extended the boxes to him.

He took them, doing his best not to hex the elf, after all, Narcissa was the one who deserved the hex. All boxes had the Prince family crest on them. _This is all Lucius doing._

He opened the biggest square box, his frown deepening. Stiffening the growl he took a necklace
from the silky bed and gave a sharp instruction.

“Turn around, Hermione.”

“But…” she wanted to protest, her entire stance recoiled in protest. Privately he agreed with her, this was not the jewellery she would wear as his secretary, but Narcissa always matched the trinkets with the dress and looks of women more than with propriety.

“It is your duty as my Secretary not to bring shame to my house. Now. Turn. Around.” he hissed.

“Fine.” Hermione frowned and turned. “But that is too expensive for a mere Secretary to wear.”

“You may thank Narcissa for it later.” he allowed poison he felt at that moment to sip in his voice.

The necklace made of white gold, the branches with small leaves woven with delicacy supported four brown diamonds around green opal. Magic tingled on the tips of his fingers as he fastened the clasp doing his best not to make any contact with her skin.

From the smaller box, he took the bracelet, a matching set to the necklace clasp it around her wrist. Finally, he took two teardrop-like earrings made of green opal and handed to Hermione to put them on.

“I expect of you to take good care of my family’s heritage...” he grumbled.

An hour later, Severus was ready to hex left and right. He was never one for social gatherings. Hermione was standing next to him, doing her part well. He was leaning on the cane, more to do something with fingers that itch to fold around the wand than out of necessity. He listened idly as Hermione chatted with Potter and Longbottom.

Severus nearly jumped at the light touch of her hand. “Ummm, sorry for startling you, but the people starting to talk. You need to dance at least one dance, is there any lady…”

“I dislike dancing, and I wouldn’t set foot on that floor with any of the hens gathered here tonight.” he hissed. “You will have to do.”

Placing his cane in Potter’s hands, he tugged Hermione to the floor. They left Potter and Longbottom gaping like trouts behind them. With a smirk and not so gentle tug he positioned still stunned Hermione for the slow waltz that just started to play.

“Do not step on my toes.” he growled at her.

“I know how to dance.” She said, blush licking up her neck. “And I have to admit, you were right.”

“Indeed, the question is about what?” he squeezed the words out, focusing on keeping a distance.

“About Harry, and how he is treated. Even he noticed, but he says it is the only way for him to achieve anything. He also advised me against politics.” she admitted, her eyes lowering.

“As much as things change, politics will always stay the same.” he nodded.

He could feel the heat of her sipping through his hand and material of her robes.

“So would you?” her eyes turned to his, two huge brown orbs with yellow flakes.
“Would I what?”

“Reconsider to take me as an apprentice?” she gulped. “Now there is a cure for post-cruciatus. And I know I’m not the most imaginative one, but… If I take anything else I’ll be forced to stay there, in that castle. And, Hogwarts isn’t home anymore.”

“My ability or inability to brew, Hermione, has nothing to do with my ability to teach.” He growled. “I could lose both hands and still be able to teach even Longbottom how to brew. Albeit, him I could teach only how to brew tea without disaster.”

“So, will you? I could pay you, I have the money from the reward, and I’ll receive revenue from the patent. Draco insisted that we share profit 50:50 even if his name is first on the paper…”

“First of all, I have no use from your Galleons, I have more than enough of my own- now.” He frowned. “Second, this is not the time nor the place for such conversation.”

The melody stopped. Draco tapped him on the shoulder offering him his cane.

“Father sent me to dance with Bucktooth, he says it is good for our public image. He also says to lean on your cane like you are tired or in pain.” Draco winked.

“I believe I’m the one you should ask not Severus.” Hermione turned to Draco.

“Hermione, you have to dance with one of the hosts, and I advise you to accept Draco’s offer. Or wait for Lucius to lose his patience.” he smirked at her glare, placing her hand on Draco’s.

Faking a heavy lean on the cane he retreated to the corner and watched Draco and Hermione dancing, undoubtedly exchanging barbs and insults over fake smiles.

He was now in predicament. His heart soared at the thought of keeping her as his apprentice. That was a danger, the one he had to stifle at its bud.

I have to look at that offer she is pursued with. Alone she is a threat, engaged or married she is safe to handle.

He knew enough about Imagic index compatibility to know that even if it wasn’t a bond or soulmate thing, it was the best way to match couples. Most of the time it happened naturally, magic sought its counterpart, its best match. With regret, he remembered when Poppy told him that she couldn’t find his match. He ignored when she told him that he and Lily were not one for each other. Then he was so angry at Lily, he was the living proof that Compatibility never had any reign over the matters of the heart.

Yes, it would be best to push her in that direction. I could arrange for her to meet that unfortunate boy out of the context of the offer and just let things develop naturally.

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“So you and Snape dancing, huh.” Draco wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“It is an obligation, just like my dancing with you.” Hermione hissed, angry and flustered.

Her palm still vibrated from Severus’ touch. Her bask still tingled where his hand was. She purposely missed the step, leaning more than necessary of her weight on Draco’ toes.

“No need to mangle me, Bucktooth.” Draco flashed her with a fake smile.

“You deserved it.” she gave him one glare, focusing on keeping the smile on her face.
“For?” Draco asked.

“This dress-robes, for one.” she growled quietly.

“You look like royalty. Learn how to be a human, Granger. You do…” Draco stopped mid-sentence. A faint tingle of magic buzzed up against her back. “Sorry Bucktooth, I have to go.”

Draco stopped their dance abruptly and lead her hastily to Severus. He bowed slightly and dashes to Astoria, whispering something and moving to the door.

*The weasel is up to something.*

Severus was talking but she didn’t listen, she will find out what was Draco up to.

“Are you listening, Miss Granger?” Severus’ sharp voice reached her, he was glaring at her, eyes narrowed.

“No, sorry. I-I have to go, leave you for a while. I’ll be right back.” she rushed the words and moved.

Hermione could hear Severus hissing her name but she hurried to follow Draco. He didn’t go far, staying on the ground floor but meandering through corridors. Casting a Cushioning charm on her soles and Muffliato she waited until Draco disappeared behind one door.

Hermione waited for a few moments hidden behind the corner. Where is an extendable ear when you need one?

She crept down the hallway. Grinn spill over her lips when she noticed that the door was ajar. Heart pounding in her chest like a hammer she snuck to the door to listen.

“I told you not to do anything, to let me handle the things.” Hermione could hear Draco hissing.

“I had to check the girl.” replied female voice.

“You said that her blood status is irrelevant to your plan.” replied Draco.

“It is, I couldn’t care less about her blood status, as long as she can give strong heirs to my family.” hissed woman.

Hermione felt anger rising, so Draco knew the family that was stalking her. Draco was working with them. *I’m going to turn that little rat into a pile of ashes.*

“And I told you that she is a less of a problem than he is. Keep on like this and you can kiss your family line goodbye...” growled Draco, irritation and hurry clear in his voice.

“I did what you told me, I released the hold of his magic. I even allowed that quack of a Muggle doctor to be his healer. Until I can talk to him, and tell him what is expected of him, the girl is the only one I can check on.”

*Maybe it isn’t about me... severus, they are talking about Severus.*

“He will fall into a trap, but you have to stop meddling.” Draco sounded angry.

“I’m growing tired of your games, boy. He has an obligation to the Prince family line and...”

Hermione pulled her wand, her heart throbbing painfully. She charged in the room, ready to hex
Draco and the woman. And she was faced with angry looking Draco glaring at the portrait.

The woman at the portrait bore unmistakable traits of the family line, the resemblance was striking.

“Granger!” Dracko exclaimed, startled with her entrance.

She ignored him, want in her hand she attacked the portrait. “Obligation? What obligation? You meddlesome peace of canvas! What is he obliged to you and your family?”

“Ah, Miss Granger I presume. Well, girl, he is a Prince after all and…” started a woman, her black eyes piercing and cold.

“He wasn’t Prince when your family disowned his mother. He wasn’t a prince when his father beat them both, unprotected by her family. He wasn’t a Prince when he suffered for over 20 years as a spy. But now, after he is finally pardoned, he is a Prince.” she hissed, her wand hand trembling. “What obligation he has to you?”

“The continuation of the family line. He did accept…”

“He was tricked into it by Lucius Malfoy, you relic.” Hermione hissed, her hand raising more, she was ready to use a Fiendfyre if necessary to burn this portrait.

“Before you try anything girl, all my family portraits are impervious to fire. And I am no fool like Hellena was, you won’t even manage to singe this portrait.”

“Granger…” Draco tried again.

“You, it was you who ordered the portrait to follow me around.” her voice dropped to a whisper.

Her heart climbed to her throat. One moment of insane hope filled her, Severus, he was her match. But that was only the moment. As fast as hope filled her, her heart plummeted down.

“I did, the boy convinced me that you won’t oppose.” the woman raised her chin. “Was he mistaken?”

“He was, and I do oppose!” she growled. “Not only to you meddling with me but to messing with him.”

“The boy assured me that you love him.” the woman replied.

“I respect him. Respect him enough that I won’t force him into anything against his will. Not anymore. Respect him enough that I will protect him, even from you.” Hermione said, sparks crackling on the tip of her wand.

“Hmmm.” hummed woman. “I had my doubts about you girl, but now I see that they are unfounded. Very well, well done, boy. I am satisfied.” the woman nodded and left the portrait.

Hermione turned to Draco. “You snake, how could you…”

“Oh, shut your yapper Bucktooth.” Draco waved his hand dismissively. “I’m not blind nor daft, you know. I can see that you are in love with the old grump.”

“What I am or not, is no concern of yours. The only thing that matters are Severus’ desires. I could pull you off as my substitute, return you to the Ministry for this.”

“That’s rich,” Draco smirked. “You are the one to talk about his desires.”
“What is that suppose to mean? I always only had the best intentions for him.” she directed her wand at Draco now.

He moved fast, struggling with her to take the wand from her hand, hissing. “Did you now? And what about your mind-bond?”

“I released him of that yesterday.” she hissed back, struggling, managing to kick Draco in the knee.

He sucked the air but kept on fighting and hissing back. “Mhm, is that why you found the way to play nasty with him, against his will?”

She stopped fighting, the wand falling out of her hand, cold sweat covering her. “You, you know that that was…”

Draco picked up her wand and pressed it at her hand. “Do not act all high and mighty, Bucktooth. All I want is to see him happy, you are just a good opportunity for that to happen.”

“She placed the wand back in the holster. “Is that why your family accepted me here? Because of that? Her?”

“Why else? My father thought that proximity will do the trick and that no coercion would be necessary.” Draco smirked. “Are you so naive to think that we would play hosts for a Mudblood like you without any ulterior reason?”

“No, I am not daft either, I just thought that you really cared about Severus. And what if I tell him about your family’s little plot?” She made a few paces back and turned to Draco, anger still itching beneath her skin.

“You do that and see what happens. Do you honestly believe that Severus is well enough to move out of the Manor? To live alone?” Draco kept smirking at her and she had the desire to smack that smirk off his face.

Voices could be heard from the hallway, Draco pulled a box from his pocket. “You may thank me later, Granger. Or not at all. You may tell him or not, let us see how much do you really care for Severus.”

The door opened and Lucius glared with them, followed by thunderously looking Severus and worried Narcissa.

“What are you two doing in here?” Lucius hissed, his eyes darting to the empty portrait frame, Hermione noticed that his shoulders slacked a bit.

“You deserted your position, Hermione. I see that obligation is tightly connected to the convenience in your case.” drawled Severus, by the tightness of his voice she could see that he was mad at her.

“It is my fault.” Draco smiled brightly. “Granger just disagreed with my idea and wanted to stop me.” he extended the hand with the box.

“Is that my family ring?” Narcissa asked from behind.

“Yes, I wanted to surprise all and propose Astoria tonight, I took the ring and Granger here claimed that it is still theft if I don’t ask you for permission.”

“Family heirloom belongs to the successor, Granger.” hissed Lucius.
“Still, it would be polite to ask.” Narcissa cut in. “But now that we know what are you up to, you have our blessing.”

“And I appreciate if you two stop trespassing, this are my private quarters.” Lucius growled.

Draco turned to look at her, taunting her to say something, before walking out with his parents. Severus stayed behind to close the room and wait for her.

“I told you not to meddle into Malfoy affairs.” he hissed at her, frown etched over his face.

“Yes, a family that is unfamiliar with meddling in people lives.” she grumbled, still angry at Draco, his words ringing in her head.

“It is not your business.”

“I thought that Draco may know who is after me.” she sighed, it was the truth of a kind.

“And, does he?” Severus raised one eyebrow.

“I don’t know, I think he does. He’s avoiding the answer.” she sighed, half-truth again, Draco didn’t tell her anything, after all.

“I still think that you at least should accept to meet with them, meet the boy....” Severus started carefully as if that subject interested him more than anger he was about to spill on her hand. Hermione sighed, the flicker of panic grabbing her.

“I told you, I have no interest in...” she started.

“You may find out that you are mistaken,” Severus said.

“I am not. And I have the feeling that you wouldn’t be agreeable with the choice either.” she snapped.

“Hermione, I couldn’t care less who the unlucky sod is.” He growled and turned to walk towards the noise of the Ball.

Oh, you would, and you wouldn’t like it one bit.
A week after the Ball and Severus was ready to jump out of his skin. He couldn’t even say what ticked him off more. The fact that his Muggle doctor and Hermione hit off like two peas in the pod, joined in their idea to rub salt on wounds, keeping them open, poking around his brain and his soul.

Maybe the fact that Hermione was so snappy and rude toward all Malfoys. It kept him puzzled and not a small amount curious to what exactly transpired in Lucius’s private library. He tried to warn her about such behaviour and she nearly bit his head off, ready to duel before backing down.

The matter was settled, at least partially, by Narcissa who almost forced Hermione to have a tea with her in her private quarters. They spend an afternoon behind closed doors, after which, Hermione changed her attitude towards Narcissa. She also came down on Draco like an angry Hippogriff, running him to the bone with chores. So much so that even Misty complained how Draco is doing her work.

It lasted for four days until Draco dragged Hermione out of the room after a long chat with Potter. Even through the closed door, he could hear Draco apologising.

His own head joined in on that carousel ride. He hoped that Draco would follow his footsteps and ask for an apprenticeship, even with cure, he won’t be at his prime, the damage already partially done to his hands. They weren’t as steady as they once were. But if he is to work as a Potion Master, he would need an apprentice, he would need help.

Granger couldn't be his first choice, but of all his students, alive ones at least in the present time, she was the most competent one. She may never be an inventor, but she could reach high and be famous for her skills if he hones them. And she would prove to be an ample assistant.

Of course, if he could persuade her to get married and remove the threat of hope - his hope.

With his Occlumency still not restored, and with his emotions raw and unbottled, he had a hard time keeping his feelings in check. His own callus and defensive nature kept others from suspecting anything. But he couldn’t escape his own mind or heart as he suspected- The girl invaded them quite thoroughly and without effort.

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Soft lips left a wet trail down his neck. A nip of sharp teeth on his collarbone. Warm hands scratching the inner sides of his thighs. Lips travelled lower and lower. He could feel a warm breath over his groins before her hand curled around his cock, pulling the foreskin down. One deliberate lick over the exposed glans caused a hurricane of feelings, making him grunt and buck...

Severus sat in bed, covered with sweat, sporting an erection that threatened to break free.
quite forcefully from its coffins.

“Oh, bloody hell.” he groaned.

Soft breathing to his right turned into a crackling of the springs.

“Severus?” Hermione’ soft whisper, husky from sleep went straight to his cock, adding to his misery. “Just a bad dream, go back to sleep.” He grumbled.

She nodded and flopped back to the pillow. He waited for a few moments until her breathing sounded soft and equal again before pulling himself out of the covers and heading towards the bathroom. He’ll be damned if he succumbs to his most basic instincts.

Divesting he angrily turned the water on, ignoring his bouncing prick. Lukewarm water prickled against his heated skin. It wasn’t exactly a cold shower but it will do. With an angry growl, he banged his fist against the wall. With Hermione’s return his Dream Lady returned to haunt his dreams, except now she had a face—very disturbing one.

First time this happened he tried to soak up in a tub, but that proved to be a very dangerous decision, considering that he dozed off and dreamt about her bathing him and giving him a hand job.

Now he opted for a shower, hoping that running water and the fact that he is standing won’t allow him to doze off again. It didn’t help. He didn’t doze off, but apparently, he needn’t to. In front of his eyes and image, resembling an echo of memory more than a mirage or a dream, appeared—Hermione, dishevelled and withering, moaning while her face spilled in the bliss of orgasm.

There was no help now, water could be ice cold and he would still have to… with a grunt, he curled the fist around his cock and started pumping. Her face still lingered in the air glowing in the post-pleasure bliss. He couldn’t contain his groans, hating every moment of it. Memories assaulted him, memories he would sell the rest of his soul to forget, not because they were unpleasant, but opposite no matter the circumstances.

His muscles tensed, he bit the yelp when almost painfully he ejected his seed, coating the wall. Leaning his forehead on the wall above the mess he made, gulping for air.

“Moronic, idiotic sodding wanker.” he grunted.

Moving slowly he stepped back allowing the water clear out the evidence before turning it off. What is going on with me? He knew, of course, he did, but he expected at least a modicum of self-control. The girl has to go; she is dangerous. Her proximity is.

Drawing himself he glanced at the mirror. His muscles returned, he was still thin but not sickly so as he was before. A scar here and there stood out, silverish against parchment coloured skin. His eyes directed to the face, black eyes and beaked nose visible through wet black strands.

“Not a sight to be seen, eh?” he sneered at his expression, using his wand to dry fully and cover his body with a nightshirt. “Tosser.” he hissed.

He was putting his covers on when she spoke again. “I’m sorry, I keep forgetting to warn you.”

“Warn me about what?” he groaned. Marvellous, she’s awake.

“About the ghost in the bathroom.” she slurred, it sounded like she is sleep-talking.
“There are no ghosts in Malfoy Manor,” he said, annoyed.

“So they say... There is one in the bathroom... And he is skilful and amorous... But it comes to you only once, too bad...” her voice sounded distorted and soft. “I’m glad... Sounded, like you had fun...”

He took the air to argue, realising that it is pointless to argue with a sleep-talker. Embarrassment singed his forehead.

_Suits you right if you don’t have the presence of mind to control yourself, sounding as if you are Erumpent in heat._ His only salvation was in fact that Hermione was still sleeping. _What a load of hippogriff dung, there are anti-ghost charms placed all over the Malfoy Manor._

Still, he witnessed the occurrence. And he couldn’t just let it go as he did the last time. Last time he might have had a lucid dream, but now he was quite awake. His brain sifted through the knowledge he gathered over the years, until his thoughts slipped in memories, his memories from the time he thought of as the happiest in his life. He might have been unresponsive to the world around, but he was happy there in his little bubble, with a faceless shadow of perfection.

_Oh, bollocks._

Could his life get any more complicated? Wasn’t he deserving of at least a fragment of peace?

Now he watched her pack, barking orders at Draco. He wished that she could hurry, get out and get going. Heaviness in his chest enveloped him like a dark cloud, making it hard to breathe. Draco finally escaped her claws and the room, it appeared that she was determined to make Draco regret he was ever born.

“Did Draco refused to give you the name of that boy’s family?” he asked, if Draco knew maybe he could arrange for her to meet a boy, unofficially and hope that magic would do the rest.

“No, I told you he doesn’t know.” she hissed.

“Then I see no reason for such treatment of Draco.” he said, she was hiding something.

“He is a vile little ferret, and he deserves far worse.” she bit out bitterly.

“And, while we are on the subject,” he decided to give his idea another go, her presence rising panic inside him. “Are you sure you will not give the chance to meet your perfect match?”

She turned to him, glaring, but beneath anger, he could see the glimpse of despair. She shook her head and her curls flew around her like dust, charged with pent up static of magic.

“We had this conversation enough times, I’m tired of it. Let it go, Severus. I am grateful for your advice but...” she sighed, it was obvious that she tried to control her temper.

“But you fancy someone else.” he nodded with a feeling of dread filling him. “And I told you, the choice is yours, but do give yourself a chance. You...”

“I do not fancy.” she hissed, eyes narrowing. “I am in love. And even if I wasn’t I wouldn’t be up for that. But now, in these circumstances...” she stopped and sighed. “Look, I know I have no chance with- him. Don’t ask me how I simply know. And this is not about him, it’s about me. I can’t stand there and do, be who I was in that tent. I can’t, no! I won’t lie. And I won’t give myself to...
someone who may just say yes out of the obligation. I won’t say yes to obligation. To stupid archaic custom.”

“And how do you know the one for whom you are refusing all this is deserving?” he raised an eyebrow still trying to discern what part of her tirade was about the potential suitor and what belonged to her mysterious love.

“I know, I just know.” she said, picking up her bag and placing it next to the fireplace.

“In your age, you may think you know everything, nevertheless, I have to strongly disagree with that. So, I’ll ask again, how do you know he is all that worth?”

“I just do. How did you know Lily was?” she glared at him, her words aimed to hurt. Except, they didn’t, not anymore.

“It is my pleasure to inform you, Hermione, that your inane theory did have some merits. So, I can safely say, what I told you is from my own experience.”

“Meaning?” she asked.

“Meaning, that I didn’t know I chose to believe, much like you are right now.” he raised an eyebrow, challenging her to take his bait.

“Well, there is where we are different. You see, I didn’t choose this, no one in his right mind would.” she sighed.

“What?”

“To be in love in the person most inaccessible to them. I-I don’t know even how it happened, it just did. I’m not some girl full of hope, I know that there is no hope at all. I still do not wish to be dishonest to that family or to myself.” one tear rolled down her cheek, she suddenly looked small and defeated.

“Hermione…” he started, but she shook her head.

“You know, I’m a coward.” she whispered, and he blinked. She stood up and shoved her bag in the fireplace taking the handful of powder. “Goodbye, Severus.” she mumbled turning to walk into the fireplace.

Half way through she stopped, she was holding something in her hand. Hermione turned and sent the letter to in his direction. “If you really wanted to know.” she said and entered the fireplace, calling for Leaky Cauldron before letter even floated to him.

Merlin, save me from weeping teenagers in love. What is so dreadful that she had to write about it? Write the letter.

He opened the letter, angry and relieved at the same time. Severus rolled his eyes, it wasn’t a too long letter, but it reminded him of every time she handed her essay. Running eyes over the nice round letters, easy to read, not too big but not small either, he forgot how to breathe. Something heavy and icy rolled through his chest and dropped into his stomach.

“S everus,

I am a coward; I know. You insisted so many times this week… Don’t you know when to quit?
Well, if the truth is what you really want to know, I’ll tell you, but… But not before I say- Whatever you read in this letter, in no way means that I have any expectations- from anyone. You included.

This is my mess and I’ll deal with the consequences.

Not with a happy heart, though, I hoped that you will take me as your apprentice, after this- well, I won’t keep my hopes up. I do, however, hope you will continue your treatment and enjoy your freedom to the full extent.

So here…

Oh, yes, one more thing. Draco, he insulted me, so I had a need to repay in kind. He said some hurtful things, implicating his family, and yes I reacted harshly. It is so easy to believe the worst about all of them.

Narcissa, she has an agenda, she always does, and she never does things without the reason, but I know that whatever Draco said- it wasn’t true. Her guilt lays in the other direction, one I can freely forgive.

And about what Draco said- if you want to know- ask him. Yes, still a payback. If you do ask, I wish I’m there to see it (somehow).

And no, I won’t give up on my ludicrous idea of not giving in, no matter how insane or impossible my feeling is. I know there is no chance whatsoever for them to be returned, nor do I expect that.

Now, that being said, I refuse to enter the union of convenience.

Seers and fortuneteller’s - parlour tricks we alone give too much credit. Their predictions would be empty and hollow as they are if we do not give them substance, a meet to feed on. If you think I’m rambling just remember Voldemort.

If he didn’t believe in the prophecy- how much things would be different?

Same way I refuse to fall on my knees in front of prophecies of any kind, I refuse to bow to the ancient laws that put magic above the heart. After all- LOVE is the most powerful magic of all.

It is proven. If you are in any doubt, just ask Harry.

I’m rambling now, right?

More like stalling.

Well, here it goes.

The name of my-my big love. The one I know it is unreachable same way I know it is fully deserving is…

…

…

…

You.

Still reading?
Well, if you do-

As I said, this is my problem, not yours. And, I will fully understand if you do not wish to see me, like ever again.

If I don’t hear from you until the end of the term, I’ll take it as a sign that you do not wish to see me. I won’t bother you or look for you. You will be free of me.

This is your chance, right?

Before I end, I wish to apologise, once more for all the sorrows and all the bad things I put you through (you know what they are). And thank you, for helping me, for teaching me, for letting me see the glimpse of a person you are.

Goodbye,

Hermione

P.S.: Do give Draco a bit more of a hard time but not too much. I think he is far more tolerable under your influence than under his father’s. ”

He stared at the parchment, letters dancing in front of his eyes. Of all the stupid, idiotic things… it had to be his luck, what else? His rotten luck. And no, he won’t fail this time, he won’t vilify himself. Not again…

He crumpled the letter, shoving it in his pocket, wondering why he doesn’t burn it? Right now.

He fought for air, a pervasive sense of impending doom stopping his lungs. In his case, that only lead to death and destruction, his and others. He won’t be weak this time. No! Never again.

Bile rose, and he rushed to the toilet, retching.

He kept on sitting there, on the floor next to a toilet, long after he had nothing to expel. Acid burning his throat.

“Bloody idiot.” He rasped.

Draco showed up on the door, pale and concerned. “Severus, should I call for medi…”

“No need. I’ll be fine.” he croaked and shuffled to rise to his feet, he felt weak.

“You don’t look so good, I should…” Draco sounded insecure, worry clear on his face.

“I had this before, and you know it. Wild magic can do that to a wizard.” he waved his hand dismissively.

“Right.” Draco nodded, still doubtful.

“I won’t need you, but before you go- what did you do with Miss Granger during your visit to Lucius’s library?” he asked, walking to the counter.

Draco palled. “Nothing.”

