When Professor Granger appeared at Hogwarts as the new Potion Mistress, she wasn’t expecting to be the temporary guardian of a beautiful and highly charismatic child. Neither was she expecting that child to draw close to her a lonely man who was encased in forced silence. This man slowly showed her that silence had a deafening sound, if you listened close enough.
"Silence creates either distance or comfort. The heart chooses which"

"Silence is the most powerful scream"

"Sometime silence has more meaning than a thousand words"

Another failure

One, two, three…he began drifting away feeling his breath constricting. Four, five, six….if only he could last until he lost count then everything would be okay. Twenty-one, twenty-two…the water was cold around him and he didn't want to open his eyes to see the darkness. Sixty-nine, seventy…his lungs wanted to draw in air desperately and he clenched his teeth denying them. One hundred and ten, one hundred and eleven…he was just on the brink of losing consciousness, his fingers cold and stiff. One hundred and fifty…so that is what drowning felt like…one hundred and ninety. Two hundred…and his legs kicked involuntarily one more time betraying him. He surfaced and when he opened his mouth, he inhaled desperately – clinging onto life again. His hands slapped the water surface as punishment for his repeated failure, and he began coughing and inhaling and coughing again as he swam towards the shore.

His hand clenched through the weeds and grasped at the mud to get a hold of something that would help him out of this watery grave. He heard a distant frog croaking through his insistent coughing and felt vomit coming up his throat.

Heavy footsteps thundered close by and a deep voice exclaimed "Not again!" Severus pulled his wet and cold body out of the lake and leaned his cheek on the mud closing his eyes. His breath had eased out, but the coughing kept coming and with it the need to empty his stomach.

"At it again Professur?" the half giant asked. Severus felt a huge hand landing on his back. Someone picked him up easily and turned him to the side. "Now, spit it all out".

Severus pushed the helping hand away and tried to glare at Hagrid, but he failed miserably. He pushed up on his elbow and another coughing fit engulfed him, and with it came all the water he swallowed. Hagrid patted his back and kept his very long hair out of the way

"That's it, better out tha' in" Hagrid said as Severus emptied the last drops and fell to the ground, exhausted.

"What devil got yeh again?" Hagrid asked and tried to pull him to a sitting position. Something that Severus denied by pushing the huge palm away and lying down.

"Yeh won't speak, righ'?

Severus shook his head dejected and closed his eyes. He wanted to turn and tell Hagrid to fuck off, but he opted to keep his mouth sealed. Instead he winced and turned his back to the half giant while trying to get a good footing in order to stand up.

"Righ', I'm callin' Charity," Hagrid said and Severus managed a swift turn that made him dizzy.

"NO!" He croaked with an unused voice that barely resembled his own. A strong shudder run
through his spine when he heard that abhorrent sound in place of his deep, impressive voice. Tears pricked his eyes and he closed them trying to push back the need to cry. His palm landed protectively around his neck, where Nagini had torn his skin, and with it his vocal chords, four years ago. His fingers traced the fabric of the turtleneck to make sure that he was covered and then he gestured at Hagrid to go away.

"Yeh know I am not leaving yeh. Come on, let me help yeh up." Hagrid grabbed his arm and, before Severus had the chance to react, pulled him up. Severus glared at him threateningly, pulled his arm away, and staggered to a safer distance. "Yeh sure yeh won' let me call Charity?" Hagrid repeated.

Severus raised a finger at him and looked at the giant man warningly, but didn't open his mouth again. The loss of his voice was only one of the many things the war took away from him, but not the most important. Still, he didn't want to listen to himself if he could help it. He missed the voice that had served him so well prior to the war. Especially when he needed to control his emotions and the emotions of everyone around him. He had mastered the manipulation of his old voice. He knew how to change its pitch in order to elicit fear and respect. Now he was left with an insufferable croak to express himself with. The loss was almost unbearable.

"I guess that's as good a punishment as any," he thought. Inside his mind his voice still held that velvety thickness that made students quiver in their shoes when it was used against them. Inside his head, it still held that respectful weight in its depth that made foes and allies alike keep their distance.

He heard a branch behind him crack suddenly and he closed his eyes. He tried to draw back the magic that escaped him unwillingly in his emotional breakdown.

"Professur, yeh are doin' it again," Hagrid said and took a couple of steps back.

"I know you bloody fool," he thought and clenched his teeth and fists, pulling back the magic that was flowing around him. Hagrid looked at the thick branch behind Severus and saw it bend as if some invisible arm was pulling it down. "Charity can help yeh, let me get 'er please!" he said.

Severus opened his palm and shook his crooked fingers with rage in front of Hagrid. He mouthed an expressive "NO" and kept on trying to control his magic from breaking the branch. Suddenly, the branch was released from his telekinetic grip and shot upwards, shedding a rain of leaves down to them. Hagrid signed in obvious relief. "Thank the Gods!"

Severus staggered back a couple of feet and leaned his back on the bark of the tree closing his eyes.

He had denied himself the ability to control magic through a wand four years ago when he had awoken from a coma, deciding to live like a squib. However, being unable to control the jolts of magic that escaped him when he was emotionally overburdened was not a side effect he had counted on. The longer he continued to not use magic, the larger effect he had on the world through the suppressed force within him. Not that this loss was the biggest he suffered in that war, either.

He gestured at Hagrid to go away and covered his eyes. His wet clothes weighed heavy on his thin frame. He was trembling slightly.

"All right, yeh don' wan' Charity. Wan' ter come ter me house for a bevvy? It will help warm yeh up," Hagrid suggested with a warm smile under his huge beard.

Severus shook his head in denial and pushed away from the tree, intending to walk back to the damned school and bury himself in his small chamber behind the main library. It was dead of night, so he was not needed to be on post yet. He still had a good six hours before he would have to get up and open the library doors for the staff. Another two days until the school would open it's gates to the
new and old dunderheads once again. Two steps down the path and a wave of vertigo overran him. Two huge hands grabbed him and kept him up. He pressed his lips together in frustration and pushed Hagrid away one more time.

"Yeh can barely stand. Come with me, or I go fer Charity. Or worse – fer Minerva." Hagrid warned.

Severus bared his teeth and offered him a deadly glare as he turned around and walked in front of Hagrid towards the man's wooden cabin. He didn't want to worry Charity, and he didn't want Minerva to bother with him at all. The shame of having to work on parole at the school was enough of a burden. As if anyone had given him a proper choice at that. It was either this or undergoing a trial – possibly facing a sentence in Azkaban. His freedom could have been deemed the biggest loss of the war…but no, that was not it either. Minerva asked him to be a Professor again, but he adamantly denied. Silently, he had ordered a quill to write on parchment, telling her that he would either take Filch's old job as Caretaker, or work in the apothecary. That was the last bit of magic he used. He requested that his job did not include extensive interaction with either staff or students. Minerva gave him the position of Study Hall overseer and Librarian since Madam Irma Pince had retired after the war.

"There we are, see? Tha' was not so difficult righ'?" Hagrid said behind his back.

Severus looked up at the well known cabin Hagrid had managed to build again after it was burned down before the war. The half giant overtook him easily and unlocked the door, beckoning him inside. The raw smell of meat and hot fire attacked his sensitive senses and he winced.

"Come in!" Hagrid smiled and Severus walked in feeling defeated on all fronts. He strode warily towards the fireplace and dumped himself on the floor cross legged, he had no strength left to refuse Hagrid's help. He was shivering from the cold and from the shock, and now his empty stomach was rumbling noisily.

"Make yerself comfortable. Care fer a bevvy?" Hagrid asked as he took off his heavy coat and dropped onto his threadbare easy chair. Fang yawned, got off the lounge, and walked lumberingly towards Snape. He head-butted his shoulder and then plopped himself next to him. Severus looked at him sideways and raised his hands to warm them by the fire. He nodded at Hagrid, feeling completely wasted. Another attempt to take his life had turned into a failure. He was not brave enough to manage that task. He had tried to kill himself by using potions, by drowning, and by jumping off a cliff. In each case his subconscious had taken over and saved him, extending his tormented life.

"Got some fire whiskey fer yeh. Drink it slow." Hagrid offered him a wooden mug that was filled to the brim with strong alcohol.

He reached out and took it with a trembling hand. Some of it spilled on Fang's back who looked up to Severus, uninterested. He closed his eyes and nodded a silent thank you as he tasted the liquor carefully. The first sip ran down his throat and warmed him up pleasantly. He sighed and raised the mug again, taking large gulps, not caring how quickly he was downing it. When there were only a few drops left at the bottom, he lowered it and inhaled with his eyes closed. Slowly, he felt his fingertips and toes warming up.

"I said drink it slow! Tha's not wha' yeh did!" Hagrid chastised him.

"No." He mouthed and shook his head. He placed the almost empty mug next to him and pulled off his muddy boots and wet shocks. He placed them next to the fire with ridiculous care and brought his feet closer to the heat to warm them.
"Yeh want me ter bring yeh a blanket?" Hagrid asked and sat down next to him. The floor of the cabin shook considerably.

He shook his head in denial again and looked at the blazing fire. One of his hands landed on Fang's back and he began stroking the dog without too much thought. Hagrid looked at him and smiled. "Fang always liked yeh".

Severus pressed his lips downwards and silence drew long between them, only the crackling of the fire and the occasional sip of Hagrid disturbed the surroundings. Severus's hands and feet got warm and a strong tingling sensation covered his body. His brain became foggy and muddled up and he knew the fire whiskey did its job which was more than he could have ever wished this night.

"Let me see this!" Suddenly Hagrid demanded and before he could react the half giant drew his left forearm up.

Severus realised what had worried Hagrid. The sleeve of his forearm was bloody. He tried to pull his arm back, but Hagrid had a good grip on it and pushed up the sleeve. Severus turned his head away and closed his eyes. Another loss of the war, although this one he deemed good. "Still bleedin' after all these years?" Hagrid was appalled.

"It never stopped." He spoke, not minding the loss of his voice now that he was slightly inebriated. When he was speaking low and he was not forcing it he could still hear faint traces of its former glory.

"Yeh should let Poppy look at it" Hagrid said and let go of his arm.

"I can heal it" he replied, feeling bone weary.

"Why don't yeh?"

He winced and drew his arm away from Hagrid. His eyes fell on the scar tissue that was seeping blood slowly in a couple of places. He had torn the dark mark off his forearm with a knife - the muggle way – after he had awoken from his coma, directly in front of Minerva and Poppy without feeling any remorse. The skin had healed nastily, but the magic of Voldemort ran deeper than a mere tattoo. It had kept the wound from fully healing even after all these years. Severus didn't want anyone to touch it with magic. He didn't want it to heal, it was another punishment he inflicted upon himself. He looked at the fire. "Do you have any bandages?" he asked emotionlessly.

"Sure, bide a minute" Hagrid said. He stood up and crossed the room, the floor under Severus shook.

He leaned his head on his knees and closed his eyes, needing to sleep. This most recent suicide attempt had emptied him of all emotion. He let the effect of the fire whiskey mellow out his rough edges and was starting to doze off when Hagrid's heavy boots shook the floors again and woke him.

"There yeh go." The large hand gave him a rather dirty looking bandage.

Severus gave him a thumbs up and took it. It was a quick job to tie it around his scar and then he lowered his sleeve, forgetting about it. Hagrid sat again next to him and resorted to silence, until he could bear it no more.

"What happen' back at the lake professur?"

"I slipped" Severus replied with obvious disdain, not taking his eyes from the fire.

"Yeh. Almost drowned."
Yes, almost. He exhaled and rubbed his forearm absent-mindedly.

"The Headmistress has given me strict orders ter watch out fer yeh." Hagrid continued. "I keep pullin' yeh out of all sorts of trouble."

Severus winced. McGonagall and her belated remorse had grated his patience constantly since his return to Hogwarts. All he wanted her to do was stay away from him, which he made evident to her immediately. She, apparently, had a deep seeded guilt and had tried to work her way back into his good graces by attempting to lure him in for a cup of tea, or checking on the library, or chasing after him for some small talk. In the end, she exceeded herself by employing Hagrid as his unspoken guardian. His dark disposition was constantly irritated by all those acts of kindness.

"Yeh know I have to report ter her what I saw 'ere tonight."

His body tensed at the idea of Minerva messing with him. She could get very persistent in her pursuits. He wanted her off his back, but at that moment he just didn't care. He shrugged his shoulders, disinterested. "Do what you have to." He spoke low, trying not to strain his vocal chords.

"So, I tell 'er you slipped?" Hagrid looked at him.

Severus nodded and kept his eyes on the orange flames.

Hagrid sighed and gulped his whiskey audibly. Then he lowered his head and looked at his fingers on his mug thoughtfully for a bit. "This war took more out of folk than we care ter admit."

Severus's back shuddered and his eyes flickered closed.

"I saw many of me friends die. Folk tha' deserved ter live, died. An' others tha' deserved death, lived." He continued.

Severus swallowed audibly.

"Others were left mangled. Neither livin' ner dead." Hagrid shifted and the floor trembled threateningly.

Severus looked at the half giant wordlessly, but his heart had already picked up speed.

"I've seen the mangled ones. Tryin' time an' time again ter take their own lives. I know yeh are tryin' ter do the same. We all know," Hagrid said and his voice sounded odd inside the walls of his cabin.

Severus's heart was awakened and screamed. It felt as if two hands were tearing it apart.

"The mangled ones cannot bare ter live in their own skin. I can feel 'em." Hagrid smiled sadly and rubbed his beard.

Severus pressed the heel of his palm on his forehead and squeezed his eyes tight, trying to block out all thought.

"In the beginnin' I tried ter do the same." Hagrid continued, oblivious to the emotional explosion that was brewing silently next to him "But there is hope yet."

"Where?" Severus intended that as an internal thought, so he was surprised when he voiced it.

"Everywhere around ye. In the sunrise an' sunset. In the livin' creatures an' the forest. In the air yer breathing"
Several cracks sounded around them simultaneously and Hagrid looked up to see all his glass pots getting fissures. He swallowed and looked back at his guest. "I know yeh tried to commit suicide again, Professur." He continued bravely as several pots cracked open and fell to the floor, emptying their contents. "Many mangled ones do. 'Ve seen it a lot…. promise me one thin'."

The remaining glass pots crashed to the floor and Hagrid twitched nervously, trying not to pay any attention to them. Some wooden mugs begun twisting out of shape and the broken glass on the floor was shaking quickly. Fang howled and looked around him "Come visit me every couple o' days fer a drink."

Severus felt the energy grounding so quickly that he exhaled audibly. He was sweating from the effort it took him to control his magic. He opened his eyes and looked back at the broken bottles. A wave of remorse touched him. He couldn't fix those bottles, not unless he used magic, and he didn't want to. He shook his head in denial and frowned. Hagrid turned and looked at them. "Ah don't worry I'll fix 'em."

"I am sorry." Severus rubbed his eyes and lowered his head.

"So, will yeh?"

He looked up at the half giant in momentary confusion.

"Come visit fer a drink. I don' get along with the new staff. Kind o' lonely out here."

"I'll come visit," he said. He returned his eyes to the popping flames, feeling emotional rawness from how close to the edge Hagrid's words had brought him again. He didn't understand why he would seek the older man's company when he wanted none.

His hand fell on the dog's back again and curled into the thick fur, emptying his mind and heart. Hagrid pushed himself up and Severus heard the swish of a broomstick behind him. He would have offered to take over cleaning the damage he inflicted if it wasn't for the fact that his legs wouldn't carry him far. Nevertheless, he pushed himself up and caught the ledge stone of the fireplace to keep himself from falling over.

"What are yeh doin'? Sit down!" Hagrid dropped the broom and supported him.

Severus raised his palm to stop Hagrid and closed his eyes. He wanted to explain his intentions to sweep his mess off the floor, but his exhaustion stopped him at the last minute. "I need to rest," he said, his voice breaking. He shivered at the sound.

"I'll help yeh, Professur," Hagrid said and tried to pull him away from the mantelpiece.

Severus shook his hand dismissively and pointed at the threadbare dirty couch. "May I?" he mouthed, feeling weak.

Hagrid smiled widely, picked him up with ease and brought him to the couch. "Sure yeh can. Lay down why don' yeh."

Severus was pushed into the couch and he laid down, unwilling to take a step towards his boots. He was so exhausted that he knew the simple task of walking back to his chamber was impossible. Without any words, Hagrid brought over a heavy duvet that smelled of goat cheese and covered him with it. Severus fingered the tourniquet on his forearm and, making sure it was dry, closed his eyes. He was thankful of the offer of warmth and rest. He was in no condition to pursue anything more complicated than that on this evening.
"I'm goin' ter check on the forest fer a while. Sleep if yeh want. No one will bother yeh. Fang will stand guard." Hagrid smiled compassionately.

Severus had already drifted into the world of dreams, away from the nightmare of his life. He didn't hear a word, neither did he wake when Hagrid finished cleaning all the broken bottles and closed the door behind as he left for the forest.

"Teddy, get off that tree!" Hermione cried, glaring at him. She was standing near the viaduct of Hogwarts, trying to get the devilish boy out of the tree for the last twenty minutes. Unfortunately, the weather had caught up with them. The sky was almost black and rain was falling heavy. Hermione had conjured a dry bubble around herself and Teddy, but she needed to get them inside soon. Minerva was expecting her this morning to introduce her to the staff.

"Why? I love it here! I can see the Quidditch field on the other side!" The boy yelled. He was five-years-old, taller than the average children of that age, with hair that changed it's color according to his moods, just like his late mother's.

"Because I came here to work and the Headmistress is waiting for us!" She tried to say calmly as her suitcase slipped from her grasp and landed on her foot. She howled in pain and kicked it, cursing.

"Granny says not to swear!" The boy jumped off the tree with ease and landed in front of her.

"Your gran is not your guardian for now, I am. And when I get pissed off, I swear!" She looked at him warningly.

"Why did I have to come, Auntie? I wanted to stay with granny Andromeda!" Teddy said, and came close making their dry bubbles connect. His hair turned dark blue.

"Your grandmother needed to attend some magical seminars and I offered to babysit you for sometime." Hermione tried hard to smile at the boy, even though her anxiety about the meeting with Minerva felt overwhelming. When she sent off her resume in various colleges around the country she didn't put Hogwarts on the list for a reason. Even though she loved the place where she spent seven years of her life, the recent events of the war had taken a heavy toll on her. She knew all her former Professors were still employed there. Moreover, that the press sweetheart and highly obscure Professor Snape was forced to work there on parole for ten years. All this had felt too heavy and too demanding to face so soon after the war. The problem was, she didn't stick to her original plan as intended and soon enough an owl was flying with a new resume straight for Minerva.

"I am not a baby!" The boy stomped his foot on the ground in anger. Hermione shook her head to clear it.

"Of course. You are a big boy now, Teddy. Now come on," she said and opened her arms. Teddy looked at her warily and then ran to embrace her. She squeezed him and lifted him off the ground. "You will meet some of the greatest wizards of our time in this school. You will even be taught by them in seven years!"

Teddy laughed uncontrollably. "I don't want to go to school…ha ha ha…I don't want to go to school!" As Hermione took him on an airplane ride. His hair turned bright red.

"I'll race you on the bridge. First one wins hot chocolate tonight!" She looked at him with mischievous smile.

Teddy laughed and began running above the stone bridge. Hermione took out her wand and
magicked her suitcases to follow her as she ran behind the boy. She felt the air blowing her hair away from her face and her robes snapped behind her back. She wandered at how far away those times of death felt to her now that she was here. The bridge had been repaired but nothing could chase away the memories of those dark times were she and Harry stood amidst the crumbling walls with blood on their hands and desolation in their hearts.

"Careful not to slip!" She warned as Teddy ran fast in front of her. The rain outside their dry bubbles were beating the ground mercilessly under the black sky.

"You can't catch me, you can't catch me!" Teddy cried in a sing-song manner and fell ear first upon a solid wall made of fabric. "Ow!" He grabbed his ear and fell on his back, soaking his pants. His hair turned violet and he looked up at a man that looked like a mountain.

Hermione inhaled sharply as the boy fell but then resumed her run and cried "HAGRID!" She fell on him with a spontaneous hug, then immediately, as if realising she was taking liberties, she pushed back and looked up to his face. A huge smile brightened her countenance.

" ‘Mione! So, good ter see yer!" he said with his heavy voice and Hermione closed her eyes and smiled.

Yes, I am home.

"Who's this young lad then?" Hagrid smiled widely and towered over the boy.

Hermione straightened her robes above her Muggle clothes and pulled Teddy up. "This is Nymphadora's and Remus's son, Teddy. I offered to babysit him for a few months while Andromeda is off to a seminar in Spain."

Hagrid's expression fell sad immediately. "He looks like his mom don' he?"

Hermione pressed her lips. "He does. How are you Hagrid? I haven't seen you since…”She stopped and licked her lips "I haven't seen in you in four years!"

"I'm happy as a bee! Still workin' me arse off under the best boss of the magical world," he said proudly.

"How is Minerva?"

"Com' I'll take yeh to her. She told me ter com' get yer. Yeh don' know how happy I am tha' yeh'll be working here, 'Mione!" He lifted her suitcase easily and led the way.

"I am equally happy, but also apprehensive. Come Teddy!" She pulled the boy close to her.

"Is he a giant?" Teddy looked curious.

"Summat of a giant." Hagrid harked.

"He is a half giant. His brother is a proper giant. How is Grawp by the way?"

"Happy livin' in the forest. The Headmistress 's takin' care of 'im. I get to spend a lot more time with 'im, also!" he said as they passed from the iron gates and entered the square plaza.

"I want to see him," she said.

"I want to see him too!" Teddy pulled her sleeve.
"Yeh're both gonna see 'im, don' worry." Hagrid smiled and the doors opened up to welcome them.

Hermione stopped and looked at the stone guardians that protected the school four years ago. They were again embedded in the wall crevices in silent vigil.

"I am home," she whispered and took a turn around herself. Hagrid shook his umbrella to get rid of most of the water. The torches on the pedestals were blazing a complete contrast to the wet blackness outside.

"Oh, big fire!" Teddy's eyes were bulging out of their sockets.

"Welcome to Hogwarts!" The strict voice of Minerva made Hermione turn towards the staircase.

"Minerva!" she smiled widely and walked up the stairs. She stopped in front of the older woman and grasped her hand cordially.

"Welcome, Hermione dear. It's an honour to have you amongst us again."

"Your shoes are huge!" Teddy was checking out Hagrid's boots.

"Me feet 're equally big!" The half giant harked.

"Who is this young man then?" Minerva asked.

"Teddy Lupin." Hermione said with a sad smile.

Minerva pressed her lips and nodded. "Hello Teddy. It's nice to meet you, young man," she greeted, drawing up and crossing her hands in front of her dress.

"Who are you?" Teddy asked as he began jumping on one leg around her.

"This is the mistress of the school baby. Uhm…the boss!" Hermione explained.

Teddy stopped jumping. "Can I jump, miss?" he asked as seriously as he could.

Minerva gave a constricted smile and looked fleetingly at Hermione. "You can jump anywhere but the moving staircases."

"Thank you, miss!" The boy resumed his hopscotch. "Can you jump too?" he asked Hagrid.

"If I jump th' castle will fall down!" Hagrid laughed heartily.

"Come, Hermione dear, I want to introduce you to the staff. They are expecting you in the Great Hall." Then she turned towards the half giant. "Hagrid, we are one member short this morning," she said meaningfully.

"Come here, Teddy. I'll show you a beautiful room where the roof imitates the sky outside," Hermione said and Teddy ran to take her hand.

"Don' worry ma'am. He slept in me house last nigh'."

"I told you to inform me of anything out of the ordinary that happens with him," Minerva seemed angry. Hermione looked back at them curiously.

"I'm sorry ma'am." Hagrid played with his umbrella nervously.
"Is he still in your cabin, then?" Minerva asked with an elevated voice.

"Still sleepin' I reckon."

"Go and wake him up. Tell him he is expected this morning."

"Yes ma'am." Hagrid bowed respectfully "'Mione I'm 'spectin' yeh fer a cup o' tea when yeh settle, okay?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." She smiled back at him.

"Follow me, dear girl," Minerva said and walked up the steps. "We have been looking forward to your arrival."

"Me too, Headmistress. Are you coming Teddy?" she asked, looking behind her.

"Come in." Minerva opened the doors for her and when she looked around her, faces broke in happiness. Many smiles and delighted faces looked at her. Many of the faces she had known for a long time, some she barely remembered, but all were welcoming and pleasant. She was overcrowded by people, suddenly, and she grabbed Teddy's hand in fear that she would lose him. She was attacked with a few embraces that made her feel rather uncomfortable in their forwardness, but mostly she moved easily through all the reintroductions. Pomona Sprout, Poppy Pomfrey, Filius Flitwick, Sybill Trelawney, Professor Binns and even Argus Filch. Rolanda Hooch gave her a sterner welcome, befitting her always distanced attitude, and passed her over to Aurora Sinistra. Finally, Hermione ended up facing Charity Burbage.

"Welcome! Welcome home again!" The Muggle studies Professor said to her with a huge smile of acceptance.

"Miss Burbage! I didn't know you survived your abduction by the Dark Lord. It's my fault for not following up on your situation. I thought they killed you in that damned house!" Hermione exclaimed grasping the woman's hand.

"An angel saved me." Charity smiled knowingly.

"You have made such a difference for us Muggle-borns with your brave stance. You are a legend amidst our community!" Hermione smiled.

"Legends are for books. We are here, together, ready to combine our forces in order to teach a new healthy batch of students. Are you ready for your trials Potions mistress?" Charity beamed at her. Hermione hissed. "Oh…I will do my best, but I cannot hide from you that I am anxious."

"No one in their right minds wouldn't be! You landed a teaching job in the most illustrious school of magic in the world!"

"You are not making things easier on me!" Hermione laughed.

"Leave the girl alone," Neville Longbottom said and Hermione froze before she faced him.

"Neville!" She smiled sweetly.

"Hello, Hermione! I am so glad we are going to be working together," he said.

"But Professor Sprout…?" she trailed off.
"Is still on the job, dearest." The plump woman said and grasped Hermione's shoulder. "But I needed a clever and able apprentice that would take care of the gardens and the apothecary and be ready to take over when I retire in two years time. Right, Neville?"

"Yes Professor," he said respectfully.

"I thought you were still studying, but I knew you always intended to return here to teach," she embraced her fellow Gryffindor warmly.

"We are so happy to be having old students as colleagues," Charity said. Both Neville and Hermione smiled. Teddy was moonstruck, watching tricks Professor Flitwick was performing with his wand.

Suddenly, the Great Hall doors opened with a crash and in came a very wet, very pissed off Snape. He slammed the doors behind him and stormed into the room before the scrutinising glares stopped him. Everyone had turned to look at him, Hermione more intensely than the others.

So. There he was. The man that had haunted her and her friends for seven years. The man that saved them from peril when there was no hope. The man she saw bleeding to death only to learn, long after the battle had ended, that he was amongst the survivors that had been sent off at St. Mungo's. The man whose memories Harry pushed her into the pensive to see, and after that the world as she knew it had shattered and had never become whole again.

He staggered a couple of feet more and then stopped again. He was nothing like she remembered. Out of his long bellowing robes and frock coat he was just a lank, tall figure dressed in black muggle clothes. He was dripping wet and she wondered why he didn't use a spell to dry himself. His hair was sticking to his tense forehead and hollow cheeks and fell low below his shoulder blades; longer than she had ever seen it before. He looked unkempt with several days of dark stubble on his cheeks and jaw. His dark eyes looked wild, like a caged animal. He bore nothing of the previously controlled distance that defined him all those years ago. He looked more like a prisoner of Azkaban than a member of the staff.

"Oh, dear me," Charity murmured next to Hermione and moved quickly to him. She grasped his upper arm and told him something in a low voice that didn't appear to have any effect.

"Professor Snape, we have been expecting you, come in," Minerva said and bypassed the moonstruck Hermione.

"Forgive…" He spoke in such a low voice that Hermione couldn't figure out the rest of his words.

"Don't mention it, now come. You are the last faculty member to be introduced to our newest addition," Minerva said with a smile. She took a hold of his upper arm and almost dragged him to Hermione who tensed unwillingly.

"Professor Hermione Granger will be taking over one of your previous positions. She is going to work here as Potion mistress. Hermione dear, Professor Snape is working as our Librarian now," Minerva said. Having reintroduced them, she stepped back happily, crossing her hands in front of her dress.

"Nice to see you again Professor Snape. It's an honour to be working next to you!" Hermione tried to put a smile on her face but his burning gaze stopped her. She offered him her hand, not even sure that she was supposed to do that.

His lips upturned in what could have been a try at a smile but ended up looking like a nasty grimace. He looked at her hand, dismissed it and then looked back at her eyes, making her squirm. She pulled
back her hand, her cheeks going red from embarrassment, looking left and right for support. That is when Teddy decided to intervene. "Why are you wet?" he asked and raised his hand grabbing a hold of Snape's turtleneck. He pulled it a couple of times to draw the man's attention.

Snape's eyebrows knit together in the most menacing look Hermione had seen in years and he glared at the boy. "What the hell is this?" he hissed.

Hermione pulled Teddy next to her and unclasped the boy's fingers from the wet pullover "A boy… he's just a boy. Forgive him Professor," she said with a worried expression.

"Why is he so wet, Auntie? Can I follow him around and splash in the puddles he is making?" Teddy asked and begun picking on his nose.

Severus curled his lips in distaste. "I didn't know that you are employing families now, Minerva. This school is going downhill fast, isn't it?" He spoke in barely a whisper trying not to hurry through the words. It was straining him so much.

Hermione felt her nape blazing with sudden heat and adrenaline shot through her as she gazed up at him. Just because she respected him to the utmost degree did not mean she would put up with his condescending attitude.

"Even if she did employ families, I don't see how that would concern you. It's not as if we are going to live in your chambers to ire you," she said cautiously, wanting to get her point across.

"You and this creature are bothering me right now," he pointed at the child angrily.

"Should I transfigure him to something more tolerable to you?" Hermione pressed her lips together, unable to stop sarcasm from creeping in her voice. Damn him! Even if she wanted to be civil and friendly with him, he stopped her from even trying with this haughty behaviour.

"I demand you remove this child from my presence," he whispered, not wanting to betray the remains of his voice to this insufferable woman.

"Severus please," Minerva tried, but Hermione was faster.

"You demand? Who are you to demand anything from me? You are not my professor anymore! And neither am I your student. I stand before you on equal ground, as a colleague!" Hermione rebuked steadily.

"This attitude is intolerable," he continued in his menacing whisper as he glared at her angrily.

"This is Nympandora's and Lupin's boy – not an intolerable attitude! His name is Teddy." Hermione rejoined with a tilt of her head. Trying again to reach out to him in some manner. He knew Lupin. He was friends with him, no matter the value he ever gave that word.

"I really do not care." Severus tried to manipulate his whisper and colour it with sarcasm, but failed. His face paled.

"I never asked you to care! And why the hell are you whispering? Did Mrs. Norris get your tongue or something?" she said triumphantly, but the brief pain she saw in his eyes wiped her smile away quickly.

"Hermione, the Professor - " Minerva, begun but he raised his hand so threateningly that Teddy ran and grabbed onto Hermione's leg.
"Enough! I shall not stand the presence of this underaged child inside my library. Be warned!" Severus hissed at both women.

"Don't worry I'll make sure he doesn't bother you at all," Hermione said and met his eyes. Daring him to continue.

Severus nodded and, with a warning glance at the small creature, he walked as majestically out of the room as his wet clothes and squishy boots allowed. Minerva sighed and crossed her hands in front of herself. When he was gone, it was as if the room exhaled in relief. Hermione pressed her lips together and rolled her eyes "I see some things never change," she said with a soft smile rubbing Teddy's back.

"Hermione dear, Professor Snape lost his voice in the war." Minerva winced.

Hermione looked up shocked. "What?"

"When Nagini tore his throat, his vocal chords were destroyed. He can only whisper – although he prefers not to speak at all usually. Today was an exception to that rule."

Remorse reared its ugly fangs and Hermione felt as if her stomach dropped into icy water. Oh, no! She thought and bit her lip. She had visited him many times in the hospital when he was in a coma. She had stayed with him as she had with other patients, to offer him comfort in his loneliness, but she didn't know about the damage to his vocal chords. In fact, she rarely – if ever – spoke with the doctors to learn any details.

At the time they probably didn't know the extent of the damage themselves. What she cared about was him waking up. When he did, she took care to never bother him again. Until now.

"Now this is awkward," she said looking down at the corridor he had left from. A feeling of sadness overflowed her; it was sudden and overwhelming. His voice had once been monumental, affecting its surroundings with its gravity. Now it was nil. This war had destroyed a lot of people.

"You couldn't have known of course." Minerva pursed her lips.

"I think I owe him an apology," she said honestly.

"I think you should keep away from him. Approach him only when you need something from the library and keep it formal. Use very few words, only what is necessary." Minerva frowned down at her hands.

Hermione lips turned down and met Minerva's eyes boldly.

"The war broke him completely. Try to be formal towards him even though the Gryffindor in you might want to lash out at times. He was a difficult man to begin with, now he is impossible." Minerva spoke solemnly and her voice broke near the end.

Hermione's eyes teared up unexpectedly. "The war broke all of us."

"Not like it did him. Believe my words and keep your distance. Don't aggravate him, please. His stay here is hanging by a thread. I don't want to lose him." Minerva sounded more emotional than Hermione had ever heard her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Professor Charity walk quickly out of the room.

"I know he works here on parole. It was all over the news. He cannot leave or he will face a trial."
Minerva winced briefly. "There are more ways to depart than one. He has been trying to find a way out for a long time now."

Hermione's lips twitched in confusion. "I won't aggravate him, I swear. My conduct back there was totally inappropriate. You should know that I deeply respect him. He did a lot more than just protect us all these years. He's a bloody war hero isn't he? I just find it difficult to handle his offensive attitude."

Minerva nodded sadly. "Not only you my dear. Now come let me show you your quarters."

The rest of the staff had formed several groups, discussing in low tones, while others were already departing with warm handshakes and a few comforting words.

"Are we going to sleep in the castle, Auntie?" Teddy pulled on her cardigan.

"Yes," she smiled.

"Near batman?"

Hermione harked. "Batman?!"

"The wet man that was making puddles? That's batman right?" Teddy asked.

Minerva covered her mouth and laughed lightly. "Charming, young man."

"I guess so, but don't ever tell him that, okay?" Hermione ruffled his green hair.

"He doesn't know he is Batman?"

"He doesn't want us to know that he is. It's a secret." Hermione placed her finger on her mouth to encourage his silence.

Teddy jumped a couple of times and clapped. "Yes, a secret. I won't say anything. Now can we eat? I am hungry!"

"Lunch is served at two and I shall expect you in my office after so I can show you around the Potion laboratories and apothecaries. You will have to work closely with Professor Sprout and her assistant Longbottom. We open the gates for the students in two day's time. We need to get through many details of your curriculum," Minerva explained, turning around at the third floor of the north tower. She took out a key and gave it to Hermione. "Welcome again, Hermione. It is a pleasure having you amongst the Hogwarts staff."

Hermione looked at the keychain that bore the initial "H" on it and a huge smile brightened her face. Yes, she was indeed home. A flash of sadness stained that happiness, however, when she remembered the desolation in Snape's eyes. She needed reintroduction to old constants, she needed to get to know things again, and she knew she would have to work hard, but she was home. For the first time in years she felt...peace.
Severus took out his keychain and unlocked the library doors. He strode across the shiny wooden floor with steady steps, making his way to his desk, feeling raw from yesterday. A couple of books flew past him and he pinned them with such a deadly glare that they fell to the floor, immobile. Even though this was a magical library filled with spells that moved books about all the time, he made sure that one glance from him was enough to stop any mischievous hard copy from moving about him magically. His command over the library was silent, but so efficient that even the restricted section fell quiet when he appeared at the narrow passage behind the chains.

The sound of unloading a huge paper pack on his desk echoed, the emptiness and the stillness of the place enhancing the jingle of his keys, as he placed them next to the pack. He chose this job as it didn't require him to use magic, because he loved books, but above all, for the silence that surrounded him. This was the one place in the whole castle where he could force silence upon everybody.

He unbuttoned his pea coat and picked up twelve volumes that needed storing in the restricted section manually, something he deeply appreciated.

"Good morning!" The happy voice of Charity made him look back at the entrance.

He gave her his silent greeting and walked to the restricted section.

"Damn, you look a dozen times better this morning." She followed close behind.

I don't feel like it, he thought and got ready to set down the books so he could unlock the chain. Her hand was upon his leather belt in an instant.

"Let me help." She unhooked the keychain and opened the gate. "Want me to charm them to follow you?"

Her constant tries to help him magically only succeeded in pissing him off. "No," he mouthed and moved steadily down the hall.

"Your hair is still partly wet. Want me to dry it?"

"No!" he mouthed again. Having to bathe and shave the muggle way had a few drawbacks, of course. He didn't have the patience to dry his hair with a towel and the castle didn't have any electricity, so using a blow drier wasn't an option. Most mornings found him with damp hair. Also, his face was almost constantly covered with stubble, he found it a burden to shave each morning.

"I can understand your refusal to work magically, but why not let the rest of us assist you?" She crossed her arms and remained at the entrance of the aisle.

He walked to each shelf and placed the books by hand. "Don't you have anything better to do this morning?" he whispered.

"No. How are you today?" She smiled at him.

He raised his brow and shook his head in dismissal.

"Where did you sleep last night? Hagrid's?"
Severus glanced up quickly but didn't speak.

"Yes, figure out as much when I saw you yesterday – dripping wet." She shrugged her shoulders. "What happened?"

He signed and locked the gate after placing the last book on the proper shelve. "Nothing," came his taciturn reply. He moved past her with deliberation and picked up several books along the way in order to return them to their rightful places.

"Then why did you look like a ghost in the Great Hall?"

His lips tilted to the side, and he gave her a quizzical look.

"Pale skin, glassy eyes. You looked almost transparent." She followed him closely as he walked up and down steps and zigzagged between shelves.

"If you hadn't noticed I was dripping wet." He tried to push her away with some distance in his tone. It didn't feel sufficient.

"It was not the weather that took a toll on you, it was something else." She looked at him thoughtfully.

"Care to tell me what?" He gritted his teeth. He wanted to tell her to fuck off, much like with Hagrid, but Charity was no ordinary witch. She was as close to him as a friend could get. The time they spent socializing before the war was a mere introduction to the seriousness of their friendship after he saved her from certain death at Malfoy Manor. After that, she just wouldn't leave him alone, and some days – like this one – he really hated her insistence.

"No. Why don't you tell me instead?" She rebuked.

"You know that useless banter hurts my throat," he whispered, telling her a half truth.

"Then speak when necessary and say only what's important."

"I have already done that." He glared at her and entered his circular desk that was overlooking all the library from the middle of the main hall.

"So, you feel fine, nothing happened yesterday, and you slept at Hagrid's because you are in love with him." She spoke nonchalantly.

He choked on his coffee and coughed until his eyes were bulging out of their sockets. She patted his back and conjured a glass of water. "Sorry. Here, drink."

He grabbed it and gulped at it quickly, all the while keeping his angry glance on her. His brows knitted threateningly as he pinned her down with a silent reproach.

"Very silly humour, forgive me." She smiled regretfully.

He raised his brows and tilted his head in a warning but did not honor her with an answer.

"I am just worried about you, Sev." She looked towards her brown tattered boots.

"I am fine." His low tone was barely heard. "Just leave me alone."

"Do not ask that of me." Her eyes looked at his solemnly and her forehead crinkled, but he didn't speak. "When my time came, you didn't leave me alone. You saved me". 
"So, I got lumbered with your solicitude for life? Oh, the joy." He placed the glass down and some water spilled on his papers.

"Why do you insist on acting hard and relentless with me? We both know the real you." She tried to be delicate with her words.

Gentleness was always lost in him, however. "I detest having to go through the trouble of hiding the real me."

"I know another Sev. He is a gentle soul that overlooked the terror of the Dark Lord and went out of his way to save a friend." She tried to touch his bicep.

He drew back as physical touches always troubled him. "You are deeply disillusioned." He tried to dry his papers with a towel, but her wand was upon them quickly. A silent spell set them straight and he felt the loss intensely, sighing heavily.

"I know I am not." She met his eyes kindly and offered him a smile.

"Then the rest of the world is," he snapped.

"I don't think the world is either." Her warm smile did not falter, instead it deepened to reach her eyes.

"Then I am." He titled his head and glanced at her acutely.

She flicked her pointer finger at him and winked. "Got it."

He straightened and swallowed, feeling rather frustrated. Instead of honouring her with a reply, he took a sip of his black coffee and sat down to begin some of his paperwork.

"And now you will ignore me." She stated with a lightheartedness that rubbed him the wrong way. He gave her the thumbs up.

"Did you let the elves clean and dry your clothes yesterday, or is there some laundry to be done?" She leaned on the desk next to him.

He pushed her out of the way, truly annoyed. "The elves did it."

"Thank the Gods you are allowing some of the magic in this castle to assist you." She sighed and looked up as steady steps drew her attention to the door.

Neville Longbottom walked carefully to the desk and set down a piece of parchment. "Good morning Professor Snape, Professor Burbage." He smiled widely.

"Good morning, Neville. Lovely weather for a walk by the lake?" Charity replied happily, rattling Severus's nerves.

He took the parchment and glanced testily at Neville, who cowered immediately.

"Y-yes, lovely weather." The young man agreed, checking the expressionless face of Snape as he read the parchment. "The list is from Professor Sprout, it's about medicinal herbs." He explained in a rush.

"What is the lovely Professor cooking now? Health potions?" Charity inquired happily.

"She wants to check on some rare roots that are the base for the advanced healing potions." Neville
looked at him warily, almost as if he expected to be graded at the end of the conversation.

Wordlessly, and without any need to comment on Sprout's and Longbottom's adventures through potions, he snatched the parchment and started down the corridor to pick up the requested books. The privacy of this job was his only solace and he valued it even more now that he was able to walk away from the busybodies surrounding his desk. It would have been much easier to call the books to him with a wordless spell, but the manual labor kept his mind from falling apart sometimes. Although today he felt a lot better and much more composed than yesterday, his mind was still prone to the occasional slip-up. However, having to go back and forth to get books was something that kept his emotional, and therefore magical, outbursts at bay.

"Oh, that's quite a list! Do you want help there, Sev?" Charity asked.

He glared at her, keeping himself from bursting into her mind to scold. Don't call me that in front of others! Wasn't it enough that he tolerated that sentimentalism without vomiting when they were in private? Now she needed to extend the annoying fluffiness in front of bloody Longbottom?

He moved deliberately through the sections, picking up book after book without rushing at all. The need to let them boil and simmer through all the useless socializing was too strong. Having found all the books, he hid himself behind a large bookcase, leaning upon a stack and closing his eyes. He took a moment to place the train of his thoughts back on track. The sad remains of some honorable part of himself wanted to tell Longbottom that they asked for the wrong books for advanced healing potions, but he was not the Potion's master anymore, Granger was. His lips turned down in distaste, remembering the short, bruising contact he had with her and the child in her care the day before. Another distasteful addition to an already repellant environment, the child a good accessory to this deformity. As if the school didn't have enough stupid underaged children to fill its halls without the new staff bringing in outside additions. Being the child of Remus Lupin was not much helping his aversion. He hoped she would be prudent enough to keep that kid away from his library. Oh…she'd better!

He stacked the books carefully and walked back to his desk. The boy had grown rather tall and was now standing on an equal basis to Severus. He stopped in front of him, and Neville looked at him warily. Severus simply released the volumes into Neville's arms. The boy lost his footing and his knees buckled for a second before he regained his balance. He looked at Snape and wondered at how strong that man truly was, even though he looked so disheveled all the time.

"Thank you, Professor." Neville tried a smile, but Snape had turned his back on him. "Professor Burbage." He acknowledged curtly.

"Tell Pomona I'll be down for a cup of tea and some munchies for brunch." Charity waved at him cordially.

"I may vomit," Severus hissed, unable to stop the grimace of disgust with all the pleasantries.

Charity scrutinised him as he donned his glasses and began writing in his long yellow parchments what books he had given out to Neville. Every now and then, he took a big stamp with a large "H" and stamped the identity cards of the books that had just been checked out. "You really do like this job, don't you?" she asked thoughtfully.

He met her eyes and raised his brow briefly before returning to his duty.

"Severus…?" Her voice trailed off until he was forced to look up at her. She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. "How are your magical mishaps going?" Her tone was careful and measured.
He felt his stomach sinking at the memory of the broken bottles at Hagrid's hut and the huge branch he had almost tore down yesterday. He wanted to be truthful and tell her what happened, but that would not end well. Besides, he controlled himself and kept his magic in check -most of the time. The instances when he lost control and ended up telekinetically twisting the environment around him were few. It only seemed to happen on occasions where his emotions got out of control. When he did lose control of his emotions, his magic ran wild and untamed; it did things he didn't consciously want. There was no need to speak about those rare days, though. He pouted his lips and gave her a quick thumbs up.

"You haven't had an incident since?"

"The leaky cauldron." He whispered and stamped another ID.

Charity raised her brows and twisted her lips in satisfaction "Almost two months now. Pretty tolerable. So not any emotional outbursts either?"

"No." He shook his head.

Charity seemed satisfied with that answer and he signed at how easily he had managed to sidetrack her once again, although his brain was telling him that was the worst thing that he could do. She was trying to help him, and he was hiding his problems. Nothing new there, he assured himself.

"So why did you sleep at Hagrid's?" She returned to the burning issue.

He pressed his lips together, deciding that in order to get rid of her he needed to give her an answer. "He shared the good ale," he returned nonchalantly.

"You went there to get drunk?" She chastised him.

"Just. Lay. Off. Th-." He tried to thunder at her, but his voice cracked, stopping him mid-sentence.

"Sev, don't push yourself." She tried to console him.

"Then stop pushing me!" He looked at her sideways and then leaned his forehead into his palm in exasperation. "You've been giving me the third degree all morning. Enough!" He whispered, trying to clear his throat. It was to no avail.

"I worry about you. Don't go there to spoil your body with booze. You have a hard time controlling yourself as it is." She spoke calmly trying to approach him.

Alcohol numbs me, he thought. He needed that distraction sometimes, although he refrained from telling her the truth about last night. There was no use in alarming her with another failed suicide attempt. He knew it would just create another sad outburst from her. And really what did it matter? His latest attempts were so sad that he didn't even really think of them as attempts to take his life, but rather very intense trials on his body.

"Your solicitude is choking me." He warned her.

"Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately?" She quirked her lips.

He raised his brow and glared at her, challenging her to say more about his appearance. He had enough issues as it was, why should he worry about pristine looks? "Really?" he mouthed.

She exhaled and closed her eyes. "I didn't mean it vainly, but health-wise. You look absolutely tattered."
He met her eyes in a sideways glance and shook his head, dismissing her. "Go away," he mouthed before returning to his papers.

"Don't get wasted with alcohol, Sev. You need to pull yourself together, not tear yourself apart." She sounded a little too caring for his tastes.

"Gods Charity, just leave already!" He hissed and glared at her warningly.

She leaned on his desk and her eyes looked dejected. Feeling satisfied that he finally put her in check, he turned back to his work until another pair of steps, lighter and quicker this time, entered the library. He didn't look up until he heard her voice.

"Good morning, Miss Charity, how are you?" Hermione smiled widely and looked about the library to find Snape. She stopped abruptly when she reached the reception desk. He was sitting hidden behind it, scribbling something in his slanted handwriting.

"I am doing fine darling, how about you?" Charity beamed up at her.

"For fuck's sake," he muttered low, not caring if he was heard. It was obvious they were not going to leave him alone this morning.

Hermione looked at him warily. "Good morning, Professor Snape." He didn't return her salutation, just offered her his palm. She looked at it, confused, for a few moments.

"Your parchment." He explained with his low, broken voice.

"My what?" Her brows came together quizzically.

"I assume you came here to ask for books, therefore you have a parchment with a list?" He looked at her intently.

Hermione's stomach dropped as she dug deep in her robes. She gave it to him with a quiet answer. "Yes, that's right." He ignored her.

"How was your first night amongst us?" Charity decided to socialize again, to his chagrin.

"As peaceful as I expected it. I've slept here for seven years. I have always loved this place."
Hermione was honest and outspoken with this friendly Professor, but every now and again her eyes fell on Snape who was studying her list. What struck her as strange was how long and wavy his hair was. He has grown grey ever so slightly. She noticed the silver locks in the front of his hairline that spread throughout the back sporadically. His eyes met her almost in angry inspection and her gaze fell unthinkingly to the dark stubble across his face. When exactly did he stop shaving? she wondered.

"You need all this now?" He whispered glancing at her. His gaze caused her to freeze.

"I know it's a long list, but I have to prepare for my classes tomorrow, Professor. I'll help you find them," she offered.

"No need," he replied succinctly. She followed his long steady stride across the sections with her eyes. His short pea coat seemed completely out of character; both with him and the surroundings. Where are his billowing robes?

"Ah, don't mind that old sour pot!" Charity threw her out of her intense observation.
"I will repeat myself: nothing has really changed around here." She spoke with sadness, which Charity picked up on.

"You don't sound happy to be here."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me! I am happy to be here. But this castle…I lost so many friends here. My memories and experiences here are not always pleasant ones." Hermione pressed her lips together, trying to find a proper way to convey her conflicting emotions about Hogwarts.

"We are all riddled with nightmares from that dark era." Charity dropped her eyes to the floor thoughtfully.

Hermione's skin crawled; this woman had been tormented by death eaters and almost died at Malfoy Manor. Her own brief torture from Lestrange would be considered a mere inconvenience compared to the defiling that Miss Charity had gone through. "I am truly sorry." She met the woman's eyes not even understanding what she was apologising for.

"Don't ask forgiveness for things you were not responsible for. Only ask for those you are." Charity stated wisely with a knowing smile.

Hermione looked up where the lean figure of Professor Snape was weaving intricate patterns between shelves, picking out book after book manually.

"Now, how do you feel about your first day tomorrow?"

"Quite anxious, I must admit. It feels I am returning as a student waiting to be sorted!" She smiled.

"You will be perfectly fine. You are the smartest witch that set foot here since Rowena Ravenclaw!" Charity beamed at her.

"I will certainly try to live up to everyone's expectations." Hermione felt the burden of her genius falling heavy on her shoulders.

"You'll have no trouble surpassing expectations." Charity brushed her off pleasantly and then strode out of the circular office. "Pomona is expecting me for a cup of tea. Care to join us?"

Hermione glanced fleetingly at Snape, who was carrying more than fifteen heavy books in his arms and pouted. "I really want to, but I have to sort out my classroom, go through the suggested curriculum, organise all my books, and check the storage room and ingredients."

"Your loss, darling," Miss Charity said in a sing song manner.

Hermione's sweet smile slowly vanished as she watched Professor Snape climbing a ladder and manually bringing down a heavy volume. "Why is he using the ladder?" Her voice was pondering and low but Charity heard her anyway.

"He cannot use magic." Her tone was neutral but the statement was shocking; Hermione's eyes snapped to Charity's.

"The Ministry forbade him?" her voice crackled with this unexpected revelation.

"Wrong choice of words. I meant to say he will not use magic." Charity corrected herself.

"Whatever for?" Hermione's brow darkened and returning her eyes to Snape.

"No one knows; no one can answer but him."
"How did it happened?" Hermione insisted. She needed an answer to this sudden twist of events.

"When he woke up from the coma he broke his wand in half and swore to never use magic again. No one believed him, but he has proven all of us wrong. He's been like this for four years."

"How can he operate like a squib inside Hogwarts?" she pondered.

"Unlike Mr. Filch, quite efficiently I must say. He runs the library with a much firmer hand than his predecessor and although he uses no magic at all, the magic free flowing in the library stops the moments he passes. Not an easy task; to command the environment simply by the strength of your personality is impressive." Charity's voice held a tone of admiration that geared up Hermione's mind.

She observed closely as he passed a stack of floating books with his heavy burden; they dropped to the floor respectfully. Hermione raised her brows.

"I'll leave you to your observations. The offer for tea still stands." Charity smiled, unaware of how enthralled her younger colleague seemed to be.

"No…uhm, really, but thank you! I will take you up on the offer this weekend, if you are both up for it." She needed to rebuke the offer, but didn't want to sound aloof or distant.

"Okay. Have a nice day my lovely!" Charity chimed.

"Buh-bye!" Hermione waved, then her eyes refocused on her old Professor. She huffed and gathered herself, walking up to him quickly and coughed a warning.

He turned, unsurprised, into the aisle and dropped her requests heavily onto a desk.

"Do you need any help?" she asked, trying to sound formal.

He shook his head in denial and climbed another ladder with her list at hand. He reached the top and begun searching the titles, pushing the ladder every now and again to go left or right.

Hermione had the choice to go back to the main desk and wait for him or stay and try to engage him in some form of conversation where she could convey her apologies about the day before. The recent revelation made her need to make amends slightly more urgent. Not only had this steely figure of authority lost his voice, but also his magic. "There, I see the book!" she exclaimed.

His lips curled up distastefully as he drew the rather humongous, one-thousand-page potion anthology with noticeable effort. When it released from the shelf, it's weight made him lose his footing on the ladder. There were two choices: either land with it on top of him or let it fly and grab the ladder. He was sensible enough to do the second, but before he knew it, a flash left Granger's wand and the book landed carefully on top of the pile. "Seems you could use some help after all." She offered a ghost of a smile; he made sure his blazing glance erased it from her face. He stepped down, fuming inside and frozen outside, brushed past her, and placed his arms under the huge pile of books. Seemingly without effort, he lifted them up and started his way back to his office.

"I can do that for you, if you'd like?" she offered with a measured tone.

He denied her an answer and continued until he reached the first steps. It was one thing to manage a great weight in his arms, but another to be unable to see where his footing should be. He struggled momentarily and decided to complete the task in two trips. He turned to go back to the study and divide the pile, when his arms were unburdened yet again. He saw the unmistakable flash of her wand lifting the pile in the air. He made sure that when he met her eyes his glare was scorching indignantly. She cowered with a slight jerk of avoidance.
"It's no big deal. Really," she said, trying to understand what she was doing wrong. She was only trying to help, but apparently she was making things worse.

"Since you are so decided to flamboyantly show off your wand skills, follow me," he whispered angrily and moved to his office – not expecting an answer from her.

It came nonetheless. "I am not showing off; I am helping you."

"I didn't ask your help!" he threw back at her as he entered his office. He expected skulking mannerism similar to her student days, but she surprised him. She dropped the pile of tomes on his desk and leaned an elbow on the edge. She then extended her right hand to him.

"I think we got off to the wrong foot, Professor. Good morning, Hermione Granger, Potion Mistress. I will be working with you for I don't know how many years to come. It's lovely to see you again. Now, can we act like we don't hate each other's guts?" She forced herself to smile even though she felt a glacial response pouring from him.

She had momentarily confused him and he frowned, not reaching to take her hand. She sighed and withdrew it. "I know it was a long shot, but just so you know, I meant what I just said. I know our past is full of differences, but I was really hoping we could start fresh. I know I'm partly to blame for our encounter yesterday," she tried. His rejection felt familiar but didn't really bother her, it had been expected.

"Partly?" he drawled, picking up a text. He removed the identification card and begun scribbling on it. After a moment, he pulled a pair of reading glasses out of his pocket and put them on, they had become necessary when he had turned thirty-eight, two years ago.

She paused and bit the inside of her lip to stop herself from retorting angrily. She was supposed to be offering him her apologies, but damned if he wasn't making it hard! "Ok, mostly." She forced the words out.

He didn't speak. He finished with the identification card and moved to the next book.

"Listen, I am truly sorry about what I said yesterday," she said, almost choking at the words.

"Which was?" he whispered. Somehow the lack of real volume in his voice had given it another texture.

"What I said about the cat eating your tongue. I didn't know," she reported nonchalantly.

"I didn't expect a Gryffindor to understand the importance of propriety," he reprimanded.

He heard the inhalation across from him. "I am trying very hard to be civil with you, but this is getting impossible. I didn't know what happened to your voice. My words were rude, but they were not malicious. I am offering you my apology one last time," she snapped. "But how about your rudeness to me? Your words about families were very demeaning." She heard the frustration and warning in her tone, but didn't regret it. He was asking for this.

He gave her a look and her teeth tightened in preparation of what was to come.

"I don't care for apologies." The icy reply that shoved her at least ten feet back. His refusal to apologise about his behaviour made her even more angry.

She tilted her head and straightened her robes. "Very well," she bit out, turning her eyes away from him. Looking at the empty aisle was a preference to the iceberg of a man on the other side of the
desk. He continued with his silent work, rattling her nerves with his disinterest in any social interactions but the most bruising ones.

"Will you need this for your chambers or the Potions laboratory?" His low tone came out as business-like as any whisper could.

Instantly, she jerked upright, a delayed sense of foreboding ran up her spine. She glanced over at him. "Do you think I missed a good volume for my class? Are these going to be too heavy for the children to read? Is my list insufficient or too much?" He should know what was best for her class, he had been teaching it since his twenties. Her greatest fear flared and she felt inefficient. To make matters worse, she had only one day to become sufficient.

She met his eyes with worry and instantly regretted her vulnerability under his stern scrutiny. "I have to document that information on the identification card," he clarified, sounding bored.

She relaxed and a low "Oh!" popped out of her mouth. His immobility alerted her to her lack of response. "For the Potion's class, of course." She cleared her throat and tried to sound business-like as well.

He resumed his work and to her relief he stamped all the identification cards and pushed the pile towards her wordlessly.

She spelled the books to follow her, but before leaving she decided to try one last time. "Thank you Professor. I hope our collaboration will get better with the passage of time, even in spite of the heavy past we share."

He held her gaze coldly for what seemed like an eternity, his nostrils flaring indignantly. "As long as you keep that child away from my library, our collaboration will remain as it currently is. That should suffice you."

The second icy push made her incline her head politely. "Very well Professor. Have a nice day."

He raised his brow without returning her farewell, and returned his attention to his papers once more. The amount of effort he had to put into verbal conversation that morning was exhausting. He was on edge and his composure was crumbling.

Hermione Granger was exceedingly annoying and her attempts to socialise with him completely unnecessary and frustrating. He allowed his gaze trail after her as she made her way out of the library with small quick steps, her books following her enveloped in an orange magical mist. When he was finally alone again, a serene feeling enveloped him and he was able to relax, dropping down into his seat at the desk. He threw his glasses to the side and rubbed his face vigorously. Last night's adventure left him raw and tired, and Hagrid's heavy ale gave him a lingering headache. Charity's insistence had only fuelled his annoyance and the presence of Granger was the proverbial cherry on top. The only thing he wished for was to close his eyes and get some sleep, but above all else, he wished to not use his broken voice for the rest of the day. He leaned his head onto his crossed arms and closed his eyes. The silence around him was a true blessing and he let his thoughts drift away from his torments.
That night Severus tossed and turned in bed to no avail. Sleep came to him in sort disturbed intervals between visiting the bathroom and brooding in the dark. Needing a drink and refusing himself as Charity's words held a dose of truthfulness. He was vulnerable to all kinds of addictions since he was unable to pull himself together unassisted. He felt as if he was unravelling during the night, only to pull his threads back in during the day under the examining looks of the Hogwarts staff.

Near dawn frustration overtook him and he decided to forget about sleep. He pulled a thick black scarf above his pea coat and on purpose left his considerable amount of hair down in order to protect himself from the morning breeze. He made it through the dark and silent hallways to the astronomy tower and remained there for a rather long time observing the horizon breaking dawn. The black becoming deep blue and then slowly shifting until the first orange streaks appeared.

Today was the last day before the school opened up it's doors for the new school year. He had most of the day free since his library was always prepared for any occasion. He was not a man to prepare the last minute. In the evening he had to appear in the small party that Minerva gave for the staff each year. A tradition passed down from Albus. He was going to skip it, but for three years in a row a very insistent Charity kept knocking on his doors until he followed her grumpily. This year he would try another approach. Appear early, make everyone happy and half an hour later find an excuse to return to his rooms.

"What are you brooding over son?" the quiet voice of Albus intruded his thoughts.

His eyes checked on the ghost lingering next to him and he signed "How falling off this railing would feel. Care to tell me?" he whispered feeling his brow crease deeply.

"Not in a good mood as usual. It's a pity since this days promises to be beautiful" Albus said complacently.

"Says the man I killed…." Severus was unable not to let acid creep in the remains of his voice.

"Says the man that asked you to help him" Albus corrected patiently.

He inhaled deeply and his gloved hand tightened around the rails "I'm not in the mood for this" his whisper sounded dark.

"You led the conversation to dark paths, I just asked your thoughts" Albus spoke casually. Seemingly not bothered by Severus's foul mood.

"My thoughts are always dark" the hard retort.

"Exactly" Albus nod seemed kind and caring.

"Talking hurts me" he offered trying to keep himself in check. His eyes never left the horizon.

"Vocalising hurts you, talking helps you" Albus wised.

Severus's lips twisted and he bit his lower lip in annoyance "I need neither"

"You don't know what you need"

"And you do…" his lips upturned in a brief sarcastic grimace.
Albus seemed to respect that last rebuke for several silent moments and Severus felt his body tense from the presence of the ghost "The doors are opening tomorrow. Are you ready?".

"Your library will work to perfection, rest assured" he whispered indifferently.

"I had no doubt about that, I know the professionalism in you. I was asking how you felt about tomorrow" Albus clarified.

"Rather annoyed actually, but that's a constant for me"

"Will you go to the party tonight or am I asking too much?"

"I will go"

That paused Albus who looked at him warily "You will?"

He nodded silently and clasped his hands behind his back. His head lowered thoughtfully.

"Well that is a pleasant surprise. You have always made my life hard about that party" Albus smiled reluctantly.

"It's simply useless hobnobbing"

"I think you have become a grumpy old man" Albus smiled.

"My mood is perfectly excused" he whispered, pain slowly creeping in his throat.

"Why Severus?"

"Because I am forced to work in the place that sucked the soul out of me all these years" his lips thinned and his eyes squinted in anger.

"I tried to talk to the Ministry. Shackerbolt can be open for persuasion, but the Wizengamot won't have it. They want you under parole"

"They chose this place on purpose" he muttered.

"On purpose?"

"It's my prison"

"Severus…" Albus didn't know what to say.

"Having to relive memories each and every day. Quite a strict condemnation don't you think?"

"Is that why you almost killed yourself again the other night?" Albus's voice sounded heavy and criticising. His previous try on a lighter mood crashed under Severus's heavy words.

"I suppose I have to thank you for not telling Minerva" he looked around at the white figure and the dryness was clear in his voice.

"Will this stop?" Albus frowned.

"Not unless I manage to free myself from my bondage. One way or another" his head lowered and his eyes looked up intensely.

"Your bondage lingers inside you….even if you are free of Hogwarts you'll still be a prisoner"
Severus gave a curt nod and lifted an eyebrow "Exactly" he breathed. Albus remained silent on that last rebuke. His eyes felt penetrative with attendance but Severus didn't linger long. He turned his back and walked away from the astronomy tower without a single word.

No one followed or tried to call him back. It was a blessing that Albus didn't deem it wise to come to the astronomy tower whenever Severus decided to visit, which was rather often. Nevertheless the old wizard escaped his painting more often than not and Severus found himself in forced company time and time again. Between him, Minerva, Hagrid and Charity he found few places of perfect solitude and that was done on purpose by all four.

He wrapped his arms around his shoulders to keep himself together, and walked solemnly towards the library. There, maybe he could find some relative peace until the rest of the staff woke up. He lowered his eyes to the stone floor when a voice stopped him sort.

"Hi mister"

His blood froze in terror for a few seconds and then he turned around to see the little creature Granger brought in the castle.

-Lupin's son-

He looked both ways to see where Granger was "Where's your guardian?" he whispered.

"My what?" Teddy was pulling a wooden horse from a string that was making way too much noise.

Severus's eyes squinted maliciously. If he found that Granger left this child unattended he was going to give her a piece of his mind "Your…nursemaid" he tried again.

"My what?" Teddy run once around him pulling the horse.

Severus closed his eyes and called on his patience which was thin "Your…Granger"

"What's a granger?" Teddy looked confused.

"What are you doing out here unattended?" Severus hissed.

"What's unotenet?" the child paused and looked up at him totally bewildered.

-oh for fuck's sake- A large palm covered his face and he inhaled trying to control the wrath that was crawling to the surface quickly.

"Where's …" he struggled for a moment behind his hand "…Hermione?". Her name sounded weird in his mouth.

"My aunt is sleeping" Teddy having fed his curiosity enough turned around and started running in circles around Severus.

"She left you unattended whilst she is sleeping?" he muttered and his eyes blazed in anger.

"I'm not unotenet. I am four and a half!" Teddy claimed seriously.

Severus's brow rose to his hairline "Does she always let you go for walks alone?". His hands clasped behind his back and he loomed above the child.

"I don't know" Teddy smiled up to him unaffected by his size and foreboding looks.
"Why did you leave your rooms?"

"I'm hungry mister" Teddy flicked one shoulder and hopscotched. The horse did the same resulting in a rumpus.

"Stop that immediately!" Severus scolded.

"Why?" Teddy looked disappointed but stopped.

"You are flaring up my headache" he looked about him making sure that this Granger woman was not somewhere close by. Oh, she would hear about this one alright.

"I'm doing what?"

"My-head-is-in-pain" Severus spat out each word trying to scare the boy with his glare. Apparently it didn't work.

"Maybe it's the mask" Teddy begun picking his nose.

"The what?" Now it was Severus's turn to regress to an inane four year old.

"The mask you are wearing" the boy continued.

"I am not wearing any masks" he rebuked becoming more confused with each answer.

"Don't you wear it when the city of Gotham calls?" Teddy's eyes grew big in query and his finger froze inside his left nostril.

Severus's stomach twisted "The city of Gotham?" his brows entwined and his mouth twisted in a puzzled grimace.

"Aren't you Batman?" Teddy looked up at him in deep concentration.

Severus's head dropped and he squinted "No" he whispered still unable to believe he had been drawn in such a conversation.

"But auntie says you are!" Teddy said in despair.

"Your aunt says I am Batman?" his eyebrow rose critically.

"Yes" Teddy nodded manically.

Severus fumed inside and he bit his lip in frustration. This woman ridiculed him in front of a four year old. The gauntlet had been dropped -and she was acting so full of remorse at the library, well-he thought and his body stiffened on the insult received.

"Well, I am not and leave your nose alone!" Severus berated one more time "Andromeda did a poor job with your manners"

"Granny!" Teddy squeaked and started running circles around him once more.

"Granger is going to hear about this" he muttered behind his tight jaw and looked down at the child "Where do you reside?"

"I do what?"
Severus plastered a palm over his face again and positively fumed.

"Are you ok mister?"

"Where-is-your-room?" Severus spoke slowly trying to control his anger from getting out of control.

"I know, it's back here" Teddy showed with his finger.

"Come on" Severus didn't wait for the child. He commenced walking down the hall.

"Where are we going?" Teddy run past him and the horse crackled on the stone floors.

"I am taking you back to your room"

"I am hungry" Teddy offered the useless information.

"I don't care"

"That's rude! Granny says that it's rude not to offer people food if you have some!" Teddy stopped in front of him and placed his small hands on his waist.

The scowl he tried looked so ridiculous that Severus felt his anger backing away slowly. He pursed his lips "Ask your nursemaid…your aunt for food"

"I don't want to wake her" Teddy flicked his shoulders and begun hopscotching again.

He observed the child jumping around for a moment. Looking clueless at the difficulties of the world. Possibly not even old enough to understand how his parents had died. When he inhaled deep in recollection he felt that his anger had backed away somewhat. For the first time in ages he regretted his decision to exist without magic. A flick of his wrist could have offered the child food and he would be left alone. The next best choice under the circumstances was walking the kid to the kitchens.

-Or take him to Granger and let her look after him- Well, that would have been the most proper course if it wasn't for the fact that the kitchen elves begun deliveries after seven in the morning. At five no one would be around but the bakers. -And the kitchens are down the next corridor. Besides you have a key to their doors, and she doesn't- his mind reminded him.

"Can I eat?" Teddy reminded him.

He looked down at the boy from his long nose and pursed his lips "Fine, come on" he wanted to bark, but he only managed a cracked sound that jittered his chest.

"Do you have a cold?" Teddy run after his long strides "I sound like you when I have fever"

"No" he grumbled and hoped the boy would shut up for a moment.

"Granny makes me drink chamomely with hunie. Drink that" teddy continued unfazed.

"Chamomile and honey" he corrected.

"Chamomale…"

"Cha-mo-mile" Severus hissed.

"Cha-mo-mile"
"and ho-ney"

"and u-ney"

"HO-NEY" Severus glared at the boy.

"U-NEY" Teddy repeated with fervour.

"Bloody hell you're gonna cause me a stroke" he whispered and he opened the door to the kitchens.

"What's a stroke?"

"Something that would probably benefit me…" Severus entered the kitchens that were empty and took banana from a fruit bowl. He offered it to the child hastily and left quickly.

Teddy followed him closely "Can you open it for me?"

"A banana is not a box to open. Peel it…can you peel it for me" he whispered tensely.

"Can you peel it for me?" Teddy gave him the banana.

"Please…" Severus's eyebrow warned him.

"Please?" the boy moved his body from side to side impatiently.

His jaw tightened and he snatched the banana "Fine" he grumbled. When he finished he gave back "Now walk me to your room"

Teddy took a big bite and then beamed up "here, it's here come on"

Severus followed the child down the corridors, feeding his anger again with how easily Granger left that boy out of her supervision. When she was a student here she was the most responsible of the golden trio. How could she leave an underaged child unattended to roam the dangerous hallways of Hogwarts….this creature could have easily ended on the moving staircases with grim results.

They reached a door and the boy pointed at it "I sleep here" he took another bite from his banana.

Severus gave a curt cold nod and rapped the door with his knuckles mercilessly. He stopped for a second and resumed intending to piss off Granger. When Hermione opened the door she was holding a blanket around her nightdress. Her hair was a brown mess and her eyes half open.

"What are you doing here?" she asked totally taken aback. The last thing she had been expecting was Snape knocking down her door at ...."What time is it?" she asked in an afterthought.

"Five in the morning" he whispered and glared at her resentfully.

-ok- "And what are you doing here at this hour?!" she pulled back suspiciously.

"Returning you this" he pulled Teddy from the collar of his fleece and brought him forth.

Hermione's heart jumped on her throat and she lunged to grab Teddy from this man's hands "Are you ok darling? What happened to you?"

"I am ok” teddy took another bite from his banana oblivious of the turmoil he had caused.

Hermione looked up to the man whose expression was even darker than his clothes "What did you
do to him?" she spat angrily.

Severus felt his brow raising testily at another insult from her. Not that he had been expecting manners, but this repeated disrespect was annoying him beyond belief "Found him roaming the hallways ….unattended" he spoke low and slow trying not to hear his voice break.

"Yes, I am unotenet" Teddy agreed and run in the room dragging his horse behind.

Hermione felt her stomach dropping first at the revelation that she had lost the child and second at his tone when he spoke the word unattended. She hurried to put things in order "Wait a minute, I was asleep, I didn't know he left…"

"That's the problem" he tilted his head indicating that this was her inefficiency. Plain and simple.

"I have put wards in my rooms, the door couldn't have been opened" she said looking at the hinges and checking the handle in a futile effort to understand by eyesight alone what took place.

"Apparently it did" he hurled back at her.

"I assure you that I don't understand what happened" she felt confused, sidetracked and tripped up. The anxiety about the child laid to rest as she saw him jumping on the couch all full of vigour and joviality. Yet, she was still half awoken and Snape had caught her totally off guard.

"Assure me nothing! This shall not be repeated. I hold you responsible for this child's care as his nursemaid. He should not roam the castle alone at five in the morning and less so, be left in the care of others! This will be reported to Minerva and if I see a repetition I am going to report your inefficiency straight to Mrs. Tonks" he glared at her angrily.

"You know Andromeda?" she shook her head not even understanding in her sleepy state why his acquaintance with Teddy's granny was more important than his warnings.

He raised his brow and pursed his lips.

"Of course you do, I am sorry Professor. You are right, this shall not be repeated. I don't know what happened and how he got out when I was asleep, but I will find out" she tried to pull herself together and sound responsible. To be an adult.

"See that you do" his fiery eyes slighted her.

She straightened her body and pulled the blanket closer to it. She nodded curtly not wanting to be subjected to anymore scrutiny "Thank you for bringing him home".

He examined her for a few more moments, making her shift her feet nervously. "Before I go. I find it inexcusable that you led the child to believe I am a fictional character from some silly muggle comic book" he glared at her with eyes that spewed fire.

"What?" she frowned in confusion.

"Batman" the succinct whisper.

"Batman?" she asked her features showing true surprise.

He raised his brows as if that was enough of an answer.

"Wait! How do you know about muggle comic books?" the confusion obvious in her features.
"You are diverting!" he warned.

She straightened "Ok, then, why didn't you tell him the truth yourself?"

"You made this theory possible to him, you are the one responsible to undo this rubbish!" he whispered menacingly.

She signed "Fine! I'll tell him you are not Batman, ok?"

He inhaled and his eyes narrowed down on her "Do try to confine him in your rooms when you are reposing. There are plenty ways to go about it, you are a witch correct?" he hissed but before she had the time to continue he spoke again "….I do expect you to be the carer of this creature and not rely on others to do the job for you"

She fumed "Very-well!"

He gave her a curt nod and walked down the corridor with a self assured step that rubbed her the wrong way again. Her nostrils flared and she blew through her nose a whole bout of anger. Then she turned to Teddy who was hopscotching again whilst eating a large banana. She frowned and closed the door.

"How did you get out Teddy?" she asked.

"I said alamora. You do that all the time" the boy said nonchalantly.

"How did you bypass the wards darling?"

"What's a ward?"

"Didn't you feel sick when you went to the door?"

"Yes, but I said the words you did and the feeling went away"

Hermione's brow rose to the ceiling. There was no doubt that Lupin's son was incredibly versed in magic. He was way too young to use such magic without a wand, but then again she was no different in his age. Then her eyes fell on the banana "Who gave you this?"

"Batman"

She twisted her head in confusion "Batman? The guy who brought you here?"

"Yes"

"Why?"

"Told him I was hungry" the boy smiled widely.

Hermione got ready to say something but stopped. Then she looked back at her door. Snape giving a small boy food to appease their hunger seemed otherworldly to her and came in complete contrast with the attitude he gave her at the door. Just what exactly was he trying to do here? She remembered his words and kneeled in front of Teddy

"Was he polite to you?"

"don't know"
"did he talk nice?"

"He used weird big words" the boy flicked one shoulder and gulped down the rest of the banana.

"You know he is not Batman right?" Hermione asked.

"You told me he was and to keep it a secret"

"You didn't keep it a secret. You told him!"

"I just asked him about the mask" the boy started moving his bottom and twisting around. His hair was bright orange since the moment Snape brought him to her door.

"Ok ok…let's take this from the top" she paused and looked at the boy thoughtfully "He is not Batman"

"He isn't?"

"No"

"Then why did you tell me he was?"

"I thought he was"

"What's his name?"

"Didn't you ask him?"

"Nope"

Hermione couldn't help but sigh deeply at all this. She took one last long look at the closed door, as if it would divulge all of Snape's secrets. Any new wards would have to be placed without Teddy hearing. He was able to mimic her magic without a wand. Making a mental note to communicate the boy's abilities with Minerva later that day, she tucked him in bed and insisted that he tried some more sleep. Teddy was adamant that he was not sleepy, but half an hour later he was softly snoring away. Hermione though was unable to sleep anymore, so she began unpacking their things. At one point the haughty face of Snape reminded her to take care of the child or else he would notify Andromeda. She frowned deeply as Mrs. Tonks never mentioned an acquaintance with this man before, but most of all because Teddy had been unlucky enough to be found by Snape that morning instead of a more friendlier teacher.

-but then…he did give Teddy a banana- her mind reminded and the crease of her frown grew deeper.
Acts of consideration

That evening found Hermione in the theatre for the Hogwart's party that took place each year before
the first day of school. After a long day sorting books in the Potion's classroom, cleaning up old
ingredients and checking the apothecary she felt thankful for the break. Professor Flitwick made a
careful comment about her appearance and hygiene when she went to pick up Teddy.

A bath and a quick late lunch for the child were her first priorities the moment they got back in their
rooms. She had to get both of them ready for the party that evening. Not only was she waiting for it
impatiently she was also proud to participate in it as a staff member now. Rumours about the
interactions and alliances between the Professor run wild amidst the student community during her
school years and now she had the chance to find out first hand. Without wanting to linger too much
on personal grooming she chose a simple purple tube dress that reached at her calfs and donned the
black teaching robe Minerva gave her upon arrival. Taming her hair in a tight bun she felt satisfied
enough in her simplicity and dressed up Teddy in a dark green suit that he seemed to hate.

A couple of hours later after thoroughly enjoying a perfect dinner she was now cradling a glass of
red wine and discussing amicably with Professor Flitwick about Teddy's abilities.

"You say wandless?" the tiny Professor asked.

"Apparently, he insists he used his hands"

"That is quite extraordinary. The child must have his abilities checked. Does Mrs. Tonks know?"

"She never mentioned anything to me. Have you noticed anything from him today?" Hermione
leaned closer to catch his eyes.

"No, but the child is too young to understand this rare ability to use advance magic subconsciously.
You need to talk to Minerva about this. I dare wager that he needs to be checked on some deeper
level and I am not equipped to dive into people's minds" the Professor smiled apologetically.

Hermione's lips turned down "I will most certainly talk to the Headmistress". She looked back at the
cat eyed witch Rolanda Hooch that had shortened a closet broom to Teddy's size and was telling him
how to ride it.

"Have you got the Potions class ready for tomorrow?" the Professor took another drink from a
passing waiter by using his wand to levitate it.

"I think so yes. I laboured hard and I hope my tries will prove sufficient" she bit both her lips feeling
a wave of nervousness passing from her stomach. Another sip from her wine helped.

"You smelled the labour" Flitwick laughed heartily and she blushed "Glad you took the time for a
bath dearest"

She covered her mouth and smiled half embarrassed and half amused when a hand landed on her
shoulder "Having a nice time Hermione?" it was Neville. Bearing a grin and a full glass.

"The food was brilliant, but the company beats all" she raised her glass saluting both Flitwick and
Neville.

"I am trying to get away from Professor Sprout" he conspired.
"What did you do?" Hermione tried to find the stout Professor.

"I tore away some Mandrakes that were too young, and broke off some branches. She has been chastising me ever since" Neville looked truly fearful "Sorry Professor" he turned to Filius.

"Don't worry lad, my lips are sealed" the small man brushed him off.

"How is it working with her?" Hermione said.

"She is an ingenious herbalist of course and I have a lot to gain from her" Neville shook his head gravely.

"She is a sweetheart when you don't mess with her gardens" Flitwick warned.

"Of course I remember her furious breakouts when one of us accidentally went through the greenhouses without her knowing" Hermione covered her mouth in sudden mirth.

"Well you were not angels darling...you were quite the daredevils all three of you. Neville was an angel in comparison" Hooch intervened. She was holding Teddy by the hand.

"We were quite troublesome I know" Hermione's cheeks flushed red "Are you having a good time darling?" she asked the boy.

"Yes I love it here auntie" Teddy laughed happily and disengaged from Hooch to run out to the balcony.

"I'm going after him Hermione" Neville said and followed the boy.

"Thank you Neville" she raised her hand to his back.

"You know Mr. Filch is getting rather pissed off with you" Hooch raised her brow.

"What did I do?" she frowned trying to locate the squib.

"You left that damned car near the main gates and tomorrow we have the students arriving. He doesn't want them to see it"

"My parent's Corsa?" Hermione winced feeling guilty of abandoning the car the moment they arrived. She had taken it from her parent's home in order to bring Teddy at Hogwarts since the Express was coming three days after the day she was expected. Teddy was not allowed use portals, the floo or apparition, because he was not yet eight years old. The only other option was flying, and for Hermione that was not even debatable. So when she offered to babysit the boy for three weeks, the only way of reaching Hogwarts was either by train or by car.