“A lie is good as much as it is it is believable. Now, Draco- talk.” he hissed and let the water running, it rinsed at least a bit of foul taste but not as much as he hoped for.
Giving up, he walked to the room, followed by Draco who changed colours to a paler shade with each passing moment. Stuttering incoherently.

“Speak, Draco. The truth. And use words attached to some semblance of meaning.” he barked sitting at the table that still lingered in the corner.

“She told you?!” Draco exclaimed.

“Now, why would I ask you if she told me?” he asked.

“To-to- Did she told you?” Draco tilted his head, insecure and confused.

“Tell a lie and we’ll both know if she did tell me or not. Now talk.” he barked and Draco straightened his back.

“I might have implied that my family know who is the behind that alleged compatibility…” finally Draco squeezed the words. “I also might have implied that we accepted her in the Manor because of it and that we had no other reason for having a-a-a… “

“Spit. It., Out.” he ordered.

“A Mudblood in our home.” Draco finished gulping.

“And do you?” he asked suddenly calm, an idea forming in his head.

“What?”

“Do you know?” he narrowed his eyes.

“No, of course not, I was just joking with her, and then she started to attacking me so I- retaliated.”

Draco gulped, backing a step.

Lie. It didn’t matter. If Malfoy’s knew he knew which tree to shake to get information, and just how to shake it. “And how that worked for you?” he asked.

Draco blinked at him, he let the boy stew. No matter how much he cared for the boy, Draco had to learn the lesson. Yes, he could find out the truth, push her in the right direction. After all, it was only stupid teenage infatuation- he dealt with that before. She will come to her senses.

He could still have her as an assistant. He could live with the knowledge that he did the right thing and that she is happy. He already watched the woman he loved married to another. He didn’t handle that well, not then, but he could now.

Draco finally came to words. “Not well.” he sighed.

“Let that be your lesson.” he smirked at the boy. “Leave, now.”

“Severus are you sure? I should call a mediwitch or at least stay with you.” Draco said.


Draco had enough brain to leave him, he grabbed the quill and parchment. Wondering if he’d finally gone completely mad.
Hermione hugged her tea. The noise in the inn didn’t do a thing to silence the fear that screamed at her in her head. Luna was across her, humming at the book she read. She nearly jumped at the sound of Luna’ voice.

“We should be going,” she looked at Hermione and smiled. “To the train station.”

“I know.” she nodded, getting up.

They finally reached the Kings Cross, then the Platform. Once they were in the compartment Luna smiled at her again.

“Don’t worry Hermione, everything will be fine.”

“Why would you say something like that, Luna.” she asked.

“Because you are not fine.” Luna blinked at her, her voice sounding like she believed Hermione didn’t know the state she was in.

“Luna…” she tried, sometimes it was hard talking to Luna, like now.

“Your head is full of Wrackspurts. It was like that since we meet at the inn.” Luna tilted her head.

“I don’t think so…” she tried, but Luna just kept on talking.

“Did you had a fight with Professor Snape?”

“Luna, he isn’t a professor anymore. And no, I didn't have a fight with him. I could have had a better holiday but…”

“He is a good man, you know. Professor. A bit on a stubborn side, but good. You shouldn’t be mad at him.” Luna kept on.

“I’m not mad at him, if anything, I’m mad at Draco and Malfoy Sr.” she snapped.

“Really?” Luna blinked, tilting her head to the other side. “Oh, well then. I think I will read some more.”

“Yeah, good idea.” she nodded.

Hermione felt like she escaped the nose around her neck. Talking with Luna when she was like this was impossible. And when she isn’t like this?
She was afraid, afraid that he will be angry, infuriated by her. That he will send her away. She really asked nothing of him, but she would love to see him well. Well, and happy and healed.

I would like to be his apprentice as well. She sighed. The train lulled her frayed nerves, and she dozed off.

It was late at evening when she finally climbed to her room. From the train, they went straight to the Dinner, and then they sat in the Common room, exchanging small gifts and chatting.

The truth was, Hermione was afraid, reluctant to stay alone with her thoughts and her fears.

On the window she noticed two silhouettes, the birds squabbled, so she rushed to let them in. What is going on?

Hades flew into the room and sat on her table extending his leg with a scroll attached to it. Royally looking owl stayed on the window till extending its foot with a note.

With a sigh, Hermione took the scroll from Hades who flew to her shoulder, she winced when his talons dug into her flesh. Taking the note from the owl she offered it a treat. The owl looked at her, insulted, turned and left.

She raised her palm to Hades. “Are you too proud to take a treat?”

Hades pecked the strand of her hair, squawked directly in her ear and took both treats, moving to the table so he could break them apart and eat in peace.

Hermione wondered if she will see this bird ever again. Hades grew to her heart. Same as his owner.

Blast, I won’t cry. I am stronger than that.

Hades finished his treats and squawked at her again, flying through the window.

“I guess you don’t have to wait for the reply.” she sighed, closing the window.

The room was freezing now, but she barely noticed. She opened the note first, Draco’s handwriting.

“Next time at least have the guts to kill me by yourself. Did you have to tell him? What did you tell him? I want to know how long I’m going to live after lying- to Snape of all people.”

She smirked, she will reply to him, in the morning. With trembling hands, she unfolded the scroll. Familiar spidery letters, in black ink instead of red. Still, same angry lines, written with determination.

“Miss Granger,

I expected more from you. At the very least, I expected you to make a difference between typical adolescent situational infatuation and love. How disappointing. Considering you are unable to see the difference on your own, I will take upon myself to point it out.

I consider this matter concluded, not to talk about it anymore.

Or ever again.

Among all that rambling, for which I’m grateful I could skim over instead of being forced to listen, I
understood that you expect to be relieved of your duties.

I do hate to repeat myself, and sadly I learn now that even with you it is a necessity.

You made a commitment and I expect you to follow through!

I do not recall receiving your letter of resignation. And I won’t accept one, not after this. As you said- this is your problem and do not dare to drag me in it.

You are still my Secretary.

And you will remain in that capacity until you assume the position of my apprentice. In that time you will help me choose a new Secretary and teach it what you know.

As my Apprentice you won’t be able to fulfil that duty. And before you ask, as I told you before, I don’t need your gold. However, I would require payment in other means. The terms of your payment will be arranged in the contract.

S.S.”

She read the letter twice, unsure should she laugh or cry. The fact that he took her love and dismissed it twisted her heart. But, it was a blessing in disguise, no matter how painful it was, he still wanted to have her around him.

Better yet- he wanted her to be his apprentice.

Hermione flopped back to the bed, laughing and crying at the same time.

The Great Hall was empty when Hermione walked to the breakfast, it was early, too early for other students but she had a plan. The only other person in the room was Luna. She sat across Luna and filled her plate.

“You look better.” said Luna not lifting her eyes from the book

“Thank you, I think.” Hermione scrunched her nose.

“Not happier, but better.” Luna continued.

“Are you keeping tabs?” snapped Hermione.

Luna raised her eyes, a serene look on her face didn’t change. “Maybe.”

“Well, don’t. Look, you are my friend, but I do not appreciate you prying,” Hermione sighed.

“Oh, I’m not. But it is sometimes very hard to miss.” shrugged Luna.

“Hrmp.” groaned Hermione.

She had better things to do than lead this conversation with Luna; it was one battle she couldn’t win. Tucking in her breakfast fast she waved at Luna and dashed to the Library.

“Madam Pince,” she whispered. “Could you, please, help me.”

“Isn’t a bit too early to be here, Miss Granger?” asked Madam Pince.
“It is, but I need some books, and I don’t know where to find them, without using magic. If you gave me…” she started.

“School rules are school rules, Miss Granger. What do you need?” sharp face of Madam Pince hardened, but Hermione sighed in relief.

“Well…”

It was nearly evening; she missed her classes and lunch, but she finally found all that she was looking for. Hermione entered the hospital wing, it was blissfully empty.

“What is it girl?” asked Poppy, entering the main room.

“I need to have a talk with a portrait that is here, Matron. If it’s not too much trouble for you.” she placed her best smile.

“It is trouble, considering how your last chat went.” huffed Matron.

Hermione’s heart speeded up, palms slicking. It was imperative that she talked to that bloody portrait. She took a deep breath, ready to argue, but the woman from the portrait cut in.

“I’ll talk to her. I’ve been waiting to hear the apology.”

“Well, good luck to you, Patricia.” huffed Matron. “Very well, girl, you have twenty minutes, use them wisely.”

Once they were alone, Hermione turned to the portrait. “If you are hoping for the apology - don’t, you won’t get one. And if you continue to follow me, I’ll find the way to remove the protection and I will burn you.”

“Aren’t you the feisty little witch? Threatening me won’t get you any information you might need.” the woman smirked.

Only now Hermione noticed the resemblance, it was mild, but it was there. She schooled her face in a hard mask.

“I don’t need information, I know all I need to know. Including why you stocked me. During holidays I had a nice little chat with Estelle Prince. I have a message for her.”

“And that might be?” Patricia raised an eyebrow.

“Stay off.” hissed Hermione. “I will protect him. I will protect him even if I had to find and destroy every single Prince portrait that is.”

“You, girl are not part of the family, so why would you care? You do not understand…” said Patricia but Hermione had no will to listen to her lectures.

“Maybe I didn’t before, but Narcissa Malfoy took good care that I learn. I do understand.” Hermione narrowed her eyes. “I am his Secretary, and it is my duty to look for his best interest.”

“His and the family name.” Patricia corrected her.

“His.” Hermione fisted her hands, itching to hex this portrait once more, she widened her stance. “His family was nowhere around when he was manipulated, played like a pawn in the game of
chess. Sacrificed for their twisted ideals. His family betrayed him, abandoned him. You lost your right to demand.”

“And yet, what is it to you? Or are you willing to change the position from Secretary to Madam?” there was a trail of hope in Patricia’ voice and Hermione smirked, taking pleasure in her next words.

“No, I won’t marry him. But if he does not want to be married to anyone else, I’ll do my best to ensure he gets the peace he wants.”

“You love him.” Patricia opened her eyes, small crinkles around them were the only indication of a smile.

“Yes, and because I do, I’ll make sure that he gets what he wants.” she said.

“If you do love him, then his willingness isn’t the issue, you could still get…” Patricia tried.

“You don’t get it. Love isn’t selfish, it isn’t about getting what you want, it is respect. It is seeing the person you love happy. And I’ll do everything in my power to see him happy. I do not care about your family line. Severus had his heart crushed, he still loves her. And if he wants to spend the rest of his life with the memory of her, then I’ll make sure he does that.”

“Is that so?” a woman’s voice was hard once more.

“Just give the bloody message to his grandmother. I don’t care about your family line, and she has no idea who am I.” hissed Hermione and turned on her heel.

“If you told him, maybe he’d be more open…” Patricia called after her.

“You really don’t know him, even if you had years to know him, really know him. He knows. And it changed nothing. So, back off.” she replied not turning to face the portrait again.

In a way she was happy. Admitting to herself that she felt relieved, she won’t have to watch him marrying off a woman just because they were matched. This way he was safe, she won’t go against his wishes, and he was free to find love again- That, she could support.

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Estelle frowned, why did Patricia call her to return here? Patricia looked annoyed by something.

“I had a chat with that rude girl.” started Patricia.

“Miss Granger. Yes, she is feisty.” smiled Estelle.

“Yes, she told me you talked to her.” bitterness clear in Patricia’ voice.

“I did. Did you call me to tell me that?” Estelle felt annoyed.

“No, I have a message for you, from the girl. Back off.” said Patricia.

“Oh?” Estelle raised an eyebrow, this was getting interesting.

“The daft rude child is in love with him, that much your source got right.” bitterly said Patricia. “What he failed to say is that the girl is determined to go against her heart and to respect his wishes.”

“Good.” Estelle smiled.
“Didn’t you heard me? He knows she loves him and it appears that he rejected her.” snapped Patricia.

“Good girl.” Estelle widened her smile, nodding. “That is the woman he truly needs.”

“Ellie, did you lost your mind? I just told you that we need to look for the next in line.”

“We will do no such thing.” Estelle sharply replied. “The next in line is too far below to be of any worth. This girl is exactly what we need, and a bit of time.”

“Estelle?” Patricia sounded confused.

“I did not renounce of my daughter just so I could alienate my grandson now.” she replied sharply. “This girl is just the right for him.”

“He…” started Patricia.

“He isn’t raised with us, he isn’t indoctrinated with the wrong ideas. He is not beaten into obedience like the rest of us. I never should have to allow my husband to rule our lives the way he did.” Estelle all but spit the words. “He is different, more strong headed, more his own. He needs a woman who can deal with him as his equal.”

“Then why you so opposed to that other- whathernamewas, Muggleborn from his neighbourhood.” Patricia asked

“She was always bad for him. She wanted to rule him, change him to fit her narrow eyes.” Estelle sighed.

“And this one isn’t? She is a better match, but…”

“Trust in magic, cousin. This girl is willing to sacrifice her love for him. She is the one. And if my grandson doesn’t see her for what she is- then he does not deserve her.” Estelle smiled.

“The girl rejects our efforts.” Patricia sounded smug.

“As she should. Young Malfoy is correct in one thing, it’s not the girl we should worry about, it is he.”

“And how do you plan on coaxing him?” Patricia raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t. Malfoys did their duty. I’ll leave all to the fate and to the magic. He is beyond our influence.”

Estelle stood up from the chair.

“Are you going? I thought you said you are releasing Malfoys…”

“Oh, I am, but they don’t have to know it- yet. They are by far better company than this stuffy place.” Estelle smirked, walking away. For the first time in years, hope was on the horizon.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus suppressed the growl. Why is this creature even here?

He watched Isabelle making a slow walk around the room. She came for a visit and he was trying to get rid of her for the past hour. By the surprised look on Lucius’ face, he deduced that her showing
up wasn’t his idea.

Isabelle reached his nightstand and run her fingers over the box on it.

“Are you even listening, Lord Prince?” she asked.

“I do my best not to.” he mumbled. “I’d say it’s about time for you to go.”

“Oh, you don’t enjoy my company?” she smiled a fake seductive smile.

“No, obviously.” he hissed.

She took the box and opened it. “Such lovely jewels, I remember them hanging around the neck of that Muggleborn…” Isabelle squealed when he yanked the box from her hand.

“Leave.” he hissed, anger bubbling beneath his skin, magic crackling in the air around him.

“But…”

“N. O. W.” he narrowed his eyes, using his most menacing voice.

She palled and backed, leaving the room with a scared face. This is going to be a nasty article in the Prophet tomorrow. He placed the box back on the nightstand.

He should have returned it to the vault. But oddly they comforted him. A piece of memory, something to hold on to. The loneliness he felt… It wasn’t there when she was here, but it was now.

As always, his freedom came with the price.
Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: Thank you all for the understanding and your best wishes.
My health still isn't good, but at least I'm home and the meds are a little lighter, tho my brain is still fuzzy and I have a problem thinking straight at any language (my native one or English). I still have one more operation to undergo, so...

I can't promise you that chapters will be regular every 2 weeks, but at least they will keep coming again. And even if it took me longer than usual, I finished this one (for those who wait for The Blur chapter - I hope I'll have it up by the end of this week).

Still not beta edited and running only on Grammarly so...

Severus watched at the swirling snow outside, January was slowly slipping away. The soft rustling of paper and scratching of a pen tugging on his ear but he refused to turn. At this point, it was a game, almost.

His therapist was silent, for now. But he was relaxed, he wasn’t an idiot after all and he recognised the benefits of such form of help. Severus rebelled at first, stayed guarded and then he tested her, telling her a few minor details that he knew if she told anyone would end in the Prophet. Wizardkind couldn’t resist such juicy gossips - but nothing showed up. After that, he opened just a tad bit more.

“So, are you going to open it?” she asked.

He didn’t need to turn or ask; he knew exactly what she was referring to. His birthday present from Hermione still laid on his nightstand, unopened.

“Why?” he said, jarring her for reaction.

“Why not?” she didn’t take the bait.

“Indeed.” he chuckled. “So, what kind of trauma you are aiming to poke around today?”

“Miss Granger.” she said.

“I’ll admit that she is taxing, but even I wouldn’t go that far to call her a trauma. A nuisance may be the more appropriate term.” Severus resisted to laugh, but his chest tightened, that was wound he wasn’t ready to touch, still fresh.

“And yet you kept her at your side as apprentice…” Mrs Rutledge softly hummed.

“The child needs guidance. Nuisance or not, she has a brilliant mind that needs proper stimuli if she is to reach her full potential. Even now there are but a few witches or wizards who can provide that to her. I happen to be one.” he shrugged, his voice deliberately detached. Severus pretended that the
snow was more interesting than the topic, but he hoped that she will take the bait.

“I wouldn’t call her a child, Miss Granger is a vibrant young woman.” she said, another statement.

*She is toying with me.* His mind growled, but his mouth seemed in odds with his reason. “She was and is my student - a child...” he stated with a tone of finality.

“And yet- you actively seek to marry her off, against her wishes.” Mrs Rutledge clucked her tongue.

“I am not.” he hissed, a lie but a necessary one.

“You are trying to find that boy, the one that is her magical match. Are you not?”

“I am, but that has nothing… You wouldn’t understand.” he shook his head. *I’m losing my touch and going soft.*

“My husband explained, it is not a soulmate thing or anything similar, it is more like genetic compatibility.” she said.

Severus turned to her, she was smiling, that bland professional smile. He frowned, even wizards didn’t know…

“It is true, the magical signature match isn’t soulmate thing, but *it is* much more than plain genetic compatibility.” he sighed. “Magic has its own ways in dealing with things. And I am sure they would require no help if she only met him.” His heart fluttered painfully in his chest. “He would prove to be a perfect match for her in every aspect, not just magical one.”

“You care for her.” that was a statement.

“I care for all my students, always did.” he replied gruffly turning again towards the window.

“I’d say your feelings for her go beyond one of a teacher for his pupil.” he could hear the smile in her voice.

“Did Lucius put you up for this?” he growled, turning to stare at her.

“Mister Malfoy avoids me like a plague, he is hardly in any position to put me up to anything.” she laughed.

“I wouldn’t put past him, Lucius is known to go to extreme lengths if it served his purpose.” he hissed.

“I do not need Misted Malfoy, I have eyes.” she tilted her head.

“I suggest a visit to an ophthalmologist then.” Severus was losing his patience, something he found, both, unable to control and disturbing.

“It is only natural…” she started.

“What? What is natural?” he growled at her. “To fuck my student? Is that what you suggest?”

“Do you want to?” she raised an eyebrow at him and he huffed, he won’t dignify her with an answer to that question. “You know, you spent with her a lot of time, shared a bond of sorts, many intimate moments… It would be the only natural…”

“Tell me, Mrs Rutledge, how natural is for an old man to lust for a child? Where I came from they
taught me it is illegal.” he sneered.

“Miss Granger isn’t a child, as I understand she was a year older than her peers, she had a device that aged her additionally. She told me she is already above 21. A young woman, in any world-Wizarding or Muggle.”

“And 17 years my junior.” he smirked.

“A difference not unheard off, even in Muggle world, if both parties are consenting…”

“Well, I am not consenting to anything, including this conversation.” Severus hissed. Is she determined to gut me alive? “Today’s conversation is over, I suggest that you revise your choice of topics or all our talks will end.”

“Very well, we will talk about something else, but I’d like you to think about what we talked.” She sighed, but he thought she looked smug. “Shall we continue where we stopped the last time?”

Severus took a deep breath and nodded. He decided to let this slip, after all, he could trust her to an extent, and he was sure that Hermione, Draco and Poppy would drag another healer, one he may not trust as much.

It was late noon, and Mrs Rutledge was long gone, but he still felt troubled. Even if she claimed she closed of all her sessions properly, he still had a feeling that each time she left an open gaping wound in his soul. This time, in addition, he had that same wound in his heart.

It is the gift, she wouldn’t poke around that topic if I only opened the gift.

With an impatient hiss, he stood from his chair and Draco raised his head directing the blue worried eyes at him. He ignored the boy and made few steps grabbing the gift. Silver paper shimmered, reflecting the light if a candle. Big, green bow stood proudly at the top.

Severus groaned and ripped the paper only to reveal a wooden box. Taking a deep breath to steady his hands he pushed the lid to open. In a black velvet, there was a pin, a pin one might use on his or her robes or a cloak. Deep, dark green stone shone with fiery flecks. He picked it up, the intricate wreath of runes donned its rim, he could feel the faint trace of magic. Beneath it was a small note. He took it, placing the pin on the nightstand.

“Happy birthday Severus.

This pin is an amulet, for protection. I think, you could use one.”

He blinked, reading the short note again and again.

“She gave you jewellery?!” Draco snapped him to reality, the boy was peering over his shoulder, amusement clear in his voice.

“It appears, Miss Granger, thinks I need a talisman to protect me.” he grumbled.

“Father will have a field day with that one.” Draco grinned.

He took the pin and shoved it under the pillow. “Your father won’t hear about this.” he gave Draco one of his most dangerous glances. “Did. I. Made. Myself. Clear?”

“Yes.” Draco gulped and hasten back to his seat behind the table.
And as if summoned, Lucius walked into the room. The warmth grabbed his heart and spread through his chest, more because of the note than the gift itself. He stilled the feeling.

*This has gone far enough.*

“Lucius, just in time.” he smiled at his friend.

“Oh, was I expected?” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“You were if you came to rescue me from boredom.” Severus gave his best to lighten his voice.

“A saviour, I like it better than why I came for. Draco, do try to explain to young Miss Greengrass that I am the Lord of the house, not an elf or an owl. She waits for you in the Sunroom.”

“Astoria?” Draco snapped his head “Father, Severus, excuse me.” the boy grinned and dashed out of the room.

“If Narcissa sees him running... Well, serves him right.” Lucius frown at the door before turning to him. “I see that the Muggle healer is still alive and breathing.”

“It sounds like you are disappointed.” he smiled. “Shall we?”

He pointed at the chairs facing the fire. He watched as Lucius made his slow walk to the one on the right; he was leaning heavily on the cane.

“This damn weather, I don’t know what is worse the cold or the dampness.” Lucius groaned as he sat.

“I had in mind more serious matter to discuss than weather, Lucius.” he smirked, sitting down.

“Oh, and what that might be?” Lucius gave him one conspiratory smile.

“Miss Granger. Or, more precisely, he suitors. You do know who they are.” he purposely said as a fact, not willing to give Lucius space to slitter out this conversation.

“What made you think?” Lucius tried to fake surprise.

“I know you, Lucius, you have your fingers in that. Do not insult me by denying it.” he smiled, leaning to pour the tea that appeared on the small table between them.

Lucius chuckled. “Can anything pass by you?”

“Hardly.” he offered the cup to Lucius. “Talk.”

Lucius took the cup and sighed, gazing into the fire. It seemed like Lucius was deep in the thought before he finally nodded.

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The pain stabbed at him even when he was sitting. Lucius felt tired. Tired of pain and tired of lying. There was no way to predict how Severus would react if, or maybe there was? He won’t be pleased, but this was the moment, the opening to finally tell Severus everything.

*If he blows up the room, Narcissa will kill me.*

He nodded, taking a sip of tea. “How long are we friends Severus?” he asked.
“Too long. Don’t change the subject, Lucius.” Severus glared at him.

“If you want to know the name, let me tell you under my conditions.” he said, staring at the flames.

“Very well, do continue.” Severus motioned at him.

“Do you know that Malfoys owe a debt to Prince family…” he started, looking the most painless way to manoeuvre through this conversation. Possibly, less likely way to avoid being hexed.

“If you are looking the way out… I am sure that the debt is far greater than naming a simple name.” Severus smirked again.

“It is almost paid off. Part of it was to extend you my protection while you were in school. Not to befriend you, mind you, that I did on my own.” he added in a rush, even if he kept his tone light. The different pain twisted his intestines at the thought he might lose Severus’ friendship. “And certainly not to take you as my brother. I think I’m still not forgiven about that one.”

“As I recall, your father wasn’t too happy about it.” Severus nodded, now serious.

“Yes, well, I should have rebelled more often against him. But my Grandfather made the debt to your grandfather. And it was on me to repay it. Your grandmother insisted on it.” Lucius sighed.

Severus was quiet, but he watched him, wrinkles of tension around his eyes. Lucius gazed back to the fire, cold fear spreading through his chest.

“I was tasked to help you prepare to take the Prince's name, and to ensure that you are the one to continue the line.”

“That explains the flock of geese you tried to surround me with. And I can understand that, not condone some of your actions, but I can go over them.” Severus nodded seriously. “That, however, still does not answer my question.”

“You see, your late relative, Patricia closely monitored all potential candidates, especially Muggleborns. With your penchant to Muggle— You couldn’t just marry off any Muggle, it had to be at least a Muggleborn witch. And before you say anything,” he rushed the words through the dry throat. “She was not your match, not even close.”

Severus flinched, pulling back a bit.

“I know you loved her, and I’d forsaken our debt if you had a chance with her. But you never did, my friend. And I did my best to redirect you. Unsuccessfully, if I might add.” he chuckled to hide his nervousness.

“You know as well as I do that I have no match.” Severus said, his voice hard.

“You do have - one. An extremely high match, in fact,” he whispered.

Severus narrowed his eyes at him. “What are you trying to tell me, Lucius?” the voice was a dangerous hiss full of pent up anger.

Lucius sighed. The time of truth has come.

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The magical pressure, like detonation, shook the walls of the Mansion. Narcissa raised her head from the book. She stood up rushing to reach Severus’ room. Even though the closed doors she could hear
shouting, Severus’ voice.

“...you thought to sell me out?! To tie me up to that-that--?!”

The silence lasted only briefly before she could hear Severus roaring once again. “She is my student, Lucius!”

Narcissa’ eyes widened. So that’s what he plotted all this time. Oh, Lucius, you should have told me, I could have done this so much better.

Another quake of magic landed on the Mansion like a pressure bubble. Narcissa frowned, whatever Lucius did, she had a debt to Severus, a debt of life, her son’s life. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked into the room.

Severus was standing next to the fireplace, gripping the miniscule ledge placed there instead of the mantle, his fingers white from the force of the grip. Lucius looked pale, a few drops of sweat trickled down his temples, but he was still seated in the chair.