Mr. Weasley offered to lend her their car, but Hermione already had her parent's. A rather fast little Corsa that she learned how to drive early on. They reached the gates quite well, but after she unloaded the luggage and she tried to start it up again in order to hide it in the woods, it was not responding. She left it there forgetting to place a cloaking spell.

"That's the one...dark blue and rather angry looking piece of machinery" Hooch smirked.

"It's not starting up. Something is wrong with it. I have to check it"

"Place a cloaking spell on it because Filch is after your blood" Hooch rolled her eyes.

"I will do it tonight, thank you for reminding me. I have totally forgotten" Hermione smiled kindly.
That is when glass hitting upon a metal tray drew her attention and she looked up. Snape swept across the room towards the balcony. Miss Burbage was running after his long strides "Severus, wait". Hermione pursed her lips and looked at her own glass. It was not her style to be a busybody, but the rest of her company was looking carefully at the same scene.

"Hello Filius, Rolanda, Hermione dear" Minerva said and they all turned.

"Good evening Headmistress. Your party has been so good I have forgotten my woes about tomorrow" Hermione hurried to get involved with something other than what was going on at the balcony.

"You are so kind, and I am sure that tomorrow you are going to do just wonderfully" Minerva smiled reassuringly.

"Minerva, Hermione wanted to communicate with you a few things about Teddy. I think it's rather important" Filius intervened "I hope you don't mind Hermione dear"

"No, not at all"

"What's wrong with the boy?" Minerva seemed worried and Hermione hurried to explain what happened that morning and the boy's abilities.

"I think Filius is correct my dear, the boy must be checked on a deeper level and there is only one person amongst our staff able to undertake this" she looked rather hesitant to continue. Fillius shook his head in disappointment and looked towards his pointy boots. Hooch offered a silent whistle and rocked her head in negation. Hermione somehow didn't want to ask that question but it came out nevertheless.

"Who?"

"Professor Snape, but he is currently unwilling to use any magic. Thus we are officially quite stuck in concerns to the boy. I suggest you raise your wards without him seeing you and also place a notification ward around his bed, so you'll know when he gets naughty during the night" Minerva offered.

"I have done that already" her eyes looked at the darkness of the balcony and her stomach sunk
"Thank you for the suggestion" she smiled at Minerva.

"Come, Professor Sinistra wants a chat with you about the possibility to use potions in order to see further into the star formations. She had read somewhere in the encyclopaedia of advanced potions that there is way to do it and she won't take my word that it's impossible. She needs the opinion of a professional" Minerva engaged her arm and before she knew it she was been dragged off towards the bar. She didn't think of refusing, even though her mind was pulling her out onto the balcony. She wanted to check on Teddy and his misbehavin.

-.-

"I won't let you come to harm as long as I can help it…” Charity spoke in a low tone behind his back. Discreetly, for they were not alone anymore.

"You have elevated what happened back then to impossible heights…and you have taken on a role that I have not bestowed upon you" he hurled back in a threatening whisper.

"You saved my life…how much more can I elevate that act?" she winced truly confused at his stubbornness.
"It's history, let go" he hissed and cupped his forehead.

"Sure, I'll let go of history, but not of you now. How many glasses of wine did you consume tonight?" she was obviously angry with him.

"Not enough to shake you off of me" the hard rebuke.

"Eight! Sev! Eight, what are you trying to do to yourself?" she whispered and grabbed his bicep. She squeezed him mercilessly.

"They are just enough to keep me in this abhorrent menagerie that you call party. It should suffice that I came" he drew his arm back, but her nails clutched him harder offering him sharp pain above the clothing.

"I would have preferred if you stayed in your precious library without any alcohol. You are already fraying at the edges, and you add alcoholism to the whole mess. You are dedicated to destroy yourself aren't you?" her voice broke and he winced at this sentimental representation.

He swallowed and squeezed his eyes tight. He tried to stop himself from giving the retort and exposing himself more, but it was too hard. In the end it rolled off his lips with his exhalation "I am already destroyed". Her hand relaxed on his bicep and he lowered his palm. His eyes met hers and saw such complete sadness that he wished to disappear. -foolish woman- he drew his arm away again and she released him.

"Can I go to him please?" Charity's eyes left him blessedly alone and she looked back at Teddy and Neville. Severus looked at them above Charity's shoulder.

"I am not sure Teddy, we have to ask your aunt first" Neville was speaking way too loudly.

"Can I go ask my aunt and then come back to the Mister, please?" Teddy asked carefully.

"I am so sorry Professors, we didn't mean to barge in your conversation, but Teddy wanted to come see you" Neville looked up with a regretful smile "Now Teddy first you ask auntie Hermione, and then we ask the two Professor's if they are willing to have your company for a little while".

Charity intervened. She placed her hand above Neville's with a kind smile "Why don't you go and ask Hermione about the boy. We'll keep a look out for him in the meantime" Neville looked at them warily "It's ok, really. Me and Professor Snape just finished our talk. Let them boy stay with us for a while if he wants"

"I don't want him to bother you, I have to talk to his aunt" Neville insisted.

Severus felt his head tearing him apart "Longbottom, leave him and go" he admonished.

"Are you sure?" Neville pressed.

Severus landed his large hand above Neville's and tore the child away from him "You are the one bothering me right now. Go!" he spat trying not to speak loud.

"Neville, if you want, go and call his aunt. We will take care of him in the meantime" Charity kept on smiling stubbornly.

Neville withdrew "Thank you Miss Charity, Professor. I am going to inform Hermione" he spoke quickly and left them blissfully alone.
"Are you ok Teddy?" Charity asked the boy.

The boy nodded and drew his hand away from Severus, only to grab onto his thigh. Severus raised his arms away and glared at the child unable to believe what was happening.

"Now don't corner Sev here, he is going to freak out on you" Charity's smile turned into honest mirth.

Severus glared at her helplessly "Can you do me a favour? Go find his aunt, because I fear Longbottom will lose his way"

Charity left them with a soft laugh "Be back in a moment"

When they were left alone Severus lowered his arms carefully and tried to look out into the darkness. To forget what clung on his thigh.

"Sev's your name Mister?" Teddy asked releasing his leg a little.

Severus's eyes grew larger than life and his palms landed on Teddy's shoulders "No, you never call me that" he warned and as gently as he could he tried to unglue the child.

"What's your name then?"

Severus grimaced truly annoyed "You can call me Professor Snape I suppose. Now can I have some space?"

"What's a space Presser Snape?"

"Can you let go of my leg?" he glared down at the boy and tried to look menacing but he was met with smiling eyes as the boy let go of his thigh.

"Sorry Presser Snape" Teddy jumped lightheartedly.

Severus's eyes thinned and he inhaled trying to keep his patience "Don't you want to go inside to find you aunt?"

"No"

"Why?"

"I like you" Teddy beamed up at him.

"You...are..what?" Severus felt almost disoriented at that answer.

"Can you do a magic trick for me?" Teddy asked playfully.

"Uhm, no..i am sorry" Severus shook his head still trying to recover from that blow. The boy unnerved him.

"I thought everybody here could do magic" Teddy tried to climb on the marble railing and slipped. He fell down messily but that didn't stop him from trying again.

"No, not all can" Severus whispered trying to gain back his composure. His anger had backed away so swiftly he didn't even notice. He straightened his frock coat in an effort to gather himself.

"I can do some magic, wanna see?" Teddy smiled up to him.
Severus's brow rose slowly "I don't know" he said slowly.

"I think you do, magic's fun!" Teddy said and moved his arms around manically. Small colourful orbs came out of his hands and began dancing around him. Slowly making their way around Severus who took a step back abhorred.

"Yes, I see, enough of this now please" he whispered and glared at the boy strictly.

"I like the colours, don't you?" Teddy lowered his hands but several orbs remained, circling around him.

"I don't particularly enjoy colours. Tell me who taught you wandless magic?" he felt puzzled at the boy's ability. Nothing extraordinary of course for someone that was moving his whole room at the age of four, nevertheless it was a rare occurrence to meet such power from such a young age. Admittedly this boy had the potential to grow up a great wizard.

"What's a wandless?" Teddy remembered that he needed for some reason to climb the banister.

"A stick that makes magic happen, or rather lack thereof" Severus observed him closely.

"I don't understand you Presser Snape" Teddy found his way to the top victoriously.

"You make magic without a stick, who taught you to do that?" Severus clarified and without any particular thinking he took hold of Teddy's hand as the boy started walking back and forth on the thick banister. His other hand went around the boy's tiny waist.

-he looks so bloody fragile-

"Granny Andromeda" Teddy reached the end of the balcony and then turned around and went towards the other side. Severus followed him carefully.

"Have you tried magic with a stick?"

"It's easier" Teddy looked so concentrated on the task, albeit the fact that Severus's hands were keeping him in place.

Severus nodded and observed the boy's feet as they alternated on the marble.

"What's your job here Presser Snape?" Teddy asked after a second of silence "Auntie works in Posions"

Severus shook his head in dismay "I am the librarian"

"What's a librarian?"

"Do you read books?" Severus shook his head disturbed, as he slowly realised that this child had actually managed not only to draw him in a conversation but to also have him physically labour over his safety.

"Gran reads me The Little wizard Pete and the lamp of fire" Teddy said matter of factly. As if there was no question that Severus knew the fairytale.

"I work in a place full of books"

"Can I come visit?" Teddy beamed up to him.
He felt his lips turning down "No, I am afraid not"

"Why?"

"It's not for children"

"Why?"

"In order to keep the books in a good condition". They reached the other end and Teddy turned around wanting a repetition. Severus's was beginning to get tired of this back and forth but he couldn't just leave the kid up there alone. Where was his aunt anyway?

"Why?" Teddy kept up the relentless questioning.

"For goodness shake don't you ever stop?"

"Stop what?"

"Asking why"

"How will I learn if I stop?" Teddy retorted.

"That's true"

"So can I come?"

"In my library no" Severus sounded strict.

"Can I buy a book then? I have some money Gran gave me" Teddy reached the other side and turned around one more time.

"I don't sell books, I lend them out"

"Can you lend me one, please? I promise I won't tear it" Teddy said seriously.

His brows rose thoughtfully. That was not such a difficult request. He could consider it…..His thoughts were broken by a female voice behind them "Teddy what are you doing up there? Get down immediately!"

He turned and saw Granger approaching carefully, as if not to scare either of them away. He pulled the kid easily off the banister. When Teddy landed he run and embraced Hermione who was trying to regulate her wildly beating heart at what she had just seen. Against all odds Professor Snape was holding Teddy protectively as the boy was walking upon the railing. She wanted to let go of the child and pinch herself to make sure she was awake.

"I am sorry auntie, I was playing with Presser Snape" the boy said sadly.

"Who told you to become a burden to the Professor? Did you ask him before you climbed up? This is totally inappropriate" she scowled down at the child who cowered away from her.

"It was no problem really" Severus intervened.

She took a moment to digest his answers and then turned to the child again "Were you polite
Teddy?"

"Yes! I said please and fank you" Teddy nodded.

"Did he?" She met Snape's eyes with a smile. He drew up and gazed at her coldly, enveloped in his considerable amount of silver black hair. He gave a curt nod. Her eyes fell briefly to his black frock coat and his knee high boots. Who was this man in front of her? She swallowed and caressed Teddy's back "Ok, but you shouldn't take advantage of Professor Snape's kindness". She felt the smile sliding on her lips again easily "Thank you Professor" she said honestly.

"Whatever for?" he whispered feeling cornered as this woman caught him committing what someone could call a considerable act.

"For taking care of Teddy and for playing with him" she pressed herself to meet his eyes boldly. What she saw could not be debated.

He raised his hand to her dismissively not wanting to engage in any conversation with her. He turned around and walked to the edge of the balcony to get away from them. He felt open and exposed beyond repair.

Hermione patted Teddy's bottom "Professor Hooch was asking for you Teddy, see? She's there. Want to go to her?"

"Yes! I will ride a broom again! Bye Presser Snape and fank you" Teddy waved at him.

"Bye" he managed to mutter and had to physically check himself as his arm made to wave back momentarily. He heard the quick shuffling of the boy's feet and waited to hear the woman's feet following. He needed to be alone desperately.

"What was all this?" her voice came closer and he looked up abruptly. Her advance stopped.

"What do you want Miss Granger?" he whispered not having to try to sound angry. She was infuriating him just by her presence.

"I want you to help me reconcile the Professor I knew of old, to what I just saw" she swallowed a dry throat and tried to keep her voice equanimous. She didn't want to annoy him. She simply wanted to understand what pushed him to take care of Lupin's son. If only temporarily.

"Concern yourself with your personal affairs and not with me...Teddy" she bit both her lips "I don't want to anger you. I don't want to bother you, honest. I just want to understand why"

"Why?" he leaned his elbows on the railing.

"Why, did you take time off to mind a child that's not your obligation" she inhaled trying to regulate her breathing.

"I have an obligation to watch out for every underage child inside these walls, Miss Granger. Contrary to popular belief, I would have done the same for every child" he tried to sound calm and composed, but that was not what he felt inside. His heart was trembling with adrenaline and his fingers twisted around each other painfully.

"I shouldn't have been so surprised" her tone fell and she caressed her shoulders.
-and I shouldn't have felt so disappointed- he thought and closed his eyes in order to keep down the frustration that threatened to emerge. Even after all that took place, people thought him a child eating monster. Not that he made honest tries to be more approachable.

"No, I shouldn't have been so surprised" she repeated and her gaze got lost in the silver locks on the side of his head "I know who you truly are..." she muttered and pressed her fingers on her lips.  

He turned around and straightened "What the hell are you talking about?" his tone took a note of warning.

"You try to look menacing, unapproachable and cold, but deep down you are a different person aren't you?" her eyes took his whole figure quickly and she tilted her head quizzically.

"I am not up for this discussion" he cut her off curtly and made for the windows.

"The world knows...about what you did back then, but I am different" she tried to stop herself from voicing her thoughts, but she also wanted to throw a brick to his cold facade and bring the whole thing down. "I've seen your memories. Harry's shown me your memories...." She heard a crack behind her, and made to turn and check, but his voice drew her back to him with it's heavy austerity.

"You are way out of line!" he growled.

"I am not insulting you, I am trying to approach you. I am trying to tell you that I can reconcile what you make people believe and what I saw just now, without your help. Because of your memories... those two people are one and the same. The man that gave Teddy the banana is inside those memories" she took a step towards him and that is when a loud crack sounded behind her and pieces of dirt and clay came flying towards her. She covered her head and yelped in shock.

Severus left without any words as the whole balcony got littered with the broken pot where a rather voluminous orange tree stood a few seconds ago. He crossed the whole room in two steps, stopping for no one and then crashed the door behind him.

Hermione felt the tree brushing her arm as it fell down. She turned around and looked at the destroyed clay pot and the mess around the balcony. -did he do that?- she thought and Minerva's voice came as solid confirmation.

"He did that"

"How?" Hermione hadn't seen him use wandless magic. In fact no magical threads came out of him whatsoever.

"He can manipulate his environment telekinetically" Minerva replied offhandedly and when Hermione questioned her with her brows she continued "I think his body found the magical restrictions he placed upon it very hard and found an inevitable outlet"

"telekinetically? That's like the highest level of magic. Controlling the environment with your mind" the academic in her rejoicing in the prospects of this revelation.

"I am aware" Minerva's distance floored her quickly.

"Does he know?"

"He most certainly does" Minerva nodded coldly.

"Does he control it?"
"I don't think he can. They happen spontaneously whenever he gets emotional or aggravated"

"Emotional?" her eyes tried to find him in the room but failed.

Minerva flicked a shoulder "We try not to aggravate him because of this. You cannot know what will break, smash or explode around you when he wells up inside"

"This sounds dangerous" she felt unease twisting her stomach.

"It is" Minerva smiled in agreement.

"Does the Ministry know?" the question had been innocent in it's birth but the fallen expression on Minerva gave her pause.

"No, and neither shall they" the older woman's tone was clearly a warning.

"Why?"

"They will treat him like a lab rat. They will want to know if this ability arose from his years next to Voldemort, or because of his uses of the dark arts" Minerva's lips turned down in disapproval.

The younger woman buttoned up "Of course I shall not speak of it". Her words sounded grave and solid in the night.

"I knew I could trust in you dear girl" Minerva's smile showed relief.

"Do you try to decipher his abilities here at Hogwarts at least?"

Minerva's eyes got lost far into the darkness "He doesn't let anyone close enough to try". Her solemn voice laced with a hint of sadness.

Hermione's head bobbed before she had the chance to stop it "He has a knack for that". Her try to approach him with a heartfelt thank you about Teddy ended up in a destroyed pot.

"So what happened?" Minerva walked around the balcony thoughtfully.

"I tried to thank him, but I think I went a bit too far" Hermione rubbed her forehead feeling emotionally shaken.

"Thank him about what?"

"He took care of Teddy for a second time during this day. It surprised me and I forgot my manners. I talked a little more personally than I should have" Hermione shook her head feeling disappointed at her own shortcomings.

"I see" Minerva smiled knowingly "Severus has been teaching for almost twenty years. He has plenty of experience with children. Younger or older ones. I don't find his attentions difficult to accept. Whereas you...you are still new amongst us"

"I was shocked...and I took too many liberties with him. I must apologise" she looked at her shoes thoughtfully -again-

"I am sure you will find your chance dear, but do refrain from aggravating him further. There are things you don't know about the Professor. Serious issues, that I cannot divulge. Please keep your respectful distance" Minerva said sternly crossing her hands.
Hermione swallowed nervously "Of course Headmistress" she agreed wholeheartedly although deep inside she wanted to ask what those serious issues were. Wasn't it enough that he forbade himself to use magic and he blasted the environment telekinetically when he was pissed off? There was more to the deal?

"Now come inside with us, I don't think there is anything we can do about the balcony or Severus at this moment" Minerva raised her arm welcomingly.

Hermione's lips turned up in a half-felt smile "I suppose so" she muttered looking thoughtfully about her.

"You really should make a trip down to the gates after the party to cloak the car you left there, or tomorrow the first students are going to flock around and possibly destroy it in the process. No matter that some wizards are at ease with muggle technology, the majority is not"

Hermione cleared her hair from her cheek and nodded curtly "I will do it tonight, don't worry Headmistress" she followed inside but her heart was still torn between what happened at the balcony tonight and what took place that morning. She found it impossible to tear her mind away from Professor Snape's conduct.

-whom have we gotten to know as Potion's Master all these years?- her mind wandered. Certainly not a man that feeds a hungry child, even begrudgingly. Certainly not a man that plays with a child. They haven't ever gotten to meet the real man behind the Potion's Master facade, and she just got a glimpse of him twice in that day. It was not the same as when she saw his memories. That had felt like a movie from another lifetime with people she hardly knew. This one, today, it was real and she was part of it. She didn't know how to feel about all of it and she decided on silent observation for the time being. Trying to approach him in any manner backfired nastily. Maybe she should allow Teddy to approach him. They seemed to be getting along better on their own. As she followed Minerva into the small gathering she remembered the words of her mother "A person's actions will tell you everything you need to know about them. Pay attention" and her thoughtful frown lingered for a long time afterwards.
Next morning Hermione was led into the Great Hall before the arrival of the students and to her chagrin she was sat next to Professor Snape on one side and Professor Sinistra on the other. On his right was Professor Burbage. She wanted Teddy by her side, but Minerva kindly explained to her that it was inappropriate for a child to share the staff table with the rest of the students on the other side of the terrain. They arranged for Teddy to be babysat by some house elves until the end of the welcoming ceremony. Hermione didn't feel at ease with Teddy away, neither with Snape so close to her.

She wondered if Minerva arranged their sits on purpose, so Hermione would find an opportunity to apologise to him about all those mishaps between them. She looked up as the elder witch gave the signal to Filch to open the doors. It felt like they were opening the floodgates as hundreds of black dressed students swarm through all the doors filling the entire room in matters of minutes.

-Is that how we looked from the teacher's perspective?- her mouth dropped open at how impressive that messy march was.

"Another year that will test our patience" Sinistra said and Hermione thought she was the one addressed. The astronomy Professor was looking across her and Snape to Miss Charity.

"Hope this year no one will blow up the astronomy tower" Charity smirked slyly.

"I shall hope not. This year I updated all the wards and the tower is practically inaccessible"

"Have you tried the wards yourself, or did you let another one have a go"

"Myself"

"You should let one of us try them to make sure of their safety. Actually you should let Sev take over breaking your walls down. They'd crumble to dust" Charity smiled and raised her glass to him.

"Yeah, if he used magic that is. No offence Severus" Sinistra said coldly.

"None taken" he whispered and Hermione heard the angry undertone.

"Should you like to try against my wards, feel free" Sinistra looked at him after a moment of recollection.

"No"

"I know you may not want to visit the astronomy tower for more than one reasons my dear man and I can understand you" Sinistra drunk some wine not realising that his hand was clutching on his fork a little too tightly.

Hermione noticed and frowned deeply at the woman's audacity. There she thought herself out of line by what she told him last night, and Sinistra was making her look completely innocent in comparison.

"I don't think Sev wants to discuss your working place darling" Charity tried to sound amicable but her protectiveness towards him prevailed.

"Said I don't blame him" Sinistra flicked her shoulder.
Hermione stiffened and darted her eyes to him. He seemed beheld in apathy.

"Then shall we discuss something else? How about Pomona's obsession with the new Mandrake batch…have you heard what she did to poor Longbottom yesterday?" Charity tried to change the conversation quickly.

"What happened? Oh do tell!" Sinistra twisted her lips in pleasure and raised her wineglass to her mouth.

At the moment the conversation felt easier and Hermione took a sigh of relief, but apparently the man next to her was still tense. Hermione heard the ting on the wine glass and saw the small fissure on it. It was not hard to figure out what was happening. The talk about the astronomy tower wound him up and he was probably trying to control his telekinetic abilities from exploding the whole table sky high. She knew he was about to break the glass in front of him, but above all that he was not going to use any magic to repair it. Not wanting for some peculiar reason to let him struggle on this alone she decided to speak. It was more of a discreet whisper towards his direction.

"I can help you with this" she said and pointed her wand on his glass "If you allow me" she met his eyes careful not to overstep any boundaries.

He was looking at her warily, as if fearing that she was going to bite his head off. -When was the exact point that I scared him so much?- she thought and felt angry at herself and at their communication up to this point. She hadn't exactly been careful around him. Maybe she could fix things now if it wasn't too late already.

Water begun trickling out of the fissure and she indicated the glass with her eyes "Do you allow me to fix this?" she kept her voice low.

He swallowed feeling his feathers ruffled, but her simple offer to help him didn't go unnoticed. It was discreet and conservative which was a conduct he preferred. He looked at Minerva who was still giving the speech for the first years and thought that he would appreciate not having to explain what happened to her one more time. Before he had the time to consider it more thoroughly his head nodded curtly and her wand reacted immediately, by mending the broken glass. She withdrew it quickly and tucked it in her sleeve.

"Anytime you may want some help…” a smile came to her lips. She didn't want to stop it.

He felt his body becoming rigid, at her offer. He never needed help….but she didn't say need…she said want help… he never wanted help either…well you wanted her help a few seconds ago - his mind reminded him and his jaw clicked set in resentment at been inadequate.

"Any help or advice you may have for a newbie like me would also be solemnly appreciated. Your teaching experience in so many subjects and the fact that you had been Headmaster yourself is invaluable" she spoke in a whisper, wholeheartedly and rather quickly so her courage wouldn't fail her.

He signed and tried to relax his tight knuckles. It was not as if this woman was offending him in any manner today. She was actually trying to sound civilised which must have been difficult for her Gryffindor bravado. He pressed his lips feeling great reserve, but in the end he spoke. His whisper came heavy since he hadn't spoken to anyone since last night "Thank you for the…” he pointed roughly at the glass and bit the inside of his lips. Saying thank you was so damned hard.

She felt her heart warming up shyly "Thank you for Teddy" she tried to see his eyes and he gave her the chance as he gazed down to her "Both times" her lips quirked on a brief smirk that disappeared
almost immediately under the intensity of his stare.

"Forget it" he dismissed her.

She bit her bottom lip and twirled her fingers around her glass "I need to apologise thrice to you, and I hope this day finds you in a good humour to do so" she tried to keep her voice balanced when her heart was racing.

"Don't…" he begun but she landed a hand on his forearm stalling him. He froze inside out at the gesture but the hand was gone almost immediately.

"Please just give me a chance to do it today. I really need to set things straight between us. We got off on the wrong foot and I don't want to continue in this manner" she spoke quickly keeping her eyes on the tablecloth.

His brows furrowed skeptically and the curt nod came unexpectedly.

His head barely moved but it was enough for her "I am sorry for commenting on your voice without knowing the pain you have been going through. That was insensitive of me. I am sorry for yesterday morning when I didn't take care of Teddy better, but I didn't know he had such great abilities at such a young age. Finally I am sorry about last night…"

His eyes rose to meet hers and she gulped a whole bout of unease at the blaze she saw in them "I am sorry I took such liberties with you, when they had not been offered. I was unexcused to talk about your past as if it belonged to me. Forgive me"

It took him a long time to digest her conduct and he felt cornered, in a noble manner. He swallowed heavily and looked at his mended glass. Finally he nodded "Apology accepted". He couldn't have sounded more grumpy and inattentive even if he wanted to. He didn't know how to act otherwise.

She smiled warmly and her heart rejoiced at this cold acceptance. She raised her hand to him "Clean slate then Professor Snape? Shall we start anew?"

He pursed his lips and caught her hand stiffly. His eyes gazed at her warningly and he nodded again before removing his hand quickly.

Feeling on top of the world by this progression she had made with him, Hermione felt emboldened to lean to him and whisper elusively "I can understand why you almost broke the glass. You know what I do to get my mind out of frustrating situations?"

He frowned at her.

"I zone out. I clear my head of all outside stimuli and I think of something that pleases me. A piece of music, a work of art, a book, nature around me, the smile of a child, the sound of the sea…anything that makes you peaceful. You should try it" she whispered and smiled discreetly.

He raised his brow and twisted his lips thoughtfully at her words.

"If that doesn't work you can always picture Mr. Filch, wearing only a pair of leather underthings with his lank hair up in a ponytail" she added, just as Mr. Filch entered the Great Hall and stood by the door at the far end.

Severus guffawed and choked. Granger patted his back and Charity offered him a napkin which he pushed away ruthlessly. After a few more violent coughs he turned and glared at the audacity of this woman at making such a joke. She was looking at him partly worried that he was going to chew her
head off and partly amused at his instinctive reaction. And that reaction was what was keeping him from chastising her in front of everybody, because it was the first time in years that he had been unable to stop an explosion of laughter. He was solemnly lucky, for the choking that followed saved him from deep embarrassment. All this could be blamed on saliva taking the wrong turn. When Minerva felt certain that the staff table had settled down she begun calling the first years to the sorting hat.

He kept glaring at Granger, hoping that he looked intimidating albeit that he didn't actually feel angry or offended at the joke towards the squib. The picture she painted on Severus's mind was giggling his stomach, threatening him with another mishap of laughter. Something he stumped down mercilessly by calling on his broodiness.

She just couldn't believe that she actually made Severus Snape, famous dark moody Professor laugh. Because that had been laughter no matter that he tried to conceal it behind his heavy coughing bout. "Worked didn't it? You just pictured him…" she whispered with a self satisfied smirk.

"What the hell…" he whispered frowning in confusion.

"Didn't you?" she insisted although she already knew the truth.

"That's quite enough" he barked and heard his voice cracking slightly. He turned his attention to his food which he picked truly bothered by his reactions back there.

"I am truly sorry, it came out of nowhere" she tried to hide the smile that threatened to surface. She needed to sound regretful in front of him, even though she didn't regret making him laugh.

"This is literally your first day at work. It takes a lot of impertinence to make such rude comments about staff members that have been working here longer than your have lived" his voice was brash, but he wanted to put her back in check before all this could escape from the closely tight borders he had originally placed. It seemed to work because she immediately assumed a more stern expression and drew up to her sit properly.

"I am sorry, really, I don't know what came over me" she bit the inside of her lip.

He gazed at her a few more intense moments with his mouth half open, still trying to digest what had just happened. Finally clicking his mouth shut he turned towards the students and whispered coldly "Admittedly your comment was somewhat amusing, mostly in the wake of Mr. Filch's appearance in the room…"

She gawked up to him not expecting a half hidden compliment behind his reprimand and decided to remain silent through this.

"Nevertheless I shall not withstand another such performance. Is that understood?" he informed her formally.

"Yes Professor" she tried to look attentive. She messed up, but at the same time she made him laugh. So she still didn't regret it deep down. She just needed to convince him of her regrets.

"Very well" he brushed her off and begun messing with his food.

Hermione let off some time to settle the air between them and she watched the sorting of the new students. Remembering her own time with the sorting hat and how easily it called Gryffindor without touching her head. She had felt so proud back then. If she knew how the rest of the years would turn out would she had been so happy?
She inhaled and intended the question for Professor Sinistra at her left, but somehow her body turned to him "Do you have any tips for a newbie? I think I am getting slightly nervous here" she looked up at him. She didn't know if she felt nervous because her first class of the year was with the first years of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, or because she was asking the man next to her.

He grimaced without turning his gaze to her and seemed inattentive for the longest of times. Just when she came to believe that he hadn't even heard her he spoke in a low measured voice "Children must be taught how to think, not what to think"

"That doesn't sound easy to do" she concentrated on the side of his face that was half hidden behind a few silver tendrils.

"It's never easy. Either for you or for your students. Your job is not to make things easy for them, but to enable them to do things easy on themselves" he whispered.

"How?"

"Through hard work and learning, which is a process both parties must undergo" he met her eyes and she bit both her lips.

"I know my subject well, yet passing that knowledge down to students feels so complicated" she admitted.

"Use simplicity" he chewed on a potato nonchalantly.

"How, since some of the most basic concepts of Potions are very complicated. The very soul of this subject is twisted around" she exhaled.

"That's where you are mistaken. Anything can be simplified in order to be passed down. If you cannot explain something with simplicity, then you don't understand it well enough. Therefore you cannot pass it down sufficiently"

She inhaled and tried to digest what he said in her own pace. Of course he was not mistaken. If she could command her subject well she could make it simple enough to be understood by all. Hadn't he done the same to them all those years back? Grumpily, coldly and sternly, but he had simplified the most complicated notions with an ease that was jealous worthy "I understand what you are saying, even though I am not sure I will be able to put your advice to practical use"

"Judging by how stubborn you were as a student I don't think you'll have much trouble grabbing the bull by the horns" he seemed indifferent enough, but this prickly compliment was not lost in her.

She felt her heart warming up and she smiled at her utensils, but feeling somewhat emboldened by their partly amicable communication this morning she spoke "Thank you for the compliment"

He glared back at her for a brief scorching moment and then looked towards his food and made no more attempts to talk with her anymore. Feeling that she had pushed him as far as she could she was satisfied enough to eat with a little more appetite. Minerva soon finished the sorting and after a good half an hour the Great Hall was dismissed. Each one was to go to their respectful dormitories sort out their things and then head to their classes.

"...

Couple of hours later found Severus as always brooding above his papers in his library. He was giving away a seven volume pack of advanced books to the sixth and seventh years. Taking his time unbothered by the line of fifty students patiently waiting in front of his reception. If he could make
them wait till the clock struck midnight and then close up and go to sleep he would have done so, only to see the expression on their happy faces melt to disappointment.

The welcoming breakfast had left him more sore and confused than he wanted to admit and those annoying feelings were making him darker if possible this evening.

"Sign here Miss Fuller" he whispered and showed her the appointed place with his quill. When she did he signed below covering half of her signature and stamped the ID card with a bang that resounded inside the long corridors. Miss Fuller jumped slightly in apprehension "Get your pack from the corner" he dismissed her without a second glance and drew a new ID card for the next student in line.

"Thank you Professor" the terrified girl scattered quickly to take her books. He began scribbling down the Mr. Henderson's name when Charity's voice came from the entrance.

"Come in young man, this…is our library!" she said and Severus gazed up from the rim of his glasses towards the entrance.

-bloody hell woman--…his mind growled at her with his long gone impressive voice. At least he could still hear it inside his mind. Charity was pulling Teddy by the hand and the child was looking around him totally bewildered.

"Sign here Mr. Henderson!" he hissed and kept his stare on Charity that was approaching his desk.

"Hello Severus, we decided to come for a visit!" she seemed oblivious by the thunders falling above his head.

"You and the child…" he bit his upper lip and drew the ID card so forcefully it almost tore in half since Mr. Henderson was still holding it. The boy raised his hands innocently and choked "I am sorry Professor"

"Yes, it was Teddy that wanted to see where you worked" Charity smiled and pulled Teddy to come closer.

"I think I made it clear that I don't want any underage children in my library" he hurled and felt his voice crackling. He half closed his eyes in disappointment.

"He is not alone, he is chaperoned by me" Charity met his eyes confused.

"Hello Presser Snape" Teddy waved at him and Severus heard some snickers from behind Mr. Henderson. His head snapped at the offending faces that quickly drew away and hid behind hair and hands.

"It matters not, he is not allowed in here" he whispered, but his deadly glare was not enough to push Charity back. She opened the door to his airy cubicle and drew Teddy in.

"Never mind the grumpy old Professor Teddy, come see how he checks every single place in the library from his overlook"

"Get your books Mr. Henderson and wipe that silly smile off your face!" Severus tried to insert enough bark into his whisper and it seemed to work as the boy lowered his eyes and walked quickly to the books.

"You are creating havoc in my working place, just to offer pleasure to a bloody four year old" he gazed at Charity threateningly.
"I would hardly call a few snickers havoc Sev, cool your fire" she leaned and whispered close to his ear.

"Why did you bring him here?" he asked in a low tone so as not to be heard by the students that were taking pleasure in the young boy. Severus glared at some girls that had the audacity to wave at Teddy.

"HI!" Teddy waved back at them. Severus raised both brows as an indication of what he considered havoc. Charity didn't seem daunted in the least.

"He wanted to see my work place, Longbottom's but most of all yours. I took them to all three. Why is this such a big deal. It's not as if I left him alone in your supervision" Charity brushed him off and took some of his ID cards to read.

He grabbed them from her hands truly pissed off "Sign here Mr. Hightower!" he hissed and the boy signed quickly. Severus stamped the card so forcefully that the water tumbler moved a little to the left.

"You are bypassing my wishes on purpose and you are pissing me off Charity" his voice dropped in octaves warningly.

"I did nothing wrong" she abolished.

"I warned Granger not to bring him here" he rebuked.

"I am not Granger" she rejoined with a playful smile that made matters even worse.

"Unfortunately" he bit and then pointed at a new ID card "Sign here, Miss Hobson"

"You wish I was?" Charity's eyes glowed with an indefinable undertone that he didn't like one bit.

He crushed it ruthlessly "Yes, for she would have taken my prohibitions seriously"

"Bullocks, the boy is not harming either the library or you…in fact I think he is benefiting you" Charity said nonchalantly. He glared at her, but she missed it as she was checking her nails.

"You don't want me to remind you whose mother assumption is, do you?" he whispered and signed truly crossed over Miss Hobson's signature "Get them!" he said pointing towards the books. The girl almost run to the corner without offering a glance to him or Charity.

"Did Teddy tell you he loves to read? What a better place to enrich this love of his"

"I don't care what he loves, get him out of here, before I throw you both out" Severus whispered and gazed at her with a decisive stare which gave her momentary pause.

"I'll show him around a bit, and then leave ok?" Charity got off the stool finally deciding that she has pushed his patience a step too far.

"How did the boy end up with you anyway? Did Granger dump him on someone else again?"

"Ah, give the girl a break will you? She had three classes back to back and this was her first day on the job. She asked Professor Flitwick to take care of him and I offered instead"

"You did this willingly?" Severus looked abhorred even at the idea.
"Why does it seem so strange? I like children" Charity flicked one shoulder.

"I don't…get-him-out-of-here" he intoned each word bringing his face close to hers. Teddy was going around his cubicle checking on every corner. Seemingly oblivious about what was happening around him.

Suddenly rushed steps made everyone look towards the entrance. Mr. Filch was leaning his arm on the door frame breathless, holding his waist. Charity recognised a problem immediately "What happened Argus?"

"Peeves has flooded the female toilets in the Hufflepuff common room! We need help Professor Burbage! I cannot find the Headmistress!"

"Oh for bloody sakes!" Charity exclaimed and opened the door of his cubicle.

"Wait a moment, you forgot something!" Severus's voice cracked as he tried to draw her attention. She turned to see Severus pointing at Teddy "I cannot take Teddy to Peeves. The bloody Poltergeist may cause more problems. Keep him here and I will be back for him when I finish"

"What?" Severus felt his back stiffening as Charity run down the corridor with Filch close behind.

"Can I read something Presser Snape?" Teddy reminded him of his annoying presence.

His eyes flickered closed for a moment. what the actual fuck- his mind tried to put his thoughts back in order. How did he always end up lumbered with this child? "You may sit still and quiet until Professor Burbage comes for you" he whispered angrily. Teddy placed his foot on the stool step and slid. He landed on his behind hitting his jaw on the stool as he fell. A shrill cry left his mouth and several students inhaled in terror.

-for the love of…. Severus leaned over and took the boy in his arms "Crying won't solve your problems" he said matter factly and placed him on the stool.

"It hurts!" Teddy looked at him through teary eyes with a pouting lip.

"It will go away in a minute. Learn patience" Severus admonished and took a new ID card "Sign here, Miss Lindsay"

"Maybe I could heal it" the girl said carefully.

Severus glared at her for what seemed like an eternity. The crying from the stool had not abated and he was hardly in a position to help the boy was he? In fact he was the last person to be allowed to care for such young children, which was ironic since he always ended up with Teddy in his care "Do it" he almost barked at the girl.

She lifted her wand and whispered a spell. Immediately the boy stopped and caressed his jaw "The pain is gone Presser Snape" he looked up happily.

"Thank you Miss Lindsay" Severus whispered and then pointed at the books "Get your pack"

"No problem Professor. Take care Teddy" the girl was pleasant and polite which didn't rub Severus the wrong way.

"Thank you Presser" Teddy said and hit his thighs with his palms.

"I didn't help you, Miss Lindsay did" he rebuked thoughtfully. Once again feeling insufficiently
muggle inside a world of magic.

"You picked me uuuup" Teddy spoke in a singsong manner.

"When I fell dooooon" a boy from the row sang along with Teddy.

Severus head sprang up threateningly "Another word from your mouth Mr. Mathers and you get five points off Hufflepuff"

"Sorry Professor" the boy looked back at his classmates but didn't look too sorry.

Severus heaved and tried to control his temper. "I think it's his" the girl next in line whispered confidentially to her friend.

"I am bored Presser Snape" Teddy moved his feet up and down the stool hitting the desk with each move.

He tightened his jaw "And I am busy" he whispered and drew the next ID. Suddenly the remaining fifteen students seemed like one hundred. Everything was moving on too slowly "Sign here Miss Niles"

"Is he yours?" the girl looked up from her ID and met his eyes with a bold gaze.

"Mine?" he growled.

"Is this child your son? For he is terribly cute" Miss Niles waved at Teddy who didn't notice her as he was picking his nose.

Severus offered her such a cold stare that Miss Niles buttoned up immediately "Are you joking?" he raised his brow haughtily and without looking he placed his hand above Teddy's and drew his hand away from his nose.

"I told you it's not his child" Miss Niles turned and whispered to her busybody friend.

"Five points from Slytherin and five from Ravenclaw for effrontery" he gathered himself and was happy that he sounded as professional as he intended. Then he spoke towards Teddy "Don't pick your nose. It's bad manners".

"It's itchy" Teddy looked up with a yearning that made Severus's back crawl with apprehension.

He took a napkin and offered it to Teddy "Go to your pack Miss Niles, and don't let me see you in the library for the next couple of days, or more points will be removed from Slytherin" he dismissed her.

"I told you it was not his, you told me to ask and now you got me in trouble, you silly cow!" Miss Niles said to the next girl.

"Wait a minute I never told you to ask him!"

Severus coughed "I am still here if you haven't noticed. Miss Niles make yourself scarce, Miss Odell your signature here, and keep your mouth shut for the reminder of your stay in this library" he pointed at the line.

She swallowed and signed giving lethal looks at the back of her friend. Severus signed and stamped it "Go, just get the hell out of here" he waved her off and she run to get her pack.
"Can I do that?" Teddy asked holding the dirty tissue in his hand.

"Throw that away" he pursed his lips and offered the next ID card.

"Can I do it?" Teddy insisted after disposing the tissue in the bin.

Severus raised his brow to the boy questioningly.

"The thing that goes boom!" Teddy cried and threw his hands in the air. Severus realised he was talking about the stamp.

"No you cannot" he frowned.

"Why don't you use some pencils and papers Professor. Have him draw something" Miss Perkins a rather reserved tall Slytherin girl spoke and picked up the pen to sign.

He kept his eyes thoughtfully at the raven haired girl and then as if deciding he looked around and found an empty paper and some pencils. He placed them in front of the child and in an afterthought he found an older stamp and gave it to him "You can stamp this, without too much noise"

"Why do you make so much noise?" Teddy asked picking up the stamp.

The boy that sang along with him before snickered and Snape was on him in a flash "Three points from Gryffindor" he pointed his quill at him.

"Why?!" the boy asked.

"I warned you not to speak again Mr. Mathers" he gazed up coldly.

"I didn't speak!"

"You vocalised that is why I deducted only three out of the five. Consider yourself lucky" Severus pursed his lips almost feeling happy that he managed to deduct thirteen points from these gossipy teenagers already. Then he turned to Tedy "This place is mine and I do as I please. You are here as a guest and you follow what I tell you. Simple enough for your tiny brain?"

"Yes" Teddy nodded bewildered.

"Thank you Libby, go pick up your pack" She was one of his favourite students. Not because she was Slytherin, but because of her reservation and perfect conduct.

"If you need any more help with him let me know Professor. I got four younger brothers" the girl's head bobbed knowingly.

Severus raised his hand to her "A moment of your time if you please Libby. Remain". She picked up her books and stood next to the reception patiently while he signed all the ID cards and gave out all the books. When he finished he wrapped his files neatly and then gazed at Libby tentatively. Teddy was stamping his paper as silently as he could. Every now and then checking if Severus approved of the sound he was making.

"You said you are willing to help?" he inquired as politely as his current mood allowed.

"Sure Professor"

"Can you give a tour of the library to the child?" he glared back at the boy testily.
"By all means" Libby smiled kindly.

"Get up, someone will show you around this place" he picked the boy up and left him carefully on the floor. The stamp fell from his hand with a loud bang "Don't take him on the restricted section, nor the special volume aisle and keep him away from the magical staircases" his whisper warned as he picked up the stamp.

"Yes Professor. Come here Teddy. That's you name isn't it?"

"Yes, what's yours?"

"Libby. I like you name, do you like mine?"

"Yes!"

"Wanna go check on some books?"

"YEAH!"

"What do you like to read?" Libby took over the boy with such ease that Severus felt a flair of envy in his heart. He rubbed his temples to alleviate the tension he had been feeling since that morning. It was the first time since then, that he was left alone and he treasured that opportunity. As long as Libby was taking care of the little creature he didn't care about Charity's departure. If only one of them got back before he closed up the library then he would be truly blessed. Else there was no other choice but take the boy back to Granger's apartments on his own again. He frowned as he realised that all this back and forth with the child was becoming some kind of pattern.

After an hour of touring the child was tired and Libby returned him with a regretful smile.

Severus excused her with a dry smile and a cautious word of thank you. He remembered her advice and encouraged Teddy to draw something. He decided to write instead and tried his name which he showed proudly at Severus in the end. With crooked letters there was a messy TEDY written.

"You are not holding the quill correctly" he noted.

"Why?" Teddy observed his hand.

"Try holding it between forefinger and thumb, near the base"

"Like this?"

"More or less. Now try the T…it's not a cross. The vertical line stops exactly where the perpendicular is and if you keep the quill upright the letter will not get crooked….much" his lips turned down testily as he observed the child's tries on the T.

"What's a perfecticular?" Teddy looked up to him.

"This line" he placed his long finger on it "Give me your hand" he leaned above the boy and wrapped his huge hand above the small one guiding it on the lines to form a better, but not perfect T "Rest your wrist on the paper, don't leave it hovering" he instructed. He was the worst possible tutor for such young ages. Not competent to teach a young child how to write. His job had been teaching kids eleven and up…this…here…was totally confounding him.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione tried to speak quietly so as not to bother them, but she shocked the older man.
He pulled back and a thick line drew from the bottom of the T down to the middle of the page. He met her eyes puzzled for a second and then anger settled "What the hell are you doing Miss Granger!?” he admonished. His heart was palpitating.

"I am sorry, I didn't mean to scare you" she showed him her palms, her heart already racing by what she was seeing. Teddy was inside his office, getting gently tutored on how to write. A plate of biscuits, apple and pear was in front of him and half a glass of milk behind it.

"Well you did! Never walk behind me like that again!" he whispered feeling vexed.

-people's actions speak louder than words- her mother's voice came to her mind and she smiled up to him "I am really sorry, it won't happen again. Teddy?" she turned to the boy who was concentrating on a straight T.

"Hi auntie" the boy said carelessly without looking up from his work.

"How in the name of Merlin did you manage to make him sit so quietly?" she looked at the older wizard truly amazed.

-had some help- he thought but didn't want to voice it.

"If you suggest that I scared him into submission I assure you…”

She raised her hand and he stopped with an increasing frown "Why does everything have to be defence or attack with you? I never insinuated anything like that" she tried to keep her voice controlled and measured. This was a person that slammed back any tries for approach.

He raised his brow but didn't speak.

"I am just impressed that you managed to make a four year sit down …quietly" she lowered her voice and tried to calm it down.

He preferred not to answer to her obvious compliment "And where have you been whilst I was managing this extraordinary feat?"

"I thought Professor Burbage told you. My last class was an hour ago. Didn't she bring the child to you?” she felt confused as Miss Charity found her and told her that she left Teddy in the library with him to take care of Peeves.

"Indeed she did, even though I had strictly forbidden this age from my workspace" he spoke up tightly.

"It won't happen again Professor. If he was under my care I would have never bothered you" she felt her heart sinking at his continuous dismissal.

"Unfortunately you were not, nevertheless this issue is not to be taken upon with you but with Professor Burbage at another time"

"Of course Professor. Excuse the trouble we caused you. Teddy come on…” she raised her arm to the boy.

"Not now I am trying the D” Teddy waved his hand dismissively and Hermione frowned at the slight similarity with Snape's gesticulations.

"It's double D, and right now it's of no use to hurry up Miss Granger. Damage's already been done.
Let the boy finish" he drawled on purpose turning his back to her.

She looked up at his long silver black hair and tilted her head quizzically. Has the man actually admitted to not minding Teddy so much or was it her idea?

"What's double?" Teddy looked at him with a dedication that made Hermione frown even more.

"The D" he indicated raising two fingers.

"Oh!" Teddy signed in understanding and returned to his work.

Hermione relaxed her posture and reposed her books on the recess "I really must thank you for all the times you end up taking care of the boy" she spoke from the heart, wanting to understand the enigma in front of her.

"Thank me, by finding a better carer for him when you are in class" he hurled back at her.

"You seem to be the best one yet" she spoke half seriously, but when he turned and threw his blazing gaze at her she buttoned up and felt her throat going dry.

"I was joking of course" she tried to repair her stupid attempt at a joke, but her mouth betrayed her again "Even though the child seems smitten with you"

His eyes grew so large she was surprised to see that they were not completely black as she had always thought, but a shade of dark brown "You are becoming totally imprudent. Did your work overload muddle up your mind?"

"This day has been rather heavy for me, thank you for asking in this abrupt manner" she closed her eyes and rubbed her temple, half enjoying the way she was pushing him to the limits again. She wanted to see how far she could go this evening in comparison to what happened that morning.

He opened his mouth to answer something probably nasty to her but at the last minute he regretted it and bit on the inside of his lip "Did you grab the bull by the horns or did the bull flatten you against the wall?" he tried to make his whisper sound dry.

She half smiled and somehow an image of her getting pushed upon a wall by a man passed fleetingly from her mind making her body go rigid for a moment "Felt like I offered hay to the bull and he accepted it without too much trouble". And that was the truth. Her first day felt like a compromise between her and the students. Neither of them wanted to stir the waters too hard for fear of the reactions from the other side. She wondered if all first teaching experiences felt that way "Did it feel like that for you when you first started?"

"You expect me to remember twenty one years ago?" he raised his brow at her.

"No feelings you remember then? Anything?" she leaned her elbows at the recess and observed Teddy's tries to the Y.

He felt his jaw tightening and he looked away from her, not wanting to respond. His fist tightened and his heart picked up speed slowly "During the time I had other, more severe things on my mind. First days as a teacher felt...detached"

She bit her lower lip and her stomach twisted abnormally. Snape's first teaching years took place after he decided to double cross Voldermort to avenge Lily Potter's death. Those years probably took first place concerning this man's nightmares. She touched again a painful subject with him, but it was difficult not to do that with Snape. He was full of wounds and she failed to find a place that was solid
and clear on him.

"I am sorry…" she tried and her voice broke taking her by surprise.

"Stop doing that" his whisper found her even though he was looking at Teddy "Stop apologising" he finally met her eyes demandingly.

"What should I do then when I always end up offending you?" She kept her eyes on his boldly.

"Think before you speak" he tilted his head stiffly.

She inhaled and shook her head. Trying to find the appropriate words around him felt like an olympic sport "It's difficult not to hurt you, since you are bleeding almost everywhere..." she spoke honestly and kept her eyes searchingly on his.

Where did the word hurt come from…Hermione you imbecile…- her mind berated her.

She saw his jaw clicking set and his eyes felt like fire on her "How poetic of you" he whispered indignantly.

Her eyes gazed at the left sleeve of his grey turtle neck that was becoming dark maroon "Holy Merlin, you ARE bleeding!" she showed his arm.

He covered it quickly and his angry eyes blazed at her "Get the kid out of here!" he commanded.

"Professor, are you hurt? I can help you..." she tried.

"Get OUT!" he cried his voice crackling painfully. He pushed the door of his cubicle open and dashed into the library corridors.

"Professor?!!" she tried but his black silhouette got lost between the dark shelves. A strong shudder of urgency run through her spine. He needed help, but not from her. He had clearly dismissed her. She needed to find either Poppy or Minerva…or maybe Charity. Yes, Charity would be the best choice "Professor, hold on, I am going to call Miss Charity" she called into the darkness not even knowing if he heard her.

"Is Presser Snape alright?" Teddy asked very worried.

"Of course honey…just a scratch. Come let's find Miss Charity" she dragged the boy urgently from the arm and they rushed out of the library in search of medical help. She was was not sure if her words made him cut himself telekinetically or if this was an older wound, but she felt guilt overwhelming her since she was the instigator of another emotional breakdown. She just couldn't find a foothold on him anywhere. Why she needed to do that was another question that never crossed her mind as she found Charity and informed her. The woman seemed to know exactly what was going on and when Hermione offered to come along, the older witch told her calmly that everything was alright and it was best if she took the child to bed, and maybe get some rest herself. Hermione was very reluctant to let Miss Charity go alone, but some more words of assurance from the witch did the trick. She took Teddy to their rooms with a heavy heart and a stomach twisted in knots of anxiety, still wondering what happened to him and if she had been the one to cause this. Needless to say that she didn't sleep for a long time. More like she tossed and turned until she began snoring away this difficult day in prone position.
Next morning at breakfast Severus fingered the sleeve of his pea jacket. He felt the bandage even above the thick material. His self inflicted inability to heal this spellbound wound, yesterday backfired in front of a four year old and a woman that bothered him to no end. When Charity rushed into the library she had been informed what took place, so Granger had seen everything. His eyes fell quickly to the young woman who had been trying to catch his eye since the moment he came into the Great Hall this morning. She was placed next to Hagrid at the other side of the table and she kept on leaning forth to look at him which was making him even more uncomfortable.

"Don't mess with it unless you want a repetition of last night's performance" Charity warned and took a bite off her eggs.

"Leave me alone woman" he spat, feeling disgusted at himself.

"I cannot comprehend why you are not allowing one of us to heal the bloody thing. All it needs is a good healing potion wrapped together with a protective ward and the remaining magic of that lunatic will be subdued" her matter of factly tone made him grit his teeth.

"I know…" he bit.

"Then do it yourself, no one is more able to counter dark magic than you"

"I am not going to use any kind of magic"

"Why for goodness sake? Haven't you punished yourself enough? Yesterday the child was asking about you. No four year old should feel anxious about the health of someone they like"

"The child has an aunt. He is well taken care of"

"His aunt was also terribly worried. The girl has barely stepped foot in this castle and she is already over her head with her classes. The last thing she needs is your troubles to drown her"

"I never imposed myself to her" he glared angrily at Charity.

"Teddy is always after you…she will get lumbered with your presence whether you like it or not"

"You make it sound even nastier than it feels. I don't want the boy chasing me around either" he wrapped his arms in front of his chest.

"Don't get all defensive with me Sev. The girl never said you were a burden. On the contrary she seemed very disturbed yesterday and I had to try hard to convince her not to come along with me at the library to find you. She has been trying to catch your eye since you came. Haven't you noticed?" Charity leaned and waved at Hermione who immediately waved back.

Severus tensed but didn't speak.

"Yeah you noticed alright, no matter that you are playing hard to get right now" Charity swallowed some bacon and acted like she was not full of insinuations.

He gazed at her loftily trying to hide his annoyance and pierced a potato hard enough to mash it up.

"Killing that potato won't change the fact that you need to talk to her at some point. If you want to act right by the child at least. They were both terribly worried. The child was sniffling at one point"
Charity raised her brow warningly.

"That was her mistake and yours for not explaining to him that everything is fine" he spat and put the remains of the potato in his mouth, not in any real mood to eat.

"And not yours for becoming such a mess to begin with…right?…" she rejoined and the sarcasm was clear in her tone.

"You are so out of line" he whispered at her with barely controlled resentment.

"Nevertheless, I am your friend and I can see what you need"

"And I don't"

"No you don't" she smiled and raised her glass ceremoniously to him.

"You are so presumptuous, it's painful" he rebuked.

"And you are blind as a bat" she threw back at him boldly.

"Are you going to continue this? If yes, I have a lot of work at the library, so good morning" he whispered and made to leave. Her hand grabbed his forearm and pulled him down.

"No, I berated you enough…i need to go talk to Hagrid. Excuse me will you?" she said abruptly and got up.

Severus looked at her back, confusion pouring out of him, until he figured out what she was truly trying to do. She leaned to Granger and spoke a few words and then pointed at the free sit beside him. Granger got up eagerly and with a thankful smile she offered the sit next to Hagrid, before walking towards him.

-oh you bloody witch, I am going to get you for this…- his mind growled angrily at Charity's play. His body went rigid and he concentrated on some vague empty sit on the Slytherin side on purpose. Scented air shifted to his side as she sat. He kept his eyes stubbornly on the empty place and stuffed his face with egg and potatoes needing to keep every conversation about yesterday away from him.

"Good morning Professor!" Granger exclaimed happily and then proved to him that such a task would be impossible "How are you today?"

"Adequately well, and you?" he drawled politely not honouring her with his gaze.

"Admittedly a little tired. I didn't sleep so well" she spoke quietly not trying to impose herself to the conversation.

-don't expect me to ask you why- he thought and washed down his scrambled meal with some water, refraining from speaking.

"I was kind of worried about you…not that my demanding first day on the job didn't assist my insomnia" she tried to keep her voice measured. She didn't want to scare him away again. He seemed very withdrawn this morning which was a step back. At least yesterday he was communicating with her, in usual his stern and tight manner.

"I am sorry I unwillingly worsened your sleeping problems" he whispered gritting his teeth.

"What are you feeling sorry about? I was simply worried when I saw all that blood on your sleeve. Is it healed? Did Poppy have a look at it?" she gazed at his right forearm. Nothing was visible under his
pea jacket.

"Poppy's attentions were not needed in this case" he tried to dismiss her with his tone.

"Miss Charity seemed to know exactly what was happening. I knew she would help you. I wanted to come along, but she advised me against it" she wanted to make him understand that she didn't just abandon him last night. That someone else gently forbade her from coming. Another bout of guilt rushed through her.

"It's better that you didn't, since the child was with you" he felt knuckles tight around the fork, unable to unwind.

That gave her momentary pause and she looked at the utensils in front of her. Trying to gather her thoughts "Can I ask what happened without you breaking something around us?"

"Are you jesting?" he gazed down at her finally.

She felt her body stiffening "I assure you not. I am asking out of concern. Whenever I talk with you something happens and I seem to be the unwilling instigator. I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable in any manner. That's all" she wanted to project that honesty to him. Hoping that he would get it.

His eyes wanted to burn holes in her mind. To figure out her ulterior motives, but her face seemed open, honest and in no way rude. His teeth ground noisily and for the longest of times he didn't remove his burning eyes from hers. Trying in some manner to penetrate her. Finally he felt something giving up inside him and he removed his gaze "It's an old wound" he spoke so low she probably didn't even hear him.

She sighed in relief when he looked away "And it still bleeds?". She was not sure she wanted that scorching stare on her again so soon.

"Sometimes yes"

"Can no one heal it?" her eyes searched him.

"It's truly nothing to concern yourself with, even though I must thank the interest you took in my health" he tried to respond as politely as his nature allowed.

"You make it sound like a professional deal, when it is simply just…." she stopped abruptly not knowing what to say. Not even aware that something had formed in her mind that she wouldn't dare utter.

"How is the child?" he dismissed her jumbled effort at whatever she was trying to say.

"Teddy?" she looked up surprised and immediately her heart warmed up "He was worried about you. He woke up happy this morning and I left him with Professor Sprout until noon"

"I am sorry I worried him last night. It was not my intention" he pressed his lips.

She exhaled another smile "Now I want to ask you to stop that…."

He met her eyes questioningly.

"Stop apologising. It's not as if you bled on purpose" she flicked one shoulder.

"Did he manage to write down his name properly?" he inquired trying to drive the unwanted
conversation to easier paths. Teddy's writing skills were the least painful to him.

She felt her head nodding "I think he likes your tutoring better than mine"

He raised a brow at her.

"He kept telling me this morning that you are more patient with him…go figure" she titled her head reflectively. Her own thoughts seemingly gaining more gravity as she spoke them.

"You seem more surprised than I am….not very polite" his whisper took a cautious element towards her.

"Not another misunderstanding…please" she tried to meet his eyes but saw only the side of his solemn face "I meant that you seem much more patient tutoring young children, than you did with us". Talking to him felt like she was walking barefoot on broken glass.

"I require less from a four year old"

"Your approach is very good. I have come to wonder if you'd be more appropriate as a kindergarten teacher, than a Professor"

"Even the thought annoys me" he twisted his lips.

"Yet with Teddy…"

"He's an exception…he ended up in my care on several occasions. I had to find a way to stop him from bothering me"

She smiled and bit both lips "Your ways have Teddy chasing after you….I know that feels uncomfortable to you. Maybe you should have tried to be less charming towards him" she couldn't believe that she used such bold words with the stone block next to her.

"I was anything but…the boy must have a fault somewhere inside his brain" he shook his head not wanting to acknowledge what Granger was telling him.

"And I noticed the not so discreet chide, back there. I told you I never meant for him to end up in your care so many times. I am trying to fix this" her lips turned down.

His winced bothered at his own inability to be more considerate and remained silent for the longest time "Forgive my forwardness in this. I have to admit that most of these occurrences were not created by you"

"Most?" she raised her brow critically.

"All…" he winced truly bothered by her insistence on details that didn't really concern him.

"Well, that sounds like a covered up apology. In which case, apology accepted" she tried to hide the self satisfied smirk, but knew she failed by the shimmering anger next to her.

"And you sound very assuming, which I hardly think is appropriate conduct" he rebuked.

"I am not assuming, I am just stating the facts. You just apologised for your blunt behaviour. Is it so hard to listen to what you did?"

"And now you are again pushing it too far" he warned with his ever cold whisper.
"Why? I have offered my apologies for my stupid conduct a couple of days ago. Why shouldn't you do the same? I find it commendable, even though I cannot help but wonder at your inability to face facts"

"At which point exactly did I become worthy of such detailed observation Miss Granger" he drawled at the Miss way too long.

"Maybe you always had been" she replied mystically, quietly enjoying his discomfort.

"This conversation is quickly becoming pointless and ridiculous. I have no time for such frivolities, now if you'd excuse me…” he made to get up but her hand stopped him.

"A person is concerned with you well being. That's never pointless or ridiculous. You are becoming defensive towards me again" she met his eyes boldly.

"What? You want another apology so soon after the first?” he hissed.

She raised her brow.

"Tough luck” he spat and removed his hand quickly away from her.

"I didn't have much hope, no…” she said almost sadly.

"Then why do you keep pestering me? Don't you have enough people around to entertain you?” he was becoming more and more biting with each passing second she was keeping him there.

"I assure you that I was hardly entertained by your bleeding…” her voice dropped solemnly and her eyes kept his gaze with courage.

He raised his brow, but didn't speak.

"Neither was I with the problems in your voice" she continued "And it is incredibly sad for me to see what has become of you…” she meant that thought for herself and was surprised when she heard her voice speak it. To the last person she wanted to hear it…

He buttoned up instantly and his lips upturned to a forced sarcastic smile "How …considerate of you…to pity me" he whispered and stood up.

Her hand landed on his sleeve and she grabbed it way too forcefully "I really didn't meant it the way you took it" she tried, but she knew she had lost this battle already.

He untangled her fingers from his sleeve and she shuddered at the coldness of his hand "Thank you for your concern Miss Granger. I would suggest you mind your classes and your nephew from now on. I don't appreciate unwanted attention…especially when it comes out of pity” he diminished her just by his stare and she didn't make anymore attempts to grab hold of him.

"I expressed myself wrong…i am sorry for that. But you couldn't have been more mistaken with your assumptions. If my attentions are upon you, they are only lingering there because of Teddy" she said feeling slightly picked and wanting to pick on his arrogance also.

He raised his brow "Then disallow the boy to corner me on every single occasion" he spat.

She frowned "I won't punish a four year old from seeing the people he likes, just because we cannot get along with each other. That had been the case between us for seven years. We can contain the misery between us and leave Teddy out of it. Unless you want to hurt him yourself. In which case,
no one can stop you” she sounded and felt stern towards him.

He gazed at her loftily, but didn't respond.

"In any case I tried to approach you because of Teddy. I care about the boy and the boy seems to care about you….If you don't want my attentions I will remove them immediately, but I will beg you…” she paused when she saw the demeaning stare he gave her. She frowned and pressed her lips "…Yes, I will beg you not to hurt his feelings because of your dislike for me. He's lost both parents…he deserves some happiness, even if it comes from someone as miserable as you"

He inhaled and his brows unwound. Unable to believe what she told him, and feeling the pain deep from the reality of her words he nodded imperceptibly his silent agreement concerning the boy. He wanted to lash out to her with the most demeaning words…wanting to hurt her as much as her words hurt him, but her strong solemn eyes held his tongue. His rebuke would be only to wound, her observations were just the truth. Somehow his heart lost all the fire and his body gave up. He had been miserable for the most part of his life, either as an adult or as a child. She was not accusing him of something that he was not. There was no reason to defend himself against that argument. His eyes lingered upon hers for several painful moments and he found himself looking away with difficulty. It felt like she had slapped him across the face. With no more words he gathered himself and walked out of the Great Hall with as much pride as he had been left with, after that conversation.

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Minerva looked closely as Severus walked out of the room bristling with dismissal for everything in his surroundings. She mused towards Hermione and then leaned to the witch next to her.

"I think your plan to change sits backfired royally"

"Yes, I know" Charity pressed her lips bothered.

"Tell me what exactly are you trying to accomplish my dear Charity?"

"Just to shake the stale waters" she replied offhandedly.

"Looks more like you are feeding gas to fire" Minerva raised her brow critically.

"Good, Gods know he needs some fire after all this time lingering in the shadows, between life and death"

"Ain't tha' a bit egotistical Miss Charity? Thinking only of him? How about Mione?" Hagrid spoke cautiously.

"I think she actually needs this more than him" Charity indicated with her head and they all remained thoughtfully silent.

"You cannot plan other people's reactions dear woman. It's impossible to predict what unfolds in one's heart" Minerva wised.

"This man saved my life Minerva, I am going to find a way to save his" she muttered thoughtfully.

"If by saving him, you mean shoving a person that irritates him in his face…then your plan is doomed" Minerva drawled.

"I don't think it's that simple” Charity bit her tongue and looked at the young Professor.
"No matter what your mind may think they both need…i see a very disappointed Potion Mistress at the table, and a very pissed off Librarian closing the door behind him" Minerva's words felt pointy.

Charity nodded "Didn't work as well as I had planned"

"Obviously, and I think you need to go to Professor Granger and try to mop the mess up" Minerva indicated.

Charity huffed and went cautiously towards the young Professor, already seeing the look of disapproval in a stare lost between the tables of Slytherin and Hufflepuff.

"Everything ok dear?" Charity sat down at the space Severus left.

Hermione felt like she got pulled from underwater. She inhaled deeply and blinked her eyes a couple of times "I am not so sure" she admitted. When Professor Burbage approached her with a request to sit with Hagrid, she thought it was done on purpose so she could find a chance to talk to Snape and check on his health after last night's grim events. Now in the aftermath of their newest argument the original idea didn't feel so clever to her anymore.

"Didn't hit it off well right?" Charity questioned quietly.

"It's been a seven year battle to try and establish polite conversation…." Hermione mused "When I was a student all he did was insult and berate me in the slightest cause. I think he hated me. Now as adults, I cannot seem to stop insulting him, even though I don't want to"

"What happened?" Charity didn't beat around the bush much.

"I left him with the impression that my attentions are on him solely because of Teddy, or because I pity him. Either way, the reasons suck" Hermione grimaced.

"Oh…that sounds really cutting" Charity nodded not knowing what possessed the girl to speak like that.

"Don't you think I know?" her head moved angrily. She was more pissed off with herself than she cared to admit to this woman.

"What made you speak like that?"

"His arrogance…i wanted to break through that frozen wall of apathy and make him understand that I care about his health. As a human towards another human. As someone I know of old and has been through hell with me…do you understand?" Hermione felt her voice raising in frustration.

"I do" Charity agreed patiently.

"You do, but he does not…and I ended up telling him off….again…” she trailed.

"Maybe you people should start anew…clean slate so to say" Charity offered.

"We did that already…and today the deal got reset. Ugh…this is infuriating me” Hermione covered her face with her palm.

Charity remained silent and left the younger witch think things through at her own pace. After some pondering Hermione raised her head "I think we shall have to accept the fact that we cannot communicate. Leave it at that you know. Keep it formally polite. I don't have to ask him about his bleeding anyway. You know what's going on…you'll help him"
"Of course I will"

Hermione paused for the longest of times and she began fumbling with the sleeves of her robe. Finally she gave up the try to keep silent "So what is going on…” she asked nonchalantly.

"About what?" Charity acted confused.

"His bleeding…what kind of wound is this? He said it is old"

"Rather old indeed…” Charity turned to her solemnly "…it's his dark mark" she spoke slowly, letting the words fall heavily from her mouth.

Hermione felt her back shivering and she tightened with sudden apprehension "Why is it bleeding?" she didn't want to know…and yet she couldn't stop herself from asking.

Charity inhaled deeply and clasped her hands "I don't know if I should be telling you this"

"I won't speak…really" Hermione tried a smile that failed "…come on…do you see us talking to each other a lot?"

Charity kept her eyes on her thoughtfully and then as if deciding she nodded "Very well. He tore the skin off his arm to get rid of the mark, but he refused to use any healing potions or any magic to fight off Voldemort's dark spell. Therefore the scar tissue around his forearm keeps bleeding on and off all these years"

Hermione's heart sank and she felt her stomach twisting painfully. She bit the inside of her lip and tried to keep her exterior unaffected. Charity looked at her with a curious frown. Hermione looked away and inhaled to control the small batch of emotions that briefly run amok "I am sorry" she whispered.

"About what he's done to himself or about asking?" Charity's question hit her right in the gut.

"Both…” she exhaled and rubbed her eyes. This morning begun quite optimistically with her wanting to draw the sour old Professor's attention, and ended up an hour later one of the worst mornings since she arrived back at school.

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Several hours later Severus was searching one of the library muggle literature sections fervently for a book he remembered was there. After the conversation with Miss Granger were she reminded him how miserable his life truly was, he sustained a whole day of annoying students and questioning Professors inside his library. Counting the moments until he could close off the doors and head down to Hagrid's hut in order to take him upon his offer.

He found the half giant cooking a stew in his large cauldron and immediately asked for a drink. Any kind suited him. Anything to numb down the feelings of desperation that woman's inconsiderate remarks brought to the surface. He would have given suicide another attempt, but ironically he felt too tired to even try, but a drink….. A drink could numb him down inside. As he consumed the fire whiskey, Hagrid provided, without any thoughts of propriety, his mind running wild with memories and his heart firing up with emotions. What took him by surprise was that not once did he break anything around him through telekinesis. The way his body worked kept surprising him to end. Now that he expected it to react violently it remained silent, only to explode with the most inconspicuous of causes.

He remained with Hagrid for several hours, downing at least three fourths of the bottle himself and
allowing the half giant only one quarter. When he left he was thoroughly drunk, but kept his bearing admirably consistent. What mattered most was his heart, that felt calm and his mind that felt almost empty.

His hand finally grabbed the wanted book and he brought it close to his face. Almost empty his mind was apart from one thing this woman said. Something that stuck with him throughout his drunken delirium.

- The child deserves happiness, even if it comes from someone as miserable as me - many decades ago there lived another unhappy little child, who never got a chance to happiness. He could offer some happiness to this Ted and comfort his own desolate heart in the process. Maybe if he gave hope to someone else, he could feel that this world was worth something at the end of the day. Did it matter that this was the child of Lupin? His lips turned down in self disgust…even this act of rare generosity he had to go and taint with his old grudges. He was acting egoistically, licking his own wounds…but no matter his original intentions, he could make a small difference. Not that it would matter to him tomorrow…but tonight, with more than half a bottle of fire whiskey in his blood, it somehow seemed to matter.

The walk to Miss Granger's apartments was quick. He was trying to hurry through this, in order not to lose courage and pull the deal back. If he was in his right mind he wouldn't have acted this frivolously. Looping in and out of numbness and pushing himself to walk straight even though from the outside nothing could be observed as out of the ordinary, he made it to her door and rapped on the wood impatiently. He didn't even know what time it was. Possibly they were both asleep.

The voices from the inside notified him that if they had been sleeping, he had successfully waken them up. When she opened the door abruptly he took a step back, only then realising how close he was to leaning upon the door.

Her eyes looked at him confused for several seconds and then she forced a smile upon her lips and drew her night robe close on her neck as if she was caught too naked in front of him. He didn't have the clarity of mind to notice her appearance in depth, or care about how exposed she was. He raised his hand and whispered "It's for the child" as if that was enough of an explanation.

She hesitantly took the book from his hand and turned to Teddy that run up to the door "Hi Presser Snape!" he cried.

"Hello" he said wavering upon his feet. Or wasn't he?

"Are you ok?" she was scrutinising him.

"Of course. Are you ok?" he inquired trying to shake off the dizziness that was coming and going.

She seemed taken aback by the question and looked at him warily "I am fine, but you look kind of pale"

"How's your arm Presser Snape?" the boy asked loudly enough to make him blink.

"Fine" then he turned to the woman that was looking at him flabbergasted "Give this to the child" he repeated in a low tone.

Miss Granger got kicked into action and she kneeled in front of Teddy "this is from Professor Snape….a gift?" she turned to him questioningly. Not knowing how to take what was happening.

He tilted his head sideways as means of agreement "Indeed" he exhaled.
Teddy took the book and immediately run and grabbed his leg so tight, that Severus lost his footing momentarily. He grabbed the door's ledge to stabilise himself "Thank you Presser Snape! I love Solomon's adventures! Libby told me all about it!"

"Yes I know, that's why I brought it. I know you cannot read at your age. Maybe you can force your aunt to read it for you" he whispered wanting to disentangle the child from his thigh, but daring not touch him.

Miss Granger was looking at him thoroughly confused and shocked. He wished that she said something for this was becoming more awkward that his initial expectation. After a few more uncomfortable moments were she kept her burning eyes on him, she addressed him quietly "That was very considerate of you"

"You seem surprised" he whispered briefly closing his eyes. He was more surprised than she was.

"Admittedly it was not a gesture I expected from you" she bit both her lips seemingly very wary.

"I am sure" he drawled dryly and dug into the pocket of his pants. He drew a piece of paper and gave it to her.

She took it less reluctantly than the book "What's this?" she met his eyes. He had a hard time focusing on her.

"Miss Libby Perkins is a very prudent, book oriented Slytherin senior. She has four younger brothers who she helps raise. If you should need a good nanny for the child, I think she will do a great job" he tried to sound professional but was unable to make sure that he was managing all that well, from the worried looks this woman was giving him.

"You found me a nanny?" Miss Granger seemed even more shocked now.

"I am just offering a name that I trust, the rest is your business" he rebuked her.

"I know Libby she took me on a library tour!" Teddy jumped about excited and then run into the room clutching his book tight in his chest.

Miss Granger gazed at him with a disarming look that made his knees buckle "Another considerate act, this time for me" her voice barely heard.

"I was informed that you are up to your neck with classes and the kid gets handed from Professor to Professor. Miss Libby could prove beneficial for both your job and the child's stability" he tried to explain, not even comprehending that he was talking with her in a civilised manner. Something that was confusing her to no end. Something that was making her very wary of his ulterior motives.

"Are you drunk?" she whiffed the air around him.

He drew up to his full height and his hair enveloped his face "What?"

"You smell of alcohol…" she pressed her lips trying to get closer to him to take more whiffs.

He stepped back away from her "What if I was….would that make you offend my gift to the child in some manner? I am used to that…bring it on Granger" he spat forgetting to use proper titles.

She raised her brows "No, no more misunderstandings. Not tonight that you made such a beautiful gesture towards Teddy and me. I couldn't care less if you are dead drunk…" she tried to add some honest humour somewhere in that.
He sighed in resignation "I am so drunk I can hardly see past my long nose. Which is fortunate for you and your inappropriate nightgown"

She blushed deeply, something he barely noticed in his inebriated state and covered her neck more if possible "Don't worry, I will remember nothing of this tomorrow..." he cast his eyes to the floor thoughtfully "Although I hope I do remember making the child happy for a moment" he said with unforeseen emotion.

She made a move towards him, probably to touch his sleeve again or something and he took another wavering step back "You did make him so happy...can you not see it?" she asked and looked back into the room where Teddy was sitting on the couch with the book open upon his knees...his nose buried in the old illustrated pages.

He huffed lost in thought "Even miserable people can bring happiness...sometimes" he whispered mostly intending that as a thought, but his drunken mind gave her his emotions on a plate.

Her stare froze intense on him and he licked his lips not knowing what more to say. After a few silent moments were they kept looking at each other he couldn't take it anymore "Good night Miss Granger" he said abruptly and left. His boots on purpose hitting the floor loudly in order to keep his pace stable and in order to cover up the silence that drew heavy behind him. At that moment he wished to disappear...and at the same time felt pleased that the child liked his gift so much. As he neared his chambers he had only one wish for the night. To forget what he just did, and to remember only the result. The child's happiness....for if I child loses their happiness then all hope is lost from the world.
"Yeh sure yeh don't want anything ter eat Professur?" Hagrid sat heavily beside him.

Severus stirred slightly and kept his eyes on the lake surface. He shook his head in negation. When he woke up this morning he was bearing a heavy head and a wounded pride. He partly remembered what he did last night. The gift he offered to the child was still vivid in his mind, but the conversation with the woman and any obscure details were buried in deep fog. He felt thankful for that. Whenever he tried to recall his actions his gut twisted uncomfortably, so he shoved them back in the dark corners of his mind. He hoped he had been prudent towards that annoying woman and that he said nothing inappropriate even though Hagrid had been reassuring him all morning that even in a drunken state, he was always a gentleman.

This morning he regretted last night's venture, but surprisingly he didn't regret Teddy's present. The child had nothing to do with his old grudges. He was completely innocent and unaware of the nightmares they had lived through, years ago. It mattered little that he was Lupin's son…or maybe that is what helped.

"Weather is beautiful today right? Sun is shining, birds are singing" Hagrid took a large bite out of his ham sandwich.

Severus gazed at him in apathy.

"Always hungry after a drinking contest" he explained taking another bite.

Fang came close and took a whiff near his face. Severus winced and pushed the dog back gently "Leave him alone boy!" Hagrid chastised. Severus scratched the dog's neck lost in thought.

"He's fine" he whispered.

"Glad, yeh decided ter come for some fishing this morning" Hagrid pulled his fishing rod and adjusted it between his huge thighs "They aren't biting though" he was unable to hide his disappointment.

Severus shook his head uncaring about his successful fishing career. Just sitting there peacefully was everything he needed to clear his head from the previous evening. As it was Saturday and one of his days off, he decided to keep the library locked this morning and come down to find Hagrid. He didn't know why he liked the half giant's company, but he was a person that didn't try to coax him into agreements and pleasantries. He was being himself, and that allowed Severus to do the same. Even if he sometimes had to mute Hagrid's insistent blabbering.

"Even though I enjoyed yeh company last night, I have ter ask yeh" Hagrid gazed at him.

Severus's mouth twisted in a silent question.

"Yeh been arguing with anyone?"

Severus shook his head.

"Problems with the library?"

Another negation.
"Then what?"

"What do you mean?" Severus whispered with a deep crease between his brows.

"Cannot help but think that summat happened last night. Yeh came too strong on the booze. Yeh downed most of me bottle. Running low on supply, I am" he spoke thoughtfully. Mostly observing the calm lake waters. Not sounding accusing, just genially worried.

"I'll get you another bottle from Hogsmeade"

"It's not about the bottle Professur, It's about yeh"

"As always. I was fine last night Hagrid. I just took up your offer"

Hagrid's beady but kind eyes gazed at him for several moments " Just don't wanna find yeh lying dead on some lakeside…"

"I didn't want to commit suicide last night" he whispered and adjusted his fishing rod, not liking the turn this conversation had taken.

Hagrid signed and as if deciding that Severus was speaking the truth he took another hearty bite out of his sandwich "So it was just companionship yeh're after?"

"As do you…if I remember correctly"

"Yeh're right. I enjoy yeh company…even though most of the staff fear yeh" Hagrid smiled, seemingly oblivious about the seriousness of his words. Severus's brow creased even more and his eyes got lost into the lake. Hagrid spoke in an afterthought "Except Charity and the Headmistress of course!"

"All the rest fear me…” he thought loudly.

"Or try to avoid yeh…yeh're not the easiest person ter be around Professur. It's alright"

Severus scrutinised him "Why do you seek my company then? Because Minerva appointed you my guardian?"

"Nah. Yeh and me both are mangled remember? We understand each other, don't we?" Hagrid smiled down at him.

Severus looked back at the lake with a heavy heart.

"I shouldn't have to look after yeh, but having ter do so, is both a pleasure and a pain. Pleasure because I like yeh. Pain because I know how strong yeh used ter be" Hagrid continued solemnly. After a moment he placed his ham sandwich down and scratched his beard "I lost me appetite, I did" -then stop speaking of he past you fool- Severus thought but decided against voicing it. The silence drew between them more comfortable than ever. All that Severus could hear were some blackbirds above the cottonwood trees. Fang was lying with his back on Severus's back and the sun was warming his silver-black hair. He begun to doze off and closed his eyes letting the peacefulness around him sip through his skin when Fang sprang to his legs and began barking. The same moment Hagrid spoke "It is Professur Sinistra with that little boy Teddy"

Severus looked up and saw Teddy running quickly in front of Sinistra towards the lake. She was yelling at the boy with her hands extended "I think there must be some trouble with them…what do
yeh think?" Hagrid frowned deeply as the kid approached the waters dangerously close.