“Now, will you boys tell me what is this all about? I would like to have a roof over my head this evening, it would be highly inconvenient if I have to serve tea to my guests on the pile of rubble.” she glanced from one man to another, keeping her back rigid but her voice soft.

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Draco raised his head, he was looking at the scared eyes of Astoria after the first tremor shook the house. His brain worked fast while he jumped dragging Astoria to the fireplace.

“Maybe it is best if you go now.” he ushered her into the fireplace, shoving a handful of Floo powder in her hand.

“Draco? What is going on? What...” Astoria sounded flustered

“It’s Severus.” he let go of her arm. “I’ll explain everything but not now, now it is best if you go. I have to find her...”

“Find whom?” Astoria was still standing in the fireplace.

“Hermione.” he breathed out, he had his suspicions and in this case, if his assumption was correct he would need the other female more than Hermione. In fact, Hermione might be the last person who could calm Severus now. If I am correct. “Go, please. I’ll call you when things settle.”

Astoria nodded and somewhat reluctantly called her home, vanishing in green flames.

Draco sprinted to his father's library, barging through the door, barely noticing wards. Pointing his wand at the frame he screamed at the empty frame.

“What did you do?”

A few sparks flew from his wand and bounced off the canvas. A female shape blinked into existence.

“What did you do?” he hissed at the frame.

“Malfoy junior, I see that manners abandoned you.” Estelle raised an eyebrow.

Another blast of magical pressure shook the mansion. Draco glared at her.
“I have no time for manners, what did you do. What did you tell my father to do?” he growled

“What is going on in here?”

“Severus is going on, whatever you did, whatever my father tried is backfiring. I need to know… What did you do?” he tried hard to hide the desperation from his voice.

“Nothing- much. I suggested to your father he should be honest with Severus and tell him…” she started.

“You fool!” Draco sneered at her rushing out of the room.

In the hallway, he found mother and father, pale and frowning. His mother radiated anger, his father looked defeated. Tossing one glare at Lucius he put his hand on the handle.

“Severus is resting dear, he took Calming Draught. Let him rest.” Narcissa smiled tightly at him. “I think we all could benefit from a cup of tea.”

Draco followed his parent to mother’ saloon, where tea was already served. Father was still pale and quiet.

“You told him, didn’t you?” he asked, maybe sharper than he should have.

“Yes.” Lucius nodded not looking at him.

“You should have listened to me and not that old had.” he reproached, spilling all his fears in anger in those words.

“I am tired of lies…” Lucius sounded broken.

“I told you, father, Granger isn’t the problem. Granger knows…” he started.

“But then…” Lucius sharply raised his head towards him.

“You do not understand, you understand nothing. If Severus extended his arm she would follow, no questions asked. Well, that might be overstatement it is Granger, after all, but… She knows, she found out during the Ball, and she refused Estelle. Not because she doesn’t want but because he doesn’t want.”

He will have to notify Bucktooth about this, but not today, he had to think first.
Hermione directed all her focus to correct wand movement, it wasn’t particularly difficult spell but the wand movement was complicated. She squealed dropping her wand, a spell half cast bounced against the walls forcing everyone in the classroom to duck and scramble for cover. She blinked at the ethereal form in front of her.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked her new Transfiguration professor.

“Granger, whatever you do, drop it! Father told him, he knows. We are lucky the home is still in one piece.” Draco’s voice echoed before patronus dissolved. Panic.

Sheer panic clouded her mind.

Severus.

She picked up her wand and dashed towards the door, the calls from her professor and murmur of students following her. In her mad dash, she headed straight to Headmistress’ office. Halfway through she remembered- she didn’t know the password.

Matron, she would know, she can help!

Pivoting she collided with someone, not even apologising she continued to the Hospital wing.

This school is bloody huge.

She never noticed that before, never gave it a moment of thought, but it was, unreasonably so.

Hermione barged into the infirmary, huffing like Hogwarts Express, the words came out as a series of unarticulated wheezes.

“Calm down, girl, what is the problem?” she heard Matron’s strict voice.

“Severus...I...go there at once…” she squeezed out. Very eloquent Hermione.

“Child, go to the Headmistress, not to me.” Huffed Matron

“I-I know, but I don’t know how to….” she stopped. Would Matron help? “I have to go there…”

“You will stay in school, Miss Granger.” Minerva's voice interfered.

“But….” Hermione turned her head sharply ready to argue her way to the Manor if need be.
“I will not tolerate students misbehaving, running off willy-nilly in the middle of the class, running into people with little as stopping, and going in and out of school as they see fit. No matter who that student is. There are rules to be followed.” Minerva’ sharp words matched her tight expression.

“But….” she tried again, desperation grabbing her gut.

“No ‘b ut’, Miss Granger. I also do not appreciate being asked to play an owl to a student, no less.” Minerva pressed her lips tight in displeasure.

Hermione blinked, confused.

“I had a floo call from Severus this morning, he told me to keep you here in the school, you may expect his letter with instructions during a day today.” Minerva continued. “Now, if that is settled. I can’t deduct points, because technically you have no house, however, I can and am giving you a detention. You are to report to Madam Hooch this afternoon, for next four days you will serve detention with her.”

“Y-Yes Headmistress.” she croaked.

Desperation turning into fear and displeasure, of all the things she could handle flying wasn’t one of those. Hermione frowned.

She can hit you where it hurts the most. How I didn’t notice that before?

“Do not worry, Miss Granger.” Minerva’ voice softened, same as her features. “I will visit Severus today in the afternoon and I’ll let you know how is he faring. If I see he needs your assistance, I will grant you the time of leave.”

Hermione felt like a huge boulder rolled off her back, she nodded, her cheeks heating. “Thank you, Headmistress,” she whispered.

“I’ll relieve you from classes for today. You may go to your room, reflect on your behaviour and wait for the news. Of you go now.”

“Thank you, Headmistress. Matron…” she nodded and hurried to reach her room. A few long hours later, when she almost beat herself in the ground from worrying and anger, a tapping sound finally snapped her out of the thoughts.

Hades lingered on the window till.

Hermione jumped from the bed and let the bird in, placing a handful of treats on the table. Hades allowed her to remove the scroll from his leg before he turned to the treats, crooning quietly as he ate.

She unfolded the letter, her eyes darting over the familiar script.

“Hermione,

Don’t you dare abandon school to come here! I have no use of an apprentice with no N.E.W.T. and I expect only the top scores from you. Fail, and our deal is broken.

As your preparation for an upcoming apprenticeship, I expect you to make good use of the Hogwarts library. At the bottom of the letter, you will find an enclosed list of suggested literature, I will talk to Minerva to grant you access to all enlisted books.

There is a matter of your dishonesty, for which I am most displeased with you. I can understand why
you didn’t want to divulge the information, however, dishonesty is something I won’t tolerate. I expect you to send me an essay on dishonesty- how a person can be dishonest without telling the actual lie, and why is it bad, what are repercussions. And what did you learn from this essay! Two rolls of parchment or more, by the end of the next week.

Consider it as your application essay for the apprenticeships.

I will deal with Draco in my way.

During the next holiday season, you will come here to the Manor, and we will commence with preparations to move into the Rosebush.

Do not disappoint me again.

S.S.”

Below his signature was a list containing maybe 20 titles. She glanced at the Hades who was still feasting.

“How is he?” She whispered to the bird. Hades raised his head and screeched ruffling his feathers. “Would you be willing to wait for a reply?”

Hades rotated his head to the side and continued to peck the treats, not rushing. Hermione took ink well, a quill and a parchment and started to write.

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Minerva stepped from the fireplace, stomping the sod from her shoes on a designated surface. Narcissa waited patiently, and Minerva carefully hid her thoughts behind the neutral mask. In her opinion Narcissa looked exhausted, her eyes gave away the person overwhelmed with worry, concealed under the thin veil of polite indifference.

“It is nice to see you, Headmistress, thank you for coming to visit him.” Narcissa’ voice measured and polite.

“I have known Severus for far too long not to come,” Minerva replied. “How is he?”

“He’s... Physically he is good, his mind is also healing…” Narcissa replied carefully.

Minerva nodded, understanding the need to tell and to stay loyal. She brushed the remaining sod from her robes.

“Well then, we will talk a bit later Madam Malfoy, but I would like to see him. I have a student ready to bolt from school.” she smiled her tight smile at Narcissa.

“Please, follow me,” Narcissa said, a soft smile brightening her features at the mention of Hermione. “He needs company, a friendly face, more than I do.”

Narcissa led her through the hallway, up the stairs to a familiar door. And with a polite excuse, she left her. Minerva watched Narcissa's retreating form, tension obvious in regal stance. As soon as Minerva opened the door she was greeted with a stern reprimand.

“I told you not to bother me.”

“And I thought I was expected,” Minerva said.
She watched as Severus spring to his feet and glared at her. His eyes had dark bags, he looked worse for the wear, troubled. She frowned, he needed company, but a few stern words wouldn’t go amiss either. He had a stubborn frown, one he wore as a student.

“Minerva.” he motioned to her to join him.

She walked to her seat. Finally sitting down, she cleared her throat.

“Now, Severus, I do not appreciate being used as an owl. I have a very distraught student that at the moment planning how to run away from my school and care. I have Mediwitch in a half-murderous mood and terrified portraits all over the school. What do you have to say in your defence?”

“My defence?” Severus’ head spun in her direction, voice brittle, eyes narrowed, anger radiating from him. But this was a different kind of anger, one she didn’t see in him for a long time, hot and live- not calculated.

Good.

“Did you know?” Severus asked.

“Know what?” she won’t fumble with explanations.

“That the Prince family portrait followed Miss Granger around the school?” Severus barked the words.

“Not at first, but after the incident… Yes, I knew of the family connection,” she replied calmly. So that’s the problem.

Minerva hid her own anger, she will have a word with Malfoys later on. It wasn’t about what they did but more how they did it. Their actions inconvenienced her, forcing the student to act, to defend itself.

“And you approve?” there was a tingle of anger and disbelief in his voice.

“I have nothing to approve or disapprove,” she raised an eyebrow at Severus. “It is an old custom, and I have no say in it, regardless of my feelings on the matter. I do, however, strongly opposed to the disruption it caused.”

Severus thinned his eyes in a line, barking a laugh. “Oh, this is rich. Don’t tell me you will sacrifice one of your cubs, the Gryffindor Princess no less, to the altar of old customs.”

Minerva tilted her head. Is he asking for my permission or assistance? “Miss Granger is of age, and I have no authority over her decisions.”

Severus gazed at her, she could see the pain deep in his eyes, poorly hidden, it moved like a caged animal behind his eyes. She sipped her tea, giving him time to compose himself, not letting him know how much his control was slipping. Finally, Severus nodded, he leaned back.

“I need your help, Minerva,” he said.

Minerva blinked, words so foreign on Severus’ lips took her by surprise. “Regarding what?”

“I need you to- encourage Miss Granger, to find some decent young man.” Severus breathed out.

“There is no way I can influence her in either direction, Severus, and you know it. But tell me, do you- care for the girl?” She asked something didn’t sound right in his words.
“I want her out of my hair…” He replied sharply.

“And yet, you offered her apprenticeship,” she smiled at him.

“It is my duty as a teacher to provide her with the best education available. There are but a few of those who would do justice to her mind.” He leaned forward, agitated.

“I see. Are you opposed to your family’s plans?” She asked, aware how dangerous the question is, but she has to know was there a need to protect him or her student.

“Are you daft, woman?” He exploded, jumping out of the chair and turning his back to her, leaning on the window frame one hand balled in a fist. “Do I honestly look to you like an old lecher?”

“No. Then again, you are not old,” she replied.

“I’m over forty.” Severus hissed.

“And you have at least a hundred and more years in front of you. You barely stepped out of the adolescence. My question stands, are you opposed?” Minerva refused to budge. *He protests too much.*

“Of course I am opposed. I am her former teacher, I’m twice her age, I’m…” he kept on listing.

Minerva observed him. His back rigid, the fist poised above his head pressing at the window frame, twitching like he is squeezing it. The cup nearly dropped from her hand when the realisation hit her. He wasn’t asking for her help for the girl; *he* needed help. He got attached and…

“Honestly Severus, I could never imagine Miss Granger being with a man her age. I always envisioned her with someone older, contrary to the pool in the teachers' room.” She smiled, testing her theory. “Does the girl knows?”

His hand tightened hard, she could see bluish veins filling with blood, drawing a map over his skin.

“She knows. She already showed at least shred of sanity and refused.” Severus said roughly, his fist twitched.

“Then I do not see the problem.” Minerva felt confused.

“The girl refused only because she believes she is doing what she thinks I want. Her sanity stops there.” He spat, veins on his hand more prominent now.

Minerva tightened the grip on her cup. *Does he realise how much he slipped just now? Or is this one of his veiled warnings? “I do not understand?”* she tried to sound naïve, to jar a response from him.

“The child is not at her best reasoning, Minerva. In her confused emotional state, she convinced herself that she is in love with me.” The words sounded bitter.

“You cannot know that.” Minerva protested, she finally begun to grasp the situation and reason behind his request.

“Oh, yes, I can. I can because she told me as much.” He growled.

“If you think it is a simple infatuation, then it will pass on its own.” She shrugged.

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?” Severus turned to glare at her, anger vibrating in his voice. “She is your cub, you know her as well as I. She already did plenty…”
“Come now, Severus, it can’t be all that bad,” Minerva tilted her head.

“Bollocks and you know it. She already almost raped me.” He hissed, spilling his desperation like poison.

The cup clanged as it hit the floor. “Severus what-when…?”

“It happened a while ago, I was still not mobile then, she had that misguided idea…” he waved his hand dismissively. “I won’t press charges, but I do not want to take any chances. I need her-otherwise occupied- if she is to be my apprentice.”

Minerva blinked, in front of her wasn’t the spy who lived through two wars, it was a boy she once taught. Insecure and desperate. She blinked again. Miss Granger’s actions terrified her in the same measure as Severus denial did. Now she recognised that intangible shift in him, he was the weak one and he needed someone to stop him.

Poppy warned her that therapy will influence him. He needed someone to control the situation he saw problematic until he could regain his old levels of control. Minerva wondered wouldn’t be better to push him in the girl's direction instead of helping him to get away from her.

They are quite fitting for each other. “If you are sure, Severus. You know that no one would be against the match, regardless of the position or age difference.” She said softly.

His shoulders slouched, all flight leaving him. He walked back to his chair and sat, burying his face in his hands.

“My miscalculation, Minerva. I was counting on your support in this matter. I won’t allow to lose the only grain of good left in me. I won’t taint something pure for the sake of old customs.” he said in a tired voice, not lifting his head.

“My late husband was twelve years my senior and my superior in the Ministry.” She whispered. “He was also my match, and not at first but I developed a deep love for him. He wasn’t my first love, and when I met him, my heart was already broken, shattered by a Muggle who refused me, on account of being a witch.”

Severus raised his head to glance at her, expression of utter confusion on his face.

“If you have a desire to ignore your chance of happiness, there is not a thing I can do or say to stop you. I won’t encourage but also not discourage Miss Granger. But I know that magic has its way of dealing with the matters of the heart. So I will urge you to use that brain of yours and consider what you are giving up before you make a definite decision. Do not make it in haste or anger, do not make it on the back of what others might think.” She stood up, flattening unexisting wrinkles in her robe. “I have to go now, do you have any messages for the girl? Merlin knows she will be in my office as soon as I’m back in school.”

“Let her use the library to the full extent,” he said, voice barely audible. “I gave her the list of books to prepare herself for the apprenticeship, she might look for reference books as well.”

“That can be arranged.” she nodded. “I’ll come and visit you again if the need arises.”

Her heart shrunk from sadness, it was painful to see him like this. Vulnerable. She had forgotten how that looked like; he was a pillar of malice and strength for years.

Exiting to the hallway she exhaled. How much did we wrong him? How alone he is. I hope he finds happiness and peace at least.
CIX

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: Shot notice for those who also follow Blur.
I'm still working out the kinks in the next chapter which means that my beta still can't do her magic. As a result, the next chapter of Blur will be a bit later than I planned.

Still not beta edited and running only on Grammarly so...

“Hermione, are you going to Hogsmeade today with us?” Luna’ voice chirped forcing her to raise her head from a book she was reading while eating her breakfast.

“Sorry Luna, I think I will use the peace and quiet in the library today.” She shook her head. “I have to finish this book and look at a few more referenced ones. Are you going?”

“Yes.” Luna gave her a look of a person who’s asked the stupidest question in the world. “Do you need anything from the village?”

“No, thank you.” Hermione frowned, thinking.

There was a murmur around the table but she ignored it, since Snape sent her that list Hermione was spending all her free time reading. Soon she will have to revise, preparing for her N.E.W.T. and there will be no more free time, she wanted to utilise what free time she had and Hogwarts library as much as she could.

Owls came rushing into the Great Hall, at least eight or ten letters fell in front of her, a rolled Daily Prophet and two more magazines about Potions. Hades nearly landed in her plate.

“The bird is doing it again!” complained Ellie, a Ravenclaw seated next to Hermione, scrunching her nose.

“Not much I can do about it, it seems that Severus gave him instructions to give the letter directly. Hades won’t risk it.” she took the parchment and unrolled it, letting Hades pick the food from her plate.

After she sent her essay to Severus they corresponded regularly, at least two times a week they would exchange letters. Sometimes they would discuss Prince family matters, Snape was still at the Manor but he refused to talk to Lucius and he started the process of moving to Rosebush Manor.

The other letters were from solicitors or carpenters, one was from Harry and Ginny while one was a regular report from Draco. She ignored all of them, opening Severus’ letter first.

Sometimes Severus wanted to discuss one theory or another, he asked numerous times about the spell she used on her parents, she even sent him a memory. The tone of the letters slipped from formal to informal and finally to familiar bordering on friendly.
One thing Severus never talked about was his therapy. He would occasionally slip news about his physical health, or his magic. They exchanged a few angry letters about his argument with Lucius. Hermione insisted that he try to talk to the man- to forgive and reconcile. The other thing they never even mentioned was the magical index match.

Amidst all that correspondence Hermione wondered if her apprenticeship was a smart thing?

With each letter, she somehow fell more and more for him. Consequently, her mood deteriorated with that realisation, knowing that what she wants she’ll never have. That didn’t stop her to feel butterflies in her belly and her hands from shaking every time she saw Hades.

Even now, reading his letter, full of plans for the Rosebush Manor, didn’t stop light tremor of her hands and insane beating of her heart. She frowned raising her eyes to look at the bird that picked at her food.

“Hades, did Severus sent something else with you?”

Hades gazed at her and ruffled his feathers, he moved to her shoulder and pecked at her hair. Hermione was confused for a moment until she realised that Hades was pulling her hair towards the door. With a sigh, she excused herself and went to her room, only there Hades landed on the table and shook loose three feathers from his wing.

Hermione gazed at feathers, her mind blank. *What am I supposed to do with them?* The memory of the letter transformed as a feather floated to her mind, a much younger Severus sending the word to the Dark Lord and one hidden to Lucius. *It can’t be...* Taking her wand she cast Finite on the feathers.

Hermione watched as one feather turned to additional scroll, one to a set of old looking keys and one to a stamp. Frowning at the items she glanced at Hades.

“I don’t know who is more paranoid, you or your owner.” She mumbled, Hades gave her one lazy glance before settling on the back of the chair to slumber.

With a sigh, she took the second letter.

“*Hermione,*

*You have now full access to Rosebush Manor. This set of keys is yours, be careful not to lose them! They are still not tied to you, but that has to wait. I also advise against going there without me for the first time, I presume that I must key you to the wards. I’d also like to keep my staff, so not a single elf can be freed before we move in there.*

*I also entrust you with my personal stamp. The stamp will enable you to access my vault. Mind you, you will still need my written permission and I still have to make arrangements with Goblins. But for all intents and purposes, you are now, beside me, the only person able to enter it. Needless to say, guard that stamp with your life!*

*You will remain in the possession of those items even after you are no longer my Secretary. I do not trust them to stay with anyone else; you are on the other hand honest to the fault, at least in some areas. This will be included in your Apprenticeship contract and compensated accordingly.*

*Now, I trust that you read the book I recommended in my previous letter; tell me your intake on Kirilov method of infusion.*

SS”
Hermione grinned, her heart beating a strong pulse in her throat, mind already shifting to the last line in the letter.

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The door opened and Severus raised his head, knitting his brows in annoyance. He has forgotten that Mrs Rutledge is coming today. He moved the parchment he was scribbling on and closed the book he was using.

She walked to the armchair and placed her bag on it with a smile.

“Good day Severus, how are you today?”

“I was better until you showed up.” He grumbled.

“Good, I see that you are returning to your old self, as they have told me.” She nodded.

The woman was infuriating, nothing could shake her up or insult. To his displeasure, she was also the only one he could trust, besides Hermione and he tried to distance himself from the girl. Severus moved to the armchair next to hers.

“When I am fully myself again, you’ll have no doubts about it.” He said.

“Did I disrupted your work?” She asked.

“Yes,” he nodded, it wasn’t hers to stick the nose into his business.

“We had an appointment.” She smiled again, and Severus had a desire to hex that smile off her face.

“We did,” he replied more to keep a conversation floating than anything else.

She nodded. “How is your sleeping?”

“As good as it can be. I have no nightmares, at least not as much as I had before.” Severus mumbled.

Oh, he wasn’t decifull; he had no nightmares, at this point he would welcome them. His dreams became less than acceptable, unfortunately, his brain didn’t seem to share or care about his moral or his reason. At first, he spent many nights under the cold shower, ignoring his rebellious body needs. It wasn’t the sole carnal need; it was more what caused it—or rather who. After a while the sowers didn’t work anymore, so begrudgingly he tried to reduce the activity in a clinical and pro-functionary necessity - that didn’t work either, his mind would conjure up images he’d rather not see. Memories he could do without.

“Good.” Mrs Rutledge nodded, rescuing him from his own wayward thoughts. “And how is your pursuit after Miss Granger’s suitor?”

“Came to an abrupt end.” Severus said, his muscles tensing.

“Oh, you found him, arranged a meeting?” She asked with a slight frown.

“I found him, he-he is not suitable for Miss Granger. I thought we agreed that…” Severus narrowed his eyes.

“I am inquiring about a thing you considered as a project. I am curious to know, though, what made him so unsuitable and by who’s definition?” She smiled.
“By my definition; and he *is* the most inappropriate choice.” Severus replied not liking the turn conversation was taking. She raised an eyebrow in question and he growled. “Miss Granger is a Muggleborn, she should find love in her own terms.”

“And would her *freedom* influence your attitude…” She started.

Severus jumped from the chair; *The woman is like a dog with the bone*. He wondered how smart it would be to confide in her, without his Occlumency, something he still couldn’t regain even if his magic almost fully restored, he had a need for a confidant. He always had more than one.

He could confide to Lucius- before… Before… Albus, no matter what he still listened to him, offered him an ear when the weight of his burdens became too heavy. Even if there were secrets he never shared, he didn’t have to keep everything to himself.

Trust wasn’t his forte, but he needed someone, ideally, that would be Lucius. The pain of loss and betrayal cut him like the knife. A sudden rush of anger, directed at Lucius, at his carelessness, fisted his hands. He was angry at Lucius, mostly for losing a friend, and now when he needed that friend the most.

But his own body and heart… He didn’t know how to deal with the feelings he had. He didn’t know how to resist them. He never had to before. She was bound with a professional oath, and he knew he could trust her. Still…

“Do you know what wizarding oath is?” Severus asked, deciding, hoping that he made a correct one.

“I am familiar with it.” She said, her voice slightly uncertain.

“If you will accept the terms of the wizarding oath, I may decide to confide in you fully, but not before that.” he continued.

“But…” this was the first time he could feel her losing her calm.

“That is the deal, Mrs Rutledge. Nothing I say will be written or said outside the privacy of the two of us. You may take your time to reconsider, discuss it with your husband, and tell me your decision.”

It wasn’t an easy decision to make, but if he could gain her consent, he’d have at least one person who could help him go through this. And he’ll end up, hopefully, slightly less damaged than before.

“My professional oath should be enough, but if that is what you need, I can concede to that.” She replied firmly.

Severus hid his smile, he still had it, he still could manipulate and twist person to do his bidding. His therapist was a smart and capable woman, but he still could pull her the strings if need be. There was a risk involved in what he had in mind, but he will take his chance.

“Very well. Just place your hand on my wand and repeat after me. I promise never to repeat in words or writing what I am about to hear and learn. Nor will I ever reveal the terms under which I learned all that.”

Mrs Rutledge gulped but did as he told her. He watched his wand release a few sparks that travelled up her hand. He knew that no oath was taken or sealed, but the fear he read in her guarded eyes will keep her in check. That was all he needed.

She released his wand as it burned her. It did, in a manner, he allowed small and low stinging hex
against her skin, just enough to make her think that magic had its hold.

She leaned back in her chair, looking at him. “I will venture a guess that all this has to do something with Miss Granger and her suitor.”

“It does.” he nodded.

“Who is it?”

“Me,” Severus replied calmly watching the shock pass over Mrs Rutledge’s features. “Not me, of course, my late family to be precise.”

“I see.” she blinked. “But, that is not the whole story…”

“No, it is not. The remaining part of that story is a betrayal. My dear friend… My only friend betrayed me, conspired against me with the portrait of my late grandmother.” he stopped, suddenly everything that was happening seemed too tangled up and he wasn't sure what to say.

Mrs Rutledge nodded, motioning him to continue. Severus was sure she still tried to process everything he said so far.

“Even my own… body betrayed me.” Severus continued carefully. The heart is a part of the body after all. “Minerva refused to see the reason, she thinks that my... that possibility of joining with the girl is acceptable. I am at a loss how to proceed at this point.”

“You developed feelings for the girl?” She nodded, a shred of understanding finally reaching her eyes.

His breath hitched, and he cleared his throat to cover it. Something heavy pressed at his chest. The coat of sweat enveloped his skin. Palms burned from the intensity of his fists. Voice betrayed him so he nodded, hanging his head low.

“As I told you before it is quite normal, even expected in situations like this.” Mrs Rutledge said. “But if it is only one-sided, there is no…” she stopped talking suddenly tilting her head. “I see, it is not just one-sided.”

He turned his back to Mrs Rutledge if she could read him so easily that meant that he lost control over his features.