"What the hell is she doing?" Severus thought out loud and his frown deepened.

"Come back boy! You hear me! Come back here NOW!" they heard her voice holler now that she was closer to them.

"No, I am not coming to you! I want my auntie! I want to play in the Gidditch field!" Teddy looked back at her as he was running, and Severus's body tensed quickly when he saw the boy's foot slip at the mud that was at the edge of the lake. Disaster was upon them as Ted slipped into the cold water and begun yelling for help.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake" he whispered and sprang to his feet. Hagrid was already running in front of him, but Severus's agility made him bypass the giant easily and he reached Sinistra that was trying to get Teddy to grab a long stick. The boy was panicking and his hectic movements were pulling him away from the shore.

"Help Severus!" was all that Sinistra managed before he jumped into the lake head first. The cold water shocked him awake as he resurfaced. He looked at Teddy splashing around a little further from him and with two strokes he grabbed the boy by the waist. Teddy grabbed him by the throat with both arms.

"Don't choke me" Severus whispered at the boy and began swimming towards the shore.

Teddy was crying with his head buried on his shoulder "I want my auntie!" he kept repeating after each sob.

"I'll take you to her, give me a moment" he tried to sound as compassionate as he could manage. Reaching the shore he tried to untangle to boy from his arms. Hagrid took Teddy with great difficulty as his small hands were pulling Severus by the cardigan.

"Come here laddie. I've got yeh" Hagrid took him in his arms.

Severus pulled himself outside with difficulty since his cardigan felt ten times heavier now that it was soaked. He turned to Sinistra angry to the bone and gave her a deadly glare "What the hell was all this?!" he growled and heard his broken voice struggling to deliver. At that moment he didn't really care. The fear that the boy almost drowned topped everything else.

"I am sorry Severus, I am sorry Teddy…are you ok?" Sinistra checked on the boy visibly shaken herself.

"WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED!??" Severus thundered and his voice crackled and riddled him with pain. Hagrid took the boy a little further off and put him down. Teddy was still crying and rubbing his eyes obviously shocked.

"He wanted to visit the Quidditch field, but the Headmistress has given strict orders to keep everyone away when the teams are practicing. Today Slytherin and Gryffindor are having double practice and you know how violent these two teams can become with each other. I denied him and he went into a frenzy. He fell to the floor and began kicking and screaming. When I told him this attitude shall not be abided he run away from me asking for his aunt. That's how we came down here" Sinistra was rubbing her forehead with a trembling hand "I cannot believe he almost drowned" she muttered to herself, but Severus heard pretty clearly.

"He's fine Professur. Just a bit shaken" Hagrid offered a smile. Teddy's hair had taken a deep purple colour and he was still wiping away his eyes.
"Can you dry him?" he asked Sinistra feeling even more furious at being unwilling to do that small thing for the boy.

"Of course" the witch agreed wholeheartedly, but the moment she approached Teddy begun screaming again. She stopped and covered her mouth "Oh, bloody hell" she murmured.

Severus placed his hand on her arm and pulled her back "Go and inform his aunt of what happened. We'll take care of him" he whispered feeling his vocal chords in serious pain. They felt absolutely abused.

"She is in the middle of a private tutoring to a couple of senior students, shouldn't we wait? Seeing the boy is alright?" Sinistra noted carefully.

"He is doing fine Professur. He didn't down any water" Hagrid caressed the boys hair.

"Fine, inform her when she finishes, but tell the Headmistress now" he gazed at the astronomy Professor warningly.

"Sure Severus…take care of him will you?" her voice was trembling.

He grimaced and didn't answer. Instead he moved towards Hagrid. Sinistra quick gait thudded on the grass behind him.

"Can you dry him?" he said to Hagrid and loomed above the child.

Teddy looked up to him with his red puffy eyes and his lip pouted sadly. Unexpectedly he tore himself away from Hagrid and fell on his thigh embracing it with such force that Severus lost his footing and fell down. The boy found the opportunity and let his thigh go, instead embracing his chest. Severus looked at Hagrid feeling at a loss. The half giant's lips pulled back in embarrassment "Maybe yeh should hug him back Professur. He needs it". The gentle note of reproach on Hagrid's voice didn't get lost on Severus.

"Dry him!" Severus spat trying to control his annoyance with how this day was turning out. He had really hoped for a quiet Saturday morning. Slowly his arms came around the little boy and he held him as he stood up. Teddy's legs went around his waist and his head rested on Severus's shoulder. Hagrid threw a spell on both of them through his umbrella and they dried up immediately. Teddy's hair turned bright pink and he giggled in Severus's arms.

"That tickled!" he cried.

Severus glared at the boy's head and lowered him to the ground, not wanting to admit that he felt relieved. "For goodness shake boy, what got into you" he whispered keeping his hand on Teddy's shoulder to engage his attention.

"I wanted to see the Gittich" Teddy looked down embarrassed. He knew very well he'd done something seriously bad.

"Didn't Professor Sinistra tell you that you cannot?"

"She is mean!" Teddy frowned angrily.

"Just because she insists you abide by the rules of this school doesn't make her mean. Your reaction makes you a brat actually" Severus chastised.

"What's a brat? What's a pipe?" Teddy asked picking on his nose again.
Severus stilled his hand and looked back at the abandoned fishing rods "Abide is to accept a rule. A brat is what you became when you started screaming and running away from your guardian. Your behaviour is unacceptable" he spoke strictly, not feeling any remorse. The boy needed to learn how to follow some rules. This world was not his playground.

"She was mean!" Teddy insisted.

"Why?" Severus pulled him by the hand and made it to their picnic area.

"She didn't take me to see the Gittich" Teddy crossed his arms and sat down dejected.

"And neither will I, or Hagrid. What will you do? Run away from us and fall in another lake?"
Severus sat down and rubbed his throat carefully above the turtleneck. His failed yell on Sinistra had probably bled his throat internally. It felt raw and butchered.

"I'll go find my auntie!" Teddy looked at him stubbornly.

"I see Andromeda failed to shape you up for proper behaviour" he noticed.

"Musta been because of his parents" Hagrid sat down at the other side of Teddy and cleaned his umbrella.

Severus turned to Hagrid "Give him half your sandwich"

"I don't want food. I want my auntie!" the boy stubbed his feet to the ground looking pissed off again.

well this is not a good day…at all - Severus thought and rubbed his forehead "Your aunt has some private tutoring and we cannot interrupt her. You have a choice to either sit with us and help us catch some fish, or go back to Professor Sinistra. Everyone else is too busy to mind your nasty attitude at this moment. Like it or not the world doesn't revolve around you. Consider yourself lucky you didn't drown today"

Teddy's hair turned deep blue and he wrapped his small arms around his legs. Severus felt slight remorse in telling him off "I am sorry Presser Snape", the boy finally said.

"Don't let me see you repeating this attitude" Severus warned.

"I won't, but can I go see the Gittich?" Teddy looked up to him beseechingly.

"When they are not practicing I suppose so" Severus felt his whisper so painful that his eyes watered.

"Yeah!" Teddy jumped in happiness.

"And if you ask politely and don't act like a complete brat" Severus's whisper was barely audible by now. He was mostly mouthing his breath to make sense. His hand went protectively around his throat.

"Yeh in pain Professur?" Hagrid was frowning clearly worried.

He nodded to the half giant.

"I'll be polite. Please Presser Snape, can you take me to see Gittich? Please…please pleeease" Teddy begun jumping up and down in front of them.

"Me?" he mouthed and glared at the boy who nodded furiously.
"Ask Professor Sinistra, when she gets a green light from the Headmistress" he mouthed and winced.

"Don't want her" Teddy crossed his arms stubbornly and his lip pouted.

"Ask your aunt"

"I want to go with you. Can I? Please? Please?"

Severus closed his eyes and placed his palm protectively on his face.

"Please…please" Teddy continued.

-oh, for goodness shake- he didn't move at all.

"Pleeesease Presser Snape…pretty pleeeease" Teddy begun whining.

-I hate children-

"Teddy, me think yeh should leave the Professur alone fer a minute" Hagrid tried to intervene.

"Please? I am polite…please can we? can we? Can we? I won't be a brat anymore! I will say please and fenk you and listen to you!" Teddy was still jumping all around him.

Resisting the instinctual urge to snap at the child he lowered his hand and looked at him through murderous eyes "Fine!" he mouthed.

"YEAH! WE ARE GOING TO SEE THE GITTICH, WE ARE GOING TO SEE THE GITTICH!" Teddy begun hollering.

Severus raised his finger in a clear sign of warning "When I feel that your attitude deserves it, I will come find you".

Teddy looked deflated for a moment and then he beamed up to him with the brightest smile "Ok, Presser Snape!"

He exhaled and rubbed his face feeling way too exhausted by every interaction with this little creature.

"Yeh want me ter take him fer a walk and then to Mione?" Hagrid asked still the traces of worry in his voice.

Severus shook his head negatively. He took over the boy from Sinistra, he would make sure he kept him until his aunt was free from her obligations. When this year started the last thing he had been expecting was to become a male nanny to a four year old. Nevertheless it seemed that this was the plan for today at least. He coughed slightly to clear his throat and the pain made him squeeze his eyes tight "Want to try fishing with us?" he mouthed with difficulty.

"Fishing?" Teddy's eyes looked curiously at the rods.

"We haven't' caught any yet" Hagrid agreed with a huge smile and when Teddy looked up, he winked.

"I can get you fish!" Teddy exclaimed and flicked his hand. A small fish jumped out of the lake and fell on Severus's boots leaving a water mark on them.

Severus looked at the boy sideways "Not by magic" he mouthed and then turned to Hagrid "I need
pen and paper”. Then he grabbed the small fish and threw it back in the lake.

Hagrid looked at his lips confused for a few seconds and then his mouth opened with sudden understanding "I have me some, here yeh go". He checked in his huge pockets and drew a yellow looking paper and a pen.

Severus scribbled something down and gave it to Hagrid. The half giant held the paper and told the boy "The Professur says don't' use magic, learn ter fish with the rods"

"Oh ok, how do I do that?" Teddy looked at Severus with large questioning eyes. Severus called him over and when Teddy came, he took the boy between his thighs and made him sit down. Then he picked up his rod and wrapping his hand around the small one he begun demonstrating to him how to hold the rod and how to swing it back and forth until the fishing line could be thrown into the waters.

The boy followed his lead rather patiently even though he kept asking questions that Severus had a difficulty answering. His throat was in agony and he mentally kicked himself for trying to holler at Sinistra. His throat had been damaged as it always did when he was yelling. The pain if he tried to whisper would feel insufferable, yet he still wasn't going to go and beg for a treatment from Poppy. Maybe if Hagrid was able to heal him, he could accept, but not these people in the castle. The ones that feared and avoided him. He wanted nothing to do with them, nor accept any help they wanted to offer.

He passed most of the remaining morning showing Teddy how to use the rod and how to sit relaxed next to it, until they felt a small movement from it. Only then was Teddy allowed to draw back the fishing line to see with growing happiness that he had caught as a very small fish. He wanted to bring it back to his aunt and put it in a small jar with water, but Hagrid took over and explained that the small fish wouldn't survive. Teddy released his prize back at the lake with a heavy heart, but soon enough he was bright and happy again. Holding Hagrid's ham sandwich on one hand and chasing moths all over the shore.

When Severus observed the sky becoming heavy with grey clouds he beckoned Teddy into Hagrid's cabin, where the willing half giant cooked for them some stew. By the time they finished it was early afternoon and the skies had opened up with heavy rain. Severus tried a few bites only to feel them burn his wounded vocal chords and he pushed his plate away not in any mood to eat. Without, asking for any permission he reclined on Hagrid's couch half closing his eyes. Enjoying the game of checkers Teddy was trying to learn from Hagrid, behind his heavy eyelashes. Thankful that at least for now he was not required to speak anymore, and hoping that Granger wouldn't take long to pick the boy up. The weather outside was heavy and the light of day was slowly going. The last thing he wanted was to go to her door again today. He was still feeling very uncomfortable from last night's events, not wishing for a meeting with her again so soon.

-.-

When Hermione closed the doors of her office she felt tired and her head was swirling. Her private tutoring took far longer than she had planned that morning. When the last student left she was surprised to see that it was close to five in the afternoon. She hurried through the corridors to Professor Sinistra's apartments, already feeling embarrassed for overusing her kindness with Teddy. The fact that nobody interrupted her classes was an assurance that everything was alright. This certainty lasted her up to the moment Professor Sinistra opened her door. Immediately Hermione knew that Teddy was not with her. The apartment's silence was evidence of that.

"Hi Professor, how are you guys doing? I hope I am not too late. My last class took a lot longer than I had anticipated" Hermione looked above Sinistra's shoulder to check for a sign of Teddy.
The Professor seemed melancholic and reserved "It's ok Professor Granger, Teddy is not here anyway"

"Where is he?" she hurried to ask.

"With Professor Snape and Hagrid" the woman said as if nothing was the matter. Granger couldn't understand how that was the case since she left the boy under her supervision.

"How did he end up with them?" she tilted her head trying not to sound too biting even though her heart was racing with adrenaline.

"Me and Teddy didn't hit it off too well in the morning. He wanted to go visit the Quidditch field and I denied him, since it was occupied for Slytherin and Gryffindor practice. The child lost it completely. I think he went into a frenzy and run away from me towards the lake. He slipped and fell in, and thankfully Severus was there with Hagrid. He dived in and got Teddy who …don't look at me like that…the boy is fine! I wouldn't have left him with them if there was something wrong" Sinistra sounded defensive.

"He was under your care! Why didn't you notify me immediately?" Hermione's voice raised as she neared panic.

"Professor Snape said it was not necessary since you had classes and that we should not to interrupt you. He said he would take over the kid until you finished" Sinistra said with a peculiarly coy look that Hermione didn't like one bit.

"He did?" she titled her head.

"Yes, Teddy didn't want to come with me anyway after the event with the Quidditch field"

"What I don't get is why no one notified me immediately. You people make no sense" Hermione picked up her bag and started quickly for Hagrid's cabin, not knowing who she wants to yell to first. Sinistra, Snape or Hagrid.

"Because the child was fine honestly" Sinistra yelled behind her.

"That's no excuse Professor, sorry" she raised her hand without slowing her pace.

"Needless to say I won't be able to care for the boy from now on" Sinistra cried.

"Fine!" she hollered back and turned to the main hallways that were leading to Hagrid's cabin "As if I'd ever ask you again" she muttered under her breath. Her heart picked up speed from her quick pace and from the adrenaline that run through her until she made sure that Teddy was ok.

When she rapped Hagrid's door ten minutes later she was panting for breath. The door opened up and she didn't address anyone. She barged into the hut and found Teddy sitting at a chair with an old game of checkers open in front of him "Oh for the love of heavens, are you ok baby" she embraced him way too tight.

"Auntie you are hurting me!" Teddy grumfed.

"What happened? Are you ok?" she repeated half mad with fear and began checking his arms, legs and torso.

"I am fine! Hagrid is teaching me checkers. Wanna see?" the boy pushed her away.
When she was certain that he was truly ok, she turned to the rest of the occupants in the cabin. First Hagrid that was standing behind her "What happened to the child?" she asked seriously.


"Why didn't you people notify me?!" she tried to keep her voice levelled.

"Professur Sinistra advised us against it" Hagrid flicked his shoulder "Said yeh had too many classes and ter wait. Want some hot coco?"

She sighed as the puzzle pieces fell in place. It was not them, but Sinistra that wanted the confrontation delayed as she had been responsible and the boy fell in the lake under her supervision. Well, Hermione was not finished with her "No Hagrid thank you. So Teddy was lumbered onto you"

"I don't think me and Professur Snape find Teddy any trouble" Hagrid's smile beamed under his beard.

Snape yes, where is he?- she thought and looked around the cabin. He was reclining in a protective stance at Hagrid's threadbare couch. His face half hidden by the shadows, the orange light of the fire catching in his dark eyes. She pressed her lips feeling rather apprehensive in his presence after last night. His approach to the child and to her was careful and very considerate. Two things he was not famous for, so she assumed that his drunken state had driven him to rather uncommon actions. Whilst she still appreciated them, she feared that on hindsight he would not be as easy with her tonight "Thank you for saving Teddy Professor" she forced a smile. His eyes remained upon hers for the longest of times before she saw a slight inclination of the head. The only thing that betrayed he ever heard her.

"I'll have to start counting all the times I need to be thanking you. The book you brought to Teddy last night kept us both up until late" she took the offered chair that Hagrid brought up behind her and caressed Teddy's bright pink hair that showed how relaxed he felt in these surroundings.

"Book?" Hagrid looked up with interest.

"Yes the Professor gave Teddy Solomon's adventures. He asked me to read him and I ended up enjoying it more than the child" she admitted with no embarrassment.

"Can you read me again tonight?" Teddy asked and hopped off the chair. He climbed on her lap and embraced her.

"After you take a warm bath, I'll make you a cup of hot milk and I will read you to sleep ok?" she spoke tenderly and caressed his back. Then she looked back to the shadowy place where Snape was hiding from the rest of them "I really cannot thank you enough for today, and about last night" she spoke with honesty.

He kept his eyes on her stubbornly without uttering a word and then he leaned his head back and closed those eyes that burned her. She felt slightly thankful for that until Teddy spoke "Presser Snape hurts, he cannot talk"

She frowned and looked at him again "What happened?"

He didn't move, nor speak. She turned the silent question this time to Hagrid.

"He hollered at Professur Sinistra fer endangering the boy" Hagrid lowered his head sadly "His vocal chords are mangled yeh see"
The movement from the couch grabbed her attention. Severus sat up austerely. She shook her head in understanding. Suddenly she felt remorse for both endangering Teddy by leaving him with Sinistra, and for unwillingly causing this man to suffer as a result "Are you in pain?" she asked solemnly.

"No" he mouthed and stood up. She looked up at him as he approached the table and found a piece of paper that was written all over. He took a pen and scribbled something on it. Then he shoved it in her direction and dropped the pen angrily at the table.

"You should try calling Miss Libby to care for the boy unless you want a repetition of today's adventure" the paper read.

"I intend to do that tomorrow. Thank you for the suggestion" she tried to find his eyes.

He gazed at her in obvious apathy and nodded imperceptibly.

She sang "Can I help you with your throat? You do seem in pain"

"No" he shook his head negatively and sat down on the couch again. Leaning his forearms on his thighs and lowering his head, his body language didn't seem as strong as his words were.

"He just don't want anyone to touch him" Hagrid spoke in a low tone close to Hermione's ear. He didn't want Severus to overhear them.

"Whisper to me" she turned at Snape.

He seemed taken aback for several seconds.

"Whisper to me something" she provoked.

He shook his head and avoided her stare, looking at the wooden panels under his boots.

"You cannot even whisper anymore can you?" she muttered mostly at herself. She reposed Teddy on the floor and stood up "You wounded your throat. Come let me have a look" she drew her wand from her sleeve.

"No" he whispered and immediately he began coughing. His face broke painfully and he turned away from her trying to control the intensity of his coughing. Seeing such a taciturn man, that could go for days uttering only five words, coughing with so much pain, stirred her in unexpected ways.

"Why are you doing this to yourself? What kind of inhumane punishment is this?". The crease on her forehead deep.

He was both unwilling and unable to answer to her because of the insistence of his cough, but his temper begun raising by her probing and he clasped his hands as he felt the familiar rise of magic around him. The uncontrollable part. He didn't want to cause any more damage to Hagrid's house. He needed to leave.

"Presser Snape taught me how to fish today!" Teddy decided to chime in suddenly with a bit of useless information.

"What?" she looked confused.

"With a fishing rod" Teddy nodded eager to share his experience.

"He did?" she looked back at Snape and his face was hidden behind his serious amount of hair.
"YEAH! I caught a little fish and threw it back in the water. Hagrid told me it would die if I kept it, right?" he looked at the half giant awaiting affirmation.

Hagrid nodded, but Hermione's attention was once more on the brooding man on the couch that had just stopped coughing. His face still hidden and his hands clasped white knuckled in front of him.

"I am so happy you had such a lovely time with these men today Teddy. Now will you allow me to help Professor Snape?" she tried to keep her voice neutral.

"No" he shook his head and raised his hand to stop any gallant ideas that she might be having.

"I am not going to hurt you Professor. I just want to help you heal. Just as a thank you for helping Teddy out today" she flicked her shoulder indicating to him that this was not something special. Yet it was even though she couldn't understand it.

"No thank you" he shook his head again and kept his eyes religiously away from her.

"Do you trust me to do a better job than Poppy?" her voice tried to sound lighter.

He couldn't resist meeting her eyes. They were kind and soft upon his. He nodded curtly and a small smile tilted the corners of her mouth "Thank you, so can I try to heal you? You look in pain and I hate seeing people in pain"

He shook his head again and looked towards the fire.

"I don't know why you are so negative towards me. You've known me for seven years. Yes, we've never been friends, but you helped us all these years. Now I have a small chance to repay that debt and you don't even want to let me try"

"Thank you for the offer, but no thank you" he mouthed not knowing if she could lip read him.

"Why since I'll be gentler than Poppy" her eyes tried to find his, but his face was away from her. Her heart drummed heavily under her chest.

"I have to leave" he stood up abruptly. He didn't want this woman to mess with him, even though today she was trying to approach him politely. He waved in the general direction of the room and made it for the door. Before he had the time to reach it and get away from her, Hermione cast a silent spell straight at his throat. Her wand shone bright for a second and Severus grabbed hold of his throat and crashed upon the door ledge. His eyes went red from the excruciating burning pain. It lasted three seconds and took his breath away. Then it subsided as quickly as it had come taking away with it all the pain from this morning's misadventure. He inhaled deeply and glared at her murderously.

what have I done now?- she thought when his eyes killed her from a distance and she took a step away from him. He looked ready to blow the hut up with all the occupants inside.

"Don't ever do that again" he warned, surprised at the absence of pain. Granger healed his wounds forcibly and that made him feel thankful but the positivity of those feelings was pushed aside viciously as now he was forced to feel obliged towards her. And he wanted to have no obligations towards anyone. Also her words of pity were too fresh to be ignored.

"All I wanted to do was heal you" her eyes looked up to him with sad abandonment.

"I really could do without your pity" he spat with menace.

The look or recognition was hard to miss in her eyes "Oh no, you are so wrong about this. It has
nothing to do with pity I assure you!"

"Those were your exact words as I recall correctly from yesterday morning" his eyes pinned her in place.

"Yes, and I regret them deeply, for they have been misinterpreted as it looks" she pointed at him vaguely with her hand.

"No matter what you might regret, I don't require help either out of pity, nor because of Ted. Just keep your wand away from me" he warned with a low tone that made her hair stand on end.

"I didn't help you for neither of these reasons. I just did it for you…I don't know how to make you understand that" her brows came together in frustration.

"Heed yourself warned" he pointed his finger at her, not even listening to what she was telling him. He felt so defensive at that moment that his hearing had somehow muted all intruding sounds. Including her voice.

"I will, but a thank you would have been better appreciated you know" she stood up at her full height looking at him straight in the eye with no fear whatsoever, but her heart felt disappointed at his rejection. More so for her stupidity when she had uttered those stupid remarks yesterday.

"I would have thanked you, if I had requested this intervention. As it was seriously unwanted, I am just keeping myself from bringing down the roof on your head!" he barked and felt his voice crackling again. He placed his palm around his neck protectively and opened the door. He didn't want to stand there facing her and uttering obscenities in front of the little creature. Ted had nothing to do with all this. He was also aware that his magical mishaps would be happening again soon if she didn't leave him alone. The door opened up behind him and her voice stopped him "Wait!"

He paused but didn't turn around. The rain drenched him quickly.

"Why are you acting like I smashed a bottle in your face?" the hardness of her voice making him frown. She walked closer to him.

"You raised your wand towards me, same principle!" he rejoined angrily.

"I have a difficulty seeing people in pain…you wouldn't have ever given me permission. I took it upon myself" she hurled at him using her hands to make her point even stronger.

"How very gallant of you, Miss Congeniality, so-thank-you" his lips sneered and he turned his back at her.

"What the hell is the matter? What got into you? Last night you were almost civil" the crease deep in her forehead with disapproval.

Her voice made him stop and he turned around angrily. His hair resting on his chest and his eyes blazing "Don't ever dare raise your wand against me like that again!" he hissed, the lack of pain on his throat bypassed. His blood was boiling from anger at her audacity to hold up to him in this manner.

"Against you? what I did was hardly against you" she rebuked equally pissed off that he didn't appreciate her help.

"Well, don't ever do it again!" he glared at her with fiery eyes.
"Fine!" she rejoined.

"Good!" he tilted his head imperiously as if he was expecting her to submit to him. That made her even more furious.

"You should get drunk more often you know" she threw at him expecting him to ask a question so she could clarify.

His raised brow was enough for her.

"I like you better drunk. Sober you are built like a brick-house…I helped you, because I didn't want to see you in pain. I didn't do it from pity. Maybe I did it because I appreciate what you have been doing for the kid since we arrived. Because your actions that are gentle speak louder than your cold and angry words. Maybe I get you better than you think and I want to assist you…ever thought of that Professor?" she hurled at him sadness overflowing her, by his inability to get in touch with his environment.

A sharp crackle, made her turn around with a yelp of fear just in time to see one of Hagrid's window panes blowing into a hundred pieces. She turned to him again with a mingled look of shock and fear in her eyes.

His were cold and calculating on her. He didn't reply. He simply turned around and walked away haughtily. She fumed and bit the inside of her lip trying to stop herself from keeping him there in some manner. He had dismissed her by his attitude and that annoyed her beyond belief."I could get to like your drunken self, but this one? No way…" she muttered to herself and then pursed her lips suddenly annoyed with everything around her. She looked at the broken glass just as Hagrid opened the door.

He walked over to the glass dismayed "He was holding himself in there. Didn't yeh notice?" he picked up a sharp piece.

"Not really" she admitted and raised her wand to the window. Slowly it mended itself, the last piece escaping from Hagrid's hand and sliding in place.

"Thank yeh" Hagrid smiled.

"Is Presser Snape gone?" Teddy asked disappointed.

"I'm afraid so honey"

"He promised to get me to see Gittich" Teddy yawned and stretched.

"I don't think he will be coming soon baby. I don't want to disappoint you. I might take you to see a Quidditch practice the next few days. What do you think?" she asked kneeling in front of Teddy.

"No, Presser Snape promised!" Teddy's lips pouted.

She looked for silent solicitude from Hagrid. The half giant landed a huge palm on Teddy's back "Come laddie, off te bed yeh go. It's late now"

"Thank you for everything today Hagrid" she smiled and took Teddy by the hand "And sorry about the burden and the consequent mess" she looked at the fixed window.

"No harm done Mione. Bring Teddy over tomorrow if yeh like. We left the game mid way" Hagrid offered them both a big smile.
"Bye bye Hagrid" Teddy waved sleepily.

"Bye" Hagrid crossed his hands contently "Goodnight' Mione"

"Goodnight" she said and half heartedly dragged Teddy back to their apartments. She washed him and readied him for sleep, but sleep didn't come easy for her no matter her tiredness. The boiling anger Snape's haughty attitude awakened was difficult to subdue and she found herself tossing and turning to no avail. This man was simply impossible. Finally near the early morning hours she fell exhausted to a deep sleep.
Regrets

A week to a day passed since that annoying encounter in Hagrid's cabin and that Sunday Severus had locked up the library doors in order to sort out the mess students created during the weekdays. Even though he was running his library sternly without the use of magic he couldn't supervise each corner of this huge structure. Most students returned books to their proper places and took care of their working areas, but once in awhile someone left a book in a random aisle, or littered some study area. Severus found the drill of going through every corner of the place once a week, to sort it out and clean it up very satisfying. The manual labour emptied his mind and afterwards he felt almost at peace with everything. The feeling lasted briefly, so he chased after such endeavours as often as possible. Sitting inside his circular reception and overlooking was hardly enough for him. Going around scolding and glaring murderously at the indecencies that had the nerve to appear before him was more productive for the library and him.

That Sunday soon after he locked up, there was a loud banging at the door and when he opened up the happy face of Charity was smiling up at him. She held a steaming cup of tea for him. On that day he was not in a specially bad mood so he took up her offer grumpily and invited her in, locking the door behind him again. Pretending not to hear her playful banter about locking them up in order to do nasty little things to her. At first he enjoyed his warm tea in front of a large window ledge with Charity bubbling away about her classes and the sun warming up his hair. When the tea cup was empty though he forced himself to get up and do some work, even though he wouldn't have minded staying there with his hands crossed listening to her gossip.

He spoke little, partly enjoying the absence of pain from his throat.

Upon that thought he tensed and his lips turned down in displeasure. What happened that afternoon at Hagrid's rubbed off on him the wrong way. It was still bothering him slightly whenever he remembered it. That woman's audacity was over any limit, and his inability to keep her in check infuriated him. She bypassed any wishes he may have had and healed him forcefully. The bloody witch hexed him. That action on it's own bothered him to no end. He felt insufficient to heal himself and that was the thorn on his side, which was feeling he knew well. This time though he was also tormented by guilt…which he hadn't felt for many many years. He felt guilty for not thanking her, and also for not picking up Ted, to take him see a Quidditch practice. He disliked her to the outmost, her presence forever reminding him of years he longed to forget, but he couldn't deny the fact that she had helped him that afternoon, even though her way was not the appropriate one. Begrudgingly she deserved a masked thank you. As for Ted….Severus was not a man that promised something without looking to it. He just didn't want to approach Granger again easily.

Whenever she came to the library with a request during this week, they were formal and kept their eyes meticulously away from each other. Ending any transaction the moment her need for books was fulfilled. He felt at peace with this kind of thin balance, so why was his soul itching to undo that by thanking her?

"Fucking guilt trip…” he mumbled under his breath and walked up a set of stairs with several books on his hands.

"Whatever it is that's eating you up, face up to it" Charity looked at him coyly as he sorted out some more exclusive hard copies at the elite section of the library on the first deck.

"Who told you something is eating me up?” Severus questioned casually.

"The fact that during this last week, you have been fidgeting, especially when a certain young
Professor enters the same room as you” he comment was sharp and to the point.

"You are assuming again"

"And that you are mumbling under your breath more often than you did previously. So what's going on?"

"Nothing"

"What did you do to her now?"

"Nothing"

"Whatever it was, this time your are wavering with indecision. Which means you have been unfair to her in some manner" she offered and took a sip of her tea.

"Very observant of you" his lips sneered bitterly.

"Come on spit it out. What did you do?" Charity raised her mug to encourage him to speak.

"Nothing!" he spat and pushed a volume forcibly in place with a loud thumb.

"Ok, I'll ask her" Charity made to put her tea down and casually walk away.

"I didn't thank her, ok? Are you satisfied now?!" he whispered with annoyance.

"What did she do to deserve a thank you from Hogwart's only human to share same body temperatures with Headless Nick?" Charity smirked at her own humour.

"Very funny… I am getting quickly tired of you" his brows creased deeply.

"You know you want to share, for you haven't pushed me out of the library yet...so speak..." she moved her hand impatiently.

He leaned his forearms on the railing and signed. With a low voice he described to her what took place that particular day, observing her face for any visible reactions. There were none. He straightened up and flicked one shoulder when he finished as if that was enough of a conclusion for all of them. Apparently it was not enough for her.

"Yeah, what happened to Teddy spread like wildfire amongst the staff" her head nodded thoughtfully.

"Good"

"What happened to Sinistra the next day, was even worse" Charity threw out at him the bait. Waiting to see if he'd bite.

"What happened?" he asked casually above his reading glasses.

Charity smiled at managing to draw him into this "Granger told her off. Apparently Sinistra had accused you and Hagrid for not notifying Granger when the events took place"

"What?" he rumbled and closed the heavy volume, the sound reverberating.

Charity raised her finger to him knowingly "And thank goodness the girl took care of this misunderstanding herself and didn't involve either you or your short temper"
He huffed through his nose dismissing her and her annoying insinuations about his inability to control himself. He knew that already. He didn't need any reminders.

"Now let's return to what you did to her...once more" Charity met his eyes boldly.

"There is no point to do so..." he whispered and took up another volume casually going through the pages. Mostly in order to look like he was occupying himself with something.

"So you acted like the usual you. No surprises there"

"Charity leave..." he gave her and resumed his work.

"Ok, do I make it for the door or do I continue our productive talk?"

He raised his brow at the volume on his hands.

"And since I didn't get an answer I shall continue offering my advice. You go find that poor young Professor and apologise"

"What I do with her or do not is none of your business" his whisper sounded menacing but that didn't stop her.

"Then stop fidgeting and mumbling. I mean your inner self wants to apologise obviously, and your iron outer-shell is forbidding it"

"You should have become a writer, not a Professor. Your talent is going to waste" he leaned over the railings again and looked at her above his glasses.

"Go you bloody idiot. Apologise. Tell her you are thankful. Don't do it for her, but for you. It will make you feel better" she smiled up at him.

He sighed and looked up "I'll think about it"

"You won't lose face when you say thank you to something this considerate. I wouldn't have healed you if I was her"

"You've healed me many times" he titled his head at the side, his gaze steady on her.

"Only because you saved my life" she threw at him.

"Fine, I can deal with being even. What picks me, is feeling obligated"

"Aha! That's what's bothering you then" her voice elevated in understanding.

"I hate being obliged and she forced it upon me" he bit the inside of his lip and his voice became bitter.

"She didn't know you fool. How can anyone know what you are hiding behind your cold exterior. You are doing such a good job keeping your feelings hidden. She probably thought she was helping you out"

"I also don't want her pity"

"I don't think she pities you, she's more like either furious or terrified of you. That's your natural echo at the environment" Charity's eyes checked him testily.
"She spoke of pity" he whispered and kept her gaze.

"I think she did it to pick on you, not because she felt it" Charity offered with care. She didn't want to antagonise him much.

"You think…" he drawled.

"I know ok?" she gave him.

He raised his brow.

"I know because I talked to her after you left. She just did it to pick on you. She doesn't pity you. Who would? You are a wall of ice for God's sake"

"And now I am being discussed behind my back…nice" he pressed his lips in disapproval.

"Yes we talk about you, because you are our friend and we care"

His glare measured her coldly.

"You are not a mean person Severus, even though you make people believe that. No mean person risks their life to save a friend" she said more emotionally than he wanted to hear.

"And now comes the psychoanalysis part, something I am not interested in" he rebuked.

"You need it though" Charity smiled and picked up a book.

-you really have no idea what I need- he thought, but didn't open his mouth. After several moments of peaceful silence and as he was coming down the wooden circular staircase she spoke with her nose buried in a book.

"I think you'll find her somewhere between the greenhouses and the gates" the nonchalant observation.

"The gates?" he frowned slightly.

"Yes, she was trying to start up her car last night"

"Her what?"

"She came here by car, you didn't know?" she looked up surprised.

His brow lifted and his lips pursed.

"You didn't…" she resumed.

"Why would a witch drive up to Hogwarts for bloody shakes?" his brow creased in confusion.

"She is guarding a child and under ministerial law, for safety reasons, children under the age of seven cannot apparate, use the floo or portals. She couldn't take the train either, because she needed to be here a few days prior to the beginning of the term" she flicked a shoulder carelessly.

"And Granger hates flying, got it" he gave her a curt nod of understanding.

She raised her finger to him with a coy smile "You remember"

"I can not forget how abhorred she was with the idea of flight from a very young age"
"Which must have rubbed off nastily to the only man besides Voldemort that can achieve flight with no broom" she raised her brow.

"It did. And you are using present tense with flight, whereas you should use past. I am in need of a car more than she is" he shook his head feeling the weight of his words.

Charity laughed heartily at his tone "Don't tell me you can drive!"

He raised his brow meaningfully and a brief smirk appeared on his lips.

"You can! Bloody hell Severus, you have to teach me!" she jumped from her chair and dropped the book on a table.

"With which car should I do that? Care to ask for Granger's?" he rebuked not wanting to admit that her enthusiasm was rubbing off on him. He hadn't touched cars for a very long time, but he was raised half muggle and his father owned a car. It was part of the rules that he learned how to drive and fix one at that.

"I'd ask, if only it worked" she sounded disheartened.

"Well, maybe when it's fixed you should ask her to teach you instead. She drove up half through England so she knows how to work the machine"

"Did your muggle father teach you how to drive?" Charity approached him with a peculiar gaze in her eyes.

He nodded.

"Hm…did he by any chance teach you how to fix one?" she threw carefully at him.

He opened his mouth and tilted his head warningly but didn't speak.

"He did…well then go to Granger and ask to fix her car. Maybe then she or you can teach me how to drive!" Charity declared with enthusiasm.

"Should I take over her laundry whilst I am at it?" he spat.

"Don't sound so grumpy. Wouldn't you want to try your hand with a car again?"

"No"

"How long was it since you have driven?"

"Too long" he whispered feeling another loss in this forgotten skill of his.

"Ok, I have an idea" she dropped her hand on his shoulder.

"I am afraid to listen"

"You go to her, offer an apology and a thank you, and then prove to her your remorse by fixing her car. Then I will ask her for lessons, and maybe we can squeeze you somewhere in between to drive yourself and see what you remember" Charity said with a finger on her mouth and serious eyes.

"So I become her doormat so you can learn how to drive. Not a very appealing proposition. I'll regretfully decline" he shook his head in order to banish her from his presence.
"She's not a person that'd enjoy you as a doormat I dare assume" Charity bit her lips truly annoyed at this golden opportunity which he was denying her.

Severus leaned his large palm over a book and scrutinised her "I am not fixing her car Charity. She brought it here, let her deal with it. Keep this up and the small chance she has to an apology will be eradicated also" his whisper was dry and didn't take any rebukes.

She raised her palm in defeat "Fine! I will back off the car thing if you make an attempt to an apology"

"How can you make a simple friendly proposition sound like a threat. Tell me that" his brow creased in annoyance.

"I know what buttons to push in order to get a reaction from you" she flicked her shoulder.

"Not always the proper reaction…now will you take this book with you?" he noticed that she still held the book she was shuffling through.

"Yes, i'd like to. Will you work the library today just for me?" she asked happily.

"If you don't push your luck anymore, yes. Give it here" he said and went to his desk in order to stamp it for her. The rest of the morning passed with him sorting out books and rare articles in the VIP sections and Charity reading her book in silence. Something that he appreciated deeply. Nevertheless her words felt like a pin at his side, making him uncomfortable on and off throughout his work. Maybe Charity was right. Maybe he could allow himself that he fucked up with Granger the other night and that he owed an apology. This insistent guilt trip was not relenting and he imagined his inner softy hitting the steel walls of his outer bastard demanding that he has a say in this matter.

Finally at noon he admitted that something needed to be done. If the words I am sorry would be easy to utter or he would stand there glaring her into submission was something that he debated until the last moment. When Charity left him for lunch he pulled his coat close around his body and locked his library. A rather spirited walk to the gates revealed to him Granger's car that was magically cloaked. Momentarily his mind enticed him to open the hood and check on the problem. He dismissed his stupid gut reactions that day and becoming grumpier by the minute he walked towards the greenhouses.

"When are the buds going to be ready for picking?" Hermione asked caressing the yellow grainy flowers.

"In two weeks, but you have to be careful with this plant Hermione. You know it's rather dangerous" Professor Sprout's brows raised in a warning.

"Of course I do, but I need wormwood for my new healing potion. I am already gathering the ingredients to begin the tests on it"

"It is a very unstable agent, especially when it is not picked on the right day of the moon cycle. Also it's stability changes according to boiling conditions, which means other ingredients and temperature play a part in it's diversity. I've seen people fall into a coma from manhandling this damn plant" Sprout's lips pursed solemnly. The stout Professor was giving her a very testy look.

Hermione buttoned up and decided to take off her frustration on Teddy "Don't touch the Mandrakes!"

"Sorry auntie" Teddy looked momentarily taken aback.
"Here love, try to water down these Strawflowers" Pomona smiled and offered him a medium sized pitch full of water.

"Yeah!" Teddy exclaimed happily and tried to lift it up managing to spill some on his shoes.

"Teddy be careful!" Hermione said harshly.

The boy gave her a long sad look and moved to the pots Sprout indicated and begun watering the plants.

"What's the matter with you today? You are ready to bite the head off the poor child. Difficult day in class yesterday or something?" Pomona's voice sounded carefully reproachful.

Hermione caressed the wormwood and pursed her lips dejected. The first teaching week felt too trying and having to care for the boy turned out much harder than she had originally planned. This day she felt as close to an emotional breakdown as she could. Pushing herself to check on the ingredients for her own personal projects was not a good idea. At first she thought coming down to see the plants would make her mind focus. The concentration alleviating the tension of this week. The result was her becoming more pissy and taking it out on the little boy in the form of cutting remarks, which was not her true intention.

"Maybe you should take the rest of the day off and we can discuss the wormwood at a later time" Sprout offered.

Hermione rubbed her forehead "I am sorry I sound rude. I am just tired you are right, but I need you to keep two ounces of buds for my project in two weeks. Can you do that?"

"I know you are a very potent Potion Mistress, but I am apprehensive with this plant Hermione….Maybe you can find some other substitute for it's properties. Wormwood was considered illegal some years back. In some countries it still is"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but a low whisper that raised the hair on her back spoke from the door "Artemisia Absinthium should not be handled carelessly"

Hermione's heart broke into a run and she turned her head and saw the recent bane of her life. Snape was standing there, imposing in his black attire as ever. Only slightly more silent now. She sighed and lowered her eyes "I know Professor". A single sentence of his made her feel patronised.

"I have been telling her the same Professor Snape" Sprout raised her voice glad that she had someone on her side in this argument. Although Hermione couldn't understand how an argument ever arose. She wanted those buds and as Potion Mistress she would get them.

"It contains thujone, which acts on GABA and 5-HT receptors. It can cause epileptic convulsions and kidney failure if ingested in large amounts" his voice continued it's whispering tutoring. He walked casually inside as if he had very valid reason for being amongst them this noon.

"I know that also, but I don't intend to ingest any large amounts" her eyes met his boldly.

"I do hope not" he noted and kept his weighting stare on her.

"Hi Presser Snape!" Teddy chimed in from the side.

With difficulty he drew his eyes away from her and she felt her muscles loosening up "Hello Ted" he spoke formally.
"I am watering the plants" the boy spoke seriously and continued his task feeling important.

"Did you learn how to spell your name properly?" Snape asked and leaned his tall body on Sprout's desk.

"Yes, you want me to show you?" Teddy made to put the pitch down.

Severus forestalled him with his open hand "In a moment please". He then scrutinised Hermione once more "I don't know why you need wormwood Miss Granger, but I would advice great care in how you handle this extremely volatile agent. Apart from what it can do inside your body if the dosage is not weighted properly, it can also create rather impressive explosions"

She opened her mouth to reply and then closed it again. Her heart sank at this new bit of information that she had never read in any book "That adverse affect is not documented anywhere"

"Not in the formal textbooks, but researchers have noted this result after some particular combinations" his whisper was non challenging which threw her off track. She was not used to him sounding so placid.

"Give me one researcher that noticed such an explosion" she dared.

"Me" he flicked his shoulder carelessly.

She opened her mouth and knew she looked stupid, but couldn't say anything to that.

"Was lucky I didn't end up in the hospital since you are not only in danger from the explosion itself, but also from the fumes that can pass through your pores to your bloodstream" he met her eyes calmly. His whisper as academic as his deep unforgettable voice had always been.

She gathered herself and needing to feel professional against his slighting she nodded curtly "I will keep all this information in mind Professor. Thank you" she sounded calm, but inside she was fuming at being caught unread. Even though this was Snape, the best mind in Potions in the whole magical world. He may not be using magic, but he couldn't just erase the knowledge from his formidable brain. And oh boy, did she ever respect what he hid inside that head of his.

He gave her a curt nod of his own, but didn't remove his thoughtful gaze from her. Making her squirm for someone to take over this.

"I am glad someone gave our Potion Mistress a good idea of the danger of this plant. Good morning Severus by the way. What are you doing here?" Pomona smiled.

He inhaled and crossed his arms "I'd like a word with Miss Granger in private"

She raised her brows and felt taken aback. He wanted a word with her?...in private? Up till recently he couldn't stand the sight of her. She bit the inside of her lip and looked searchingly at Teddy. Standing there looking like an indecisive teenager didn't make her look very professional to him. That is what pushed her to straighten and nod "Certainly. Lead on" she raised her hand in front of her.

He got up and she followed him outside the greenhouses "What can I do for you?" she asked as they stopped.

He turned and offered her a peculiar gaze that she couldn't quite place. He kept his penetrating eyes on her too long for comfort and just as she was about to scream to the top of her head for him to look away he spoke "Admitting that I have taken too many liberties by interrupting your professional
meetings, I am here to fulfil a promise” he said mystically.

She frowned and steepled her fingers not really knowing what he was referring to "I assure you I was not in any professional meeting. We just came down to see some ingredients and for Teddy to play a little bit at the lake afterwards. It's my day off". Suddenly as an answer to his careful formal approach, her annoyance backed off and her tongue loosened up more than she willed it.

"As it's mine too, I wanted to inquire if Ted is free by any chance today" he continued with the same measured tone.

"Teddy free? Whatever for?" she frowned and looked back at the room.

"I promised the child to show him a Quidditch practice" he said as if this was not something notable.

Hermione's heart sped up though and she broke a brief smile "You are here to take him to see Quidditch?"

"Obviously" he drawled.

"Because you promised him…” she tried to penetrate him with her eyes, but failed.

He nodded his agreement.

She squinted her eyes at him and looked behind his back. No one was there. Then she met his eyes again feeling excited and apprehensive at the same time "You are not jesting me?"

"Why would I?"

"So you mean it?" she insisted.

"Miss Granger, is Ted free today? If he is not, find a day that suits you both and contact me. You know where to find me” he signed and made to leave. He was not ready to subject himself to all this scrutiny, because of his fucking guilt trip.

She raised her hand to him more quickly and willingly than she anticipated "Wait!" she cried.

He turned and raised a brow to her.

"Who's playing today?" she inquired trying to control her voice and her heart that was elated at his proposal.

"Slytherin team practice” his taciturn reply.

A sly smile appeared on her "I should have known"

He raised both brows waiting for a clarification.

"That you'd choose your house to show Teddy" she did as he bade with his silence.

"I am not it's Head anymore Miss Granger" he shook his head dismissing the suggestions of her words.

"Yes I know" her voice was dreamy as her eyes were trying to weight this unpredictable man in front of her.

He licked his lips and inhaled impatiently.
"Teddy is free yes, and he will be excited to know you are taking him" she swallowed.

He drew both his lips between his teeth and bit them taking on an expression of both annoyance and impatience.

"And I am bringing him to you now…wait here" she walked quickly and leaned on the door frame "Teddy come here a moment love"

"Yes auntie" Teddy run out to them.

"Professor Snape wants to take you see Quidditch today. Want to go?" she clasped her hands on her lap and smiled at him feeling her heart smiling also.

"YEAH! I want to! Can I go please?" he jumped in excitement.

"Yes, but you have to promise to listen to Professor Snape and be a little gentleman ok?" she took on a warning tone.

"I promise auntie" Teddy sounded serious.

"Will you bring him back, or should I come pick him up?" she turned to Snape that was checking his long fingers.

He flicked both shoulders without answering showing her that he didn't mind any arrangement.

"I'll come pick him up. Do you mind if I join you guys at the field later when I finish with Pomona?" she said quickly before losing her courage.

He raised his gaze upon her and pressed his lips at this unexpected proposal. He hadn't meant to invite her also, but she somehow managed to invite herself. He shook his head denying himself the opportunity to reply nastily to her. He didn't need more guilt on top of the previous one. He was one thank you sort already. Hermione translated his head gesture "It's ok, I won't come then" she pulled back and bit both lips looking embarrassed.

"You may come" he felt the words scraping his throat even though they were spoken in a low tone.

Hermione's heart stopped and she felt time pausing around her at the impossibility of this situation. The shock made her smile uncomfortably "Fine then..uhm, see you there…then". The words barely coming out of her throat.

He nodded curtly and turned to Teddy "Ready?"

"YEAH! Let's go! Can I have some popcorn, please?" Teddy run and placed his small hand on Snape's large.

He momentarily hesitated but his fingers grabbed the small hand loosely "We'll see what we can do" he muttered trying not to feel Granger's burning eyes on his back as they walked away from the Greenhouses.
"Impossible…simply impossible" she murmured entering the greenhouses. She felt flabbergasted at what had just happened. A week ago she had told Teddy not to expect Snape to approach them again soon. After what took place once between them and the nasty remarks on both sides, she expected to see the last of him. During the week whenever she had to visit the library she kept their interactions formal and distant. Avoiding his eyes and keeping words to a minimum. She didn't expect a thank you for healing his throat, and she certainly didn't expect him to take the kid to see Quidditch. This man was confounding her with his lofty attitude and his acerbic tongue always ready to lash out. With his beloved solitude keeping him isolated from the rest of them. And yet the words of her mother repeated themselves in her mind "Actions speak louder than words". His actions didn't speak of solitude or coldness. They spoke of quite the opposite and the implications of this were making her stomach twist uncomfortably.

"What's impossible?" Sprout asked clearing some pots.

"This man, he is impossible to fathom" she shook her head trying to clear it.

"Who, Severus?" Pomona looked up.

Hermione nodded.

"Well, yes, he is not the easiest person to get along with"

"I don't know what to do to approach him. I am always offending him one way or the other"
Hermione sat down thoughtfully.

"I'd advise you to be politely silent around him. Let him take the lead. That could possibly help you" Pomona wised.

- The lead? -

She never let anyone take a lead. She was always on top of things and Snape had always been on top of her when she was a student. Maybe her annoyance at him came from those years. Maybe now she acted in this manner because she wanted to prove to him that she was not his pushover. That she was an adept Professor, not easily bullied by wordplay. And maybe her reactions to him had been a little too much on the offensive from ground zero. Could she take Pomona's advice? Would that create a better vibe between them? All she needed was civility from him. She didn't expect any kind of friendship. She admired him to the utmost, but letting him use her as a doormat had not been in her plans and she made that known from day one. Had she taken it too far though? How did Charity approach him so much? Those two seemed to share a very friendly relationship even though his reserved nature was always prominent.

"Is that the way you approach him?" she raised her eyes to Pomona.

She laughed heartily and shook her head "I don't try to do that. I keep my respectful distance darling"

Hermione felt her cheeks blushing and she smiled at the wormwood instead "I would have done the same, had he and the child not taken serious interest towards each other. As things are I have to find a way to strike a deal with him. Agree to be civil to each other"

"It's Teddy that likes Snape so much isn't it? Heard him talk about Presser Snape only too much"
"Yes, the boy is absolutely smitten with this man" Hermione's lips pulled in a soft smile.

Pomona's brows raised in abandonment "Then you should maybe try harder to be more polite"

"Even though he is so lofty that he makes you want to punch his mouth" Hermione smirked.

Pomona laughed again "And you want to punch his loftiness away?"

"I don't know why his attitude angers me so much. Maybe because he always rejects any tries I make to approach him. When someone rejects me I don't usually react nicely. Remember what happened when Harry and Ron rejected me during my first year here?"

"Ah, yes, you hid away in the girl's toilets and came face to face with a mountain troll. How can I forget"

Hermione flicked her shoulders "It's my knee jerk reaction to his own haughty rudeness…to his constant rejection"

Pomona crossed her hands above her stomach and looked at her critically "How well did you try to approach him?"

"I don't know" Hermione replied honestly. She thought she did a good job without letting him bully her too much.

Pomona's lips scrounged testily "Check on that before attempting anything else"

Hermione bit the inside of her lip thoughtfully "Yeah I'll do that alright" she murmured and looked out of the algae stained windows. Today he gave her a reluctant chance to set things straight between them one more time. Maybe she could try a little harder.

-for Teddy's shake- she told herself and began stroking the wormwood's buds with a mind that was already intricately interwoven in all that had taken place up till now.

-.-

"That black ball is mean!" Teddy cried and as he jumped off his bench some popcorn fell to Severus's boots.

"It most certainly is" he agreed and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. His eyes followed Miss Libby as she gave one of the black balls a hefty strike sending it to the other side of the field, thus protecting their Seeker.

"Now pick up the popcorn that fell down and throw it in the bin. Do you see where?" he pointed.

"Yes Presser Snape" Teddy kneeled down and picked up every piece of popcorn his little hands could fit. Then he made it for the bin.

"Come back here" Severus stopped him.

Teddy returned and stood in front of him with his hands full of popcorn and his eyes wide and willing. Severus drew his fluffy jacket up slightly and made a cloth made bucket "Put them here, and pick up the rest also. There is no point in keep going back and forth"

Teddy's eyes glowed "Fenk you" he said and sniffed.

"You getting a cold?" Severus frowned and placed his palm on the boy's forehead gently. His
temperature seemed normal.

"My nose is tickling" Teddy replied vaguely and having picked up the last popcorn he run gingerly to the trashcan. He emptied the popcorn and then run back to Severus. He sat down quietly next to him and began picking his nose. In a delayed realisation he stopped and looked up to him. Severus was observing him silently.

"Can I have a tissue please?" Teddy said and showed his palm.

Severus lips twisted in a small smirk and he put a clean tissue in Teddy's palm "You're getting better" he whispered.

Teddy blew one nostril and gave Severus the dirty tissue.

"Blow the other one also, and go throw it in the bin" Severus said nonchalantly.

Teddy did as the older wizard bade him and then sat down next to him quietly "When will that man catch the silver one?" he asked and pointed upwards.

"Golden"

"Golden" Teddy corrected.

"When he finds an opportunity. Considering he is not the best Seeker I've seen, I'd say it will take a rather long time"

"Have you ever played Giddis?" Teddy asked and looked at him with dedication.

"A little bit" Severus brushed him off "And it's called Quidditch"

"Gidditch?"

"Qui-"

"Qui-"

"dditch-"

"ddis"

"Close enough for now" Severus pressed his lips.

"You know how to fly with a broom like Presser Hooch?" Teddy's looked at him wide eyed.

Severus smirked again "Kind off"

"Can you teach me how to do it?"

Severus frowned.

"Please?" Teddy added.

He sighed and looked at the boy "It doesn't have to do with politeness, son. I cannot fly anymore" his whisper was low and reserved.

"Why?"
"Not with the why's again" Severus couldn't help but rub his forehead "See up there? The Seeker made an attempt to catch the Golden one. It's coming towards us, get up to see better" he found the opportunity to make the boy concentrate on something less complicated. Teddy got up on the bench and Severus grabbed the back of his jacket to steady him. His eyes got drawn at the fluid motion of the brooms above them and he momentarily got lost in the beauty of flight. A pleasure he hadn't allowed himself to feel for four years now.

"Am I late?" a woman's voice made both him and Teddy look suddenly down. There he saw Granger approaching them with two steaming cups in her hands. The orange scarf of Gryffindor around her neck and the lapels of her long coat drawn up near her ears. Her brownish wild hair were falling loose, very long, close to her waist.

when was it that she grew such long hair?- he noticed as she approached and sat next to Teddy. She turned to him with a reserved smile and offered him one of the cups. He visibly hesitated.

"It's not poison, just a hot cup of coffee. I asked Charity and she told me you take it plain with no milk or sugar" she kept her hand in front of him, refusing to back down on the offer.

He lifted his hand and took the cup, their fingers slightly grazing. She turned towards the field and bit her lower lip before taking a sip from her cup "Thank you" he whispered vaguely and took a sip also.

"This is for you love, a hot cup of coco" she said and presented Teddy with a third cup. When she saw Severus bewildered expression she flicked her shoulder "I magicked it to follow behind me, since you don't want me to show off my wand skills". The smile on her lips assuring him that she meant no harm by this comment.

He raised his brows and looked towards the field once more.

"I couldn't carry three cups, but I also didn't want you to feel uneasy with me using my wand around you" she explained carefully.

He could see how he may have scared her with his attitude all these times. He nodded curtly "There is no need to be this careful Miss Granger" he whispered.

"I thought there was" she rejoined quickly.

He met her eyes but didn't speak.

"I don't want any more misunderstandings between us" she flicked her shoulder as if that was enough of an explanation.

He lowered his head and warmed his fingers around the hot cup. This brew was exactly what he needed at that particular moment "I understand"

"So what are you guys doing? How is the practice going?" her voice sounded almost pleasant. She was trying to uplift the moods seemingly.

"The Seeker is trying to catch the Silver"

"Golden" Severus corrected.

"Golden ball, but this thing is flying so quickly. It passed by my nose a moment ago!" Teddy giggled and drank some coco.
"You don't say…” Hermione smiled at the boy.

"There are also two mean black balls. Miss Libby hits them with a stick” he pointed at the aforementioned broom that was carrying a rather tall and well build Slytherin girl around the field.

"Bat" Severus couldn't help another correction.

"Yes, a bat, not the ones that fly at night, that stick it's called a bat" Teddy explained to her eagerly, but her eyes kept returning to the black and silver haired wizard that looked solemnly out in the field.

"What do you like the most about Quidditch Teddy?” she asked tasting her coffee and trying not to feel tense just by sitting there with Snape.

"They fly, can I fly too auntie?” the child asked seriously.

"When you are of age, Hogwarts will teach you…” she flicked her shoulders "…probably" she added in an afterthought. She was trying hard not to push Snape or draw him in any kind of conversation. To follow Pomona's advice and let him take the lead, if he found any string of the conversation interesting enough. Which she rather doubted.

"What age auntie?"

"Eleven and on"

"It's too late…” Teddy's face fell in sadness.

"Some people don't learn even at older ages" Severus whispered taking her by surprise.

The snicker that escaped her was audible and he met her eyes "Good point" she flicked a finger to him.

He pressed his lips and raised his brows.

"You remember that I hate flying” she dared.

He gave her a curt nod and his eyes got lost in the field.

"I don't think Teddy's gonna have a problem. He is truly charismatic, magic wise" she said taking care to look at the game and not at him.

"Indeed" Severus found himself agreeing.

"He's been showing off to you? I don't like that” she frowned and tried to sound strict.

His eyes scrutinised her profile and his lips twitched.

"I'll make sure he stops that immediately” she added not looking towards him.

"I don't mind the child" he whispered and warmed his throat with the coffee. This evening the conduct of Granger was baffling him.

"Thank you for your patience” the quietness of her voice drawing his eyes on her one more time.

"Think nothing of it, although the child must be checked at some point by a wizard. His abilities are too advanced for his age"
"I talked to Minerva about it, but unfortunately there isn't anyone in the castle to take over Teddy. I will inform Andromeda when I take him home next month" she licked her lips and looked thoughtfully at the child. Teddy was drinking his coco silently and looking at the field that was now magically lightened as the sun set and darkness fell around them.

Severus mouth opened up slightly and he bit his upper lip. An exhalation escaped him and he opted to drink more coffee than speak at that moment.

She left a respectable amount of time to pass before she attempted a new approach "How is your throat today?"

He raised his brows and tilted his head a little "As well as can be expected for it's mess" he whispered.

"You sound better than last week"

He huffed "Anything is better than that"

She smirked and lowered her head "I hope you have forgiven my ways around you that day. I feel that I offended you, even though my actions were only meant to help" she dared and her heart picked up speed expecting a new thrashing.

He fell momentarily silent and weighed his choices carefully "I was not myself that day. Thank you for healing me" he whispered with difficulty. Why did it feel so hard to feel thankful?

She inhaled sharply and gazed at him sideways "I didn't do it out of pity" her voice was barely heard over the yells of the Slytherin team.

He nodded thoughtfully but didn't speak.

"I said I felt sad about what happened to you….not that I pity you. I hope you can see the difference between those two" she tried to approach with care.

"Thin line" his taciturn reply.

"I cannot pity the man I admire" she spoke quietly looking at the black steamy liquid on her cup.

The silence next to her feeling heavy until she raised her gaze to him. His burning eyes were trying to see through her. She kept his gaze steadily, unwavering under his intensity. She was speaking the truth and she wanted at least that honesty to pass through to him. Finally as if accepting her words he tilted his head slightly and removed his eyes from her.

She exhaled and offered herself some coffee. She looked at Teddy who had drunk all his coco and was now standing with his arms crossed upon the railing looking at the flying brooms totally starstruck.

"Have you contacted Libby yet?" he inquired after a long time where no one spoke.

"No, actually I haven't" she shook her head.

"Is it because she is Slytherin?" he couldn't help himself.

"No..I know a lot of decent Slytherins. One is sitting next to me" she kept her eyes on his head, willing him to look at her.

He did and one side of his lip was tilting up, in an almost invisible smile "She will assist you with
"I will talk to her today, with your assistance. If that is ok with you" she gave to him.

take the lead…- her mind thought and she counted inwards to see if it worked.

"Certainly" he spoke low and his body straightened against the growing wind.

-it worked…- she smiled inwardly "Thank you"

"The child needs strong tutoring in his manners by the way. He gets out of line way too many times" he spoke again after a stretching silence that was eating her up inside. Letting him lead most of the conversation was truly killing her, but it was well worth it. This was the first time that they were talking with civility between them.

"I have noticed"

"Andromeda did a poor job"

"She lost her daughter, her son-in-law, her sister, her parents…the war took everything away from her. She was only left with Teddy. She gave all she had to him. That can spoil a child rotten, but I can understand the reasons" she was unable to stop the sadness from her voice.

-the mangled ones of the war are all the same- his mind told him and he pursed his lips truly bothered by the darkness of his thoughts. His brow creased deeply and his fingers tightened around the cup.

"He lost both parents and he is being raised by his grandmother and a bunch of strangers. He needs loving discipline not hard. That is how you have won him over I think" she felt her heart pinching her painfully at how sad their conversation just turned.

He looked at her searchingly and she met his eyes with a dejected smile "You are treating him steadily. No yelling or punishments. You are just showing him how to act properly by example. I have taken after you and try to do the same with him whenever I get the chance. Most of the times when he gets out of line people become frustrated with him. Remember how easily Professor Sinistra dumped him on you that day at the lake?"

Severus sighed and looked at a Slytherin Keeper that hit a black ball with his bat sending it across the field and out of sight. He nodded.

"It amazes me that you take trouble to care for a boy you barely know" she smiled at her hands.

"The first child I troubled myself with, was your friend Potter. After him I suppose the exception became a rule. I am responsible for every child in here as I have told you before Miss Granger"

She swallowed a dry throat and nodded attentively "You have so many things that trouble you, the last thing you need is someone chasing you around the castle in order to teach him how to spell his name"

"Maybe that's what I need sometimes to forget the rest of my troubles" his voice was low and lost in thought.

She pressed her lips "Can I ask you something? If the question bothers you, then don't answer"

He flicked his shoulders not really minding her questions at that moment.

"Does your impulsive telekinesis scare you at all?" her gaze was steady on him and a crease was
upon her brow.

He inhaled and pursed his lips "Yes" he found himself answering and he frowned deeply.

She sighed and bit her lower lip, but remained silent.

Now it was his turn to feel the need to explain "I cannot control it. I don't want to cause harm to the people around me but I can neither stop it nor predict it"

She nodded "I don't understand, but I empathise. And that doesn't mean I pity you…” her eyes met his kindly.

His lip upturned and he nodded curtly "It's ok"

"Have you asked anyone for help?"

He shook his head and wiped his upper lip, feeling the stubble of several days scratching the palm of his hand.

"I am going too far most probably, forgive me" she hurried.

"No, I just…” he hesitated and his eyes followed the Seeker that passed close from Teddy who yelled in happiness.

She waited patiently not wanting to stop him.

"This isn't something that anyone can help me with. That's just something only I can stop…” he spoke slowly. Weighting each word.

Her stomach dropped and she tightened her grip around the cup. She didn't know what to answer to this. She knew this man had been burdened heavily during the war. It seems that what the war left of him was even more difficult. They remained silent for what seemed an eternity. She wanted to open her mouth and tell him she was sorry again and again, but she didn't do it. She let him ride out their words at his own pace.

"Why didn't you choose one of your previous subjects to teach? Why the library?" she asked quietly after a long time.

The snarl next to her came as a surprise. A dry smile was upon his lips "Haven't you noticed the lack of my voice?" he whispered.

She swallowed and kept her eyes upon his with difficulty.

"I cannot use my voice to tutor properly in any class. And even if I can do it with my whisper, hearing it crackle under strain…is just too much for me. It pains me physically, but also …." he hesitated and his fingers felt frozen upon the coffee cup. The brew in it was cold now also. He shook his head negatively and didn't continue down that line.

She rubbed her forehead and bit the inside of her upper lip "Why don't you let Poppy heal it? This is something that a healer can help you with"

"I…” his whisper stopped. He didn't know what to tell her. He couldn't explain all the reasons that made him keep away from Poppy and her healing methods. They run too deep and were too painful to open up to a girl almost half his age "…have come to terms with my loss now Miss Granger", he turned the sentence around quickly and avoided her eyes.
"Would you allow me to help you?" she asked feeling her heart beating quickly.

He shook his head but didn't speak.

"Not now…if you are ever ready I mean. I want to create a new healing potion, and maybe we can collaborate upon it. Maybe we could try it on your vocal chords…” she trailed off, surprised that he allowed her to move so deeply in subjects that mattered to him today.

"No, but thank you" he was quick.

She nodded "It's ok" she allowed.

He signed silently thankful that she was not pressuring him into any conversation that felt uncomfortable today "You should really be careful with Wormwood" he said after a long silence. He tasted the remains of his cold coffee and scolded at the cup.

She raised his brows surprised again at the covered concern of his whisper "I know it's unstable Professor, but I am an adept Potion Mistress. I think I can handle a small portion of this ingredient in my experiments". She hoped she kept the annoyance she felt at his patronisation well at bay.

He nodded and observed the Slytherin team landing as the practice finished.

"I see they are done for the night. Teddy we should go love, I have to go visit Hogsmeade tomorrow for some rare ingredients and I need to wake up early…." she said to the boy's back. Then she turned with a timid smile to Snape "…not that I didn't enjoy immensely this rare opportunity to have a civil conversation with the most brilliant mind residing in Hogwarts" she added steadily.

He was thrown off his tracks and he observed her closely. Trying to figure her out "Could you perhaps buy me a bottle of red wine from Hogsmeade?" his question came out of nowhere. Maybe her kind and careful manners around him all evening had helped loosen him up.

She seemed more surprised than he was "For you?"

"No, for Hagrid" he said offhandedly. He wanted to restore the bottle he finished, but he didn't want to visit the village himself.

"Certainly. Any particular brand you want me to search for?" she inquired.

"No…I don't think so at least" he frowned confused. Not able to remember which wine bottle he had finished that dark night, in his desperate need not to be consumed by desolate thoughts once more.

"Maybe you'd like to join me and Teddy in Hogsmeade tomorrow?" she asked and her heart palpitated from the audacity she had to ask the most difficult man in the area, out.

His thorough gaze pinned her in place silently.

"If you see the wine bottle you might remember the brand by looks" she tried to explain and entwined her fingers in front of her coat.

His eyes fell to her Gryffindor scarf and then met her eyes tensely "Thank you for the offer, but no" his whisper was strangely deep.

She smiled uncomfortably "It didn't do any harm, asking, right?" she flicked her shoulders and then turned to Teddy "Are you ready?"

"Yes" the boy yawned and stretched.
Severus squinted his eyes testily upon her and inhaled deeply "Do you have your car keys with you?"

"What?" she frowned.

"The blue Opel Corsa that's by the gates cloaked?" he indicated with his head.

She frowned honestly confused "Yes, that's mine. What do you need the keys for?"

"Someone informed me that it's not working" he raised this brow.

"That's true" she tried to understand where he was taking this, but she couldn't have been more surprised at his next words.

"Maybe I can fix it" he spoke with simplicity.

Her mouth dropped open and she looked at him like a moron "What?"

"I'd like to have a look at the engine if you don't mind" he tilted his head.

"Uhm…sure…I mean, are you sure?" the crease on her forehead deep and her mouth quirking.

He raised his brow and showed her his palm.

She dug deep in her pockets suddenly apprehensive that she had lost the keys. Feeling like she was in the middle of a soap opera and that not finding the keys equaled to the worst tragedy of the series "Hold this Teddy" she spoke quickly and gave her cold coffee to the child.

Teddy tried to taste it, but Severus's large palm was upon his hand pushing the cup down "No" he said strictly and the boy lowered his eyes "Sorry Presser Snape" he said looking regretful.

Hermione found the keys but the moment they left her pocket they slipped from her hands and dropped on the wooden floor. They both dove and their hands touched the keys. She drew back as if touched by fire and offered him an upset smile. His actions were making her feel confused and tense. Why would he ever offer to fix her car? He had no reason to help her. And yet there he was taking the keys and placing them in his pocket.

"You can fix cars?" the delayed thought rose to her lips.

He flicked one shoulder "I don't know yet" he said mystically, and then raised his arm to catch the attention of Miss Libby. The girl saw him and waved back "Maybe we should move down to the arena. You have a chance to talk to the girl" he stood up and she raised her eyes, his impressive height at that moment overtaking everything around her.

He walked at the exit and turned to her again. She was looking at him like a statue "Shall we?" he pointed towards the stairs. That kicked her into action. Her mouth closed shut and she moved in front of him. She was trying to understand what had taken place between them and how her car came into play. They walked down the stairs with Teddy in front of her and her body highly aware of the man behind her. When they exited at the arena she had already decided to let him take all the leads that evening. She kind of loved the results, even though she was not ready to admit that to him. He approached the tall Slytherin student and made the introductions and Hermione followed silently and politely until it was time to ask the girl some important questions about her experience and her time schedule. Feeling deeply satisfied by Libby's prudent and serious disposition she made an appointment with her next morning so she could take care of Teddy, whilst she tried that trip in Hogsmeade alone.
Snape escorted her and the child down at the clock tower entrance and there he stopped "I must bid you my goodnight here" he said solemnly.

She covered her mouth and a big smile spread under it. Without any restrictions she gave him her hand "This evening had been lovely Professor. Thank you for everything".

He shook it steadily and his touch was strong and confident "Thank you for the coffee. Goodnight Ted"

"Goodnight Presser Snape" the boy waved at him and in an afterthought he run and embraced his waist.

Severus pressed his lips and patted his back carefully. Hermione felt her heart warming up to that image. The boy unglued from him and run up to his aunt taking her hand. He looked tired and satisfied. Mostly what she felt also "Take care now. I'll get your wine tomorrow" she reminded him.

He nodded and pressed his lips in acknowledgement but didn't speak. He turned around and walked down to Hagrid's. Somehow this night he didn't want to pass it alone in his cold rooms behind the library. He wanted some form of company and the half giant was the closest to amicable he could get this evening…after Granger and her boy. At that thought his lips turned down and his frown deepened. Even though he enjoyed this evening, it also troubled him. It wouldn't be easy to sleep tonight.
Hogsmeade Trip

Next morning at seven found Severus already with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his forearms black from engine oil. The hair that has escaped his loose ponytail was sticking on his cheeks and forehead making his life hard. The cold air freezing the sweat around his neck. When last night he offered to check Granger's car, it had been a well meant gesture to show her his appreciation about what she's done for him in Hagrid's hut. So that morning at five when he couldn't sleep as usual, he didn't walk up to the astronomy tower to brood and talk to Albus. Nor did he drink himself to sleep. He dressed and picked up her car keys. It was best to put all his frustrations to a productive use. It was Sunday and as such he could get away from the library for as long as he wanted.

He hadn't touched a car engine since he was fifteen years old, but his father had been strict on his tutoring up to that point. Severus hadn't forgotten the basics. It was just a matter of reacquainting himself with this particular engine. Shortly after he identified the problem and he was currently trying to seal up one the valves properly. He huffed as he tightened the bolt with one of the T handle sets that came with the car. He had never forgotten the pleasures of manual labour since he run the library by the sweat of his brow, but fixing a car engine hadn't been his thing for many years.

"Aye Professur! Good morning ter yeh" the voice of the half giant spoke and Severus winced and gave the T handle another twist. The bolt had lost its turns and he didn't have any replacements.

"Good morning" he whispered and wiped his forehead thoughtfully.

"What are yeh doing here at this ungodly hour?" Hagrid came round to check on the engine. His eyes looked awestricken.

"Keeping it thoroughly ungodly" he exhaled.

"Seeing yeh messin' with this hocus pocus is strange" Hagrid rubbed his beard and then in an afterthought took off his hat and scratched his head.

"Yeah, I am pretty sure muggles consider your magical umbrella an equal hocus pocus" Severus felt some pulling from the bandage on his forearm and rubbed it.

"That's why I say that muggles and magical paraphernalia can't mingle. This complicated malarky should 'ave been far away from Hogwarts!" Hagrid blew through his nose a whole bout of annoyance.

"It's no more complicated than your motorbike. The one you gave to Potter…remember?" Severus pressed his lips in equal annoyance. Mostly because of the difficulty he had tightening the loose valve.

"Drivin' this malarkey ain't the same as fixin' it. I always left that part ter Mr. Weasley" Hagrid said almost proudly.

"Yes, well, I can imagine that" Severus whispered with a deep frown as he checked on the valve.

"Ain't it startin' up then?" Hagrid leaned over to check on all the tubes, metallic boxes and coloured lines that run under the hood.

"It'll start up alright, give me a piece of your shirt" Severus pointed at him.

"Eh? What the hell fer Professur?"
"I need it for the valve. Temporarily, now come on...you are the only one between us that wears thin leather currently..."

"Aye..." but the half giant didn't try to cut any.

"You want to see this hocus pocus firing up?" Severus opened his palm to him.

Hagrid's face lit up bright "Mr. Weasley would'ave been jealous of me right now"

"He sure would" Severus agreed calmly

"Aye" Hagrid crossed his arms contently.

"I need a piece of your shirt" Severus brow rose.

"Aye, of course" Hagrid tore out a small piece.

"Thank you" he took it and stuck it down the sides of the valve. He pushed with his fingers until it snuggled around the inside of the tube and then he tried to screw it again.

"Who taught yeh ter fix these muggle machines Professur?"

"My father" he spat, not wanting the name to stick on his tongue for long.

"Yeh liked messin' with them as a kid?"

"I had no choice actually" he whispered and felt the screw shutting tight around the valve. He twisted it a couple of more times to make sure it couldn't turn anymore.

-a belt was waiting for me in the kitchen if I didn't do it...and bloody hell did that belt hurt- his mind said and he wiped out his eyes and cheek with the back of his hand. He gave the T-handle to the giant and opened the door to the Corsa. He sat at the driver's seat and turned the key "Give us a prayer master Hagrid" he looked up at him. The engine fired up easily and Severus pushed the gas pedal down. It roared and a flock of birds flew from the trees above him.

He was unable to stop the small smirk that appeared on the side of his lip at the result "Bloody hell Professur, haven't seen yeh smile in years" Hagrid mused and wiped the air in front of him as the car's emissions polluted the clean mountain air.

"Don't get used to it" Severus whispered and released the gas letting the car run on idle. It sounded pretty stable and he nodded with satisfaction "That will work temporarily" he muttered under his breath and got out of the car.

"Yeh fixed it alright" Hagrid's smile was content, as if he was the one that fixed that complicated piece of muggle engineering.

"Yes" he pursed his lips and rested his hands on his waist.

"Yeh don't believe it yerself" Hagrid laughed out loud.

"No, actually I don't" he agreed truly surprised that he remembered the skills his father embedded into him through physical abuse. His hand went abruptly up to his forearm again and he rubbed it gently.

"Yer wound hurts yeh?" Hagrid looked concerned.
"A little bit" he admitted and pushed some stray hair away from his cheeks.

"Does Mr. Weasley know yeh can fix cars?" Hagrid returned to the burning issue at hand.

"Let me see.. Charity, you…and now Granger…more know than I'd like….so leave Mr. Weasley out of it" he voiced his afterthought.

"I'll keep me mouth shut!" Hagrid raised his palm in a scout promise. "Can yeh also drive one?"

Severus raised both his brows and his lips twisted.

"Yeh can!" Hagrid laughed heartily.

Severus got in and killed the engine "Hagrid, please …don't speak about this to anyone" he whispered. He really didn't want this to get around Hogwarts. The three people knowing were more than enough.

"I won't, but Professur maybe yeh should take off the bandage" Hagrid pointed at his forearm. The dirty bandage was becoming deep maroon slowly.

-not again…- he thought and bit his upper lip.

"Let me see it" Hagrid took his arm and began undoing the bandage. When it was off, Severus saw the scar tissue tearing up in several places at once with blood.

"It's ok Hagrid, it can't get worst than this" he whispered and pulled his arm away. He pressed the bandage on his forearm to stop the bleeding.

"Won't yeh wait fer me here? I got some clean bandage in me cabin" Hagrid walked away quickly.

Severus sighed and sat at the edge of the car's hood. At least he managed to fix it before his arm gave up on him again.

-.-

"So Libby you have three brothers?" Hermione asked as they walked upon the viaduct.

"Four Professor" the girl smiled.

"You remind me of my best friend"

The girl looked at her.

"Ginny, she has six brothers" Hermione clarified.

"Do you have brothers auntie?" Teddy asked.

"No darling, I was an only child"

"That must be so nice…” Libby trailed off thoughtfully.

Hermione smirked.

"Not to have so many people to share with or argue with" Libby continued.

Hermione laughed even though having siblings was her ultimate dream. Always pine after what you cannot have, she thought "So are you sure you can handle Teddy till noon?" she returned to the
original plan.
"Of course Professor" Libby sounded easy and not very worried. She guessed that is what so much experience with brothers did to a girl.

"Teddy I expect you to behave today" Hermione stopped and kneeled in front of the boy.

"I will auntie" he agreed and swivelled his bottom around.

"I don't want to hear from Miss Libby that you run away from her when she didn't do what you wanted. Like what happened with Professor Sinistra" Hermione warned.

"Ok, auntie" Teddy was not looking at her but all around him.

"Libby you think you got it dear girl?" Hermione met her eyes kindly.

"Don't worry Professor, we are going to be fine" Libby said carefully and pulled Teddy's hand "What do you think big man?"

"We are going to play!" Teddy begun hopscotching around Libby.

"Ok, I will be back at about one at noon, will that suit you?"

"Of course" Libby gave a heartwarming smile.

Hermione kissed Teddy who wiped his cheek clean with apparent disgust and then waving goodbye to both of them she walked towards the gates. She lifted the lapels of her coat and placed her gloved hands in her pockets as this morning the cold felt piercing. The sky was grey and heavy, preparing them for rain later on. Hermione inhaled deeply the invigorating mountain air and felt energised enough to face this day. She had a lot of things to do. Buy the most usual ingredients for her storage house, a couple of books she needed, maybe some clothes and of course Snape's wine. Upon his thought her lips twitched and her brow rose. She still felt somehow sidetracked from their civil conversation last night and she couldn't really get a grasp of him. Just when she thought she had him figured out, there he went and turned the tables on her. On either direction, it mattered not. The advice of Pomona worked though last night. When she let him take the lead and she didn't overburden him with her insistent personality, things took a turn for the better. Maybe she could continue down that road with him now that she knew what didn't bother him so much.

She walked buried deep in her thoughts and she didn't notice either her car nor Snape resting on it's hood until it was too late.

"Good morning Professor Granger" his solemn whisper made her yelp and look up quite shocked.

"Good morning Professor" she tried to find her words and to slap her brain back into basic functions. Against all odds, but true to his request last night, Snape was sitting on the edge of her car. The door to the driver's seat was open and so was the hood of the car. He had his sleeves rolled up to the elbows and his hair drawn back into a ponytail with several sweaty tendrils sticking near his temple. A small black smudge was on his cheek and he was holding a bloody bandage on his forearm.

-bloody?- her mind kicked her into action "What happened to you?" she came up to him concerned.

He pulled back slightly "Nothing I assure you"

"Are you bleeding again?" she scrutinised him with her gaze, wanting him to look back at her and answer.
"One can hardly call this bleeding" he raised his brow dismissing her concern.

"Can I see it?"

His brow tested her by remaining up and he didn't speak.

"Please?" she continued.

After a few more minutes of silent observation he sighed and pulled away the bandage. Hermione's heart sank. His skin was marked with scar tissue that was tearing up mildly in several places. There was no sign of the dark mark.