“Do you think it is connected to that… Whatever you call it, compatibility? You told me once that if you set the meeting between Miss Granger and that young man the things would resolve themselves on their own.”

“Yes…” his voice cracked and Severus had to clear his throat. “Yes, I am sure that is a part.”

“Only a part?” she asked

“Well, she has a usable brain.” he snapped. At this moment Severus tried not to think that she had an invitingly built body as well.

“But, that is something you knew, you were her teacher for years and yet, you developed none of these feelings before. So why now? What changed now?” Mrs Rutledge said.

Yes, why now? That seemed to be the right question, one he could not find the answer. He was usually good at untangling the web of confusion and seeing the solution or answer at the very least.
But now he felt crippled, blind to something that he had a feeling stared at his face. Possibly mocking him.

“If I knew the answer to that question, do you think we would lead this conversation?” he hissed.

“Very well, we may return to that question later.” She nodded. “Tell me, how do you feel about this development?”

“How should I feel? I am were her teacher.” Severus growled. Defeated, sad, hopeful. “It is hardly a matter I could do anything about it, besides what I am doing already.”

“And that is?” Mrs Rutledge blinked at him.

“Trying to find the way to keep the girl out of the harm's way,” Severus grumbled. “And I seemed to be only one.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Lucius, Draco even Narcissa seems to be more than keen on throwing the girl at me. Minerva is also quite calm about it. Poppy… Well, Poppy is Poppy. They all closed the blind eye at the most glaring facts.” Severus barked, annoyance stirring in his chest.

Why no one can see how wrong all of it is?

“Hm, you said to keep the girl out of the harm’s way. Why is that?” She leaned to him.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he sighed. She is just doing her work, she has to ask these questions. “If I neglect for the moment most glaring reasons like age difference for example or… Still, she is a part of the Golden Trio, a war hero and the best friend of the Boy Annoyance. I am an ex-Death Eater, twice charged for treason and my association. She survived the war, but her hands are still clear. I killed, more than once. What I did of my own free will or out of necessity- that creates darkness that taints everything you touch.”

“And yet, none of the surrounding people don’t see that darkness in you. Including Miss Granger. From what you told me about her, she knows most of the things you did and she still developed feelings on her part.” Mrs Rutledge said.

Severus briefly wondered if she is adamant to end what others already started? To push him deeper into the amby’s. Without Occlumency he was already lost, never needing to develop any other form of defence.

“I would like to continue this conversation, but later. We will talk about something else for the rest of our session, however, I’d like you to think about the question I asked you regarding this topic. Next time we see each other I’d like to see what conclusions you reached.”
Severus sat in bed, breathing heavy. Sheets tangled around him like Devil's Snare, they did nothing to soak up the sweat. With an angry growl, he tugged on the sheets until he was free.

The floor felt icy cold and bit into his feet when he stood up.

He won’t return to sleep tonight. Not that sleeping was ever his favourite hobby, but after the last conversation with Mrs Rutledge, it became an almost undesirable feature.

Damn that woman.

Over time, she forced him to reconcile with a lot of things in his life. To accept them, giving a fresh perspective. No, not to forgive himself but to see them in a different light. He never asked himself what if question, then again, he never tried to see himself as any other human before.

His mistakes, his inadequacy to fit in, even his intelligence defined him.

She helped him see that his ambition isn’t a crime, isn’t bad. That he is not so different from anyone else.

Mrs Rutledge slightly tilted her head. “Why do you say that?”

“If I wasn’t so focused on success, on recognition, I might have to stop and think long enough not to…” he hissed in frustration.

“Not to what? There is no crime in ambition. The desire for recognition isn’t a crime. They are a normal part of every living human. Do you think your ambition or your desire for your talents to be recognised are to blame for the war?” she asked.

“Of course not, the war would come, with or without me in it. But maybe I could have…” he stopped, it was a ridiculous notion, they didn’t want him- the side of Light.

“Mr Snape, bigotry wasn’t an exclusive right of the side you initially signed in to, I can tell that you see that. Same way ambition or ego’s wanted to get recognised and celebrated for their greatness-no matter how small, wasn’t either. In a way, you were more benign than some others with far more influence, on both sides.” She said.

She compared him with Muggle scientists, people who just wanted to focus on their science, but their findings turned out to be weapons of mass destruction. They didn’t start with an idea to make destruction devices; she said.
It was all nice and fine, but the guilt and weight of their discoveries still lay on their shoulders. Same as his guilt lay on his.

Then again, those Muggle scientists never enjoyed punishing others, he did. Mrs Rutledge forced him to see the other angle, not a forgiving one. Yes, he could deal with his anger and pain and frustrations differently, if anyone ever showed him how. Instead, he first became Death Eater, then the Dark Lord’s torturer, a weapon to hold Death Eaters in check, and loved it.

However, she had the point, if he wasn’t Dark Lord's punisher, someone else would be. And then things may have been different. The pain and suffering he caused would be much greater. That person would punish him at one point, he may have been killed. And where would war be then?

His part wasn’t glorious, but it was somewhat important.

And yes, it was true, his ambition or need for recognition wasn’t as nearly lethal or megalomaniac as they were for some others. Dumbledore’s ambition was. Dark Lord’s was more insane, if not as bigoted as many believed, including Death Eaters. Dark Lord wasn’t opposed to Muggleborns, he had a fair share among low ranked and unmarked. But Dark Lord also adopted the rhetoric and idea that could mobilise the masses, indulging Pureblood supremacy to gain powerful allies.

He simply wanted to do what he did best - brew.

Severus shook his head looking at the garden filled with moonlight.

He could talk about the war, both wars. He could talk about the monster of his father. He could face his own mistakes and accept them. He’d talk or think about it gladly, in fact.

It was preferable than facing some other aspects of his personality.

Facing everything that had to do with Hermione was far more difficult. It required of him to admit, at least to himself, that he wasn’t as blameless or forced into things as he’d want to be. He protested to her actions, but not as much as he could have or should have.

Hermione’s misplaced attempt to replace his bad memories with better, more pleasant ones, for example. He didn’t contemplate whether her actions were wrong or not- they were. But the blame wasn’t only on her. She did what she did, but she was inexperienced. He was the one who did nothing to stop her.

His magic didn’t flare up to his defence.

He could have used his mind to thwart her attempt.

He did nothing of sorts.

He was selfish even if not intentionally and knowingly. Deep down, hidden even from him, he hoped that her plan will succeed. He wanted to feel something good.

Furthermore, his unconscious mind recognised her as his Dream Lady. It used their connection to molest the girl while he was catatonic. He was ashamed to admit, but he wanted to show her how good it could be.

He was selfish.

He wanted everything she was offering.
He still does.

In a way, it was a pointless struggle. The compatibility wasn’t some soul bond nonsense, but as he told Mrs Rutledge - it was more than mere compatibility. It also wasn’t emotional, it was practical and grounded. Their magical cores were the backbone and the skin for them, they compounded the very essence of each witch and wizard. People with high match were compatible in more ways than to produce a strong magical heir. Interests, proclivities, life goals, temperament matched them. By everything that defined them and made them who they are.

They were, to put it simply, perfect for each other in every sense.

In fact, possessing magic had nothing to do with it. He knew well that some wizards or witches had their matches among Muggles. Andromeda was one, and she produced a strong magical child.

His mother….

Severus shook his head, preventing himself to go there. He’d hated the thought that his mother found her match in the monster that was his father.

And he wanted… He wanted to feel how it is to be loved back. The most troubling part, he was loved back. And yes, he loved , this time it was real. A sure sign of it was that he was thinking of her more than of himself. He wanted to save her from everything she would be exposed to if he gave in.

But, why now?

Maybe because he only had the chance to met her now. Truly know her. To talk to her from the position of equality. Now she was a young woman, not the child. As a teacher he never tried to know his students, he only wanted to teach them, and as a result- he never really noticed any of them.

Not to mention that I got stuck on one girl, one girl that never noticed me in return.

If things were different. If he survived and Hermione wasn’t by his side like, she is now. If they meet years from now- nothing would change. He’d still fall for her, but maybe then she’d be married or he would. Maybe then he’d...

Or maybe not.

But, thinking about what if wasn’t a solution, it didn’t hold the answer? It wasn’t easy to admit but he could stare at the face of his own feelings, now when he knew what they are. It solved nothing.

He was still the same callous, short-tempered person with slow poison dripping from his words. Most of the wizarding world still hated him. He was better but still damaged. He was still responsible for his crimes, a man with the blood on his hands.

What he could offer to the girl like Hermione Granger was?

His title did little to repair the damage of his reputation. One couldn’t live on love alone, especially with the person like he was. This train of thought leads to nowhere. Thinking about what if was the exercise in futility.

Severus curled his hand in a fist and slammed it with all the might against the window frame, sparks of pain travelled up his arm like electricity.

Damn that bloody woman .
Harry blinked. Neville's jumbled words didn’t make too much sense if any. Try as he may, he couldn’t see anything wrong in what was Neville saying.

“You don’t get it, Harry, she is constantly locked up in the library,” Neville said.

“Yeah, but mate, that’s Hermione we are talking about.” Harry tried to sound reasonable. Not that he was sure what was reasonable these days, especially when it concerned Hermione.

“She is changed, Harry.” Neville sighed.

“Changed how?” Neville made little sense.

“She is trying to fight the school system. We put the suggestion box, she drove entire staff insane, to the point we had to find an excuse to remove the box.” Neville shook his head.

To Harry that sounded like Hermione he knew. “Remember the S.P.E.W.?” he asked.

“Yes. And this is different. The rest of the propositions was, well- longer breaks between classes, less homework, you know- normal stuff. She asked for a cancelling of the house points system, joining the common rooms for all houses, joint Great Hall tables. Projects that demand two or more houses to work together. She demanded new subjects, Harry. Obligatory Muggle studies for all who grew up in a magical world. And obligatory Wizarding studies for all who grew up in a Muggle world. She demanded that Bins is replaced with a living teacher who would, and I quote, teach history instead be a relic himself.”

To Harry, nothing sounded more like Hermione than what Neville just said. He felt relief. “Sorry Nev, but that sounds exactly like Hermione. She’s done that sort of things since the first year.”

“At the last Quidditch match, she cheered for Slytherin. Slytherin, Harry.” Neville shook his head.

“Let me guess, that was after she suggested house equality and joining of the common rooms?” Harry chuckled, that sounded exactly like Hermione he knew before the war.

“And she refused everyone, and I mean everyone who asked her to Spring Ball.” Neville huffed.

“Neville, it is understandable. She had a bad fallout with Ron, and…” Herry tried again.

“No, that is not…” Neville huffed in annoyance.

“You want me to go to the Ball with Hermione?” Harry blinked. Please let it be it.

Harry was slowly losing his patience. From all he understood Hermione was back to her old self, fixing the world and driving everyone around her insane.

“No. You are in contact with Malfoy. I want you to ask him to take her to the Ball.” Neville almost barked the words. Harry blinked. “But that is not why I called you. She’s been acting strange lately, so I sat to talk to her- as a friend, not the teacher, you know.”

“Mhm…” Harry nodded afraid to speak.

“Well, she is in love.” Neville huffed.

“Are you sure? Hermione in love? With Malfoy?” Harry’s felt like someone punched him in the stomach. Sure, he had his suspicions that Hermione fancied Snape, but Malfoy? “Which, Malfoy?
Please tell me at least it is Draco.”

That didn’t sound right to him, then again, she and Malfoy worked well together. To his shame and regret, Draco had more in common with Hermione than he ever did, or any of those she called her friends.

“W-what? I didn’t say Hermione is in love with Malfoy!” Neville jumped to his feet, distancing himself from Harry.

“But…” Harry sighed. “Fine, can you tell me again? With sense this time Nev?”

“She is in love with Snape.” Neville’s voice contained a great deal of horror, Harry breathed a sigh of release. “I asked you to call Malfoy, and yes- Draco, to take her to the ball and after to take her to the Manor on Spring break. But didn’t you hear me, Harry? She is in love with Snape.”

“Yeah, I heard you. I had my suspicions for some time now.” Harry nodded.

Not that he was too happy about it, or thought like it was a good idea. When he first started to doubt, he had to deal with his own feelings of repulsiveness. But somehow, he forced himself and see the logic behind possibility. Now, he was mostly afraid if that was true- Hermione was signing up for another heartbreak and disappointment.

“But, that’s-that’s awful.” Neville sounded scared and sad at the same time.

“Look, Neville, I know you don’t like him but…” Harry tried, sure he was on the solid ground now. Yeah, it was a bit unsettling, not to mention creepy. His best friend was in love with the man who was, and as far as Harry knew, still is- in love with his mother. But, Snape would never hurt Hermione. Harry was sure of that at least. If nothing, Snape was protective of her.

“No Harry, it has nothing to do what I think of him. The portrait that followed Hermione around. The one that wanted to know her… that witch is part of the Prince family. Don’t you see what that means?” Neville looked like a Boggart materialised in front of him.

“I’m afraid not, Nev.” Harry felt tired. Tired of being expected to know things he couldn’t know, things no one ever mentioned to him. Hermione’s demand for obligatory Muggle/Wizarding studies sounded reasonable to him from this perspective.

“Snape is her match. But that isn’t the worst. It is Snape, Harry. You know, the bloke who is still in love with your mum. This is a recipe for disaster.” Neville shook his head.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Nev. Hermione is not unreasonable now that she’s back to be herself again. And Snape won’t hurt her, I think. I’ll talk to Malfoy, I’ll talk to Hermione as well- but not now. Look I have to go…” Harry smiled uncertainty, all he wanted was to go home and think about what he just learned. He put up a brave face in front of Neville, but he was worried, at least a bit.

He’d have to sort this out before he acts, and he’d need a strategy.

Harry barged in the room, banging the door behind him. “Snape I want to talk to you.”

Snape was sitting at the table and writing. He slowly raised his head and glared at Harry.

“I see that your manners still leave much to be desired, Potter. I suggest you find them fast or this will
be a very short conversation.” Snape raised an eyebrow.

“I want to know what are your intentions towards Hermione.” Harry looked at Snape stubbornly, he won’t back down or allow Snape to intimidate him.

Snape folded arms over his chest, his demeanour changed. Harry could swear that Snape’s face turned to stone. The man had an expression Harry was familiar with from his school days.

“Did Lucius put you up to this, Potter?” Snape’ voice cracked like a whip.

“No one put me to anything. I heard about….” Harry blinked confusedly. Why would Malfoy wanted me to talk to Snape about Hermione?

“This seemed to relax Snape at least a bit, which wasn’t too much considering that Snape still had rigid posture and a frown.

“I want to know that Hermione would be ok, I know you offered her Apprenticeship.” Harry raised his chin.

“I did.” Snape nodded.

“Look, I don’t want to… I don’t want to see Hermione hurt again. I know you wouldn’t… Just don’t hurt her, ok?” Harry sighed.

“Potter, I plan to *teach* her not torture her.” Snape deadpanned

“I’m not talking about that. I was referring to the plans your family has… I don’t want to see Hermione broken-hearted again.” Harry stuttered, feeling tangled up in his own words.

Snape tipped his lips in a menacing half-smile. “You surprise me, Potter, not long ago you were here asking me about your mother. Now, you are here trying to… what? *Woo* me for Miss Granger? Tell me Potter do you dislike your friend that much if you wish to inflict me on her person?”

There was a sharp bite in Snape’ voice.

“I’m not trying to woo anyone. I want to be sure you will turn her down gently. She doesn’t need another heartache.”

“Fear not, Potter,” Snape nodded and returned to his papers. “Miss Granger isn’t in any danger from heartache, she has more reason than that. My family already solicited her, and she turned them down. You have nothing to worry about. If that is all…”

Harry knew this should satisfy him, he should just turn and leave, but something in Snape’ voice kept him rooted to the spot. Thinking of all the times he saw Hermione with Snape, seeing Snape take care of her or defend her...

There was an air of defeat and sorrow around Snape. Nothing tangible, nothing he could put his finger on, but he still could sense it. Maybe Hermione wasn’t the only one who developed feelings, at least to some degree.

Harry blinked, wondering is it selfish of him to nudge Snape at Hermione’ direction if that was the case?

*It can’t be all that bad, she is in love with him. I want her to be happy.*
It wasn’t untrue, either. He wanted to see Hermione happy even if that meant- happy with Snape. If there was a chance for it...

“Why are you still here, Potter?” Snape raised his head sharply.

“Where can I find Draco?” Harry said the first thing that popped in his head, he didn’t know how to approach Snape on a sensitive subject like what he had in mind. Well, not without drawing the man’s ire.

“In the library, I presume.” Snape frowned. “Why do you need him?”

“Oh, I wanted to ask Draco to take Hermione to a Spring Ball” Harry shrugged.

Snape’s reaction was instant. Snape straighten his back, shoulders squaring, jaw tightening. If a look could kill Harry was sure he would be dead on the spot.

“Draco is engaged.” Snape hissed.

“I know, it isn’t a date, but maybe she would accept an invitation from Draco, Neville said she refused everyone else and I already have to be there with Ginny,” he said...

Harry tried to hide his grin, Snape definitely wasn’t disinterested as he claimed. This was jealousy, by now Harry knew the signals; he’d seen them often on Ginny, even if there was no reason for that.


“Thank you.” Harry nodded. He turned and walked to the door, adding over his shoulder, hand on the doorknob. “I like Hermione, she is like a sister. And I also think she could do much worse than you. Come to think of it, it makes sense.”

Harry rushed to exit the room, not wanting to linger and find out how his words were received.
When Severus was just a kid, he saw a cartoon—mother took him once to a huge store, on the telly in the electronics department was a telly. It fascinated him; he thought it to be real magic. The cartoon was about an ugly black duckling. The duckling kept repeating *injustice that's what it is*.

He felt now the same as a duckling, words like *unfair* and *injustice* came to mind.

For a few staggering moments, Severus felt lost.

That was before anger that bubbled in his stomach reached his chest. He pushed the books and parchments off the table before standing up, angry pace’s measuring the limitations of the room, wall to wall, before he returned to the table.

*Why was he the one who had to be responsible? Why no one could see?*

With the angry flick of his wrist, he returned mess from the floor on the table. Arranging it again into a more functional order, gave him something to do with his hands.

He could just give in but he didn’t want to put her through what he’s been experiencing for most of his life. He respected her too much for that. Even before… Before he became aware before he realised what his soul and his body already knew and apparently accepted.

Severus felt the need to destroy. Not wanting to repeat the process of arranging his study papers again he grabbed the backrest of the chair. The pain bit into his palms from the intensity of his grip. He had no more strength to be the strong one, to be the reasonable one. The need to…

With a loud pop Misty materialised in front of him and he gave her an angry glare.

“Maybe Master want another chair?” Misty squeaked.

“What?” He blinked, confused.

“That chair is magical, Misty can’t fix it if Master breaks it. Misty can bring the chair Misty can fix.”

Elf explained calmly. “If Master breaks the chair Mistress Narcissa not be happy.”

He blinked again, releasing his grip. Misty’s words drained his anger, it was pointless and not productive. He didn’t need to be angry; he needed a plan and for that a clear head.

The elf stood looking at him.

“I won’t break the chair, Misty.” He finally sighed.
“Misty see.” Elf nodded. “That awful boy is with Master Draco. Should Misty chase away Harry Potter?”

He blinked again, he never heard Misty mentioning Potter before, and certainly in that tone.

“You know Potter?” he asked.


“I think you had him confused with Hermione, she is the one with an agenda to free elves.” Despite still present tightness in his chest, he chuckled.

“No.” Misty shook her head. “Missy-big-mouth tries to free elves, she doesn’t know how. She thinks Master Malfoy owns Misty. She can’t harm Misty. Potter is sneaky, he tricked Master Malfoy to free Dobby.”

Severus did his best to keep his mouth shut, or they might just hang open. He’d forgotten all about that. At the time Lucius was beside himself from anger. In fact, what Potter opened Hermione’s eyes to the situation of House elves, and what solution might be.

“Missy thinks Misty is from here. Misty stays here because Master comes here. Misty go where Master go.” Misty continued, her small face scrunching.

“Don’t worry Misty, I won’t let her trick me. You will stay with me for as long as you wish. But should you wish to leave…” he started.

Misty released the wail and stepped back, pulling on her ears. “Does Master not want Misty any more? Misty is be good, Master…”

“Misty!” He called her, she quieted still shaking her head. “You will stay with me for as long as you wish.”

She nodded. “Thank you, Master. Should Misty send Potter away? Potter is making Master Draco miserable.”

“He’ll live. Thank you, Misty, that will be all.” He nodded.

Misty poofed out of his sight in a hurry, as if she was afraid that he might change his mind and free her.

Severus returned to sit on the chair. He felt like someone pulled the rug from beneath him. No, as if someone pulled the ground from beneath him.

Why can’t they see?

It wasn’t what he might do to her, but what his reputation would do. And it would, no doubt about it. It fell on him, on his shoulders again to twist that rusty dagger logged in his heart.

Mrs Rutledge’s persistence made him realise that his love for Lily was never a-love to begin with. Not that he didn’t realise on his own, but at least then he could ignore it. It was just a teenage infatuation. He could see now that Lily wasn’t as good as he thought, nor she was as bad as he sometimes wished her to be. She has shown the kindness to a boy starving for it, and he wanted to keep that for himself. The one thing he thought could be his and only his. He twisted his need to be loved and treated like any other human being, twisted and squeezed until he destroyed completely what was gifted to him.
Until he turned it to the driving force, upfront for some other deeper reasons he might have.

Twisted it again later into guilt, another driving force.

It wasn’t love; it was his own selfishness.

Just like his past impotence was self-punishment.

He paid his dues- tenfold; it was time to stop being selfish.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Draco watched as Hermione paced angrily, her hair jumped with each step, ruffled. She was ruffled. He transfigured the chair to a wingback and now he waited, legs crossed, pretending to observe his cuticles. Behind him Madam Hooch occupied the only real stuffed chair, she snored lightly.

So much for a chaperone, some things never change.

Draco took good care not to smile. Hermione’ ire just shifted from him and Potter to other topics, he’d make sure to stay that way.

“That’s… That’s…” she growled.

“It is because you’re doing it all wrong,” Draco said calmly.

“But none of my…” Hermione choked out.

“Not none, they took two of your suggestions into consideration. They are planning to make a going to pension party for Bins…” he started.

“Pension?!” Hermione shrieked and Hooch twitched snoring louder, she glanced at Madam Hooch and hissed in a lower tone. “He doesn’t need going away party, he needs to be- banished or exorcised- or whatever.”

“Exco... What? Never mind, must be some Muggle idiocy.” Draco frowned. “Look, Granger, if they don’t send him away properly he’ll just continue going to classes, bothering both students and the new teacher. Besides, they have a good reason to replace him.”

“Yes, I gave a bloody good reason why we need better history teacher...” Hermione growled.

“It is nice to see that you have so high opinion of yourself, but no. Bins refused to teach the most recent history, as I understood mother he’s refusing to teach events he wasn’t a part of, at least not before the books are issued.” Draco suppressed the chuckle.

“He wasn’t the part of? He was here, in school the whole bloody time. The history classroom collapsed through him.” Hermione hissed.

“He is a ghost, the happenings of mortals are not his concern.” Draco sighed. “At any rate, they also debated the second proposition you made, the obligatory Wizarding/Muggle classes. Not that you could take full credit to it, the mother is nagging McGonagall about it for the past four or five months.”

“But the rest…” she slumped her shoulders.

“You are doing it all wrong. They are comfortable doing the things their way, as they’ve been doing them for decades. If you want to change something, you don’t go into their faces and knocking off
the legs of the chairs they lazily rocking on. You go behind their back to those in power.” Draco
couldn’t resist, he rolled his eyes.

So naïve. Gryffindors…

“I did, I went to Headmistress.” She glared at him.

“And do you think she wants to be the reason behind the bad news to the entire staff?” Draco
clucked his tongue. “Besides, you wanted to break the prejudice about House rivalry? What better
way than to go to the ball with your mortal enemy?”

She blinked at him.

“Me, Bucktooth. Slytherin and a Malfoy.” Draco sighed. Clueless.

She glared at him for the longest of time before she huffed. “Fine, I’ll go with you. Get out of the
room, I want to dress.”

Hermione said loud enough to wake up Hooch, who twitched to awakeness with one loud snort.
Madam Hooch ushered him out of Hermione’s room and down to the Common room to wait for
Hermione.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione descended the winding stairs, not all too pleased with time she had wasted on preparations
for the pointless school party. She took more than an hour to make herself presentable.

Stupid. Pointless.

She was overdressed, unsurprisingly since she had only one formal robe and they were made for
Malfoy Ball. Narcissa prevailed, making her get rid of all other formal robes she had. Winding
towards the Common Room, her hand reached to her neck.

Hermione’s heart jumped and started to beat fast.

In the Common Room Draco was sitting on the sofa, surrounded by Slytherins and Ravenclaws,
Hufflepuffs sat close but not too close. Gryffindors, on the other hand, sat as far away as possible,
 glaring daggers at the group.

My house is the most prejudicial one. Shame.

Her hand, still at her neck was shaking.

Damn him. Git.

Her fingers ran down the lines of the intricate jewellery. Severus sent them along with the dress.

But why?

It was the same set she had at the Malfoy Ball. Maybe because they were still here? He couldn’t have
returned them to the safe, she had the key, the one once belonged to Lucius Malfoy. Maybe because
he thought it would go nicely with the dress? They did. But…

Damn him.

Her heart climbed to her throat. Sending these had a meaning, to those who cared for meanings.
Snape didn’t, that much was obvious. If he cared he wouldn’t include them.

*Maybe he thinks she corrupted them?*

The entire wizarding world knew she wore them, splayed all over the Prophet after the Ball, causing speculations even then. Maybe he knew that no other Pureblooded witch would touch them.

*Will I have to buy them out? How much this could cost, anyway? I have to ask Narcissa or Draco, maybe they know?*

Her heart was beating somewhere beneath her tongue. He couldn’t mean for these to mean what they would if Severus was one to pay attention to etiquette.

She stepped into the room. Draco stood up, his robes shimmered, smooth black with thin emerald green stripes. The stripes shone as he moved.