Upon seeing the dejected look in her eyes he covered the scar tissue again, cursing himself inwardly for ever giving her the chance to pity him "Will you allow me to cast a spell on it, to control the bleeding?" her voice sounded carefully manipulated to appear professional.

"Or else what, you are going to hex me again out of the blue?" he felt defensive all of a sudden.

"No…” she smirked at her hands "I would never touch you again without your permission. It's all up to you” she gave him the reigns of this conversation again, knowing that he didn't like feeling cornered. Albeit that her heart was yelling that she should be helping him, and that her mind was objecting at her inability to do something about him immediately. She had to control herself or he would probably fly away from her again in a cloud of anger and dismissal. Like he always did.

He exhaled and pressed on his forearm "There is really no need" he whispered.

"Alright Professor" she agreed telling her pained heart to shut the fuck up, cause this man didn't need it's empathy right now. He gazed at her steadily. "Might I ask what you are doing in front of my car then?" she tried to change the conversation.

He inhaled taken aback by her lack of persistence about his welfare "I said I was gonna try to fix it, didn't I?"

"And did you?" she smiled at him.

He flicked his shoulders and wiped his arm "Don't know, give it a try"

She got into the driver's sit and observed him from the windshield. Dark and brooding, overtaking the area with his presence in a manner that felt unusual to her all of a sudden. She licked her upper lip and turned the key. Her heart rejoiced when she heard the engine firing up. A smile brightened her face and she tried to catch his eyes by placing her foot on the ground and leaning out of the door "You fixed it!" she exclaimed.

"Apparently" he muttered to himself.

She killed the engine and got out. She came and stood in front of him "You are absolutely brilliant. What was wrong with it?" she tried to look under the hood.

"Poor compression. If air and fuel are not properly compressed, the engine can't carry out its combustion process. One of your valves was not sealing up properly" he explained nonchalantly.

"How did you fix it?"

"Used a piece of Hagrid's shirt…” he met her eyes feeling slightly traces of mirth at the pit of his stomach.
She winced "The what?"

He shook his hand dismissing that thread of conversation "Just take the car to the nearest engineer. It needs new bolts in one of its valves. My solution is temporary"

"Yet, you made it work. Thank you…honestly" she said and had to physically restrain herself from kissing his cheek. Knowing that he wouldn't have appreciated such a gesture she opted with playing with her knuckles again.

He gave her a curt nod.

"Who taught you how to fix cars?" she thought she asked an innocent question, but his reaction had not been anticipated.

He inhaled and his eyes glared at her angrily "My father, at the age of nine with the use of physical abuse…Alright? Just sorting out any possible questions your persistent mind might be having about this weird hocus pocus I can do with muggle cars" he hissed.

She raised her palms defensively "Innocent your honour. I never required all this info…consider it deleted from memory" she hurried. Trying to balance this sudden mood change through humour.

He huffed and gazed at her partly confused, partly annoyed.

"Didn't mean anything by that question. Let's forget about it ok?" she said and her eyes got lost at the small black smudge on his cheek, just above the stubble line.

"Ok"

"Just know that appreciate you taking the time and effort to help me out" she said and took a timid step towards him.

"Never mind" he waved her off.

"Is there anything you cannot do, really?" she muttered, mostly addressing herself. Thoroughly amazed by his wide range of skills.

"Actual magic…” he whispered and his eyes kept hers pinned in place.

She pressed her lips and inhaled "Uhm..can I…” she raised her hand to his face and he drew back "No…wait…I won't …just give me a second" she said in broken sentences as he jerked back away from her again and again. Unable to stop herself at that point she landed her hand on his shoulder and stopped him from pulling back "Stay still!" she ordered and with her knuckles she wiped off the black smudge. Raising a brow with satisfaction she released him.

He touched his cheek that felt burned by her touch and glared at her incredulously "What are you doing?" his whisper low and rough.

"I am OCDing on you, forgive me" she backed up and rubbed her temple.

"You are what?"

"Obsessive Compulsive Disorder…I just couldn't stand the dark smudge on your cheek. It was driving me crazy since I saw you. I had to clean it. I couldn't stop myself" she tried to make him understand.

His gaze froze upon her as his heart beat rapidly. His eyes kept scrutinising her, trying to figure her
out for the longest time possible. He was still holding his cheek and she looked flustered and uneasy. The only thing that broke that spell between them was the solid voice of Hagrid that made them both look up.

"Here yeh go Professur, aye good morning Mione" Hagrid came over and gave him the clean bandage.

None replied and Hagrid frowned "What's the matter with yeh people?"

Get a grip on it girl, what are you doing?- her mind bashed her.

"Good morning Hagrid…” she croaked and instantly coughed to clear her throat.

Severus tried to wipe away her touch and any possible smudge with his bandage forgetting that it was full of fresh blood. He ended up getting a bloody cheek and eyes full of trepidation that tried to avoid Granger's.

"Uhm…no Professor, you are killing me right now…” she murmured and tried to approach him again. She raised her hand and tried to find a place to get closer to his cheek "…you messed it up again…stop jerking….it's full of…oh damn!” she muttered as he pulled back from her touch.

"Yeh cheek is full of blood Professur" Hagrid explained better than she could have ever done it. At that moment she felt like a complete moron.

"Stop it both of you!” he croaked and coughed as a result.

"Sorry" she hissed and pulled back.

"You, keep your hands off of me…!” he glared at her hoping that he was intimidating enough "And you give me the bandage!” he turned to Hagrid.

"Here yeh go" Hagrid said and she repeated a low "Sorry…” bearing her teeth and lowering her eyes to her boots.

He turned the dirty bandage to a clean side and wiped his cheek "Is this ok, Miss OCD?” he asked her.

She met his eyes and felt her fear backing away quickly "Yes, better” a small smirk broke on her lips.

"Thank heavens…you are going to kill me you are" he muttered under his breath and threw the dirty bandage to Hagrid that caught it mid air. Then he tried to tie the new bandage around his arm.

"It's going to get bloody again, since the tearing hasn't stopped. You want me to stop it first?” she was unable to stop herself.

"Will you leave me alone after this?!” he gazed at her feeling truly annoyed at how this morning was developing.

"Yep, promise” she smiled.

He winced and his brows creased "Do it then” he whispered feeling that maybe a small assistance from her was not such a bad thing. Charity has done the same to him that other night in the library, and she was nowhere close by "Just a tourniquet spell, nothing more” he warned as she approached with her wand raised.
She nodded and the spell left her wand and entered his skin making it feel warm. Slowly the pain left him and the blood stopped. He caressed his scar tissue and quickly turned it away from her, even though her gaze was steady and unafraid "Thank you" his voice was barely heard. He turned away and lowered his sleeve. There was no need to place a bandage upon it currently.

"Don't mention it" She brushed him off and tried to put her attention on her car in order not to make him feel uncomfortable. He was trying to gather himself by the looks of it.

"I still find it incredible that you have so many skills Professor. Fixing a car is not an easy thing" she sat at the drivers sit and tried the engine again which fired up easily.

"Stop sucking up, it doesn't suit you…" he reprimanded her. He put his pea coat back on and wrapped his scarf around his neck trapping his pony tail under it. He was both hot and cold at the same time. Feeling very uncomfortable.

"Your honesty is straight as an arrow" she pressed her lips slightly annoyed as he came close to the door.

"Kill the engine, you are scaring away the wildlife" he chastised and looked up at another flock of birds that flew away from them.

She did as she was told.

"Where is Ted this morning?" he asked remembering the little child, as he begun settling down from her intrusion.

"Oh, he is with Libby" she locked the car and offered him an evasive smile.

"Glad you decided to try her" he said.

"Yeh got Teddy a nanny?" Hagrid tuned in.

"Yes"

"Wise choice Mione" Hagrid's smile uplifted his thick beard.

"Had some wise help" she met the brooding man's eyes and his head tilted in acknowledgement.

"I have to return to the library. Good morning Miss OCD" Severus nodded curtly and made to leave.

"Good morning Professor" Hagrid said pleasantly.

Whatever it was that pushed her into action, was powerful "Wait Professor!"

He turned and frowned.

"Are you going to call me this silly appellation from now on?" she crossed her arms.

"Depends if you intend to act in this silly manner ever again" he rejoined and crossed his own arms in reply.

She exhaled and bit her lower lip "Are you sure you don't want to join me in Hogsmeade today?"

Both his brows raised "I think I have already replied to you about this"

She nodded and tried not to feel too put off by his coldness "I could use your wisdom once more
concerning certain rare potion ingredients. Also you may find the wine you were looking for. Besides walking might bring some colour back on your cheeks"

He touched his chin and his brow became heavier but he didn't speak. He was trying to understand what her game was.

"Yeh going for supplies Professur? Can I give yeh a list?" Hagrid begun searching his pockets "I wanted ter go down myself ter get some things"

"Now I am to take your grocery list also? How the hell did I end up in the middle of this?" he whispered.

"Yeh are not going then?" Hagrid looked confused with the list on his hand.

"The Professor didn't intend on coming Hagrid" she explained trying not to be too put off by his double rejection. "I was just hoping for some assistance, since it's my first time teaching and his is extremely experienced. Good opportunity to pick his brains about things he kept from us when we were students".

His angry glare warned her silently about her sucking up, hoping she was getting the message.

"Nevertheless I can get your things" Hermione offered to take Hagrid's list.

"Nah Mione, I'll go myself later. You are alone, I don't wanna burden yeh. Thank yeh" Hagrid made to put the list back in his pocket.

"I'll manage Hagrid! I am a grown woman! Now give!" she felt her voice dropping and the back of her nape crawling angrily. Both at Snape's rejection and at Hagrid's obvious dismissal of her capabilities.

"No Mione, but thank yeh" Hagrid insisted.

Severus was starting to get infuriated by them, and suddenly returning to the library didn't feel as satisfactory to him. Getting into the car and driving off with a couple of drifts would have been preferable. Maybe covering them with mud in the process would make both of them shut up already..

"Give me the paper" he raised his hand to the giant truly bothered.

"What?" Hagrid looked at him confused

"Give me the list Hagrid!" he whispered threateningly and Hagrid obeyed and looked at Hermione who was equally confused. "How long are you going to spend at the village?" he turned at her.

She gazed at him way too quickly "Uhm, no more than a couple of hours. I have work back at my storage room. You know sort out the new ingredients and what have you"

The crease of his brow deepened and he glared at her thoroughly. Scanning all her features and feeling his throat going dry. Instead of turning his back to her and going back home, his body was debating a trip to Hogsmeade. Something that was extraordinary on it's own right.

"I'll get your things" he whispered at the half giant, still confused how he ended up taking this path.

She pulled back as if someone struck her across the face "You will?!" she croaked.

He tilted his head slightly and waited.
"I mean of course you will…Uhm…you are coming with me then?" Her heart was beating out of control suddenly and her hands had grown cold. His acceptance shocked her to the core and now she had to deal with the whole of him.

"I am taking the same road as you, at the same time…you want to arrange that into a sentence better?" he barked truly pissed off. At whom he didn't know.

"Nope" she shook her head bewildered.

"Fine then! Cloak this car of yours, and let's get going" he pointed down the road tensely.

She took her wand out quickly and did as she was told. Then she smiled at Hagrid "Good morning Hagrid" she waved.

"Morning Mione, thank you Professur. See yeh later" Hagrid called happily behind them. She found herself almost running after his rapid military pace.
She walked beside him quietly until they reached the outskirts of the Shrieking Shack. He seemed buttoned up and tense beyond approach, but reality was that he was actually walking beside her no matter the bipolar nature of their situation. He not only fixed her car, which probably took him a long time, something he was not obliged to do. He also came with her, to assist her with Hagrid's things. Or maybe help his friend. What mattered was that once again his words came in contrast to his actions. And even though she felt raw from his bruising ways, she couldn't bypass that he was actually doing things to help her. She opened her mouth to thank him again, but decided against it. She was always either thanking him, offending him or apologising. Not a very productive way to communicate with someone.

As they came along the path that led to his place of 'death' his steps quickened and his head lowered. He kept his eyes thoroughly stuck on the ground and suddenly she was highly aware that maybe the reason he didn't want to approach the village was this place.

"What ingredients are you interested in?" his whisper caught her by surprise and drew her out of her contemplations. The moment they passed from the Shrieking Shack his pace slowed down considerably. Now she could keep up with him easily.

"Dandelion root, Dittany, Poison Ivy, Nightshade, Nux Mystica, Fluxweed and Belladona. Some of them" she spoke quietly.

"Tampering with several dangerous ingredients…is that necessary for your classes?" he didn't turn to her. He kept his eyes on his boots.

"I told you I want to develop a new healing potion. Part of my research"

"The same one that contains the unstable wormwood?"

She blew through her nose "I am not a student anymore…"

His gaze fell upon her "I've noticed" his whisper held a mysterious undertone that made her spine tense.

"I can cope you know" she added suddenly feeling under scrutiny.

"Famous last words, nevertheless I know an apothecary that can give you all the ingredients at lower prices"

The side of her mouth uplifted in a small smile "Would appreciate it, but don't get obliged because of me"

"I am good with the owner" he shook his head as if to say there was nothing to this. They both fell into uncomfortable silence until they reached the village. The sky above them grew darker by the minute and Hermione stood in the middle of the main street with her arms crossed and her eyes upon the sky. She offered that they should split and do their shopping quickly before returning at Hogwarts and he agreed. He told her that when she finished with the rest of her shopping, she should meet up with him at Vesta's apothecary. A place she had never heard of and that was hid between some tall buildings at the end of the village.

She took her time to shop around for her books debating whether to gift herself with new set of robes, in order to exchange them with the ones the school gave her. In the end she made it to the
fashion shop and bought two pair of robes instead of one. She shuffled through the store fronts and slowly begun to loosen up from the tension that Snape's presence was causing her. When she offered him to accompany her last night and again this morning she hadn't grasped the enormity of that attempt. Nor did she understand that it would be hard to manage pleasurable social interactions with the most reserved man in the magical world. Why she did it was something she couldn't answer.

She exhaled and rubbed her forehead feeling the weight of the responsibility she had taken falling heavily on her shoulders. Now that she asked him out and he shockingly accepted she didn't know what to do with him.

why did you do it then bloody idiot?- her mind chastised.

why did he accept so easily? - she rebuked.

he didn't accept quite that easily…and did you do it because you thought he wouldn't accept?- her mind retorted.

She raised her brows at this inner debate and made to place back the book she had been checking out in that small bookstore, when a couple of female voices coming from the next aisle caught her attention.

"Did you see him?"

"I sure did"

"It's him, I am certain. I've seen his pictures in the newspapers"

"It's him alright"

"He never comes into the village, do you think something is going on?"

"Maybe something serious considering who he is and how secretive …"

"Not to mention that he is under Ministerial Probation. I mean is he allowed to come to the village like that?"

"Why? You think he is dangerous?"

"He's got one of the darkest pasts the Wizard Weekly has ever printed. Not to mention a couple of obscure books written for him, that never cleared him up all the way"

"I really don't believe any of those rumours. Don't you think the Ministry has his magic under probation also? He is hand bound to be chased if he either leaves Hogwarts territory or if he uses his magic in deviant ways"

"And that makes you feel secure when he is walking around the village with no Aurors for escort?"

"He doesn't bother me, and he doesn't scare me. Quite the contrary I might say"

"What?"

A snicker escaped the woman that sounded more composed and logical "He is terribly handsome ..."

A shocked inhalation came from the other woman "Well..."

Hermione frowned and rested her hand on the bookshelf. She leaned in to hear better "Oh come on,
he has grown up to become a silver fox…rather attractive in his broodiness"

"If I bypass the fear that his Death-Eater days hold for me …then quite reluctantly I'd say I admire his eyes. They can boil a cauldron from the other side of the street"

"It's unfortunate that he is one of the hardest to get..."

"Snape is unapproachable, unavailable and dangerous. Keep away from him"

Hermione's brows lifted up to her hairline and her mouth opened in a surprised O.

"Don't you think I know, now come on…I need to check on the Classical English Literature section" the voice said and quickly shuffling feet walked away from a bemused Hermione.

Listening to a pair of women pining over her dark Professor was so shocking that she didn't move for a several minutes. She mulled over their conversation, partly enjoying how other women were seeing this mysterious man. She had never truly seen him as a man. He had always been a Professor to her. Distant, cold and derisive. With an air of loftiness that pushed people away. This new point of view was strikingly impressive but felt foreign to her. She shook her head and smirked "Good luck nailing down Snape" she whispered and felt truly sorry that one of the women had a crush on such a block of ice. These two women made her wonder how many other females were seeing her old Professor as interesting.

After half an hour she finally finished picking up the books she wanted and made her way down to the hidden apothecary. He was inside discussing with the owner and she had to stop herself from checking him out through the eyes of these two gossipers in the bookstore. Pushing herself to stop acting like a moronic teenager she came up to them and tried to adult. She morphed her voice as professional as she could and picked up all her ingredients with the assistance of the owner and a few taciturn advices from the man next to her. When she finished, the bill was way cheaper than she had been expecting and she knew that this was Snape's doing. Something that she secretly appreciated, but decided against voicing it. Enough thank you's. Maybe she should show her appreciation in a more productive way.

As they got out on the street, they got assaulted by heavy rain. She pulled up her hood and took out her wand to project a protective bubble around them. The look of prohibition he gave her made her pause "I shouldn't cast magic on you…" she said mostly to herself.

"No, but you can cast on yourself" he pulled the lapels of his pea coat up to his ears but let the rain drench his hair that stuck in thick tendrils on his cheeks and temples.

She bit her lower lip and looked towards a cafeteria that was full of people on her right hand "Or I can do this for both of us" she grabbed his forearm suddenly and pulled him towards the door. They stopped under the ledge and their eyes met.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Getting us out of the rain, wanna go in?" she tilted her head at the door.

He frowned but gazed her thoroughly. Not knowing how to feel about any of this.

"I don't think I do" his honesty was hard to conceal.

"I think you do" she smiled and pushed the door open. Her hand landed on his sleeve and she pulled him in behind her.
When he came face to face with all these people, the noises, the smells and the lights he felt assaulted. He winced and placed his hand above his eyes protectively. Her hand lowered his and surprisingly she cupped it and pulled him inside "You must be unused to so much activity". He appeared totally shocked by what was happening. She was also shocked by her audacity…not truly understanding what was behind her own actions.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he whispered but followed her dumbly.

"Really? I have no clue" she admitted and pulled him deftly between the people. She found a nice spot by the windows and sat down.

He remained standing.

"Now this looks ridiculous….I am not abducting you Professor. I just got both of us out of the rain, and I will pay for your hot cup of coffee. Or are you in the mood for some tea?" she took off her coat and placed it to a chair next to her covering her bags.

"I cannot believe this" he shook his head unable to grasp what she was doing. The reason of him not leaving her at that moment was a mystery to him.

"Me neither…nevertheless we are here now. So why not grab the opportunity to relax and have a beverage until the rain stops?" she pointed at the chair across her.

Begrudgingly he sat down and placed his own bag next to her coat. He didn't make a move to take off his though.

"Hello my lovelies, what can I get you?" a middle aged waitress came over to them.

"Did she just call me her lovely?" he felt abhorred by that nauseating try to coax clients.

Hermione's hand covered his one more time and his eyes fell on it, forgetting the waitress and her idiotic words immediately "Not now" she whispered and then turned to the waitress.

"I want a cappuccino, how about you Professor?" she knew she was taking over and his sense of propriety was probably going haywire, but she didn't care. He looked unable to handle their current situation and the waitress wouldn't wait forever.

"Green tea" he hissed.

"That's perfect! Be right back my lovelies!" the waitress chimed and swayed away from them.

He was stuck looking at her hand above his, feeling his breath constricted.

"You should take off your wet coat, before the water sips down to the rest of your clothing" she tried to offer the advice nonchalantly and pulled her hand away from his.

He cradled his hand under the table and his eyes got lost at the raindrops upon the windows. He needed to get his composure back in some manner and Granger's actions were making this harder than life. He remained silent and immovable as a statue.

"It's probably sipping down already. You look like a wet puppy" Hermione tried to stop her smirk but was unable. The lost look in his eyes and his wet hair, flared up a string of protectiveness inside her.

He opened his mouth to hurl something nasty back at her…but nothing came out. Instead he stood
up and unbuttoned his coat. Quickly he took it off and dropped it at an empty chair. His scarf followed foot. When he sat back down his posture was stiff and his arms were crossed protectively on the table in front of him.

"Want help to clear up the hair that's sticking on your temples?" she made a move to clear it for him, but his hand took hers and pushed it gently away.

"OCDing on me again?" he whispered, feeling slightly better at getting the ability to talk back.

"It's really making me go haywire" she flicked her shoulder "But I'll survive" she added in an afterthought.

"You are impossible to fathom" he voiced his thought.

"I suppose I shocked you today. Never meant to make you feel uncomfortable" she met his eyes comfortably.

He raised his brow and his lips twisted testily as if he was questioning her motives.

She raised her hand "Let me explain. I wanted to cast us a dry bubble, but I recalled how much you detest people casting magic on you…I could have done it to myself, but that would have been rude since we are together in this excursion. Next best choice was to offer both of us non magical shelter"

He sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes "I suppose it was the best choice under the circumstances" he admitted half heartedly.

"Even though this place makes you feel uncomfortable"

He looked at her sternly.

"I saw how you reacted when we came in…What bothers you most here?" she wanted to approach him again. To make him feel more at ease with his environment.

"The noises are too loud, the lights too bright and there are too many people" he looked around him, feeling a sense of anxiety rising.

"Too quiet in the library for too long…your sensors must be going crazy right now" she smiled kindly.

you have no idea…he thought and his fingers twisted around each other tightly.

Her eyes fell on that and she swallowed "Remember what I said about zoning out?"

His eyes gazed at her thoughtfully.

"What would calm you down now?" she leaned her elbows and came closer to him.

"The sound of the rain" he whispered without too much thought.

"Look out the window and imagine the sound the rain makes as it falls upon the windows" she said quietly.

He did as she said and slowly he tried to block out all external stimuli. He looked at the individual raindrops and saw them sliding down the window panes slowly. His mind muted all noises and as if by magic he begun hearing the sound of rain upon wet tiles. When the waitress came with their cups he didn't even hear her. Only when Granger's hand touched his lightly did he turn around and met
"Are you better?" she looked at his entwined fingers and saw that they were not taunt anymore, but almost relaxed upon the table.

He sighed and nodded, mesmerised by her ability to calm him down with such ease.

She smiled "Now the coffee shop doesn't seem so intimidating, right?"

He shook his head mutely.

"Try some of your tea…you want some sugar? Milk?"

"No, thank you" he muttered and unclasped his sweaty hands. Oppressing the need to wipe them off his jeans, he picked up his cup and tasted the tea. It was warm and welcoming in his throat. His hand went around his neck to make sure his scars were covered properly and then he pulled his wet hair away from his cheeks "Better?" he looked at her.

"What?" she was taken aback.

"Am I helping your OCD?" he pressed his lips.

Her stomach tingled her and she nodded "Thank you, yes". It was weird how they kind off looked after each other in a discreet and formal manner. She tried to calm him down and he took care to clean his face and calm her down in turn.

His head bobbed and he took another sip silently.

"Did you get all of Hagrid's things?" she asked and observed him closely.

"Yes"

"Did you find the wine you wanted?"

He nodded and gazed at her as she sipped her coffee. Her voluminous hair was up on a messy bun and her cheeks were rosy. She wore a plain muggle shirt under that coat of hers, and to his chagrin the ever lasting Gryffindor scarf was loose around her neck "Did you get all the things you wanted?" he whispered and lowered his eyes to his tea realising that he was checking her out.

"Yes, I even indulged myself some new clothing, even though that was not part of my money plan" she flicked her brow somewhat bothered at her inability to control herself in that fashion shop.

"Did you buy a new scarf?" he licked his upper lip.

Her hand went protectively around her Gryffindor heirloom "No, I have one"

"You need a new one" his brow lifted testily.

She pursed her own lips and glared at him "Because it's from my house…the Slytherin in you is becoming obsessive right?"

He snarled and stopped himself just in time before a smile appeared on his lips.

"I am not giving any money to buy a new scarf" she was unable to stop her smile. His eyes gazed at her so intensely that she had to lower hers to her hands in order to gain her composure.
"Stubborn with history, stubborn with your ingredients, stubbornly pestering me with your presence….so should I call you Miss Stubborn or Miss OCD?" he whispered with a warmth in his tone he hadn't heard in years.

"Pestering you with my presence?" her eyes glared at him angrily even at the insinuation that he was bothered by her.

"Miss Sensitive can also be added to the list. Choose" he flicked his long fingers to her.

She exhaled through her nose bothered "Am I really pestering you?…"

He sighed and lowered his eyes. His fingers moved the tea spoon back and forth a couple of times. He shook his head and forced himself to look at her.

She didn't know whether to believe him or not, but her body loosened up and she smiled "Then it's neither one"

"What should I call you then?" he gazed at her calmly.

"Hermione would be nice…" she flicked both shoulders and raised her palms at him. Trying to invite him to take over her offer.

His lips pursed silently.

"Should I call you Mister Telekinesis, Mister Whisperer or Mister Bad Temper?" She tried the same game with him. Feeling emboldened by the slow shift of the atmosphere around them.

He couldn't stop the smirk this time. It lifted up the side of his mouth "Severus would do" he replied exactly what she had hoped.

"So is this some new level of trust between us?" she huffed and leaned over.

He looked at her confused.

"You know, calling each other by our given names.." she bit her lower lip with a playful smirk.

"Some kind of sorcery beyond my recognition" he hurled back at her trying to keep the mood as light as she did.

She laughed and covered her mouth "I don't know if I am glad or intimidated by the knowledge that you can smile and can also loosen up sometimes"

He pressed his lips and lifted his brow haughtily "Prefer intimidated"

"I am sure you do…" she smiled at her own hands.

He coughed and observed his tea way more intensely than he wanted "Thank you for helping out with my arm today" he whispered quietly. Thanking her about her gentle way of taking him out of his anxiety attack a while back felt too private to touch at that moment.

"Thank you for fixing my car…even though that image will stick with me for life"

"I bet"

"I always forget you are half muggle" she tried to explain how she saw him, knowing that she was probably doing a poor job.
He nodded in understanding "In my current state I resemble more a muggle than a wizard" he gazed at her carefully. His heart pinched him painfully.

She inhaled "Can I dare ask you why you have prohibited yourself from using magic?". One way of helping him was understanding, but would he be willing to give her insight?

He opened his mouth and gazed at her not knowing what to say "It's difficult to explain" he whispered.

"I have all the time in the world, and the rain hasn't abated yet" she looked out the window. Taking a sip from her coffee she observed his profile as he was looking out also. His hair curling up from the rain assault, silver near his forehead and temples, but turning solid black as it reached the back of his head. His brows always well defined and serious, taking no bullshit. His eyes penetrating her very soul with their depth. His stubble giving him a disheveled, but also more approachable look. She observed the sparse dark hair on his forearm and the movement of the defined muscles under his skin for a long time before realising that he had exposed that part of his body at some point.

"Let's just say that all my problems arose when I found out I was a wizard... since my childhood" he spoke slowly weighing each word, so as not to give out too much information.

She looked at him "So banishing magic, might help you get rid of your problems?"

He nodded half heartedly "Close enough"

"Apparently it only made them worse for now you can use the highest level of magic…unwillingly" she treaded carefully, observing each reaction, to make sure she was not overstepping boundaries.

"Correct" he gave a curt nod and looked at the rain once more.

"I have no advice to offer…"

"I don't require one" he whispered without looking at her. The raindrops made him feel in control somehow. Just when his hands begun tightening around his cup, Granger's words of zoning out returned to him.

"I cannot pretend I really know you Profes…" she stopped and he inhaled deeply without averting his eyes from the raindrops "…Severus, but I will admit that I'd like to get to know you better" her voice was low and measured.

"Why?" the question left him unexpectedly.

"I cannot answer that which I do not know" she said honestly and her fingers entwined nervously.

"Good answer" he offered her and drank some tea, enjoying it's warmth. Not even realising that he had silenced out all the noises around him, to concentrate only upon the raindrops and her voice. Something that had a tremendously calming effect on him. She remained silent and he let that silence drift over them for a while before a question popped in his head "Why did you choose to return to Hogwarts?"

She felt taken aback by his question. She raised her brows and licked her lips. It was her turn to remain quiet.

"Since this place offered you such nightmares in the end...why did you come back to it?" he insisted and he turned his head to her. She raised her eyes to meet his. His gaze was burning.
"No one ever asked me this question, and I don't think I have even asked myself…" she tilted her head thoughtfully "Maybe because I want to bring back the happiness of those early years of my life…" she muttered and shivered at how true that was, but above all that she had never realised it until now. Had her life been so dark and sad since the end of the war, that she needed to bring back to it some childhood happiness through Hogwarts? She felt irrevocably sad at that moment and her lips turned down.

His eyes burned the top of her head, but she didn't want to look at him now "You are a mangled one also…" his deep whisper made her shudder one more time. Suddenly her eyes filled with unbidden tears that came out of nowhere. She didn't want him to see her cry.

She covered her eyes with the palm of her hand and pushed herself to stop "I am sorry" she tried to speak but her voice came out broken.

A surprisingly warm, but calloused hand covered hers and a light smell of cedar entered her nostrils. He wrapped his hand around hers and drew it steadily away from her eyes. She pushed the sob down and forced herself to look at him. She didn't want anyone to see her broken. She was the happy, strong and ever collected Hermione Granger. The crease on his brow was deep and his eyes interrogating "It's ok" he whispered slowly. When her hand reposed upon the table, he withdrew his respectfully.

"I don't know what came over me all of a sudden" she tried a smirk that was too sad to feel real and a tissue was offered. She pressed her lips and took it.

"I shouldn't have asked such personal questions" he swallowed feeling his throat dry. Seeing this young woman breaking down in front of him and trying to hide it, had stirred him in unexpected ways.

"You couldn't have known…really" she waved him off and wiped her eyes.

His hand wrapped around her wrist one more time and she felt her back curling inwards at his touch. She looked at him. He lowered her hand and turned her forearm up. His other hand pushed back her sleeve and his finger traced the scar tissue that read 'Mudblood'. She bit the side of her lip and felt more tears welling up. His finger traced all the letters gently, making her skin scorch "But I do know…" he whispered darkly and pulled her closer by the arm. She didn't resist, neither did she want to. She closed her eyes as his hand drew down her shirt at the neck revealing a scarlet scar "Bellatrix branded you for life…" he muttered his eyes drawn deep into her scars. He didn't notice their teaspoons and several napkins levitating above the surface of the table. She nodded and that movement was enough to make him realise just how physical he had become with her. He released her abruptly and all the small items fell back at the table. He looked at them with a deep frown. Thankfully she hadn't noticed.

She kept her eyes closed and she lowered her sleeve "I didn't have it worse than you" her voice was barely audible. Her heart was drumming in her ears and her stomach was in tight knots.

what the hell are you doing? - his mind chastised and he pressed the heel of his palm upon his eyes "Forgive my lack of propriety" he whispered and squeezed his eyes tight.

She rubbed her own eyes and tried to calm down the wild beating of her heart. His words and his touch stirred her more deeply than anticipated "The war has destroyed many people…I am no exception. Unfortunately I am the rule" she tried to make it sound like nothing happened. When in reality her very soul had been shaken, if only for a moment.

He inhaled and tried to calm himself down from that momentary loss of control towards this poor
woman "Maybe we should go…the rain seems to have become a steady drizzle" he looked out and felt the tension between them clearing up.

"Which will probably last all day long, you are right" she forced a smile upon her lips even though her arms crossed protectively around her shoulders.

He noticed and felt remorse at making her feel this bad. He raised his hand to catch the attention of the waitress who brought over the bill. Hermione made a move to get her purse but the strictness in his eyes forestalled her. He paid and then soon enough they were walking out in the streets silently. After that unexpectedly deep conversation in the coffee house, neither wanted to renew any talk. They walked calmly next to each other. Buried in their own thoughts. Hermione trying to understand at which point exactly she lost her cool, and Severus at how easily he had become physical with her. Throwing all sense of propriety out the window. When they reached the gates, none stopped, neither did they try to split ways. They seemed comfortable enough to accompany each other to the main entrance. That is where Snape stopped and forced her to look at him.

"I need to go to Hagrid's" he lifted his bag trying to offer her a gentle explanation why he couldn't go any further with her.

She sighed and a sad smile appeared on her lips "And I need to sort out my new ingredients" she lifted her own bags "Thank you for accompanying me today Severus" she didn't hesitate on his name "And thank you for helping me out with the apothecary. It's going to be my new favourite place from now on" she tried a lighter tone, which fell empty as neither of them was in a particularly pleasant mood.

"Never mind" he brushed her off.

"And thank you for the car" she added.

The side of his lip uplifted.

She sighed again "See you tomorrow morning then". She didn't move to get away from him though. Something made her wait for his affirmation that she was indeed going to see him tomorrow.

"Of course" he gave her a curt nod.

She waved at him and forced herself to turn around and walk away. Every single cell in her body wanted to turn her around and plant a kiss on his cheek, but knowing that wouldn't receive a good welcome she crashed that need under the cruel thumb of her mind. When she finally made it to her apothecary she realised that she was unable to function and that sorting out anything today would be a total loss of time. She decided to return to Libby and Teddy and she found them reading Solomon's adventure on the couch. Libby had cooked spaghetti for both her and the child and she had saved a plate for Hermione also. Something that she appreciated deeply as she was in no mood to do anything. She ate, and laid down at the couch listening to Libby reading the story with an animated but smooth voice. Soon enough she was overtaken by a dreamless sleep. Neither Libby nor Teddy bothered her as she slept straight into the afternoon.
"What are you supposed to be?" Severus observed Ted above the rim of his reading glasses. The boy entered the library dressed as a black spider with eight black legs hanging from his torso, and his face painted black. Two red "eyes" were drawn upon his forehead. He was carrying a small basket that had some candy and chocolate inside.

"You didn't let me speak first, that's not fair" Teddy's lips pouted and he crossed his arms bothered.

Severus sighed and gazed briefly at a rather tired looking Granger that stood behind the boy silently "Indeed…forgive me…one more time please" he whispered and moved his finger in a small circle.

Ted went back and pushed Granger with him. She rolled her eyes obviously exhausted by the kid's play "Enough already…let's move on" she chastised him in a low tone.

"No auntie, we have to do this right" Ted was adamant in keeping up all the pretence.

Severus drew up and crossed his arms waiting for the child's act. Ted approached the cubicle again and knocked on his door. He opened it up and waited "Trick or treat?" the boy tried a growl that didn't impress him at all.

He took a handful of butter lollipops and threw them in Teddy's basket "Treat of course".

"Yeah!" Ted felt victorious.

"Don't tell me that you were expecting him and you got some candy just for this occasion" Hermione approached them and leaned her elbow on the recess.

"No, Charity brought them over in case you came along" Severus's lips tilted upwards calmly.

Hermione felt tired this afternoon and unwilling to be sociable with anyone, but Snape's try didn't go unnoticed "Thank you for the effort" she offered.

Severus shook his head, making her understand that this was no problem and then turned at Ted "You didn't tell me what you are supposed to be"

"Isn't it obvious?" Ted was unwrapping a candy.

"It's not obvious" he drawled.

"A big black SPIDER!" Teddy jumped happily.

Severus raised his brow "Did you scare all the Hogwarts staff with you eight legs?"

"Actually you are the second one after Charity that we are visiting" Hermione couldn't stop herself from rubbing her eyes.

"So you have all night ahead" he pressed his lips and turned his attention to his papers.

"Don't remind me" she exhaled.

He gazed at her sideways "You seem rather exhausted" he noticed.

"It's the new potion I am developing, plus all the classes. When we finish with Teddy, I have to mark
grades for four classes" she felt defeated even at the idea.

"I am not the one giving out advice, but maybe you could postpone it for tomorrow, when you
would feel more rested. It is Saturday in case you've forgotten" he tried to offer this as gently as
possible without sounding patronising.

"I want to start brewing the potion this weekend. Libby couldn't take over Teddy tonight so I can
finish my grading…it's ok though. I'll manage somehow"

He gazed at her thoroughly. Her eyes were slightly red and there were dark circles around them. Her
skin looked pale and she looked ready to collapse. Trying to mess with the unstable substance of
wormwood so exhausted was not very wise. Instead of offering her more advice he decided to offer
her some possible resolution to her obvious distress. It was not a big thing for him to take over Ted's
trick or treating whilst she graded and rested for the rest of the evening. His library was in order and
he was about to close up anyway. He had nothing else to do. Only a book and his bed awaited for
him in his small chamber. Trying not to feel too confused by his need to assist a fellow Professor, he
inhaled and tried to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"Ted do you need assistance in this trick or treat malarkey?"

Hermione glared at him, but he pretended not to notice.

"What do you mean Presser Snape?"

"You want me to come help you trick or treating?" he flipped the pages in front of him as if he was
searching for something.

"YES! Can you? I mean can I? Can we auntie?!" Teddy begun jumping around Hermione who was
looking at him with great reserve.

"Did you just offer to take him around the castle so he can get candy?" she asked truly confused.

He nodded, but avoided her eyes.

"Can you please look at me?" she asked releasing Ted and opening the door of the cubicle. She got
inside and approached him.

He gazed at her mutely.

"Why?" she asked and her eyes fell on his stubble and then at his mouth.

"I think he has the opportunity to get more candy with me than with you" he whispered and tried to
stop the smirk that was coming on his lips.

She raised her brow testily.

"You are not as intimidating as me Professor Granger" he rejoined calmly, knowing that it was the
first time he was offering her proper title.

She inhaled and pursed her lips "You are not as scary as you might think" she trailed off and bit the
side of her lip. A small smile appeared there.

It was his turn to raise a testy brow.

"When someone gets to know you better, you are not even close to scary" she clarified.
"Keep this up and I will take back your only chance to get some work done tonight" he turned his attention to his paperwork dismissing her.

Her heart smiled and without any thoughts she came close and reposed her hand on his shoulder. He turned and met her eyes and she looked up since he was several inches taller than her. His long hair was brushing her fingers and felt light and soft to the touch. One finger moved and rolled around a silver tendril. She gently pulled it and her eyes got lost between his hair and the fabric of his turtleneck "I appreciate what you are trying to do…" she forced her eyes to meet his and her heart missed several beats at the look he gave her. It was intense enough to make her feel warm inside.

"What are you doing?" he whispered trying to understand what she was doing so close to him. His body felt electrified and more awake than it had been in years… or maybe centuries? - he thought and swallowed to a dry throat.

"What?" she muttered.

"Is there something in my hair?" he didn't know what to do with her.

"Are you going to kiss Presser Snape?" Teddy chimed in. She released his shoulder and pulled back at a safer distance quickly.

"What are you talking about Teddy? Of course not!" she chastised and turned around. Her hands straightened the loose hair on her temples and she tried hard to control the wild beating of her heart. Her stomach was twisted in knots and then suddenly she realised that she had been indeed very close to kissing him. Not his mouth… his cheek…or maybe between the mouth and his cheek.

what?- her mind asked and she shook her head bewildered. What had just happened? What had taken over her? Did she appreciate his attempt to help her so much that she had briefly debated kissing him? "Just a bit of fluff…" she threw back at him, not wanting to face him.

"Thank you for removing it" he whispered with his gaze fixed on her brown hair.

"Thank you for offering to help me with Teddy" she turned and forced herself to look at him. His lips tilted sideways and he dismissed her with a flick of the wrist "you look like you need the time off…"

"Is that a polite way of telling me I look like hell?" she smirked.

"More or less" his eyes flickered at her quickly before returning to his working space. It was as if he was trying to avoid her stare also.

"Truth be told I haven't had a break since we went out together", the moment she uttered those words, they struck her with their enormity. Had they gone on a date a week ago and was this the first time she was realising that? The look of similar recognition in his eyes told her that he had probably not thought about this until now either.

He looked at his papers and his brows flicked up "You should take this opportunity to rest then" he whispered, not dismissing her about their date. At that her back shuddered slightly.

"I will…uhm should I come pick him up from your place, or …" she trailed off and her fingers entwined nervously upon each other.