*I wonder how Severus would look in something like this?*

“No as good as I.” Malfoy smirked at her, he was now only a step away. He leaned towards her. “You were mumbling, and he has a similar set, mother had them made for him. His have silver and deep forest green stripes. He claims that they are too formal for anywhere someone might invite him.”

She blinked. “Time to get over with this charade, Ferrentface.”

“Don’t keep your hopes up, Bucktooth, I’m spoken for.” Draco wiggled the eyebrows with the grin. He offered his arm, and she took it. Gryffindors glared at her, mouthing *traitor*. Draco chuckled quietly.

“Welcome to the club.”

He lead her out of the Common Room and down the hallway to the Grand Hall.

“What club?” Hermione frowned.

“Mostly Slytherin, but the club of the rejected ones as well.” Draco was now snickering.

She stopped, pulling him to stop. “I am not a Slytherin, never was and never will be. I hold no ill will towards the House, but…”

“Well, you certainly are pretending to be one.” Draco widened his grin. “You try to implement the things Slytherins try for ages. You are friend with Slytherins, they defend you. Not to mention, you spent almost a year and a half practically glued to Slytherin House Head. And, you lived for a year at the Manor.”

“That makes me human and intelligent, not Slytherin.” she huffed.

“Tell that to them.” Draco winked and pulled her to continue walking. “Come Bucktooth, endure through this and I’ll take you to the Manor after the party is over.”

She stopped again. “What?”

“Headmistress gave me a permission slip, I can take you home, well, my home, tonight.”

Hermione just nodded, her palm slicking and her heart beating fast.
“Draco, do you think I'll have to buy out these jewels?” she asked quietly, not looking at him. It was humiliation enough she had to ask something like that.

“Not to my knowledge. Why?” Draco sounded serious, but Hermione refused to chance a glance.

“Well, in the book your mother gave me… He couldn’t have meant… So, I thought, maybe he thinks…” she stuttered, not able to finish her thoughts.

“And maybe he changed his mind?” Draco stopped.

Hermione raised her head looking at him, not allowing herself to hope that his words might be true.

“Do you- know something?” She whispered.

“No. I know Severus, and he is a stickler for protocols. If he wants you to buy them out, he’d send a bill not jewels,” Draco tilted his head. “Talk to him, Granger. Why asking me?”

“Because…” she started. Because you are with him while I’m stuck here. Because he doesn’t want me. Because it hurts too much.

“He’s changed, Granger. Having that Muggle healer changed him. Being angry at my father changed him. Maybe he changed his mind about you too.”

She nodded. “Readdy?”

They were at the entrance to Great Hall, surrounded by glares and stares. Neville smiled at her approvingly, McGonagall smiled to her tightly, Flitwick dropped his cup.

*Irrelevant.*

They all were irrelevant. After this she’ll go to the Manor, to see- him, and that was all that mattered.

*Calimero - Calimero (カリメロ Karimero) is an Italian-Japanese animation about a charming, but hapless anthropomorphized chicken; the only black one in a family of yellow chickens. He wears half of his egg shell still on his head. Calimero originally appeared on the Italian television show Carosello on July 14, 1963, and soon became a popular icon in Italy. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calimero*
In the end, Hermione had a much better time at the party than she thought she would. Sure, some hostility was aimed mostly at Malfoy, but his presence also influenced more mingling. After the initial shock caused by Malfoy’ appearance on the strictly school Ball, Hermione noticed that people from all houses were friendlier towards each other.

The only group held far away were her own Housemates, Gryffindor returnees. Hermione guessed it was to be expected, they took the brunt of the final battle.

The whispers followed her all evening, however; they had nothing to do with Malfoy’ appearance beside her. Nor did they had a connection to the usual- her attempts to change schooling system.

Everybody commented on the jewellery she was wearing.

Hermione had a good time, in general. Inside she was boiling- the slow burn of pain, a constant reminder that Severus would never turn to her, turned to the raging fire of anger.

It all started fairly innocent. One Slytherin 5th year came to ask her will she marry their former Head of House. She took several moments to stop blinking and blushing until she had to explain that she won’t and that Severus is a generous and thoughtful boss. In the meantime, Draco nearly doubled from laughter.

By the time they were going to the Manor Hermione was ready to hex. No, she was ready to seriously damage Severus, including everyone who could try to stand in her way.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

To say that he was in a bad mood would be an understatement of monumental proportions. Severus couldn’t tell what he wanted to do with himself.

Ever since Potter’ visit he couldn’t sleep. He could hardly breathe.

*I lost my mind.*

It was the only solution, the only reasonable explanation he could come up with. The other option was far less favourable. No, he was most definitely *not* jealous. Why would he be?

He decided not to be selfish.

He'll do what is best for the girl.
If now only he could act and react like a responsible adult…

But the night after Potter’ visit he woke up covered with sweat, tangled up in sheets, gasping for air. When he thought he’d welcome the nightmares- Severus didn’t have this in mind.

He could maim that blasted doctor now with no regret, it was partially her fault, his state of mind. He caught himself staring at the ceiling, analysing the meaning and reason behind his dream.

Severus didn’t like what he came up with.

He was afraid, not a novel feeling for him, especially not as of late. What drove him to feel afraid enraged him. He was afraid to lose her, which was preposterous. He shouldn’t be afraid of it, he planned it.

And no, it wasn’t anything stupid as jealousy, at least not at the Draco. Draco was his charge, Draco was also engaged, and most importantly- Draco would never do something like taking an interest in Hermione. That would kill Lucius faster than any curse could. But, courtesy to his nightmare, Severus was faced with a choking feeling of jealousy towards any other sod that might come along.

And will come along.

Nevertheless, that couldn’t even compare to a block of ice that left him feeling empty inside and petrified. Every time he planned the scenarios in his head, he’d come to the point where Hermione would finish her apprenticeship and…

He’d choke out.

He couldn’t imagine how his life would be, trapped in that huge monstrosity of a home. How he would get by without her abysmal pestering. Even now, far away from him, Hermione still influenced his everyday life through instructions she gave to Draco.

Sodding idiot.

Propelled with an inner nervousness Severus resumed his fast pacing. His legs hurt, his back hurt. The pain was as physical as it was psychological.

I made no promises, Severus huffed, distracting himself by thinking about something else. Hermione again, it was like a siege or hostile takeover- she dominated across thoughts.

His research yielded no results. Hermione was thorough in her Obliviation of her parents, and he could only do so much. It wasn’t the conversation that will end well. It was, however, the conversation that will persuade a girl he is a wrong choice- and that would lead to…

Another wave of jealousy spiced with fear raised a wave of anger inside him.

Elf popped in. His foul mood scared off even Misty, she gazed at him warily; he turned to her growling.

“What?”

“Master Draco and Miss-big-mouth are home.” Misty squeaked and poofed out.

Severus stopped breathing.

Soon enough Hermione barged in the room and he frowned stubbornly ignoring sudden quickening in his pulse. Whatever he expected of this meeting, what happened- he couldn’t even predict.
Hermione barged into the room, her hair flying in all directions, an expression of fury on her face. She was gripping something in her hand. Without stopping, she barrelled at him, hitting him over the chest with whatever she held in her hand. Severus caught it not paying attention to the content in his arms. The attack was accompanied by an angry hiss.

“You insensitive pillock. Of all mean, idiotic, cruel things you could do…”

“Mind your language, Miss Granger.” He growled, her anger clashed with his.

Hermione’s proximity wreaked havoc to his insides. He glanced in his hands; he was holding jewellery boxes.

“I will mind my language when you mind your actions,” Hermione growled at him, jumping up on the balls of her heels. “I thought public humiliation only works if you can see it. Or maybe you tasked Draco with showing you the memory?”

“As heart-warming your trust in me is- Explain what are you talking about,” he growled back, it was on a tip of his tongue to send her back to Hogwarts, but words got stuck in his throat.

_Merlin help me, I want her to be here._

“Why did you sent these? To humiliate me?” Hermione hissed, eyes filling with tears. “I told you I’ll respect your wishes, why can’t you respect me at least enough not to- to do _this_?”

“It was the test, one you failed I wager judging by your reaction.” Severus forced himself to sound snide.

“Test? Failed?” Hermione echoed, angry blush replacing tears that threatened to spill.

“You know the customs enough to know how smart or air-headed it would be to put publicly these again.” He tossed the jewellery boxes on his bed. “Your carelessness placed us both in an unpleasant situation.”

Severus did his best to ignore the feeling that swelled inside him at the idea Hermione put the jewels publicly once more.

_Soon._

Soon she will hate him again, and that pesky irrational speck of insanity called hope will quiet down. Sorrow will drown it, another bleeding wound, this time at least Severus will know that he did a right- unselfish- thing. For now, he had to battle with it, to stifle it.

“If you honestly wanted to give me a choice, Misty could dig up _my_ jewellery along with my dress,” Hermione grumbled.

Severus had to bit his tongue to stop the words.

_She did._

She really did, one thin golden chain with teardrop pearl and accompanying earrings. Not nearly good enough for the robes she had. Severus had a half a mind to take something more suitable from the vault, but that was impossible at the present situation. The boxes that now lay on his bed were already at his possession.

_And you knew how it would look._ His brain supplied. He did, but at that time he didn’t care. Secretly
he even hoped.

“The damage is minimal. The rumour will die down soon enough.” He finally waved his hand dismissively.

“You really are a pillock.” Hermione frowned at him. “Do this one more time and I’m done! Done with you! Done with an apprenticeship. Just done…”

“What are you on about?” Severus snapped at her, his temper flaring through the need to pull back, her words hitting like stones.

“You can’t do that.” Her voice stated to crack.

“And what did I do to cause your ire?” He narrowed his eyes at her.

“You… I… I thought you may have changed your mind. I’m fine now, healed and… For a moment I thought you maybe gave that Index a chance…” Hermione looked defeated now, she went to her sofa and plopped heavily on it.

“Why ever would you think something so…? I am not irresponsible contrary to public opinion. Opportunistic- but not to that extent.” Severus squeezed through the clenched throat. “And as far as your fine goes- leaving me a letter with your confession hardly can constitute as a sign of fine or, indeed, any shred of mental health.”

“You are wrong.” She raised her eyes to his, big and bright and still half-angry.

“Hermione, I have nothing to offer to any potential companion. Nothing apart from the family title I did not want in the first place. And I would not be so… I wouldn’t even consider placing you in such position.” The words surprised him.

Why do I need to defend myself, this is the opportunity to push her away...

She shook her head and Severus sighed, this wasn’t the best of time but it had to be done. “In my current condition, I can’t even brew properly. I failed at the task we agreed upon…”

“Task?” She blinked.

“I finished my research on the Obliviation of your parents,” Severus said, his heart shrinking. “Unfortunately, there is little to none I can do. Two solutions are possible, either to leave them as they are- or to attempt a partial restoration.”

“Partial restoration?” She echoed.

“Yes,” he nodded sitting on his bed opposite to her. “You did a surprisingly thorough spell-casting. The best restoration won’t do much, it might draw to the surface familiarity. They would think you familiar from somewhere, but that is as much as I can do it.”

Severus prepared for tears, for screaming, for curses flying his way. For the second time that evening Hermione throw him off balance. She closed her eyes for a few long moments breathing deep, before standing up and taking his hands in hers.

“Thank you.” She whispered.

“I do not see the reason for your gratitude- I failed,” Severus said.

“Our deal was to help me. You did. You found the best possible solution, and I am grateful for it.
Now, I have to figure out what is the best course of action.”

Severus blinked. He was unused to gratitude, especially for failed attempts. Anger, even punishments- he knew how to deal with those. Words failed him, not that his throat would cooperate at any rate. His heart lodged itself firmly in his oesophagus.

He felt like a teenager, lost and confused. Shaken by the mere touch. Hermione sighed, sadness filling her eyes.

“I won’t give up, and with your and Draco’s help…” words escaped him. He was raging inside but what came out of his mouth was a soft whisper.

“No. Even three years is a long time, even if we… There’s no-no point anymore.” She sighed. “That does not mean you didn’t fulfil your part of the deal. And… Once Healers help you, you’ll brew again.”

“Hermione, Healers may stop the progression, they can’t heal existing damage. I should be grateful, I suppose. I will be able to brew with assistant competent enough…”

Hermione’ eyes filled with hope. Will she give up?

“Assistant’s job is not a position in which you can advance or develop further. That is not a job for you.” Severus said.

“Who do you think you are?” She hissed, and he flinched resisting to pull back from her sudden rage. “Who do you think you are to decide in my name? If you don’t want something- that is your prerogative, but don’t you dare make assumptions in my name?”

“I am, begrudgingly, in your debt. At least I’ve been told so. The only way to repay you is to prevent you from making mistakes that will haunt you for the rest of your life.” Why do I implore with her? One insult, well aimed, should suffice.

“You do not owe me anything…” she started.

“I beg to differ if memory serves- you were the one to negotiate.” He reminded her.

“And you healed me, so we’re even.” She huffed, talking over him. “You are a great Potion Master and good man.”

Hermione raised her hand to touch him and Severus jerked back, afraid that her words and her touch would break his resolve. It was hanging at the thread as it is.

“You do not know me…” he tried again.

“You do not owe me anything…” she started.

“I beg to differ if memory serves- you were the one to negotiate.” He reminded her.

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“You do not know me…” he tried again.

“I do. I saw your memories…” Hermione cried out.

“She’s getting too emotional. “You joined in late on a memory lane. You, little girl, have no idea what I’m capable of.” He growled calling up on anger to assist him.

“I saw, and I still think…” Hermione insisted.

“You know nothing. What I’ve done, what I did to even be admitted.” He hissed.

“I know you,” Hermione said, her voice pitching.

“Misty!” he called grabbing her arm to prevent her from backing off, his eyes narrowed.
He never planned to resort to this, but if this would open her eyes… The pain stabbed him, he’ll lose her now for sure, she’ll be out of his life if not from his heart and thoughts. *It is for the best.*

Misty appeared, squirming but quiet.

“Bring the Pensive,” he ordered.

“What…?” Hermione tried to ask, but he cut her off.

“Oh no, now you’ll learn,” he hissed menacingly.

The Pensive showed up next to them and Hermione gasped, jerking slightly. He pressed the want to his temple and allowed a silvery string of memory to float to the basin.

“You think you know me? Let us test this theory.” Severus growled pushing her towards the water.

She didn’t resist- at first. He dived in with her. Severus could kick himself, he’d rather not revisit that particular memory, his last task as Initiate Death Eater. Somewhere halfway through she twitched, trying to turn and run, he held her down, forcing her to stay until the end.

Finally, they both emerged, breathing heavy. Her face frozen, blank. Eyes directed to the floor. Pang of- some unnamed feeling grabbed his throat and squeezed hard. He destroyed her feelings for him, her image of him. *It is all over now.*

He should be happy.

He wasn’t.

“Can you still claim you know me?” He hissed, his voice rough from emotions.

Suddenly she was hugging him, pushing the air out of his lungs. The wetness from her face rubbing against his neck. Words like a stream gushed at his collarbone.

“No wonder you were so numb. What you had to do… if I could I’d take those memories away…”

He stood still, frozen by her reaction, unsure what to do. She surprised him for the third time that evening. Panic slammed at him with full force, his defences- feeble as they were. Crumbled under her warmth and the feel of her.

“Unhand me, witch!” He used all the strength left in him. “What. Do. You. Want. From. Me?”

She pulled back, and he jumped from his seat, pacing agitatedly.

“And what do you want?” She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head. “*Did* you change your mind? Come to think of it, you changed subjects, you tried to slander yourself in my eyes. But- Not once during this entire conversation you negated or rejected me.”

“Miss Granger…” He growled. *This is dangerous.* He counted on her emotional distress, that she’ll not notice… His own mind betraying him, blocking all attempts to lie.

“You know I hate… Another distraction. You *did* change your mind, your logic telling you that following your family’s plan is the most sensible idea. That’s why you sent… And that’s why you try to push me away.” Hermione’ voice vibrated dangerously. “For whose benefit? Not mine- I already *love you.* You can’t change that- so why not use it to your advantage if you are so *despicable* as you claim to be?”
Severus closed his eyes for a moment. She was the image of strength and fire, her anger pulling all
her strength to the surface. Clenching his fists he rooted himself on the spot.

Damn her. Damn that blasted doctor. She did this to him, that doctor made him this weak.

“What do you want from me, which?” He repeated angrily. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to know…!” Hermione cried out. “I want to bloody know… Once, just once- how it feels.”

She slid to the floor, sitting on her knees, tears that danced on the brim entire evening finally falling
free. Severus felt as if someone kicked him in the stomach. Her tears- he expected them, he wasn’t
ready for them.

Bugger me…

Cursing his own weakness, in two steps he was next to her on the floor, his hand wiping Hermione’s
cheeks. She kept her eyes directed to the ground, breaths falling from her lips interrupted with sobs.
Each shuddery breath cutting into his soul, ripping through any resolve he had.

“What…?” He whispered.

“And now is even worse.” Her voice, broken and pained. “You want me to hate you, but I can’t.”
She shook her head. “What am I to do? Don’t you understand or do you even care? Probably not…”
Hermione sobbed.

Her words cut, making small nips, a paper-cuts, over his heart. “I respect you.” He choked out a
neutral sound.

“But you don’t care… Why would you… You, even you have a chance… Someone loves you,
you’ll find love even one-sided but you will.” She continued brokenly. “I have no one. Everyone
hates me.”

“That isn’t true…” Severus tried, but she continued talking.

“You say being an assistant isn’t for me, but who would hire me? I won’t stand still and everyone
knows. I am not welcomed at school, not after…” she trailed off.

“Hermione…” He was worried now, anger dying down fast under the weight of her sorrow.

“I- hoped… Those witches seemed happy with you, even her. And I know I did a wrong thing, we
talked… If I could, but what’s the point? The best I can hope for is to find someone like- Ron.” She
hiccuped.

Something inside him roared at the mention of the oaf’s name. He tightened his hold of her. She
wasn’t broken, not like before, it was much worse- she was beaten. She surrendered, he could see.

“But when you sent that jewels- I sort of hoped…” Sobs cut the words and he pulled her closer,
rocking her gently. What else he could do?

He wanted to be less selfish, to do the right thing. The lines blurred now. If he…

Would it still be the right thing?

Regardless of his own wishes- he could do that. He could give her the necessary shelter, save her
from making his mistakes.
He could still save himself too...

Her desire to know how it feels resonated inside him, and now- it even wouldn’t be selfish. It wouldn’t be for his benefit. He had everything she needed, he could provide…

In a way, the position she was in- It was partially his fault. If he didn’t survive, she wouldn’t be so determined to save him. Against his best efforts, his bad reputation already tainted her life.

*She is my responsibility now.*

His chest heavy. Heart tugging like a trapped wild animal. Happiness battling reason while cold ice spread through his veins. The damage already done, and now the choice is taken out of his hands. Now there was only one road, and Severus wasn’t so sure it will lead *her* to happiness.

He’s damaged. He’ll always be damaged. And yet…

“Hermione, try to rest now, and we will discuss this tomorrow. I never planned to continue my line, but if I-we… You understand that?” His voice scratched over the dry throat.

“I don’t want to force you. For once you are free…” She hiccuped.

“Yes, and I offer from my free will,” Severus whispered.

*A lie*, a blatant lie.

She grabbed his robes, bunching them in her hands. Her head pressing at his chest. Hermione shook, sniffing, moistening his robes. He kept on rocking her.

Severus couldn’t tell how long they stayed like that before she calmed down.

“Hermione…” he called, but she didn’t reply. “Hermione…”

With surprise, he discovered that she cried herself to sleep. Sighing, he manoeuvred her into his arms. Standing up, he turned to his bed. He’ll have to explain a lot come tomorrow but for tonight he wanted to protect her, to *be there* for her.
CXIII

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J.K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: Thank you all for your support, kudos, comments and klicks.

Quick note for those who follow Blur - chapter was written late so my beta hadn't had the time to edit it, I'm posting it as soon as she's done. Sadly, I'll keep messing and missing the posting dates for a while longer :( My work, Master studies and work around the house (painting walls, re-furnishing etc) take up much of my free time. On top of it all, I started doing tests and checkups - somewhere around end of the month I'll have that second procedure, I still don't know will I and/or for how long be on the meds again. First time around they really messed up my mind, turning it to a useless mush :( Still not beta edited and running only on Grammarly so...

Her head was heavy and fuzzy. Hermione tried to move but it seemed that her mind and motoric functions were separated. Eyes refused to pry open. But she was warm, in fact, she was in the cocoon of warmth.

What time is it? What happened? Where am I?

She worked her jaw, not an easy task against a rather hard surface she used to press her face against. The surface was moving, rhythmically. Hermione frowned. The room felt familiar, not that she could see it, but still, something inside her told her that she is safe.

The feverish feeling coursed through her body, weighing on her, drumming on her sleep addled brain. Memories came rushing in- the argument, her parents... Her parents. Pain surged like an electric current.

I hoped, but I knew. I think I always did.

She broke after she found out. She lost it, taking it all on Severus. Demanding...

Oh Gods! Did I really... And did he... Severus...

Her neck sent small needles of pain down her shoulder. Half of her face felt sort of numb. Sure she was warm, but something weighted over her waist. She tried to move. Her forehead collided with a hard but moving surface. Whatever pressed her down increased its pressure, pulling her closer to...

Severus!

Hermione’s eyes spring open, just moments ago she couldn’t force them open but now they were wide. She stared at the dark shapes of a nightshirt. The light in the room was muffled by the drapes, but the moonlight was still strong.
She wasn’t, as all previous times, on the covers, huddled against Severus’s arm. She was under the covers, his right shoulder serving as her pillow, his left arm wrapped around her.

*He must be mighty uncomfortable like this.*

Severus was in half twisted position, mostly on his side, turned to her but somehow she still managed to use his shoulder to sleep on it. The pain in the neck reminded her of it vividly. Hermione tried to move her legs but gave up. Her right leg was trapped between his thighs, pressing at...

She could feel the heat gathering in her face. Her heart drummed in her chest, hammering its way out through the bone.

Her eyes, now accustomed to the gloom of the room, gazing at the tendons on his neck and the shy peak of his collarbone through the V-shaped opening in his nightshirt. Shifting just so, Hermione raised her face to look at Severus.

He always looked so peaceful sleeping, it almost transformed him into someone new, unfamiliar. The lack of harshness, softness of his features, even his lips appeared to be fuller. Carefully not to disturb him, Hermione sneaked one arm out of the cover, she let it hover over his lips.

The need to cry mixed with the desire to press her lips to his was overwhelming.

*No! Never again! Not like that, not without…*

“Either you do what you ought to do, or give up and let me sleep.”

Hermione squeaked- startled, her body jerked back, trying to pull off. It was easier said than done, his hands still cradled her, leg trapped between his. Embarrassed, she tried to hide her face, lowering the head in a spastic movement. Her forehead collided with his chin- painfully.

“Bloody hell, witch.” Severus rumbled, grouchy but without sharpness.

“I… Sorry, didn’t mean to… I’d never… never again…” Hermione stumbled over her own words.

“Stop.” Severus sighed, his body pulling back just a fraction, releasing her of his hold. “I must say it is highly unattractive when you stutter like that.”

Hermione’s brain froze. She was still trying to untangle her thoughts when the word unattractive cut into her mind. She blinked, then blinked again.

“Don’t read to much into my words, Hermione.” Severus' rumble came from great distance.

*How can it be?*

He was still almost pressed against her.

She blinked again.

“What time is it?” Hermione asked. *Idiot! Fool! Of all the things I could say…*

“One, maybe closer to two in the night.” Severus replied.

“Ummm, yes. I’m sorry to wake you up. I was just…” she tried to explain and failed. Hermione still couldn’t explain to herself how she ended up where she was.

“You cried yourself to sleep, I placed you close where I can watch over you in case of need.”
Severus finally opened his eyes.

The situation, their position was highly intimate. Her heart picked up the pace of already insane beat.

“I’m sorry to bother you.” She managed to squeeze a lame apology.

“It’s too late for that, I’d say.” Severus chuckled. “Do you recall anything from the conversation…”

“I remember everything, Everything.” Hermione felt her face heating again, she was grateful he couldn’t see it. “Don’t worry, I won’t hold you to your words. I understand that you wanted to help. But, it is not your…”

“How long do you know me?” Severus asked with a note of annoyance. “How many times did you heard me say something I don’t mean, at least on some level?”

“I don’t want to force you….” she whispered.

“You are a far better option than all others combined. But, I will make you a deal. We keep this quiet, not telling a soul living or dead, about our conversation. Not until you finish your apprenticeship. And, I give you your full right to change your mind during that time.” Severus sounded awake and serious. “One more thing, whatever happened between us from now until you start your apprenticeship, on that day it stops. I was never unbecoming toward any of my students, and I do not intend to start now.”

“But you are still willing… I mean…” Her brain did the summersaults, not quite capable to focus on what he wanted to talk about.

“Yes.” Severus sighed with exasperation. “Did you ever heard the word of what I was saying?”

“I did, I heard everything, I don’t understand why- but, I don’t need to at the moment.” She snapped at him. “Sorry, I just… I don’t want to force you to anything.”

“That is rich, coming from you. Ever since I woke up, all you do is forcing me to do something.” Severus chuckled again. “Face it, it is in your nature to be pushy and bossy.”

“So you… Yes, I know- whatever we do stops when my apprenticeship starts until its end. But you would willingly…?” Her voice vibrated with anticipation.

Severus sighed, murmuring under his breath. Hermione couldn’t hear the words, but a thingle of mint wash over her mouth, moments before his hand cupped her cheek. Severus’ lips gently touched hers.

It was the briefest of touches but her eyes fluttered close, breath hitched.

“By now you know enough about me to know that I had far less- agreeable tasks.” Severus murmured into her lips.

The buzz of words thingled, building pressure of anticipation and something she couldn’t quite understand. Something she couldn’t name but it was strong and compelling. Severus chuckled again, it was odd. He was so different from what she knew about him, from what he was usually like.

“I did think that you’d want a more- romantic setting. A sort of courting or candle-light dinner.” Severus continued.

Hermione pulled back, tugging her entire body, colliding her elbow to his side, her head once more
with his. Tugging on her leg…

*He is serious, ... Oh, Gods!*

She nearly missed his words, half grunted but still almost amused. “I did hope that it will be less damaging for my person. If I may suggest that you try to preserve any parts you deem necessary- for now or in future, perhaps.”

Hermione stilled. Severus released her leg and gently let her to roll on her back, propping on the arm above her.

“Are you sure you want to…?” He asked.

Hermione opened her mouth but voice betrayed her, she just nodded, eyes wide. His head blocked the light from the window and his face was just a ghostly white blur obscured with black strands.

“What do you want?” Severus asked again.

Hermione gulped, her mouth felt dry. “I want to… I don’t know much… What do you like?”

“You may find yourself disappointed, Hermione. My memories do not necessarily reflect my preferences.” Severus replied softly, he was trailing one finger over her features. The touch addled her brain.

“I’m sure. That is if you do not feel forced to.” the words scratched her throat.

“Do I look forced to you?” Severus raised an eyebrow.

No, he didn’t look forced, but the word coerced kept pressing on her mind. Hermione felt confused. If she said something wrong he might change his mind, then again if…

“I have my reasons, Hermione. And I can assure you, they are utterly selfish.” Severus finally mumbled.

She nodded again.

“But we are dressed.” It was all she could think of saying. She was fully dressed, he was in his nightshirt. That wasn’t a promising start.

“Is that all that bothers you?” Severus almost laughed.

Hermione didn’t know what to say or do. She never initiated anything with Ron, and Ron never asked anything remotely like this. She never felt this way either, and all Severus did was one almost chest kiss and he traced a finger over her face.

She sucked the air sharply when warm sheets touched her bare skin.

“Better?” he asked and she blinked.

Severus shifted, hovering now over her, she could feel his body heat through the barrier of sheets still separating them. Her entire body shook, trembling like she is freezing. There was a good mixture of desire and fear.

Hermione wasn’t afraid of him. But she couldn’t stop her brain of thinking of all the times she tried and failed to relax and at least enjoy herself. She wanted this time, with him, to be good. To be special. Something to remember if opportunity never presented itself again. But what if she wasn’t
capable of...

“We may stop whenever you want to.” Severus murmured in shooting voice.

That spurred her to action. Hermione reached and pulled him closer. Their lips touched again. It was different now, still tender but also more urgent, more demanding. The trembling of her body intensified, but it wasn’t all unpleasant.

Touching his skin felt new. She knew every inch of his body, she touched it numerous times, and it still felt different. It was different. His skin was warm, tight over the muscles that gained their strength. It felt like soft cotton stretched over the granite.

Severus’ tongue tickled her pallet, his hand run lazy circles over her skin, drawing prickles in its wake. Hermione was confused by her own reaction. She could feel her body responding, her nipples tightening, muscles in her lower abdomen tugging.

And she didn’t know what to do with her arms. Finally, timidly, she wrapped one arm around his shoulder, the other hand ended up in his hair. She pulled him even closer, gasping when his weight pressed over her.

The feel of his skin on hers was electrifying.

They snogged for what felt like hours before Severus abandoned her mouth and traced the kisses down the neck. He gently lapped at the pulsating vein and she moaned. The sensation was indescribable. Tingling, slightly painful in a pleasant way. It made her entire body surge up, to press against his.

He was silent, not really looking at her but focusing all his attention to places his lips touched. She tried to stifle the sounds when he reached her breasts.

“Don’t be quiet, I want to know if I’m doing something right. No one can hear us.” Severus softly whispered.

He licked the hardened peak of her nipple blowing gently. Even if she wanted, Hermione wouldn’t be able to suppress the sound. Hand on his back curled, she could feel the skin under her nails. Severus grunted, but he didn’t complain or pull back.

Hermione wanted to move her legs, do something, anything- to participate. But, disappointingly all she could do is lie on her back, feeling passive. It became increasingly problematic to be passive the more he nipped and sucked and licked her breasts and nipples.

When Severus continued down she giggled, twitching. “It tickles.”

He didn’t say anything but Hermione could swear that his hair somehow managed to linger on most ticklish parts. And she was certain she could feel his smile on her skin.

Her legs parted to accommodate his torso as he placed small kisses all over her stomach. Hermione grabbed the sides of the pillow she was using, clenching tightly. It was embarrassing, she was wet and the more he neared her core the more aware she became of the wetness.

Her body stiffened when his lips touched the apex of her thigh, just below the hip bone line.

No, it can’t be. He won’t...

“What is the matter?” Severus asked.
Hermione opened her eyes to find him looking at her. Deep heat engulfed her face.

“I, I didn’t wash. I did, before the ball but that was hours ago and…” she managed to choke. That magnificent feeling slowly slipping away.

“I won’t do anything I find unpleasant for me, I expect the same from you.” There was an annoyance in his voice, almost like Severus was insulted by her remark.

Without any more delay, he slipped back down. Her legs fell over his shoulders. Hermione wasn’t aware that she could even produce the sound she did when his lips touched the skin of her core. Her hips bucked. The sensation was- new, she couldn’t compare it with anything she knew before.

Somewhere inside her, the pressure gathered, but she couldn’t pinpoint where started. It was elusive and yet present. She felt his fingers palpating around the entrance and wailed. The feeling of embarrassment covered her like a blanket.

She didn’t want him to stop and she was mortified.

One of his fingers slipped in, the other soon followed. Her muscles tighten around his fingers, that glided in and out, softly touching inside her, pressing here and there. He must have touched something because Hermione thought she was shocked with a mild electric shock. Every nerve in her body tightened, her skin prickled and vibrated. Her hips bucked again when he touched the same spot sucking hard on her clitoris.

The pressure was suffocating, but she couldn’t reach it.

“No…” she whined when his lips abandoned her clitoris.

“Relax, just relax and stop thinking about it.” Severus’ voice sounded rasp. But he had a compelling quality and she obeyed his command.

The pressure intensified. At this point, there were so many sensations for her to focus only on one. But pressure continued to rise, tugging on her muscles. And then, it just burst, released all that pent up energy in a flare of white spots and trembling of muscles and oddly calm floating sensation. It pierced through her, escaping with one unarticulated yelp.

Hermione came down from her high slowly, breathing heavily- more like gulping for air. She became aware of the sweat coating her skin and the fact that Severus was still more or less in the same position, with his fingers still inside her.

Oh, Gods!

He was watching her. The moment she felt heat licking her neck and face his fingers moved again.

“What… Oh…” she tried to speak but her head fell back.

The feeling was back, not as strong but still present. But I wanted to… I need him to shag me. However, she felt too afraid to speak and break the enchantment of the moment. His fingers felt more determined now, not exploring as much as leading her.

The need returned, but without the pressure.

“Please…” Hermione heard herself saying. What was she pleading for?

It appeared that Severus knew, even if she didn’t. He pulled back from her, leaving her to feel almost
abandoned, but moments later he was above her. Hermione could see his feverish eyes, and feel the warm breath on her skin.

“Are you sure you want to…” he asked, his voice gravely.

Hermione pulled him down, seeking his mouth, wrapping her legs around his middle and locking her feet on the small of his back. There was a moment of awkward shuffling on his part and touching and huffing before she felt his cock pressing on her entrance.

She stopped wiggling and nudged him with her heels. Murmuring the words she couldn’t understand Severus slowly sink into her. One long hiss escaped him and buzzed through the kiss. She felt full, sort of stretched, but it was different this time.

The burn was missing, but it did feel like there was less space than before. He was still for far too long and she wiggled.

“Close your eyes, focus on the feeling.” Severus murmured in her ear, trailing kisses over her face and neck.

He started to move. It was- definitely different than the last time. More pleasant. Even his cock managed to touch some spots inside her or at least rub at the right places. His movements speeded up and she clenched her muscles. He hissed again.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to… Did I hurt you.” she breathed out.

“Keep. Doing it.” Severus hissed the words and she did her best to rhythmically clench her muscles.

The sensations were different now, less intense but more caressing. Hermione decided that she could spend hours like this. She probably could, the pressure would appear but only in short burst and dissipate fast after. She’d worried about it but his mouth found all the spots that made her release sounds she’d normally feel embarrassed about.

The rhythmic motion lulled her to a state of bliss. But Severus speeded up, grunting, jerking his hips sharply against her. And soon, with a low growl, he suddenly pulled out of her with a grunt and the hiss, pressing his head into the pillow next to her neck.

Hermione could feel the trembling of his muscles and tried to pet him. Then it hit her, she didn’t… she enjoyed but she couldn’t reach orgasm like this.

_Maybe Ron was right, maybe I just don’t know how to enjoy._

Oddly, she wasn’t disappointed. Not even sad. She still enjoyed immensely, but she still had a feeling that something was missing.

_What would Severus think?_ Ron was always moping and grumbling if he managed to notice…

Severus, rolled on his back, pulling her to his chest, damp from sweat. He was still breathing like he just ran a marathon, but one of his hands caressed her hair.

_He will change his mind now. Who would want a girl incapable of orgasm?_

“Stop worrying, Hermione.” Severus rumbled above her.

“I wasn’t… How did you know?” Hermione decided that she won’t lie to him.

“You are not only chewing on your lip but also on me.” Severus sounded knackered, but he still held
her close, his fingers grazing her skin. “What is wrong?”

“I think I might be- wrong. Broken somehow. Maybe I just can’t have an orgasm like other girls.” she sighed into his skin.

“I disagree. You are very responsive.” he tried to convince her.

“But…”

“Hermione, sex like anything else is a matter of practice. Like in dancing, you have to learn how to follow your partner, how to feel one another before you can move like one. You are quite capable of having orgasm as you demonstrated.” Severus said.

“But not after.” She frowned.

“And I wasn’t expecting it. Like I said, it takes time.” He stroked her back.

“So, what now?” Hermione asked. That was the question, one she had no answer.

“Now we sleep.” Severus summoned his wand and dried the sheets. Showing the wand under his pillow he pulled her tighter against him. “Rest.”

Hermione nodded, snuggling next to him. Tomorrow he may change his mind, and she wanted to to take as much as she could while he offered. This was the memory she would cherish, everything else- every worry she might have- could wait for her return to Hogwarts.

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Severus waited until her breathing told him that she was sleeping. He couldn’t sleep, his body still hummed. He never felt more alive.

_Dying before experiencing this would be a waste._

He pointedly pushed back the bitter thoughts that threatened to ruin this moment of absolute bliss. Yes, he could go through with it, with all of it. Selfish as it was, he would gain more than she ever would from that deal.

He pulled her closer, inhaling her smell. Even if she didn’t know it, it was a novel feeling for him. The tender and suffocating at the same time. Whatever experience he had, as poor as it was, he never before- made love.

It was a whole new ball game if memory serves him what it was before. He could see her insecurity, her doubts and fears. He took as a personal challenge to show her that she could enjoy.

Severus huffed in annoyance.

He won’t allow himself to be compared to that oaf.

Severus wanted to erase the memories of her previous bad experiences with Weasley boy. He hoped that he managed at least partially in his effort. On his part, Severus knew that he would cherish every moment, every sigh and moan, every tug of her body. They were already engraved in his memory.

She may change her mind, in time, and he will let her decide the fate of both of them. But for now… for now, he’ll stick to the plan. She was still his responsibility, and he will act accordingly; not that would be an effort on his part.
We should use tomorrow to go to the estate.

It was time to key her in. Soon they will move there, but at the time she will be his apprentice and once more out of his reach. He pulled her closer, soaking the heat of her body.

Everything he does from now on, he is doing for her. It was his duty to do the right thing. Oddly enough, doing the right thing out of duty never felt more right in his life.
Draco entered the room and raised his eyebrows in bewilderment.

Something was different about the room but for the life of him, he couldn’t tell what it was. At first glance, there didn’t seem to be anything that has changed, but there was something in the atmosphere he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Severus was sitting by the window reading while Granger was curled up on the sofa, also reading. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary.

“Granger, Severus,” Draco nodded. “I was left a note to come here after breakfast,”

Granger looked at him with a slight frown. She then blushed and continued to read.

*Odd*, Draco observed.

Severus marked the place in the book and snapped his book shut as he gave Draco his full attention.

“Yes, Narcissa was kind enough to offer you as her replacement. You and your father will take us to the Rosebush Manor today,” Severus stated evenly.

Dracos’ eyebrows knit together as he thought back to Severus and his father not speaking a word to each other since the argument.

*Maybe that’s what’s off*, Draco concluded.

“No, Narcissa was kind enough to offer you as her replacement. You and your father will take us to the Rosebush Manor today,” Severus stated evenly.

Draco snapped his jaw shut as he continued to think of what to say next.

“Are you and father on speaking terms then?” Draco asked as he inwardly sighed as he continued to
keep the conversation running smoothly.

“No. Nonetheless, your father is the guardian of the wards which means he has to be present,“ Severus replied with a slightly sour look on his face.

From the corner of his eye, Draco noticed the abrupt motion of Hermiones’ head as Draco noticed her pointed glare at Severus. Before he could process what he saw, he heard a low growl from Severus.

“No a word, Hermione, that topic is not open for discussion,” Severus warned.

Hermione harrumphed and lowered her head as Draco continued to observe her way of showing her disagreement.

*Something about Severus’ words must have grated Granger the wrong way, but what was it? Did she disapprove of the argument between Severus and Lucius? Or did she relish in it?* Draco thought bitterly as he cleared his throat, the least he needed was for two of them to quarrel again.

“When would you like to take your leave?” He asked. Not that it mattered to him, but he needed to misdirect the tense charge in the air.

“In half an hour or so,” Severus replied while scowling at Hermione who pointedly ignored them as she read.

“Fine. I will make the appropriate arrangements and let Astoria aware of the change of plans, seeing as we were supposed to be meeting this morning,” Draco stated as he watched Severus’s features softened as his shoulders fell a fraction.

Severus gave Draco a quick nod of acknowledgment. “See that you are ready on time;”

Once Draco was out of the room, he leaned on the wall outside Severus’ door and took in an even breath. He began to process the occurrence of what took place just moments ago.

*What was going on? Did I do something to make Severus angry towards me?*

Moments passed till Draco shook his head to shake off the event that took place. Pushing himself off the wall, Draco slowly headed towards his room. As he slowly walked down the corridor, Draco couldn’t help but shuffle through his head of the events from previous days. He was sure he did nothing to aggravate his Godfather, though it would not be a difficult thing to do, especially as of lately.

*I even went to that stupid dance with Bucktooth!* Draco frowned once more till moments later a crooked, tentative grin spilled over his face. *Bloody hell!* Draco wanted to swing his head back and laugh now. *I must observe him carefully now,*

One hour later…

Grangers’ refusal to sit on a broom or on an Aethonian enraged Lucius till it took one unexpected carriage ride, on the ground later till they finally reached the Rosebush Manor. Lucius was taking them to the Manor down the cobbled path from the stables where they had left the horses in the care
of a House Elf. Severus quietly followed him with a slight frown while Draco pulled Hermione to walk behind with him.

He mulled over their trip to Rosebush and was even more convinced that his idea wasn’t so insane after all. He reviewed the scene in his head when Severus helped Hermione to enter and exit the carriage. He even took care that she was well and comfortably set. Those were things his mother drilled in his own behavior, but Severus? Draco scoffed and shook his head with a smirk on his face. Severus wasn’t exactly known for extending such courtesy to the opposite sex. At least not that Draco knew of.

“Do you think there is a chance of reconciliation?” Hermione asked quietly.

“Huh?” Draco blinked at her as he came back to reality.

“Your father and Severus,” Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes.

“I don’t know,” Draco shrugged with a small sigh. Severus was obviously hurt by his father’s behaviour. “What is it to you?”

“Nothing, but your father is the only true friend Severus has. I can’t say much for your father, but I think he sincerely cares for Severus,” Hermione said thoughtfully as she tilted her head and looked at two men in front of them.

Draco nodded in agreement and as he glanced over at Granger his eyes caught something on her neck.

I must be seeing things, Draco mused as he looked in her eyes with a curious expression. Narrowing his eyes to her neck he grabbed the material of her robes of the shoulder under the pretense.

“Slow down, I want to keep my head on my shoulders. It won’t happen if they overhear us”, Draco hissed leaning to her, his eyes trained on the reddish mark on her skin.

“What is this?” he asked in a half-whisper and a knowing grin.

“What?” Hermione yanked her robes free, fixing them.

“This,” Draco pulled at her robe again, poking at the reddened spot on her trapezius near the neck.

“My skin and muscles. Will you stop that?” Hermione growled, swatting at his hand.

“It’s a love bite…” Draco sheepishly grinned at her once more.

“Tha-that is not possible,” Granger rushed.

“It is a red spot on your skin…” Draco prodded. Does she think I am that naïve? Draco thought smugly. “It wasn’t there last night.”

“Then I must have had an itch and scratched myself,” Granger huffed as she began to blush in a shade of deep red. “And why are you checking me out? That is disturbing,”

“Checking you out?!” Draco snorted as he backed away from her. “In your dreams may be, and that is a love bite, I know one when I see it,” Draco said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Exactly how deeply does insanity run in your family?” Granger stammered as she sped up her pace.
“Is he any good?” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You know, there are tales about his skills that still go around Slytherin dorms. He’s sort of legend in that regard to us,” Draco said proudly.

“I am to be his student! To even think of him in such a way would be onerous,” Granger said distastefully as she stuck her nose in the air.

“Yes, because you didn’t before. Did you tell him how you washed him by hand while he was in his own little world? I bet he would like to hear that tale,” Draco pressed on, enjoying her nervous twitch.

“If there really is a red spot, it is either because I scratched myself or from an insect bite. If it wasn’t there before- I’d ask questions about the sanitation of your home before making up stories,” Granger spat as her blush deepening.

Draco stopped, it felt like she punched him in the stomach. She used his confusion to catch up to his father and Severus. Draco watched as Severus fell a few steps behind to nudge Granger to walk with him by a simple and brief touch of the small of her back.

It isn’t right,

Severus never preferred touching others, nor did he like being touched. He even despised giving handshakes. Draco noted how this was the third time today that he initiated anything by touch. No matter how meticulous or insignificant those contacts were, they were still touches nonetheless and he wouldn’t ignore it.

Unless… Draco pondered. Unless I was right and they…, another smile spread on Dracos’ face as he began to piece together all the small details. Severus’s coldness towards him, his moodiness, and last but not least, Grangers’ blush from the mention of the insect bite.

Draco continued to eye Severus and Granger as his grin began to widen.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Hermione rushed to catch up with Severus. Her throat tightened as she began to question herself. Do I really have a hickey?

She forced herself not to touch the spot that Draco poked on her neck, that now itched to be touched. Hermione forced herself to wear a blank expression on her face as it felt like butterflies in her stomach had gone to war with a swarm of angry hornets. She was still trying to gauge if she was lucky or not, while Severus’ words echoed in her head: We keep this quiet, not telling a soul living or dead… And now that Draco has seemed to have figured things out….

It wasn’t a hickey, not really…

The early rays of dawn spilled through the window and gently nudged Hermione out her slumber as she turned into Severus as his arm was still curled around her. Hermione ran her finger along the line of his cheekbones and smiled to herself, or perhaps to him as well. She was simply content.

His eyes slowly opened with tenderness and sleepiness.

She drew her hand from his face as he let a sigh. The same refreshing spell washed over her as Severus pulled her in for a kiss. She kept her eyes open as his face neared then blurred while his lips
It was unbelievable how a simple kiss could make her feel fluttery and making her hips to strain towards him on their own accord. It seemed as if they kissed for an infinite amount of time until her brain was nothing more than a blank page. She could do this forever.

Severus pulled her closer to him with one hand gripping her shoulder and fingers sinking in her neck. She gathered enough courage to touch him back and let her hand run down his torso. She even dared herself to go lower and once she reached for his half hard cock, she wrapped her fingers around it.

Hermione half expected to be thrown out of the bed, but to her surprise, he trembled beneath her embrace and encouraged her by digging his fingers into her flesh.

Severus’ hand stopped Hermione in mid-step on the path. Hermione flashed him a questioning look.

“Stay here until I call for you,” Severus barked as Hermione nodded with obedience as she wondered why she needed to stay.

“Too bad, I was half-hoping that Severus would let you in,” Draco snickered behind her back.

“And that would be worse than this- how?” She jeered at Draco.

They were both standing in front of a huge Victorian-style stone house.

“Pureblood families had a habit of placing anti-muggle protection spells. A lot of them are quite deadly, actually,” Draco shrugged.

“Oh,” Hermione nodded, speechless, slightly enraged, yet not surprised.

“So, Granger- will you tell me how you got that love bite?” Draco leaned on the short wall that lead to the stairs.

“It is not a hickey,” Hermione huffed with annoyance.

“Fine, you can keep your secret, but just know that I know what that insect bite is not an insect bit,” Draco waggled his head with a daunting smile.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. If she cannot gain any control over this situation, then…

A pleasant smile spread on her face as she turned to Draco.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

“You don’t trust me?” Granger said with a voice that forced Draco to worry. “Shall we ask Severus to confirm my claim?”

She raised one eyebrow, reminding Draco very much of Severus himself. It was one thing to tease Granger, but to openly talk to Severus about something like that would be a suicide.

And he didn’t mean to use his knowledge to gain favors or get the upper hand. He just wanted to have a bit of fun. Granger smirked at him, with an all too smug look on her face. Draco rolled his eyes, resisting the need to frown- he lost and she knew it.
“You are such an easy target, Bucktooth.” He clucked his tongue.

“Aim now?” She was still smirking at him.

Voices came from the house. His father’s, sounding dignified as always but
Draco recognized the note of sorrow in it. Severus’ voice was quiet and monotonic as usual. He
turned towards the house when both men appeared at the entrance.

Lucius nodded to Severus and continued to walk while heavily leaning on his cane with slow and
careful steps as if each step caused pain. Draco took a deep breath, he may not see eye to eye with
his father but he still loved him.

“Hermione, come here,” Severus called and Granger rushed up the stairs.

Lucius hobbled beside Draco and stopped next to his son as his eyes looked off in the distance,
gazing over the elegant park toward the Malfoy Manor.

Draco frowned, this wasn’t a very large house, it held no more than eighteen to twenty rooms. It
was, however, joined to a huge glasshouse. Draco burned to go inside and take a peak, he only heard
of this place but never had a chance to go and see it for himself.

Severus was talking to Granger, their words concealed with magic.

“No need, sitting won’t change anything. As I am eager to leave this place to tell that blasted woman
that our debt still stands,” Lucius spat. “I never wished to leave that burden on your shoulders.”
Lucius sighed, his pose straight, distinguished but the voice was subdued.

I can handle that old witch. But I don’t think you should rush to conclusions,” Draco smirked
while his eyes were still locked on Severus and Granger.

“Severus is a hard man to manipulate, Draco. Even harder to influence. And I lost not only his
friendship but also his trust as well. I am afraid that the task falls on you now. Your mother refuses
to be involved,” There was a note of bitterness in Lucius’s voice.

“I think you force things too much, father. You want them to play in your imagined scenario.
Honestly, father, you have no one to blame but yourself for Severus being angry at you. Though, I
do not believe that you have failed- or rather, I believe that things would have happened whether you
influenced them or not,” Draco sighed, his father was still oblivious to what was going on around
him.

Lucius turned his head to glower at Draco.


“Yes, but can you afford it?” Draco glanced at his father, raising an eyebrow. “Stop being so self-
absorbed and look around. If I were you, I’d watch this,” Draco motioned towards the entrance to
the house.

Severus was talking and Hermione would nod occasionally with a short reply.

Lucius shuffled next to Draco, to see what he was talking about, but Draco’s eyes stayed locked on
the pair at the door. Disbelief growing with each passing moment.
Severus produced a small silver knife while taking one of Hermione’s hands in his; he made a small incision on her palm.

Lucius sharply drew his breath.

Severus placed Hermione’s blooded palm on the door, his lips moving to the incantation Draco was more than familiar with.

*He’s keying her into the blood wards.*

“Did you read today’s Prophet, father?” Draco asked quietly.

“Not yet. Is there anything worth reading?” Lucius sounded shaken.

“A very interesting article about last night’s Hogwarts ball. I’d remember this scene while reading it,” Draco smiled coyly.

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Estelle rubbed her temples. For one dead and painted, headaches shouldn’t be a problem.

The dark portrait room was buzzing with noise and chatter, it was the liveliest that it has been for decades. Ripples of magic coursed through the stone walls.

A small, plump witch tottered in her portrait and squeaked with excitement.

“New blood! Do you feel it?” the witch sang.

“I wouldn’t count the chickens yet, Estrid,” Estelle dismissing the witch.

“But…” the witch blinked.

“You do not know my grandson,” Estell shook her head. It was up to the muggleborn. She was a smart girl, it’s all on her now.

“A Mudblood!” came an outraged roar from one male voice and the rest of the portraits raised their voices, hissing and threatening to the man who rebelled.

Yes, they were desperate now; they do not care for blood status now. They wouldn’t be in this situation if they hadn’t held onto old traditions when the boy was born.

“You know the girl, you’ve talked to her,” Estrid turned to her in annoyance as the chubby witch continued. “Maybe you can persuade him…”

“The fool stays a fool, no one can change it,” Estelle cut the witch off with and let out a long sigh.

She stood up and walked out of the frame, seeking refuge in the quiet of Malfoy library.
Hermione had a distinct impression that soon she'll hex someone or try to rip her own skin off. She'll be on her way to school come tomorrow.

*And all be lost.*

This - whatever this between Severus and her was, that fragile connection - it may crumble under the pressure of distance. For the first time in her life, Hermione didn't have a desire to go back to school.

These days were like a dream come through and her worst nightmare blended in one. He - they maintained the image they had for the past two years in front of everyone, in public. Privately, at night, she’d spend the nights in his bed, in his embrace.

*It isn’t much, but at least it is something.*

That dual play weighed on her, and Hermione often wondered how he’d do it? How he managed to keep his sanity for all these years, playing a double role? She felt as if she was crushed by the pressure, becoming irritated and snappy.

She wanted to leave for him a perfect home, sometimes scared at the ease with which she chose the changes to his absolute liking, without even consulting him.

It elated her.

It scared her.

He was always so correct and polite, distant while they were in the Rosebush. But he hexed the paint of his great uncle’s portrait when ruddy thing called her *Mudblood.*

And then, there was that afternoon in the greenhouse, behind the bushes of lavender and rosemary, on the bed of cloves. Far from prying eyes, just two of them…

*Was he just responded to my needs, or did he act on his own?*
And that was the crux of it, without the connection she couldn’t tell. It would be difficult even with the connection, but he might have dreamt of it, had a glimpse of memory to give her insight.

Hermione huffed at the sound, swirling, wand in her hand. She was in no mood for idle chit-chat. She was in no mood, period. Her eyes meet Draco’s figure, his hand raised in mock surrender.

“You know my mother won’t take it kindly if you blast her garden.” he grinned.

“How would she take it if I blast you?” Hermione snapped back.

Draco lowered his hands and shook his head. “Come, Granger, I have something to show you.”

“I prefer to be left alone.” Hermione raised her chin.

“And miss what I have to show you? I don’t think so.” Draco raise one eyebrow.

“Fine, but it’s better to be…” She started, annoyed.

She never managed to finish. Ancient looking elf appeared and snapped his fingers, in a blink of an eye they were in what looked like a hangar. Hermione blinked.

“What is this? Where is this?” she asked, more curious than frightened.

The room reminded her at the Room of Requirement during the DA times.

“We are in the practice room, below the library and next to the pool room.” Draco smiled. “You would benefit from blasting that nervousness of yours safely. The dummies are self-repairing, like wizarding chess figurines.”

“Since when did you became so insightful?” She tilted her head.

“I’m reading books on Muggle psychology, interesting reading…” Draco’s smile turned to grin. “Set the attack mode for dummies and blast something that won’t cause you trouble.”

Hermione frowned. He had a point. Begrudgingly, Hermione nodded casting a standard spell. With the corner of her eye she saw Draco scrambling to move out of the line of fire when dummies came to life. First attack was too easy, she managed to blast the dummies in only a few moves. The second one wasn’t any better. She stopped, feeling frustrated more than before.

“Try this.” Draco took out his wand and swirled in the air.

This time the dummies attacked differently, more unpredictably. They moved with swift precision, even casting a mild stinging hex. Hermione grinned happily. This was the workout she needed. All her worries, all her insecurities she poured into the parry and attack. One of the dummies, was particularly hard to overcome.

She dodged one hex and blocked the other. But it was all she could do, to defend herself, it appeared she had no chance of defeating the dummy. Suddenly, dummy froze stopped in a mid-motion. She leaned hands on her thighs, breathing heavily, not even questioning who or what stopped the incantation.

“If that was a real opponent, you, Miss Granger, would be dead.” slow drawl forced her to straighten. “How on Merlin’s name, your side managed to defeat the Dark Lord is beyond me. Your fighting skills are abysmal.”

She frowned as Lucius Malfoy hobbled towards her, expression of smug superiority on his face. He
positioned himself behind her, taking a grip of her wand hand. Hermione snatched her hand free, glancing to see angry expression on rather unstable Lucius.

“Stand still, you arrogant little hussy.” Lucius hissed at her, grabbing her hand again, pressing a middle finger at her wand. “Draco, if you will…”

The dummy came to life.

Hermione’s first instinct was to doge, something she found impossible now with Malfoy senior blocking her way, holding her hand, he forced her wand to move and on an impulse she casted a shield charm. Malfoy twirled her wrist hissing.

“Cast bombarda, now.”

She obeyed.

The dummy blew up in a million pieces.

Malfoy released her, stepping away. “That is a basic protect and attack move. Something any thirteen-year-old should know,” his voice full of disgust. “At least a Pureblood one.”

She glared at him, a scratching remark on her tongue.

*(He did just show me the move.)*

“Can you…” she stopped.

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“That dummy is a tough one to beat.” she said. “And we never learned that move in school.”

“No? I suppose you did not.” He smirked at her. “If you find that dummy hard to beat, how’d you fair against the real thing?”

“The real thing?” she echoed.

“Yes, Severus. And the dummy fights at the skill level he had at his final year of Hogwarts. Tsk,” Lucius clucked his tongue moving away slowly. “Again, Draco.”

Dummies repaired themselves and attacked again. Hermione tried to mimic what was shown to her, block and blast.

“Any combination of spells would do. Honestly, the-brightest-witch-of-her-age.” Lucius sounded side.

She continued to dodge, parry and attack. This time with more success. Once she managed to defeat all dummies she went to the edge of the room, tired, breaths labored in a sharp hiss from her mouth. Draco grinned at her and went to inspect the damage on dummied. Hermione glanced at Lucius.

“Thank you.”

“I have no idea what you are about, Miss Granger. But your gratitude to my presence is welcomed.” Lucius drawled, leaning heavily on his cane.

Hermione noticed the shadow of the pain in his eyes.
“I was meaning to talk to you, Mr. Malfoy.” She forced herself to say. *And it would be a whole lot easier if you are not such a prick all the time.*

“Oh?” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“You know Severus much better than I do, well- longer in any case… What would it take for him to forgive you?” Hermione gave her best to sound neutral.

Lucius gazed at her, honest surprise on his face.

“Short of a miracle- nothing comes to mind.” Lucius raised his chin. “Worry not, Miss Granger, you will be blissfully free of my presence during your Apprenticeship.” A shadow of deep and honest sorrow passed over his face, but it was there she saw it.

_Severus isn’t the only one who lost a friend… No, you won’t feel sorry for him._

Hermione tilted her head, idea forming in her mind as they stood there. Finally, she scrunched her nose, it was time to go, this small reprieve didn’t alleviate her worries. The nervous void remained, tempered only so.

“I wonder… Shame, I almost looked forward to you coming to Rosebush and wondering should you drink your tea or not, wondering if I laced it with something.” She gave him a tight smile and briskly walked away. Amused chuckle followed her on her way out.

_No, he didn’t just approve of what I said to him._

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus resisted temptation to roll his eyes, it was such childish move and he won’t allow himself to stoop to that level. No matter how much situation demanded. From his point of view- the situation almost pressed the notion.

He watched as Hermione nervously huffed, re-packing her things.

_The way she behaves, one would think she’s going to her trial not back at school._

The girl changed her mood from inexplicably sad to frantic to this huffing in the past hour.

Five days flew by. They spent their days in the Rosebush, and nights sharing _his_ bed. Hermione proved to be a genuine slave driver, for as much as she tried to spare the elves, she drove workers insane. It would be an understatement to say that no one was happy at the end.

The Manor, on the other hand shone in a new light. She didn’t really change much of anything, but the gloomy house was somehow full of light. Small details here and there, brightened the place considerably.

He was content to re-assemble and bring to functionality the old Potions laboratory and the greenhouse. And Draco took seemingly permanent residence in the library, which was good considering that he and Hermione kept on bickering.

_It is a good thing she is going back to Hogwarts tomorrow._

Severus frowned. Something painfully heavy pressed at the edge of his ribs, and he pointedly ignored it. This, whatever this was between them, was only a borrowed time. They already signed the contract, and the next time he sees her she will be his apprentice and out of his reach.
“Four years, plenty of time for her to see the error in her ways and change her mind.”

He didn’t want to dwell on that thought.

“You do realize that Hogwarts has a fully equipped library?” Severus drawled. He resisted a temptation to notify her that school trunk refused to accept books forbidden for students. The last thing he wanted was to argue with her.

She turned to him with a frown. “They don’t have these books.”

“As a matter of fact- they do. You just weren’t privy to them as a student.” He replied calmly, as calmly as possible considering that her behavior draw him mad.

“And how’s that helping me? I am still a student.” she huffed.

“I asked Minerva to grant you access to the professor’s library as part of your Apprentice preparations.” He growled. “Now, would you stop that and settle down?”

“Yes, fine… Not like I’ll manage to pack all these books anyway.” Hermione sounded sad again.

Oh, for the love of…

Her mood swings started to affect him as well. She, begrudgingly, finalized her packing by taking out the books from the trunk. Finally, she settled down.

“You or Draco will have to deal with that bloody portrait. I placed the Mufilato on it, but other portraits are rather aggressive towards him.” She sighed.

“I’ll have him placed in my grandfather’s room. He won’t bother anyone there.” Severus nodded.

He didn’t want to talk about that. Then again, he had no idea what he wanted. Something crawled under his skin in a most unpleasant way. Occlumency or not, he became quite adept at ignoring unwanted thoughts and feelings, and he applied that newfound skill generously at the moment.

She sighed and he growled again. Hermione’s head sharply twitched up.

“Look, I know… I’ll be out of your hair tomorrow, I want you to know that I am grateful--” her voice broke, tears threatening to spill.

“I was under the impression that you want to finish your education. You’ll be in my hair, as you put it so eloquently, in a month's time again. I fail to see the reason for tears and this…” he waved his hand at her direction. “As for you being grateful, I can’t even begin to fathom- what for.”

He wasn’t dismissive or cruel, even if her expression told him differently. Severus truly failed to see what he did to earn her gratitude. As wrong as it might sound, he cherished every moment she spent in his arms.

“For sacrificing once more- for me. For showing me how…” her face scrunched.

“I am no stranger to sacrificing, so rest assured- that this is far from what I’m used to.” Severus tilted his head. Liar.

This wasn’t a sacrifice on his part, no matter how much he wished it to be. This was selfish indulgence, purely self-serving. She opened an entirely new world to him, while all he ever gave her was a bad reputation.
“Well, I’m grateful all the same.” Hermione sounded sad.

“It is late, we might as well go to sleep.” Severus sighed; it was much safer option than what he had an urge to do.

He won’t turn into one of those sappy buggers and hug her. He won’t reaffirm his neediness for her. He won’t stoop so low to use her state of mind for his selfish needs. He won’t…

“Ough…” he huffed as a weeping witch cannonballed in his lap, squeezing the air out of him, choking him with her hair.

His arms closed around her, it felt almost natural to do so. Her warmth stirred something in him, something he didn’t want to name or dwell upon. He was losing the battle.

“So where do you want to sleep?” Severus whispered.

“I have a choice?” Hermione sniffed, straightening.

“You always have a choice, we all do. Question is- do you know how to choose wisely?” He tried to avoid the answer.

“And you wouldn’t mind if I choose one more night with you?” She blinked at him.

“And apparently you do not. I have no qual… Mmmm…” his words were cut off by her lips.

Severus tried to stay focused, his mind racing. This was the first time she acted this way since- then. They did share the bed, and more than satisfying carnal pleasures, but she always held herself back. She would reach for him, but always pulled back, waiting for him to encourage her or take charge.

He liked her initiative.

She wasn’t as passive as she forced herself to be.

*I am an idiot!*

Still attached to her lips, he picked her up in his arms, rising from the chair. His hand muscles screamed, still not fully strong enough to support her weight. He can withstand it, however, if he puts his mind to it.

Severus made a step.

“Oww…” Hermione grunted when they both ended up in a heap, thankfully, on the bed.

*Bloody moron, that’s what I am.*

His knee pulsed with pain, he collided it with the edge of the bed frame. His hands could be willed into obedience. His legs, apparently, were another matter altogether.

*Well, so much for me and that romantic drivel.*

She whizzed, and he lowered his gaze. *Was she hurt?* He should probably move, but Severus had to detangle himself first. Hermione started to shake, and he hastily rolled over, pulling her hair in the process. She issued one *“ouch”* still shaking- *from laughter.*

“I am glad that our predicament amuses you.” Severus grumbled.
Her laughter stopped abruptly, face from radiant turned to a mask of fear.

“Severus, I-I’m sorry, I should have asked you…” Hermione stuttered.

“Ask me what? Should I fall on you?” He sat hissing at pain in his knee.

“No, to- kiss you.” Hermione bowed her head.

“As I recall, you asked me to- show you, you wanted to know, and I agreed to this. Constant waiting for my approval is tedious.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “But for tonight, I am certain that you will have to take charge or give up on the idea altogether. This unfortunate incident incapacitated me.”

Hermione widened her eyes, plucking the wand from her sleeve and banishing his clothes. She nudged him back, towards pillows and ran her fingers over him. There was nothing seductive or amorous in her deft search of his body.

*She could benefit from a few instructions on seduction.*

Reaching the banged knee, she gently probed at the angry reddish mark, before casting a charm. The whoosh of cold air felt sublime. But he finally understood that this wasn’t her attempt at seduction, but rather a healing.

“Well, what will it be?” Severus asked.

It wasn’t like he could fake indifference, not while she could clearly see his arousal.

“Are you still… Yes, stupid question…” She started to stutter, blush tinting her cheeks, her eyes darting to his crotch area.

“I hate repeating myself, furthermore, I expect you not to need constant repetition. I am sure I’d be fine, as long as you do not require of me to- be active.” Severus could kick himself, a few chosen words would have much greater effect, but he’d be damned if he says them to her.

*And this is how I always cook-up things.*

Surely the moment was gone, and whatever remnants of romance were in the room, now fled for cover. The more he felt pressed to say something utterly ridiculous, like to profess his feelings- the more idiotic things came out of his mouth. He wished she’d jump on him again and save him from what he might say next.

*Five days, five bloody days.*

It was all it took to turn him to complete idiot, a despicable old lecher. His brain shut down the moment her lips descended on his once more. The feel of her silky skin against his.

*When did she lost her clothes?*

It wasn’t like it mattered at this moment. *She is a witch after all,* his brain slowly detached from the reason. His hands tightened around her, pulling her closer and on top of him.

She stiffened.

*Bollocks…*

Severus lightly separate their lips, sneaking one hand up to brush finger over her cheekbone.
“What’s the matter?” He asked, knowing well what troubled her.

“I’m not… It didn’t work quite well last time…” Hermione stammered, her eyes getting cloudy.

“There is a world of difference between willing and unwilling partner.” Severus whispered, still caressing her cheek. “Why don’t we just go about it and see how it goes? Purge the bad memories with the better ones. Eh?”

Of all the wrong things I could say...

She nodded, hiding her face in a crock of his neck, her hair attacking his airways again. Her lips moved over his skin and he forced himself to stay passive and quiet, to keep his eyes open. He will hate himself tomorrow, but for now he wanted to soak up every move, every touch, even the smallest of details. He wanted to feel desired- loved. To be needed for himself if only once in his life.

She trailed her kisses, mapping his skin with her lips, nipping at his collarbones. Severus focused on staying still while fire roared in his blood. Her shy lips and clumsy hands forced a grunt out of his throat. Her hair tickled his neck and chest, to the point he wanted nothing more than to roll them over and bury himself in her.

Hermione raised, her face flushed, eyes glittering. She straddled him, mindful of his injured leg- and groped for her wand, floating one pillow, setting it under his banged knee. A million scenarios passed through his head, he wouldn’t mind playing a patient to her- not being one but… Gasp escaped him, his back arched and eyes briefly fluttered close when her hand reached behind her to coup his sack. Sparks of light dancing behind his closed lids.

When he opened his eyes, Severus faced her breasts, they danced in front of his face and he licked his lips. His hand, quite detached from his brain, reached gently massaging enticing flesh and she moaned. Finding a purchase on his chest, she centered herself and begun slow descent. If he had any sanity left in him, she separated him from it now. Her heat slicking over his cock, maddeningly piecemeal.

More than his own feelings and sensations, he was mesmerized with the shift of emotions and sensations so clear on her face, the tentative focus morphed into a wonder, lust and settled on pure pleasure. She moaned above him, her inner muscles twitching, pressing…

A groan escaped him.

Her eyes narrowed, observing him, muscles repeated the squeeze and he groaned again. His hand, still attached to her boob synchronized with the twitching of her quim, fingers blindly seeking to tweak her nipple.

Her eyes widened with a glimmer of understanding.

She rolled her hips, still manipulating her muscles to clench. His other hand surged up to tweak at the other nipple, a sound between moan and keening whooshed out of his lungs. His eyes locked on hers. She started to move, at first slowly but then faster, experimenting with angles and movement until she settled for a grinding motion, pressing hard on his chest.

Who needs air anyway? If I die today, I won’t have to live with myself tomorrow. What a sweet death this might be…

She was in control, setting the rhythm, and for once in his life he didn’t mind. It was so easy to surrender, to just- be, carried on a wave of pleasure. Her hips gained in speed, mewls escaping her with fast breaths. Her eyes unguarded, locked on his.
He was lost in them.

His constant need to be in control, melting under that heated gaze, full of love and belonging.

Her body tightened, breaths labored now, but a small frown began to appear as her hip lost their rhythm. He abandoned her nipples to grab her hips, lifting them slightly and anchoring them in the air above him- still connected.

Hermione cried out, a slight desperation twisting her face.

Biting on his lower lip, to still the words that bubbled in his chest, Severus anchored his healthy leg on the bed and thrust up.

Hermione moaned, her eyes now wide and shiny, hips jerking.

“Still down, let me show you…” Severus purred.

He trusted up again. Her head fell back, hands seeking and finding purchase on his inner thighs, digging the nails in a soft flesh. Her back arching.

Yessssss…

He continued trusting, watching her, listening to her. His own need shoved aside; he found the tempo she needed. This time was different, different from all previous…

It was more emotional.

It was desperate.

It was magnificent.

Her muscles, barreled around him, twitching madly before she arched her back and froze, red-faced, with a shout. With feeling of loss, he forced himself to pull back, out of her body. His own release following, ripped from him along with an embarrassingly high-pitched yelp.

Hermione collapsed on him, breathing heavily.

Severus gently rolled her beside him, cradling her in his arms, next to his heart that tattooed her name against the ribcage. She smiled at him, tiredly.

“Infinitely different,” she slurred, snuggling closer.

Before he knew, she was sound asleep, tucked next to him, breathing in his skin. Severus pressed his lips at the roots of her curls, salt from her damp forehead coating his lips.

There will be no sleep for him tonight.

If this is all he can have-- No, tonight he won’t sleep…
Harry leaned back in his chair and shook his head, looking at Neville who at that moment had his face obscured with a mug full of Butterbeer. Neville insisted that they talk about Hermione.

She looked fine to me, better than in the past year or even longer.

Neville always had his idea what is fine when talked about Hermione. Neville lowered his mug and wiped the foam with the heel of his palm.

“So, what is the problem now?” Harry asked giving his best not to sound inpatient.

“She is behaving- odd. More like herself, but also strange.” Neville sighed.

“Strange, how?” Harry raised his eyebrows.

“First, she caused a ruckus in school again. A few days back, Headmistress called her in her office and had to step out for a while… Let’s just say that half of the school herd Hermione screaming the head of the petrified portrait of Albus Dumbledore. He said something, I don’t know what, but it took three professors to stop Hermione from damaging the portrait.” Neville sighed.

“That’s not odd, it’s not smart but not so much, odd for Hermione.” Harry shook his head. Since she started caring for Snape Hermione had a chip on her shoulder, she could not condone the way Dumbledore used Snape.

“Yes. Well, if you consider that she… She behaves… Well, in a part like what she was in school-before, or this year. I caught her -moonlighting over the book. She has that stupid smile on her face and gazing in the distance, in the library, over the book.” Neville leaned to him, whispering.

“She is a girl, Nev, and, she is in love. I’d say it’s quite a normal behaviour.” Harry sighed.
“We are talking about Hermione.” Neville widened his eyes.

Harry realized that Neville thought his words as an explanation.

“Look Nev, she had a rough two years... She had a rough since the first year in Hogwarts with war and all and being friends with Ron and I - I’m sure it didn’t help. To put it simply, we... For all we know this may be real Hermione.” Harry gave Neville a weak smile, tact was never his strong point.

“I don’t know, we are talking about the girl who colour coded and charted her schedules from the first year.” Neville shook his head.

“What is she doing now?” Harry wanted to give up, he couldn’t influence Neville no more than he could convince Neville to let go.

“Preparing. Tomorrow is the Parting Feast. Headmistress introduced some old customs...” Neville sighed.

“Meaning?” Harry felt confused.

Going to Auror training without returning for my N.E.W.T. was the best decision I made.

“Meaning- the head table will become awfully crowded.” Neville smiled nervously and stuck his head in a mug again.

“Do you want me to show up?” Harry tried to get information from suddenly not so talkative Neville.

“You can’t and you know it. War Hero or not, Harry- Hogwarts has its rules.” Neville smiled at him.

“I’m not a War Hero, at least not the only one, Serpent-slayer.” Harry grinned.

Neville rolled his eyes at him and complained. “Now I need Firewhiskey.”

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Hermione shuffled behind Luna. A month flew by, filled with reading books, thinking about Severus, and corresponding with him. His letters same as always, not a letter that would indicate what happened between them. Not that she expected it.

Nagging question, how he will greet her come tomorrow weighed on her mind. Her fingers nervously found the necklace to play with it.

Stop thinking about what you want, he’ll be your Master and he’ll act accordingly.

“Stop daydreaming.” Deidre nudged her in the back. “The sooner we finish with formalities, I can enjoy one more decent meal.”

Hermione chuckled. Deidre’s mother started cooking, much to the dismay of the rest of the family. If one could judge by the cookies she sent regularly, the woman was probably the worst cook in England.

They took their places at the table.

Headmistress stood up and buzz of chatter came to a halt.

“My dear students, another year came to its end. This year is the last we have returnees from the past
war among us, and I am proud to say that no matter how dire times were—many students finished their education.

For those who part with us only during summer hols, I wish pleasant rest. But I urge you not to forget about your obligations.

Now, as you all know, we decided to honour some old traditions. It brings me joy to reinstate one of the most sacred traditions this school ever had. I call upon all of you present, to acknowledge and give due respect to our seventh- and eight-year students that secured Apprenticeship.”

Headmistress paused and murmur carried through the crowd. Deidre leaned to Hermione.

“This is so exciting! It is one of the greatest honours to have this ceremony. My grand grandmother talked about it. They cancelled it after Dumbledore became the Headmaster.”

Hermione felt her heart beating in her throat before sinking low.

*He won’t be here, no way he’ll show up. He said that he won’t set foot in this school ever again.*

“Without further ado,” Headmistress spoke again. “Let us call our Master’s to join us at the Head table.” She started clapping, and students followed.

Hermione clapped half-heartedly; her eyes firmly set to her plate. Excited whisper carried over the sound of clapping. Luna elbowed her in the ribs.

“Professor Snape is here.”

Hermione twirled in her seat, her eyes darting to the row of twenty something men and women who slowly walked towards the head table. Severus was among the last, leaning on the cane slightly, but still imposing and elegant. She sucked a hungry gulp of air.

*His robes....*

He was in fine robes, black with green stripes, the ones Draco said that Narcissa gave Severus, but he never wore them not having an event formal enough. He looked distinguished, with his slightly longer hair tied at the nape of his neck. Hermione bit her lip. To most of the students who knew him, he probably didn’t look too much changed. His face was still stony cold, sharp eyes as cold as ever. He didn’t billow, but apart from black and green robes that was the only difference.

Hermione could hear excited whispers.

“I heard he is a War Hero now.”

“At least he washed his hair.”

“Who is the poor soul he’ll torture for the next four years?”

“He never, never took an apprentice before.”

Hermione clenched her fists, fingers itching to hex those with negative comments. Headmistress cleared her throat again.

“I ask the students, when I call them, to join their Master or Mistress at our table.” With that Headmistress start calling names, much the same as she did at the Sorting ceremony.

Hermione couldn’t divert her gaze, heart beating insanely against her ribcage. Her muscles flexing
under duress to prevent herself dashing to his arms.

“Hermione Granger, War Hero, recipient of the Order of Merlin First Class and one of the best students this school ever had. Seven N.E.W.T. subjects, all Outstanding.”

Luna and Deidre nudged her, and Hermione stood up, feeling slightly panicked as all eyes trained on her.

“Miss Granger, please come and join your Master, Potions Master Severus Snape, War Hero, Order of Merlin First Class.”

Hermione started to walk, her body following the instruction while her brain reeled. Silence escorted her to the table. Severus stood up to pull the chair for her, nothing other Master’s and Mistresses didn’t do for their charges. Collective gasp followed by claps and a murmur broke as she took her place at the Great Table. And in a good time too, her legs gave out.

Severus nodded to her with one sharp twitch of his chin, sitting down and directing his narrowed eyes at the Hall, like he dared students to act out of order. It was a strange feeling, sitting on this side of the Great Table. Sitting next to him like this.

Hermione didn’t know what to do or say. Around her everyone chatted quietly. She clenched her arms in her lap, and nearly jumped when under the table, one long warm hand covered her nervously crushed hands. She glanced at him, but he was still gazing at the rows of students.

Finally, the ceremony finished. Food appeared on the tables and excited chatter filled the air. Hermione felt her throat was dry as a desert, as if he read her mind Severus filled her glass with something. She turned to him, smiling sheepishly and took a good gulp. Severus clucked his tongue.

“One of the first things you out to learn is never to take a drink before testing it.” He sounded and looked like her old Potions Professor. “Not even from your Master.”

Hermione nodded, frowning.

From her other side, a Hufflepuff boy leaned to her and whispered. “Did you ask for him?”

Hermione sharply turned her head, ready to hex at first negative comment. Jutting her chin, she glared at the boy.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” She said. I, bloody, had to blackmail my way into this Apprenticeship.

“Lucky!” The boy replied. “He is not nice, but he is the best Potion Master in the country. Wrote to him first, he never even bothered to answer.”

Hermione blinked at the boy. “So, what are you taking for your Mastery?”

“Potions. Mistress Jameson accepted my application.” The boy replied with a shy smile.

“Table manners, Miss Granger.” Severus sharply hissed and Hermione jumped slightly, nodding to boy, and turning to sit straight.

“Apolologies, Master Snape.” Hermione murmured, blushing.

She hated the fact that they reverted to Miss Granger and Master Snape.

“Let us survive this, do not eat too much, you are returning to the Manor with me. Narcissa made a feast, Potter and few of your friends will join us there later.” Severus whispered to her.
Hermione was sure that to anyone his whisper sounded like an angry hiss, but she relaxed. Leaning over the table, Luna raised her glass to her with a wink. Neville sent her a smile.

Hermione turned to look at the Great Hall and rows of tables that buzzed with life. Suddenly realizing how detached she felt from this place. Hogwarts will always have a place in her heart, but she wasn’t belonging here anymore. She glanced at Severus; he was eating, scowling at his plate. Hermione knew how that looked like from the other side of the table. A wide grin, the one she could not suppress appeared.

“Cease and desist that.” Severus hissed not turning his eye to her.

“What?” Hermione just couldn’t stop smiling.

“Grinning. Before everyone here gets the idea that I hexed you somehow or put something in your food.” Severus continued grumbling.

“I secured my Apprenticeship with the best Potions Master in the country if not even Europe. The one Master that never took Apprentice before, even if many asked him to. I have all the reasons to grin.” Hermione informed him, a smile still on her face.

“A known Death Eater and murderer.” Severus replied flatly.

“Odd, all I heard was a War Hero when they announced you.” Hermione furrowed her brows but continued to smile.

Only now, she noticed the slight shake of his hand and a thin coat of sweat at the base of his hair. The too pronounced muscle of his jaw indicating clenching of the teeth.

“Are you in pain?” she leaned to him and said in a hushed whisper.

“Yes,” he grounded through almost clenched teeth. “The situation, however, won’t change for the next four years, so there is nothing to it.”

“Well, I’m ready to go whenever you say.” Hermione grinned at Severus again.

That is where she belonged, with him- and she had four years to prove him she meant it.
Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction. Harry Potter is owned by J. K. Rowling. This story is purely for entertainment purposes, no money is being made from it.

A/N: Thank you all for your support, kudos, comments, and klicks.

I skipped sending this chapter to my beta, again. So, all mistakes are mine as always.

~Four years later~

Severus walked by the Sunroom on his way to the Laboratory. The giggle echoed through the door that stood ajar, and the sharp pain constricted his chest. He stopped to listen, hating himself, but also unable to resist. Why he tortured himself like this was beyond his ability to comprehend.

For four long years, they lived in the same home as Master and Apprentice. Nothing, nothing unbecoming happened between them. She was a diligent student, but he expected nothing less from her. And in the same way, her mind was now sharp and better than ever. She bloomed into a tantalisingly looking woman.

His feelings for her only fortified themselves, hidden deep inside his chest. The chest that now buckled under the pain of realisation that their time together is nearer to the end. Four years had to be enough for her to realise that she made a mistake, for sure. But what she might see as a mistake he cherished as a precious memory.

He will let her go, he learned his lesson well, what will become of him after she’s gone was beyond him. Laughter rang again and Severus flinched, he listened to the muffled voices.

“I can bet that you’ll lose your courage and there will be no kiss. In fact, I’m ready to put the Galleons where my mouth is.” Hermione giggled.

“You’ll lose your Galleons for nothing.” Replied a male voice.

“No, I don’t think so. You don’t have that courage, you are down-right afraid of him.” Hermione’s voice teased.

“And I’ll prove you wrong.” A male voice replied with a purr.

“Right, we’ll see. Tonight, eight at evening, at She Colour. I already placed a reservation. Will you dare to show up?” Hermione’s voice still teased.

“You can bet your arse I will.” Replied male voice.

“It’s a date then.” Hermione singsong with a note of challenge.

The pain in his chest hitched the air in his lungs. Severus rushed to the Laboratory, leaving the giggling couple behind.
I knew this would happen; I prepared myself for this.

He wasn’t prepared, not really. He should take consolation in knowledge that she at least chose a decent bloke. His Secretary, the one she handpicked and trained.

Severus walked into the Laboratory and heavily leaned on the wall closing his eyes. He never expected it will be this difficult. True, he did not encourage her or shown even the smallest sign of attraction. He still allowed himself to hope…

Bloody hope. Bugger!

He opened his eyes and walked to the table, preparing ingredients. They had to finish this batch of potion before Lucius shows up. His hands fell on the worktable, Severus heavy leaned on it.

Lucius…

It was her doing.

They sat in the train, heading to London after the Parting feast. He could finally breathe, being in that school suffocated him. She was sitting across from him, gazing in the distance with a soft smile.

He wanted to kiss her, to hold her in his arms. He wanted her to show at least some sign that she wanted it too. They sat in silence, and when the silence became unbearable, he cleared his throat.

“Did you choose the potion you want to improve for your first year?” Severus asked.

“I did if you are complacent about it.” Hermione looked at him, soft smile and warmth shone in her eyes.

“And that would be?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Anathematismus” Hermione lowered her eyes, blushing. “That is what you are making for Malfoy Sr., correct?”

“Wrong.” he replied, wondering what she is up to now. Hermione blinked at him, confused. “That is what I’ll be making for him once I return to brewing.”

“Did Healers at St. Mungo’s set up a date for your treatment then?” Her eyes were full of hope.

“Two days from now.” He replied with some discomfort, she nodded.

“I’ll be there. Anyway, I wanted to see if we can improve on that potion, Anathematismus that is- if Malfoy Sr. agrees to be our guinea pig.” Hermione said seriously.

Severus narrowed his eyes unsure if she wanted to take revenge on Lucius by using him as a test subject or she had some other hidden agenda. He could not contemplate on that thought. Laughter announced Longbottom and Lovegood along with a few other students’ moments before compartment door opened. A pungent smell filled the compartment.

“There you are.” Deidre chimed.

“Neville, you stink!” Hermione scrunched her nose.

“He lost two games of Exploding snaps, then his plant sprayed him with a puss,” Luna said dreamily. “I told you-you are neglecting her, and that she needs love.”
"She wouldn’t spray me if I wasn’t trying to save you from spraying. Stop hugging my plants, Luna.” Grumbled Neville.

They worked on that bloody potion in her first year of apprenticeship; they improved the potion. And in the meantime, he renewed his friendship with Lucius.

Thinking back at the past four years, Hermione was like a Good fairy in his life. She nudged him in all the right directions, brewed his potions to stop the tremors- the residual damage of post-cruciatus. She nagged the portraits into submission. She, bloody, run this house. His house.

The door opened, and Hermione walked in still grinning.

“You started without me.” She called instead of the greeting.

Severus wished to hide behind his Occlumency walls, he didn’t use them anymore even if he once more had a full reign of his magic.

“I just arrived. Lucius will be here in a few hours,” he replied. “You should focus on your Defence tomorrow.”

“They can’t ask me a question I can’t answer.” Hermione shrugged, taking another chopping board and a silver knife. “I’ll work on valerian root.”

“You are smug about something,” Severus said, kicking himself mentally for his weakness.

“I am, I set up a date.” Hermione’s grin widened.

“Congratulations. Who is the unlucky party?” Severus asked before biting his tongue. You pathetic tosser.

“Why would he be unlucky?” Hermione stopped chopping to glare at him.

“As much as I appreciate your skill in potions or your organisational skills, you still are annoying and bossy. I feel sorry for the bloke already.” He replied in a dry tone.

“Well, Blaise Zabini- your secretary, if you must know,” Hermione replied with amusement in her voice.

“I see, you are developing a taste for Slytherins,” Severus replied conversationally, wondering why he pressed on the matter. Working in silence was perfectly acceptable. Why he still needed to torture himself by pouring salt on the wound?

“A Slytherin.” Hermione corrected him with a frown. “But I’d say that Slytherin fever is going on among Gryffindor’s. We’ll see after tonight if I’m right, things are still uncertain.”

“If he does not realise how good you are for him, then it is his loss, not yours.” Severus sighed.

“I thought I’m annoying and bossy and that you already feel sorry for the bloke.” Hermione huffed. “Besides, this particular Slytherin wouldn’t notice me if I am to walk naked in front of him.”

Anger rose from his belly to his chest in a matter of moments, blinding white anger, mixed with images from four years ago. Her naked body on the bed of cloves, skin gleaming from sweat on the rays of the sun that broke through still smudged glass. He stopped chopping to glare at her. Fists clenching uncontrollably.

Hermione shook her head at him.
“I can’t believe you are so blind. I wouldn’t tempt Blaze nor Neville. I’m missing a few bits that get them going, and I have something extra on the wrong place.” Hermione burst into laughter.

“Longbottom?” Severus felt like someone poured a bucket of iced water on him. “What he has to do…”

“I set up a date between two of them for tonight.” Hermione cut him off, still amused.

That tight knot in his abdomen and chest started to unwind.

“To shame, Zabini is a decent young man, he’d suit you.” Severus intoned, returning to chopping.

He raised his eyes from the board when she slammed the table with both of her hands. Now he was facing her angry eyes and a flushed face.

“You, pompous prick!” She hissed.

“Language Apprentice Granger, I am still your Master,” Severus warned he, pushing his voice to sound dangerous. Not an easy feat, she looked so attractive when she was angry.

“Only for one more day. And if you think for a moment that I have forgotten- you are sourly mistaken. You. Won’t. Get. Rid. Of. Me. That. Easily.” Hermione growled, walking away from the table.

“Where do you think you’re going? We have a potion to finish.” He growled back.

“Finish it yourself.” Hermione snapped, slamming the door on her way out.

Severus stared at the door, shaking his head. He should be angry, he should be mad, instead, he felt amused. And he truly was until realisation slammed at him.

And that is how I still have the talent to muck things up.

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Lucius frowned and coughed; the bitterness of the potion lingered on his taste buds. Through watery eyes he noticed Severus roll his eyes.

“You could make it more palatable, you know” He rasped.

“And miss that expression on your face? Now, why would I do that?” Severus replied smugly.

“Well, for one- it would save you some of this fine and utterly expensive Firewhiskey.” Lucius leaned back into the chair and took a huge gulp from the tumbler.

“That is a blatant lie and you know it.” Severus shook his head, chuckling, before setting his face in a serious mask. “How is this last batch working for you?”

“Good, better than in fact. This cane, my friend, is once more just a fashion accessory.” Lucius tilted his head. “I will have to live up through another humiliation and express my gratitude to that rude Apprentice of yours. While we are on the subject, where is that insolent chit?”

He watched as Severus shifted, glaring at him. Lucius had to admit, he’ll never be fond of the girl, but he stopped hating her a long time ago. If nothing, much to his cringe, he felt grateful to her. Not only because she worked diligently to improve the potion and to prolong his life span as much as it was possible, but also because she somehow swayed Severus into being his friend once more.
Indeed, a miracle.

Something was off. Severus appeared troubled.

“In her room, I presume,” Severus replied tightly.

“Don’t tell me you had another argument with the portraits. Your grandmother is boring me to death with her insistent chatting, but she did not mention two of you or the Match for a long time now.” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

This was still slippery terrain, one that Lucius tried to avoid if possible. But over the years, Severus confide in him. He had the feeling that he did not hear all of it, but he knew about his brothers love for the girl and that was enough for him.

“No, Hermione took care of that. I believe that portraits are afraid of her.” Severus replied.

“I’d say, she has no respect for ancestry.” Lucius nodded.

“She has a defence of her Mastery set for tomorrow.” Severus murmured, sinking back in his chair, and closing the eyes for a moment.

“Ah,” Lucius nodded, even if Severus could not see it. “So, is she packing now?” He asked cautiously.

“No… Yes… Probably… I don’t know.” Severus shook his head, keeping his eyes closed.

“Have you considered- talking with her, perhaps? Letting her know…” Lucius almost whispered—this was, indeed, a dangerous question.

“We talked, four years ago, about her staying as my Assistant. And she still has… That means nothing. We fought today…” Severus finally looked at him.

Lucius sighed; he could strangle Granger girl. If she was so blind, so oblivious to how Severus felt about her… Wasn’t she the one that claimed to love him? Or was that just the passing fancy? Draco was still adamant that her feelings for Severus didn’t change, but Draco chose her to be his witness at the bonding ceremony. He couldn’t trust the boy’s objectivity on the matter.

“I wouldn’t be too worried about it. After all, she has nowhere to go.” Lucius shrugged.

“Is that supposed to make me feel any better?” Severus sharply snapped his head towards him.

Lucius flinched internally, cursing himself for making a mistake. Well, what’s done, it’s done.

“It is not like I told you the news, Severus. You knew that, even when you were still at the Manor.” He replied with a bit of subdued tone.

“That does not make the situation any better,” Severus replied tersely with ill-conceived air.

Lucius hated to see him in this state, mainly because he did not know how to approach the subject or help Severus.

“Well, I have to cut my visit short, Draco and Astoria are coming. Maybe today I’ll finally hear good news.” Lucius stood up. “I am afraid that at the end they’ll be another Malfoys to thank you for the potion…”

“Not to me. If all goes well, not this time…” Severus rose from the chair, a sly smile on his face.
“Yes, well, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” Lucius forced himself to arrange his face in a mask he wore for so long.

The truth was, he mellowed a lot over the past years. Illness dulled the hate and anger. Losing Severus’ friendship brought him to his knees, not that he’d ever admitted that. And whether he still believed in supremacy was irrelevant, he withdrew from public life.

“No need to escort me. I’ll see you in a few days.” He nodded to Severus and walked out of the room.
Harry shifted nervously on the chair; it was the most uncomfortable piece of furniture he had the misfortune to sit on. Snape paced in front of him. Harry wished to tell him to sit or at least stop pacing, but he knew better.

For the past four years, Snape learned to tolerate him, same as he learned to tolerate Snape. He could appreciate the fact that Snape was trying. Harry had a nagging suspicion that effort was made on Hermione’s behalf, even if he could not get any proof to his claim.

His wand vibrated again, and he ignored it. He told everyone that he’ll take the morning off, it’s not like the department would fall apart if he wasn’t there for a couple of hours. In fact, Harry was thinking about changing the department, to somewhere where they could use his skills instead of his fame. But there was still so much to do, public opinion moved slowly from the old ways.

Severus huffed.

“She’ll be fine. It’s Hermione, and if there is one thing, she’s good at- it is studying and passing tests with flying colours.” He tried to…

Harry wasn’t so sure what he was trying to do. What he did was to draw Snape’s attention to himself.

“There is one more thing she is apt at- throwing hexes at idiots.” Snape snapped at him.

“Yes, but she is…” Harry tried.

“She is in the room full of old, prejudicial idiots. She is my Apprentice and they won’t go easy on her.” Severus hissed.

“She is not a fool.” Harry tried to placate the increasingly annoyed Potion Master. It won’t bode well if Snape decided to go in the next room. In Harry’s opinion, Snape was a more likely candidate to throw hexes.

The door cracked and Harry stood up. Snape stilled, reminding him of a snake ready to attack. Hermione slipped through the door, frowning. The moment door closed behind her she growled.

“Idiots! Bunch of bloody old farts.”

“What happened?” Harry asked, glancing at the stormy expression on Snape’s face. “Did they-flanked you?”
“Fla-what? No! Of course not! I gained my Mistress title.” Hermione turned to him. “But you wouldn’t believe the questions they asked. Wankers. They asked me, and with all the smugness they could muster, mind you, where do I plan to find employment being a collaborator? The nerve…”

“So, you hexed them?” Harry breathed out, wondering if he should go in and assess the damage.

“No, I informed them that I already secured employment with my Master. We are opening the Apothecary to sell our products, along with contracts not only from St. Mungo’s but also various other hospitals over the world. I had the pleasure of informing them that all improvements on the existing potions are patented to only two of us, as well as all the new potions we developed.” Hermione grinned a smile that scared him. “You should have seen their faces! They asked me if I’m aware that Apprentice can’t patent a potion to his or her name, and that all developed potions belong to the Guild.”

A soft growl forced Harry to flinch. Snape was sitting on the chair glaring at the door.

*If she didn’t hex them, he will. I must take them away from this place.*

“The nerve,” he agreed with her. “Shall we go to the Rosebush?”

“To the Rosebush? No, we are going to the Leaky Cauldron to celebrate. And it is a double celebration. They got nothing!” Hermione laughed. “Good thing I told Blaze to patent everything on the name Snape-Prince.”

Harry noticed that Snape looked at her with narrowed eyes.

“But, Hermione, then- nothing is in your name.” He whispered.

“I’m not concerned, we have a contract, Severus and I; I’m still well off. Besides…” She stopped talking and waved her hand. “Let’s go celebrate.”

She moved to the exit; Severus followed her still looking thunderous.

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Hermione entered the house. The celebratory lunch was- well, civil might be a word to describe it. Harry and Severus had a semi-decent conversation once Severus stopped fuming. The questions Guild commission asked he took as a personal insult.

*Good thing I didn’t tell them about all the questions they asked.*

She found it offensive, even more so, in her commission were not only men but women as well.

*Who would want to marry me? Hah, like all my worth is in being married.*

She had to bite her tongue, and hard not to give a reply to that question. No matter how much she wanted to. They had an agreement… He promised her…

Well, that was then. For the past four years, Severus diverted to calling her Apprentice or Miss Granger again. He was- not distant, but he maintained a civil and proper distance from her. Not once in all these years, she got even a glimpse of passion they shared.

The swarm of an angry butterfly’s wreaked havoc inside her belly and did their best to break free by clogging her throat. But she had to talk to him.

*Four years is a bloody long time.*
Hermione felt torn, afraid that he changed his mind. She didn’t want to impose on him, to force him into a relationship he didn’t want to be in, or he might perceive as another form of servitude. But love was not the offer on the table, never had been, at least not from his side.

For gruellingly long four years she tried to let him know, discreetly, that he still held all her interest—professional and emotional. She refused all the suitors. She socialised mostly with a small group of trusted friends. She avoided going in public without him...

*Ok, fine, I avoided the journalists and public scrutiny as well.*

She even developed a rather tentative friendship like relationship with Lucius Malfoy. Being friends with Narcissa was easy, even with Draco and Astoria. Lucius, she had to work for it, to give her best not to poison him. She perfected his medication. Not one of her brightest moments, given the circumstances, but he still was Severus’ best friend, brother by choice. Hermione could respect that.

*What now?*

Someone grabbed her from behind and lifted. She squeaked, surprised with an unexpected twirl in the air. A voice whispered.

“You lost, pay up.”

“Blaise, you idiot. I could have hexed you into yesterday!” Hermione laughed. “Now, would you be so kind to…”

Hermione squeaked again when Blaise dropped her. A growling swirl of black robes stormed next to them. Blaise helped her to remain on her feet as Severus nearly ran over her.

“Are you hurt?” He asked, worried.

“No, but he might be when I’m done with him.” Hermione hissed.

“What’s wrong?” Blaise blinked, confused.

“I have no idea, I’ll find out,” she shook her head. “But later, you’ll tell me every bit of detail about your date.”

Hades flapped into the entrance hall, squawking loudly. He landed on her shoulder and ducked his head in her hair.

“Bloody hell,” Hermione muttered. “I will flay him alive if he destroyed something of value again.”

She headed to the workroom, halfway there she changed her mind and rushed to her room. Ignoring the mess, she left in the room that morning, Hermione picked up one scroll and with determined steps walked to the workroom.

Severus was at the window, back rigid, hands tightly clasped at the small of his back.

“I do not recall inviting you in. Remove yourself from my presence.” Severus hissed, not turning back.

“No,” she replied calmly.

“You will obey my…” Severus turned to her, face frozen in a stoned mask.

“I don’t have to obey anything you say anymore.” Hermione tilted her head. She neared him slowly
but determinedly.

“How dare you…” Severus growled in a low tone, anger vibrating in his voice.

“How dare I- what?”

~ S ~ S ~ S ~

Severus forced himself to stay as he was, not to move a muscle. He gazed at Hermione, her eyes narrowed in a thin slit, anger radiating from her. His throat felt too dry to produce any sound similar to normal speech. In retrospect, it was a blessing in disguise that he formed his thoughts as a question rather than what they truly were.

Don’t you dare leave me...

He wanted her to storm off, angry, insulted. He wanted her to show any inkling of affection. To leave him alone to lick his wounds. Not to prolong inevitable. To tell him in no uncertain terms that she still loves him. To bind him with his promise made so long ago. He made all those promises, the Apothecary, the job of an assistant… He also promised that he’ll stay with her, marry her, according to the Old Laws and the Match if she desires so.

She changed her mind; the choking fear reared his head under the swirl of thoughts. He also promised to himself that he will let her go if she changes her mind.

Four years of inhuman control, cold showers, and every feeling he had for her masked in anger and aloofness, it was almost a second nature by now. He summoned it to his aid.

“As per the agreement, as my assistant, you will open and run the Apothecary. Now, that you are the Potions Mistress, I’ll transfer the patent rights to your name, for all potions you developed. I will, however, retain the rights on all improvements, with a regular fixed percentage that belongs to you,” his voice sounded unnaturally calm.

“In other words, you are angry at me for protecting our accomplishments without gaining your blessing beforehand?” Hermione tilted her head.

No, I am angry at them, at myself but never at you. “I have a full right… You should have talked to me about it, not just assume- and certainly not just instruct my Secretary what to do. You do not run my bloody life like I’m incompetent.” He hissed through clenched teeth.

“Really? My first year as Apprentice, you drilled in my head how to negotiate, haggle, how to deal with red tape and Ministry. You groomed me to be the front while you can play ‘mad scientist’ from old movies and cartoons, locked in your laboratory.” Hermione growled, wrinkling her brows in a frown. “And now, you are complaining when I do something without asking you. And not just anything, when I react to protect our work…”

“I would expect that you consult me on such matters,” Severus replied, bringing as much ice and scorn in his voice as he could. “It seems that all my lessons failed, considering that you transferred all your findings and patents to my name.”

“Better to yours than to gift them to the Guild.” Hermione shrugged. “It is done. What is that you wish me to do now?”

“Correctly, it is done. However, I can rectify it. And as for what I wish- I wish for you to remove yourself from my sight…” He growled, narrowing his eyes. No, I want you to say that you will stay, to remind me what I promised. To force me… To say that you still love me.
Severus could see in her features, all anger drained from her, replaced with something hard and cold. The edge, of whatever it was, clear in her voice.

“If that is what you wish... Prepare the documentation.” Hermione nodded, spun on her heel to walk out of the room, her back straight, shoulders square and head lifted high.

Few steps made, and she stopped, twirling to face him. Her face was an odd mixture of reluctance, determination, and something he couldn’t put his finger on. Severus blinked at her; she unrolled the scroll. It was their Apprenticeship contract. She mutely pointed at their signatures. Letters that all these years glowed with a golden hue, now stood at the bottom in dull black ink. Not a trace of binding magic in them. Severus scowled at the parchment.

Hermione showed the parchment in his hands, bunching his robe in her hand. She yanked him and he lost his balance briefly, enough for her to press her lips at his. His brain went on strike, abandoning his motor skills and closing shut his speech centre. Hermione pulled back, leaving him feeling stranded and lost.

“This was for me.” Hermione half hissed – half growled the words, voice raspy. “Now you can write any bloody document you want. I’ll be out of your hair.”

She swiftly turned and left the room at a brisk pace before he came to his senses. The door clicked the resounding sound of her departure, Severus weakly leaned on the window frame. Emptiness hollowed him inside. He closed his prickling eyes and took a few deep breaths.

*If that is what she wants...*

The need to escape was enormous. The need to run his hand over his lips even stronger. His lips still tingled from the sensation. The pain forced the air out of his lungs at the thought... No, he won’t allow himself to raise his walls again, he won’t fall in that trap again.

Severus opened his eyes moving to the desk. His hand shook slightly when he took a quill. After only a few lines he frowned. His handwriting always resembled as a spider dunked in ink had crawled over the paper. Judging by the evidence in front of him, now the spider zigzagged like a drunk sailor. He crumpled the parchment, contemplating should he call Zabini and dictate the contract...

The door opened again, only to show the blond hair of Draco.

“Not now, Draco. I’m busy.” He growled.

“Doing what? Anyway, mother sent me to call you and Hermione to the dinner tonight.” Draco entered the room, ignoring his gruff remark.

“You may deliver the invitation to Miss Granger. She is in her room. And I’ll write the apology to Narcissa. Now if you don’t mind…” Severus fought to keep calmness in his voice.

At this point, his hands trembled enough that he’ll have to take a few drops of Calming Draught.

*Where is that damn vial?*

Years ago, Hermione took on her to care for the potions in the house, he didn’t even know where she held them. Apart from making potions for sale, he didn’t touch them if she didn’t hand them to him.

*Bloody menace.*
“Why is she in her room? Why are you not celebrating? What is she doing in her room?” Draco asked, his pale eyes suddenly alert.

“Miss Granger…” He started but Draco interrupted him.

“Miss Granger? Severus, what is going on?” Draco’s voice now had an edge of panic.

“Yes, Miss Granger… She is no longer my Apprentice.” Severus hissed. Emptiness filled with pain twisted inside him.

“Is she packing to leave?” Draco stood up.

“Tell me Draco, do I look like a seer to you?” Severus struggled to stay calm.

Is Draco… Is she packs? That never occurred to him, not before Draco brought it up.

“You are a fool, Severus.” Draco hissed at him, looking angry. “You have a witch, smart and a powerful witch who loves you more than her own life, and you will let her go.”

“My private affairs are my own…” Severus started to raise from his seat, not the best idea considering that his legs felt weak.

“You made it my business when you insisted that I am the one to poke around your head. Now, as your healer and your blood, I’ll tell you- you are a fool. You may hex me, but if you let that witch… The one that loves you. The one you love… if you let her walk out of your life…” Draco raised his voice, choking on the words. “Deliver the invitation by yourself, and your apologies too.”

Draco stormed off, leaving him blinking at the closed door, hands shaking.

Is she leaving? Where is that bloody…

His thoughts interrupted when elf popped handing him a vile with Calming Draught.

“Madam said take this to Master, young Master Draco upset Master.” Squeaked the elf and vanished.

She knew him so well. She knew him better than he knew himself. He’s lost without her. He had to find the way and keep her. Taking the vial, he noticed a loosened cork.

Bollocks.

Severus gave up on a Drought. He took one large, deep breath to steady himself and forced his body to move.

The first floor of the Mansion never looked higher. Knocking would be polite, but Severus his arms felt heavy, too heavy to lift them for a knock. Fortifying his resolve, he opened the door.

“If you think you can…” he started.

Severus wasn’t sure what he’ll say, probably something utterly stupid. However, he had to do something. His thoughts came to a screeching halt, his brain only now registered the image in front of him. Hermione was sitting on the floor, surrounded by half-packed trunks.

Draco, you bloody wanker.

The kid had it right. It hurt, that Draco figured her out better than even he could.
Hermione’s eyes, filled with tears, stared at him wide with a mixture of shock, fear, and sadness. Hands in her lap held in a death grip on family jewels, the ones he gave her so long ago, for the first official appearance as his Secretary.

The pain-filled emptiness twisted the air out of his body, his mind blank.

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