"I'll bring him to your apartments, don't worry" his gaze was steady on her.
"I cannot thank you enough" she exhaled and rubbed her forehead.

"You don't need to…" he observed her solemnly.

"So …I am going now…" she pointed above her shoulder.

He nodded and rested his hand on his waist. His eyes scanned her thoroughly.

"By Teddy love, you be careful to listen to Professor Snape ok?" she kneeled in front of the child.

"Yes auntie" the little spider replied and she embraced him warmly.

"If you get tired, don't hesitate to cut the walk short…." she gazed at him truly thankful of what he was doing for her one more time.

"I won't…" he assured her with a small tilt of the head.

"Ok, have a nice time guys" she waved at them both and felt like a little girl.

"We will" the silver fox offered a careful smile "YES we will!" the small spider agreed.

Trying to keep her body straight and her walk dignified she left the library…feeling his eyes scrutinising her every step.

"So are you ready?" Severus asked Ted the moment her long robes snapped behind the corner.

"Yes Presser Snape!" Ted tried to sort out his spider legs.

Snape took Teddy around Hogwarts religious to his promise to Hermione, not feeling the least bothered by the arrangement he created. Intending to do a thorough job of this trick or treating his first stop was at the Astronomy Professor who opened up the door and gawked at the odd pair that was standing in front of her.

"A hail to all the Gods of the magical kingdom…I cannot believe my eyes" Sinistra pulled back surprised.

"Trick or Treat?" the child asked and growled.

Sinistra's eyes fell to the black dressed brooding man that stood guard behind the boy "Severus you took the kid for a Halloween walk?"

He raised his brow silently.

"Hey Miss! I am here!" Teddy tried to draw her attention.

"Of course you are my little black spider. Treat of course" she smiled and took a large basket full of candy "How much should I empty inside?"

"Did I scare you enough to put two chocolate bars in?" Ted looked at the basket with wide eyes and then at her.

"Yeah you scared the living daylights out of me!" she nodded eagerly.

"Then two chocolates?" he asked and then in an afterthought he turned to Snape "Please?" he added.

"Of course young man…" she emptied half her basket in Ted's and the boy puffed up, full of pride.
Severus's hand landed on the boy's shoulder and the child looked up at him "I think you also owe Professor Sinistra an apology Ted. About that day at the lake, where you run away from her upon a whim….remember?"

Ted's eyes grew wide and he nodded eagerly "I am sorry Presser"

Sinistra looked satisfied "I am thoroughly impressed with the slow change in his manners Severus, and I cannot help but think that you have a lot to do with this"

"We have a lot of doors to knock upon, so if you could excuse us" he bypassed her compliment easily. She was the last person he wanted to analyse his attempts to sort out the boy's attitude with.

"Certainly, see you around scary spider" Sinistra waved at them.

"ARGHHH!" Teddy growled as the door closed.

"Come on" Severus walked towards the Headmistress office.

"Granny Andromeda took me trick or treating, but you are more scary Presser Snape. They give me more candy with you. Can I do this with you next year?" Ted run to catch up with his long strides.

Severus's lips turned down sadly. He didn't even know if he would be alive next year…”I really cannot say" he whispered.

"Trick or Treat!?" Teddy cried and Severus looked up to see Mr. Filch approaching them. His cat hissed when Teddy came running.

"Don't scare Mrs. Norris boy!" Filch chastised abruptly, but upon seeing Snape behind Teddy he stood on attention "I meant …son…good afternoon Professor Snape" he tried to change the tone of his voice.

"Treat the boy Argus" his whisper held a tint of warning.

"I have no candy on me" Argus looked about him honestly worried.

Severus frowned at the effect of fear he always held with the squib "Then run and find some" he rebuked calmly.

Filch opened his mouth to answer, but deciding against it he walked quickly down the corridor "Will do Professor, be right back with some candy son!" he declared as if this was the most important task Snape could have ever given him.

Severus's brow lifted and he pondered silently all the way to Minerva's office. When she opened the door to them, her surprise hadn't been lesser than Sinistra's. She welcomed them inside and tried to engage the boy in a detailed conversation about spiders and how scary they could get. She advised him to also visit Hagrid who knew all about the arachnoids and spoke proudly about the hundreds of huge spiders in the forbidden forest. Something that left Teddy mute and awestricken. Thankfully neither she nor Albus's portrait commented on Severus being Teddy's chaperone although Albus kept his burning stare on Snape the whole duration of their visit. He was certain this would arise in some future conversation between them on the Astronomy tower.

The two of them walked around the castle for more than an hour and a half, passing from every single Professor, Head Student and even Elves. Hagrid was not spared, but since he didn't have any candy he gave Ted a small egg of a spiked back dragon telling him that when he hatched he could be kept safely as a pet until he became one year of age. Then Ted had to return him to Hagrid. The boy
went crazy with that and he kept the egg in his arms like a baby for the rest of the visits, forcing Snape to hold his basket full of candy. Something that caused a lot of heads to turn as they returned at the castle. Finally when they have passed a second time from some of the Professors Ted had yawned enough to admit his sleepiness. Snape led him to Granger's apartments thoroughly sated from this excursion. Carefully pleased with himself that he helped a fellow Professor and at the same time intimidated the rest of the staff enough for several weeks, he knocked at the door and waited patiently.

"Hello auntie!, look at how much candy we got!" Ted showed Hermione his basket when the door opened.

"Well, that's impressive baby, but you won't eat all of them tonight or else you'll get a belly ache" a tired smile appeared on her pink lips. Severus unlocked his eyes with difficulty from them. She was holding a glass of red wine that was almost empty.

"Can I eat two chocolates?" Ted run inside.

"No" she met Snape's eyes and another smile return spontaneously to her "Want to come in?" she offered.

He tilted his head thankfully and entered.

"Can I have three?"

"No!" her eyes rolled and then she raised her glass to him "Can I tempt you with a glass?"

"I really have to leave…it's late" he looked fleetingly at the corridor. The door was still open.

"A quick glass?" she insisted calmly.

He looked at it but didn't reply.

"Come on, you just babysat for two hours. You deserve a small compensation…"

He sighed "Very well, make it a small one" he allowed.

"Want to come sit with me Presser Snape? We can check the egg" Ted was cosy upon the couch and he had emptied all the candy in front of him. He was sorting them out carefully.

"What egg?" she looked behind her shoulder.

"Harid gave me a dragon egg! I can keep it for a year after it hatches" Ted seemed way too excited. Hermione raised her brow testily "We'll see what Andromeda says about that…ok?"

"But I want it!" Ted sounded angry.

"Just because you want it doesn't mean you get it. Not at your age. Your keepers decide, and right now you are being rude to one of your keepers" Snape's whisper was cautiously calm.

Teddy's lips turned down and he caressed the egg "I am sorry auntie" he mumbled.

"Thank you Ted" she replied calmly. She thanked Severus silently with her eyes. He acknowledged it.

"Give me the egg. I'll put it in a warm blanket…"
"Can I have it next to my bed tonight? Please?" Ted offered and looked back at Snape to get reassurance.

Severus tilted his head in acceptance.

"Yes, now eat your sandwich, then take bath and then you are off to sleep. You had Presser Snape to yourself for two hours. Let the man catch his breath ok?" she took him off the couch and began putting the candy back in the basket.

"Did you just call me Presser?" he gazed at her.

She laughed lightly "Yeah…kind of cute right?". She placed the basket on the counter and filled a glass for him "Professor Charity gave me this bottle the second day of my arrival. She thought I might need it after my first day teaching here"

"I really cannot see why..." he drawled.

She exhaled frustrated through her nose "Well, I think you do…it was a useful gift. Especially today after all the grading I had, it helped me relax a little bit" she sat next to Ted that was eating his dinner with a lot of appetite.

Severus tasted the wine and it was fruity and full. He enjoyed the taste a lot "Did you get a lot of work done?"

"Sit down please" she offered "Yes, finished all the grading and I was just making some notes on the new healing potion I want to start tomorrow. I made good time today, thanks to you"

He looked back at the kitchen counter were all her notes were laying open. A long forgotten academic curiosity took over him to check her work "Don't mention it"

"How did you manage to get so much candy for him?" she asked. He looked at her tired eyes and a small string of protectiveness awoke inside him. Taking him by surprise and making him brood over his wine.

"He did all the work himself I assure you" he whispered.

That is when the door knocked and Hermione looked up surprised. She was not expecting anyone else this evening "Excuse me" she told Snape and opened up. Filch was standing there with a basket full of candy.

"Mr. Filch…uhm…Good evening. Can I help you with something?" she asked and covered her throat with her robes.

Argus gazed at Snape that was sitting comfortably at the easy chair "This is for the child. Happy Halloween" he said quickly. Before she had the time to speak he turned abruptly and left.

"Thank you!…uhm…what in the name…" she muttered closing the door "He just brought over another basket for Teddy. The child has candy for life now"

"Go figure" he whispered and tried to restraint his smirk.

"YEAH! More candy!" Ted came over to pick the new basket up, but she lifted it out of his reach.

"Nah, nah nah! You ate your sandwich, now come on young man. Time to change you and tuck you in bed"
Severus twisted his lips and observed Granger and the boy above the rim of his wineglass.

"Will you excuse me for the last time this evening?" her eyes looked tired and her body exhausted.

"Don't let me detain you" he made to leave the wine and go, but she stopped him rather abruptly.

"No, please remain...for a moment. Until I put him to sleep" she forced a smile, not knowing how to sound less needy of his presence at that moment.

He gave her a curt nod and gazed at her intensely as she took the boy down the corridor. Soon enough he heard the sound of running water and understanding that she was bathing the kid, he stood up, wine at hand and approached the bench where her notes on the new potion lay open and inviting. Instead of retreating to his quiet and crumbled chamber behind the library, to seek refuge in some obscure book, he found the prospect of checking her notes much more appealing. He leaned his elbows upon the counter and rested his glass next to him. He dug for his reading glasses and then begun studying meticulously her notes and potion diagram. Slowly he lost touch with his environment and for the first time in many years the academic side of his old profession drew him in. He was so drawn in the diagram and all the possible ways that this potion could become better and more stable, that he didn't hear her footsteps. Nor did he realise that she had been gone for more than half an hour. He uncomplainingly stood in front of that counter, slowly sipping his wine without any shame that he was alone in the apartments of a woman at eleven at night.

"You want a refill?" she carefully approached and leaned her elbows across him.

He looked briefly at his wine glass that had a couple of sips left in it "No, that's fine".

"You studied my healing potion?" she took a sip from her own glass.

He nodded thoughtfully "Yes, and I must admit that you have many unstable agents in it. Without including a solid basis which could neutralise them in case of an imbalance"

She winced "I have been trying to find this basis all afternoon". She felt frustrated, but knew her fatigue was causing her this inability to concentrate.

"You tried to embody Sal Ammoniac, which might be a good neutral agent, but it is known to interact with several of your ingredients on high heat. Particularly with Herbaria and Boom Berry. And I see the heat of your brew at several stages is going to be really high" his whisper took on the academic tone that she loved so much. A feeling of nostalgia overpowered her.

"I've thought of using Deadlyius, it is neutral enough when brewed three days prior to adding it to the main potion" she leaned over to look at her diagram.

"Do you have a quill?" he looked at her above the rim of his glasses.

"Sure" she pulled back and went to her office "Are you sure you want to do this tonight? Aren't you tired from Teddy's walk?" she said and brought him a quill.

"Deadlyius, might become inactive and a good basis if you don't add Mercury in the solution, which I see that you do add at one of the later stages" he pointed with the end of the quill at the point where she added the reactive metallic liquid.

"Therefore we go back to Sal Ammoniac, which is the most neutral agent. Maybe I could lower the heat so as not to activate it" she muttered thoughtfully.

"Or you could take a step back and use Sulphur Vive instead...simplify, remember?..." he met her
eyes and waited for her to catch up.

She felt enthusiasm and defeat rise hand in hand inside her "Of course…the base of Sal Ammoniac which has a much better reaction to heat due to it's main ingredient which is also common in volcanoes… Sulphur…"

He raised his brow in acknowledgement "May I tamper with your diagram?"

"For the love of Merlin please do…as it seems I am unable for logical deductions this evening" she rubbed her forehead in complete defeat. The answer had been in front of her all along, and she had been going around in circles. She didn't know if she should feel thankful of him solving this mess for her, or feel ashamed that she flopped in front of the most brilliant mind Potions has seen the last few years.

She observed him as he corrected several places in her diagram without crossing out her ideas. He drew new lines and gave her a couple of new ideas on how to optimise her scheme. He was concentrated on his task, reminding her so much of her old Professor, but she was intensely concentrated on him. On his long fingers holding the quill so deftly and on his eyes moving silently across the page, thinking, calculating, adding and subtracting to create perfection with a speed and adequacy that was hard to match. When he finished he looked at it from top to bottom and then he gave it back to her "Just a few suggestions…you are free not to follow them of course" he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"You can do actual magic…" she smiled and rested her palm above the precious document that carried his brilliancy on it.

"What?" he looked up surprised.

"You said the only thing you cannot do is actual magic…." she nodded to the parchment.

"That's logic, the magic will come from you" he whispered quietly.

"The magic comes from that brilliant mind of yours"

He raised his brow "Sucking up Professor Granger?"

The laugh came naturally and she enjoyed it freely. She shook her head and drunk some wine "Why not…"

He huffed and finished his own wine "Doesn't suit you in older age…"

"Doesn't suit me period. I never sucked up to you Severus…and you can call me Hermione you know. We've done this before" the smile felt permanently stuck on her lips.

He nodded "Is Ted asleep?"

"Yes, blew out like a candle. You tired him" she felt deeply thankful for everything he had done for her the last few weeks.

"I should go" he offered her a polite smile and made for the door.

"Or you could get a refill and enjoy the warmth of the fire with a new friend" she offered.

He hesitated and looked back at her. His gaze was searching. He didn't honestly know how to answer to such an offer. The surprisingly deep talk they had at the coffee shop made him realise that
this woman was not a frivolous teenager anymore. She a woman that went through hell in the last war and came out victorious, but still mangled like him. They had that one thing in common and it was something that drew him to her. Did he want to remain for a wine refill?

do I?- his mind stretched, but his mouth was unable to speak.

"I am not certain that is appropriate" he whispered and the frown creased his brow deep.

"Ah, to hell with your propriety Severus. I would enjoy your company for a while longer…if you think so too then come sit and give me your glass" she felt emboldened by the fact he didn't dismiss her offer immediately and that he was still standing in the middle of the room, and hadn't run away crashing the door behind him. That on it's own accord was a small victory on her part.

"Just a small one please" he whispered, but didn't make an attempt to approach the couch. He remained standing like a statue in the middle of her living room.

"Why so?" she took the glass from him and went to the counter for a refill.

"I have a slight difficulty controlling my magic when I get tipsy" he admitted and steepled his fingers patiently in front of his lower abdomen.

She raised her brow and debated if she could take up with him, a suspicion that had been festering in her mind since she learned that he was trying to suppress his magic all these years. She offered him the glass "Yes, uhm, why don't we take a sit?" she offered.

He gave her a curt nod and followed her. She sat at the easy chair and offered him the couch which he took "Thank you"

She took a sip and licked her lips thoughtfully. He was calmly observing his wine "Severus, since you spoke about the difficulty of controlling your magic…"

He looked up at her.

Her lips played a shy smile and the inner debate closed down "You do realise that what you are doing is highly dangerous correct?"

"You mean my telekinesis…” he nodded.

"I mean much more than that…." she tried to make a careful approach.

He raised his brow.

"As you might remember, I always loved to read" she begun.

He patiently waited for her to gather her thoughts.

"Read not only for my classes, but anything in the library really" she smiled.

"True" he agreed.

"I have an extensive general encyclopaedic knowledge, which helps me a lot of times in my profession, but which most of the times is useless" she continued.

"Knowledge is never useless" he offered.

She nodded "True enough…in your case what I read in the past might come in hand. If you are
willing to hear me out"

Both his brows rose and his head gave a confused tilt "I am suddenly afraid of what you might say"

She passed her fingers from her curly hair and sighed "You are a very well read wizard Severus, so might I assume that you know what an Obscurial is…?" she stopped and waited to see his reaction.

He sighed and pursed his lips "I am too old to be that, Hermione" her name got stuck on his tongue, but her observation was even more troublesome. It was not that he hadn't thought of that possibility himself.

"I know the term is used only for young wizards, but what you are doing is not much different. You are suppressing the magic in you through physical and psychological abuse, thus possibly creating a Obscurus" she tried to find his eyes that were lost in the fire.

"I haven't had one single episode since I stopped using magic, and my telekinetic explosions cannot be compared to the invisible destructive force of an Obscurus" he whispered trying to count his words carefully.

"It is a parasitical magical force, that might consume you in the end. That might even kill you" she gazed at him intensely.

"Which I most certainly don't host…" he exhaled "I told you I had never had such an incident"

"Maybe you weren't pushed enough, and your emotions and distress didn't reach an intense enough level for it to be released"

"Do you think I haven't thought of that possibility? Nevertheless the evidence till now points that I am no real threat to my environment. Unless you count some plant pots or Hagrid's jars" he muttered and drank some wine.

She sighed and felt that she had gotten more answers from him, than she had been expecting. She didn't want to push him more with this.

"Relax, I am no real threat to you. Wormwood should worry you more" he raised his glass in a toast.

She smiled sadly, not feeling very comforted by the easy way he was dismissing such a dangerous health complication "I don't fear you…I just fear for you"

He met her eyes almost demandingly "Nothing out of the ordinary is happening inside of me….or outside of me for that matter. I am quite boring in every aspect. I am not festering a destructive magical force that could obliterate the castle in the blink of an eye….ok?"

She laughed lightly and pinched her nose "I suppose you are right. Obscurials have stopped existing for over three hundred years"

"Exactly" he agreed.

"Forget about it, anyway" she waved her own worries away "Thank you for helping me out with the potion diagram" she tried to change the topic.

"Your logic was very interesting, but you lack on experience. Nevertheless I must insist you don't use wormwood so easily"

"Your experience with that ingredient must have been painful" she noticed and twirled the wine in
"Listen I will sound presumptuous this evening, but I would like you to try out my new healing potion when I get to finish it" she studied him carefully.

"On which destroyed part of me do you wish to experiment on?" he felt bitterness oozing out of him and what bothered him most was that he was the one that inflicted all these problems upon himself.

"I don't want to experiment, I want to help you" she felt hurt, but she knew he didn't mean to hurt her. All his actions leading up to this were meant to help her. He was the one hurting the most.

"I am sorry, Hermione" he whispered and rubbed his tired eyes "I don't tamper with these matters easily" he muttered.

Following the cue of her body, she stood up and went to sit beside him. He didn't lift his face from his hand "I would like to try healing your arm first, and then maybe your voice" she spoke calmly, not minding that her heart was already picking up speed. Just by sitting next to him.

"Trying to become the hero of the day again?"

"Why do you always have to see the dark side of people?" she bit the inside of her lip.

"Has it ever crossed your mind that life never gave me the chance to see much of anything else?" his whisper was steady. Void of all emotion. And that was scaring her more.

"Very well then, give it a chance to show you something different now. From a friend" she tried.

He met her eyes sternly "A friend?"

"Yes, if you'd like to be my friend of course" she smiled.

"Why would you like to be mine...that's a more important question" he demanded and his eyes burned through her.

"Because I admire you Severus" she felt her eyes watering, but she felt proud for her honesty with him. The worst that could happen would be getting rejected. The best, to gain a possible friend whom she admired to the outmost. She had nothing to lose.

"You should have been afraid of me" he sounded reserved and confused. She rather liked that, it suited him in a cute nerdy way.

"You did try to scare me indeed" she agreed with a wholehearted shake of the head.

"I failed…" he resulted sadly.

"Don't sound so disappointed. You may have failed to scare an ex-student, but you may have gained a good friend. Even though I acted demandingly towards you at the beginning" a shy smile played on her lips and she decided to finish off the rest of her wine in one gulp.

"Never mind..." he met her eyes steadily.

"No...don't be so easy on me all of a sudden…". He frowned. ".....And don't look at me like that. My reactions to you were instinctive and inappropriate. I just didn't know how to approach you and everything around me was new and equally demanding"
"Why did you have to?" he asked with a slight tilt of the head. Confusion pouring out of him.

She bit her bottom lip. Now what? What could she tell him when she didn't even know the answer "Because of your attitude with Teddy"

"Ah…of course" he nodded in realisation, slightly bitter that her approach was instigated because of the child.

She nibbled her bottom lip and part of her thumb "I am not expressing myself correct again, right?" she tried.

He shook his head but not without smiling briefly.

"Your attitude with Teddy, showed me what a gentle man you can be. What woman…Uhm…I mean person wouldn't want to know you, better?" she tried once more to put her thoughts in words. "You are turning this sucking up into a profession..." his brow clouded and his eyes scrutinised her.

"So what if I do…that means I value your friendship enough to coax you in various ways. You should feel honoured by my attentions" the playfulness was clear in her eyes.

He huffed "You truly baffle me"

She smiled widely at him "Does that mean you also find me interesting apart from confusing?"

He raised both brows, but remained silent.

After a few silent moments she broke character and her shoulders relaxed "I am joking of course…you got that, right? Or not? Don't tell me we are in the verge of another misunderstanding…"

"I saw it more like a tease…" the side of his lip upturned in a quiet but reassuring smile.

She exhaled and curled her finger in a long lock by the side of her face "Scared me there for a moment"

"Seeing as we are both making a solid try to be civil with each other…"

"Friendly" she interposed.

"What?" he frowned in confusion.

"Trying to be friendly with each other….civil is too formal…" she winced.

He sighed and raised both brows "Friendly…yes. Since we are trying to be friendly with each other, I would suggest you don't fear your own shadow around me"

She bit her lower lip and became deeply immersed in her own thoughts for a few moments. As if settling some inner debate she looked up to him "Seeing as we are trying to establish some kind of trust between us…I want to ask you something…" she hesitated.

"Certainly" he waved his hand to her.

"Are you making all this unusual try to approach me because of Teddy too? I told you, it's only fair that you tell me also" she said and held her breath.

He opened his mouth intending to tell her the truth…that yes Ted was the one that made him have
more patience with her….made him approach her because he had to. Somehow that revelation seemed insensitive to him.

since when do you care enough to be sensitive towards anyone? his mind tried, but he told it to bugger off.

"Ted, forced me to your company at first…yes" he tried the honest approach as carefully as his unpolished nature allowed.

"At first?" she gazed at him deeply.

He gave a curt nod and his lips pressed uneasily.

"And now?" her burning eyes never left his.

He looked at his hands "Not for Ted now, no" he whispered.

She tilted her head "For me then?"

He shook his head "For…a friend…” he muttered deeply feeling the tension in the air between them electrifying.

She exhaled and a sweet smile appeared on her countenance. Breaking the spell that surrounded them "A friend, yes. Thank you Severus" she cleared her cheek and only then did he notice that she had become very red in the face.

"Although at some point you have to discuss the boy's extraordinary abilities with someone” he lowered his eyes and evaded the awkwardness by turning the conversation to something more easy.

"An extraordinary Legilimens you mean?” she offered him a sly smile.

He gave her a curt nod with a smirk of his own.

"Like you?"

He exhaled "No, not me. I cannot work magic anymore, but I can give you some advice if needed on how to control the boy’s magic yourself. That is, if you have ever tried Legilimens successfully"

"Only textbook material from my schooldays"

"That won't do…”

"Whenever you feel like it, I am also up to it” she pointed her elegant finger at him and flicked her shoulders.

She rather looked like a young schoolgirl at that moment and that thought made him smile bitterly. He felt too old sitting there next to her. Too old for everything...."I really think I should leave and let you and the child rest…it's too late…” He placed his empty glass on the coffee table and stood up.

"I enjoyed your company a lot Severus" she walked after him, regretting his departure. She wouldn't have minded if he stayed a bit longer.

"Admittedly I didn't hate yours" he stopped by the door and turned to look at her. Her cheeks were rosy and her lips red, but her eyes betrayed exhaustion "You should try to get some sleep” he offered trying not to sound too motherly or caring.
"I will...will you promise me something in turn?" she approached him even more. He wanted to jerk back, but he remained out from fear of insulting her.

"what..." he whispered.

She didn't know what pushed her to act this way but her hands trailed up his shawl cardigan slowly. "Will you consider taking my healing potion when I finish it?"

The throb in his throat was too hard and he tried to swallow it down. "I will...think about it..." he muttered, his whisper even quieter than usual.

Her fingers curled around the thick material and she pulled herself up to him. She closed her eyes and her lips touched the place between his lower cheek and the side of his lips. Exactly where a small wrinkle was. His stubble scratched her in a way that spread warmth in her body and she sighed upon him in satisfaction. Kissing him felt so fulfilling that she didn't want to pull back. The only thing that drew her attention to reality was his long fingers curling around her bicep gently. She opened her eyes and pulled back regretting the warmth of his skin and the cold air that got between them. "Thank you" she whispered and met his eyes quickly. The fire in them made her look away blushing.

He cleared his throat, but his fingers didn't want to uncurl from her arm. "I really have to go" he intoned the word, trying to pass through to her the real need to leave. Currently remaining would be a folly for both of them.

She pulled back at a safer distance and when his hand uncurled from her arm she felt her heart almost palpitating. Was it because of the wine, or her innocuous kiss?

Who cares...- her mind thought...she loved every single second of what took place, and if he allowed her she would try it with him again.

He opened the door with a slightly trembling hand and got out. "Tell the boy Happy Halloween and thank you for the wine" he said looking down at her. Trying not to sound pressing, or look at her with as much tension as he felt inside.

"Happy Halloween Severus...thank you for everything this evening" she clasped her shoulders and felt her cheeks on fire.

He bit both his lips and sighed. Then he turned around and walked away from her as quickly as possible. This night proved to be much more than he would have bargained for and he didn't know if it was the fault of the wine or something that naturally happened. He couldn't deny though, that her innocent kiss stirred long lost feelings inside of him and that made him both angry and happy. This was going to be another difficult night to achieve sleep, so instead of returning to his chambers, he went straight at the astronomy tower. Hoping the cool night air would clear his head.
"You have taken over the boy completely" Albus intoned each word and tried to find Severus's eyes. The younger wizard was looking out to the distance, far over the mountains.

"No, Libby is Granger's nanny currently" the whisper that came was cold.

"Bullocks…Miss Libby didn't take him trick or treating…” Albus waved him off.

Severus winced silently.

"Yes…and your actions are confusing everyone"

"I am sorry I am overturning the world's fixed ideas about me…” Severus drawled sourly.

"Don't get biting. I am not accusing you. I am simply trying to understand…” Albus raised his brow.

"What?"

"How come you came so close to the boy. Is it because he is Lupin's son?"

"I don't suffer regrets about the death of the werewolf…no" Severus wanted to sound as hard as he felt inside at that moment. When he came over at the astronomy tower, once more unable to sleep, he was half expecting a visit from Albus. The choices had been limited though. He didn't want to wake up Hagrid, nor Charity and the next best choice was surprisingly Granger, whom he really didn't want to wake up Hagrid, nor Charity and the next best choice was surprisingly Granger, whom he really didn't want to bother so late at night. The fact alone that she went through his mind as a choice for company was rather unsettling. Even though he needed to believe that this young woman honestly wanted to be his friend, his own body was telling him that her tries would not be met with equally honesty from his side. When she had kissed him a week ago at her apartments, his body had not reacted in a friendly manner….and that makes you kind of hypocritical since the girl just wants a friend…his mind chastised him and he frowned with austerity towards his thoughts. He inhaled deeply. That week passed with frequent visits from Granger in the library where she always brought her long book lists, along with the unnerving need to socialise with him. She always tried to find a footing on his hurried professionalism by bringing up the potion she was experimenting on, or the child. He was more than a willing participant in these conversations, but tried to keep the distance that propriety ordered. As the days passed, their level of intimacy progressed slowly and by the end of the week she felt comfortable enough around him. She was not acting like she was stepping on eggshells like at the beginning. That pleased him, and also scared him. Like her innocent and friendly kiss… And those were emotions he hadn't felt for years. The only emotions he felt in this place were anger, loneliness, bitterness and sadness. He brooded heavily at the horizon as his thoughts took a turn for the dark side slowly.

"Then it's because you honestly like the boy and seek out his company?” Albus looked at him carefully.

"Have you ever thought the boy's presence makes me forget my darkness Headmaster?" Severus whispered. His gaze frozen at the sky that was slowly breaking dawn.

The silence next to him felt unbearable.

He looked at the ghost "Whenever Ted is around me, I forget the need to slash my wrists or drink myself to death…” his whisper dropped low and he felt his eyes watering. He quickly looked away from Albus. He took a rugged breath and tried to calm himself down.
"It never crossed my mind…." Albus tried carefully. Seeing the young wizard next to him close to breaking down with such minimal effort on his part spoke volumes about his emotional instability.

Severus nodded and a bitter smile appeared on his lips "Obviously"

"Why did you come at the astronomy tower this morning son? You only come here when you feel overburdened"

"I feel tired…." Severus trailed off and pulled back his tears. Something that always caused a lump in his throat that lingered.

Albus looked at him silently.

"I feel tired of this menagerie around me all these years. I need to be free, one way or the other…" he whispered with menace.

"Menagerie?"

"Come on Albus, don't play stupid with me…." Severus smiled bitterly and his back straightened. His hands tightened inside his pockets.

"Care to explain to me, what I am being accused of?" Albus raised his brow.

"You are as guilty as the Ministry for keeping me here under your control. You could have let me go…it would have been easy for you….but no. You decided to keep me locked in here. How many times have I asked for a Wizengamot hearing? To speak to them myself…"

"They will not accept anything unless you finish your probation. It's not as if your past is innocent… Severus" Albus warned.

"I lived in darkness all my life, and I am guilty for choosing that path from the beginning. But, guilty I am too for doing your bidding all these years….just to help you win the chess game you set against Voldemort" Severus spat.

"Now you are being manipulative"

"When you were never such….leave off Headmaster…." Severus pressed his lips feeling disgusted.

"Severus…" Albus tried to calm him down.

"I was always a useful tool for you. What confuses me, is why you are keeping me trapped now. I am of no use to you now…. I cannot use magic anymore Albus. You cannot use me for anything!" he spat and looked at the Headmaster with hatred. Betraying one of the reasons he didn't want to use magic anymore. He didn't want to be anyone's servant…and without his magic he was useless to all of them……yet still he was imprisoned, and that imprisonment was choking him to death.

"That's why you stopped using magic?" Albus's eyes glared at him with shocked realisation.

"You used me because of my magic…"

"Because of your abilities…"

"Many of which stemmed from magic…Albus would you have trapped me under your command all these years back and used me for espionage if I was a squib like Argus?" Severus slowly begun regulating his breathing again. Trying to control his emotions from spiralling out of control.
"You used me, and so did Voldemort...if I had never been born a wizard nothing of this would have happened. People might have lived...Lily might have lived if she had never met me. Maybe I would have lived another life...a better life..."

Albus didn't reply, and Severus inhaled deeply "I have become an empty shell. Barely alive, yet unable to die...this is no life Albus. This is hell...and it all started from my magic. Even my father's abuse on my mother, and his drinking problems began when I first presented him with my 'unnatural' abilities. If I had only been a muggle, nothing of this would have ever happened..." he whispered, feeling his heart slowing down and his eyes getting lost in the deep blue colours upon the mountain lines, that the new dawn was bringing.

"You cannot know that..." Albus tried feeling his heart breaking at the pain of this young wizard.

"Oh, but I do know...my father accused me of destroying the family...and when I abandoned all and came to a place where I could express my magic freely, I destroyed everyone around me with it" he stopped and sighed deeply "I will not use magic ever again Albus, if I have a choice. You cannot gain anything out of me anymore. Let me go..."

"Severus, I am not keeping you bound to me in order to use you...the wizengamot..."

"...Is going to listen to you, if you speak from the heart. I just wonder if you have one...if you ever had one..." Severus muttered feeling defeated by his own words. Not by the ghost.

"I have spoken to them...but..."

"Haven't I earned my freedom?" Severus's eyes thinned and the horizon broke in oranges and deep reds as the sun made it's appearance.

"...If I could release you in some manner, I would have done so..."

Severus spoke over him "...You could have let one of my suicide attempts succeed...play blind eyes Albus. You were always a good puppeteer...that would be easy for you"

"I cannot let you die, don't ask me to do something impossible!" Albus frowned in anger.

"When I was supposed to act with bravery, and kill you...You are such a hypocrite Albus, you make my stomach turn. You had no inhibitions on forcing me to act out of character and ethics when it suited your plans, but when it comes to yourself...you cannot force yourself to do anything that would burden you with guilt" Severus shook his head dismissively and felt the bitterness stinging his eyes.

"Severus you are being unfair with me..." Albus's voice broke slightly.

"When you have been wearing a cloak of fairness your whole life....." he shook his head angrily. He was almost trembling from adrenaline.

"You are bitter with me son" Albus tried.

"I am bitter with the world...and don't ever call me son..." Severus whispered and pulled his white knuckled hands out of his pockets. He wrapped them tightly across his shoulders.

The silence stretched long and uncomfortable, but Severus knew Albus was still next to him.
"I cannot even visit the mountains…just for a few moments to escape this hell. I can only go as far as Hogsmeade…" he felt his eyes watering again and his throat choking. He closed his eyes and tried to control himself as the large globe behind him began twisting out of shape, with a boring sound of bending metal. The orbital tracks around it vibrated quickly.

Albus looked behind him worried "Severus, control yourself my boy. I can perhaps negotiate a small excursion for you, with the Wizengamot, but I cannot promise they will agree…Severus you are destroying Sinistra's classroom!" the old wizard tried to warn him.

Severus felt his eyes burning under his closed eyelids and his breath constricted…zone out…zone out…Granger's voice tried to channel through, but it was too hard for him to calm down at that moment. His arm begun bleeding and he felt the warmth trickling down his sleeve "Leave me!" he commanded the ghost with a haunted whisper.

"I will call Charity" Albus said and disappeared quickly.

"Fuck off…" Severus spat to the nothingness around him and heard a loud snap from the globe behind him. He tried to find a safe place. Something to ground him to the present moment. Something to make him draw back his magic. Something soothing on his heart…like her kiss…immediately the image of Granger kissing him on the cheek flashed in his mind and filled him with unforeseen warmth. Slowly his anger begun pulling back to the dark recesses of his mind. His magic withdrew from the surroundings so suddenly that the globe shook violently when he released it and the orbits around it rattled heavily. He opened his eyes and took a few steps back. The railings stopping his retreat. His sat heavily upon them and panted like a fish out of water. He raised his hand and wiped off his forehead that was sweating heavily. That had been close. He had to stop coming up to the astronomy tower when he couldn't sleep. He had to find other ways to help his insomnia. Talking with Albus, no matter how helpful sometimes, it was also very burdening, and he only needed a small push to fall off the edge again.

He remained there leaning upon the railings very close from an impressive drop that could have set him finally free, debating if it was even worth trying another suicide attempt for a long time. Long after the sun had risen and the school bells rang in order to call the students to class. When he decided to walk back to the library, the sleeve of his coat had been drenched in blood. Fifteen minutes later he unlocked the library and abandoning his domain to the idiocy of the students, he made it to his crumbled up chambers. A set of small but cosy rooms behind the library that consisted of a small living room/study, a very small kitchen, a bathroom and a bedroom. He had overflowed it with books and articles that filled every available surface. Even the kitchen counters. He entered feeling like a bunch of ruined nerve endings and made it for his bedroom, taking off his pea coat and throwing it upon the floor. He shed off his turtleneck that was equally bloody and entered the bathroom. He grabbed a small towel and cleaned his arm feeling his upper body thoroughly chilled.

"Fuck" he mumbled. He rinsed the bloody towel with some water and pressed it on his arm again. His eyes lifted at the large body mirror in the bathroom and his brows scowled deeply at his image. His face pale, the lines etched in displeasure. He glared at the ugly scar tissue at the side of his throat, where Nagini tore his flesh to pieces once upon a past lifetime. His adam's apple moved and he looked away quickly not needing to be reminded of that particular memory. That is when he heard a soft knock on his door and the worried voice of Charity came through. Apparently Albus had found her.

"Severus are you in?" she was already inside and he cursed his foolish mind for not locking the door after he came in.

He sat down at the toilet and leaned his elbows on his knees feeling mentally exhausted. His head
hang in defeat as he heard her footsteps entering the bedroom. He had no strength to push her away. He had no strength to go through this day, period.

"Oh, bloody hell" her voice said as she rounded at the bathroom door.

He didn't lift his head. He pressed the towel with more force and he frowned angrily at the floor.

"What happened?" she said and quickly kneeled in front of him. She tried to pull away the towel but he didn't move "Severus? Albus told me that you lost it at the Astronomy Tower" Charity's voice was truly worried.

"I am fine" he whispered quietly.

"You are clearly not fine, look at me" she cupped his cheek and raised his head.

He sighed and met her eyes steadily "Albus was messing with you. I am fine Charity"

"Then what are you doing half naked and bleeding in your rooms instead of tending to your library, which by the way you left unattended. That's not you being fine Sev" Charity's thumb caressed his chin gently.

He jerked his head away from her and closed his eyes "From everything you've said the only thing that's out of the ordinary is me being half naked in front of you. Get out of here…." he whispered.

"Humph…Who told you I have a problem ogling half naked men, especially as well defined as you" Charity tried to put a lighter tone and turned around. She picked up a clean towel and watered it.

"Glad you find my scars appealing…" he whispered dryly, but didn't make an objections as she took away the bloody towel and began cleaning his arm with the new one.

"I didn't even look at your scars you silly man…I am looking at your eyes that seem more haunted than I've seen them in a long time. What did Albus do to make you mad?" she said and took out her wand. Without asking for a permission she cast a healing spell on his forearm that burned him for a couple of seconds.

"He reminded me why I have to be imprisoned in this hell…" he whispered and met her eyes steadily.

She averted her eyes quickly and sighed "I see"

He lowered his eyes silently.

"There…now that the blood stopped we can clean the wound properly" she said concentrating on cleaning him up.

"I have to go to the library" he said quietly and rubbed his forehead. When she withdrew the towel his eyes got lost at the scar tissue and he swallowed dryly. He covered his face and closed his eyes.

"Do you intend to get dressed first…or do you want to show everyone that even geeks can be very well toned?" she rejoined with a sad smile as she wiped his forearm clean.

This time he was unable to stop the snort that escaped behind his palm.

Charity smiled honestly at him and her hand landed at the side of his head "Feeling better?"

After a few moments he nodded and withdrew his hand "Thank you" he whispered.
She pressed her lips in acknowledgment and pulled him up "Want me to choose you clothes?"

He shook his head and made it to the closet.

"Probably for the best, for I think you should wear something other than turtlenecks, cardigans and your bloody pea coat"

"Bloody indeed…it needs to be cleaned" he whispered thoughtfully and pulled out a deep green turtleneck which he wore quickly "I don't have any other coats" he added and drew a lighter green cardigan. He wore it above the turtleneck and buttoned it up.

"You have that stand collar tweed coat" she pointed at the cupboard.

"Too formal…" he rebuked and picked up his bloody clothes from the floor. He went into the living room and reposed them tidily at the back of couch so the elves would find them when they came to clean his rooms and replenish the fire.

Charity followed quickly behind him as he locked his door and made it to the library "You really shouldn't let Albus bother you so much…".

"It's not him that bothers me, but my situation" he said and entered his cubicle. With a quick eye he checked the whole library and saw if anything had been messed with. Apparently the fear he held for the students was enough to keep everyone in check no matter that he went missing briefly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she lowered her voice because a student was approaching.

He shook his head.

"Can I check out these Professor Snape?" a senior Ravenclaw asked.

"Which sections did you take these articles from Mr. Pearson?" he whispered and put on his reading glasses.

"This and this are from the Stack Section…this article is from the U.N. Depository and this is from the Thesis Section of the Forbidden aisles" the boy clarified and straightened his reading glasses upon his clever eyes.

"Do you need me to remain with you this morning?" Charity leaned close to speak so as not to be overheard.

"Why would I?" he replied and pulled out four cards. He spread them upon the boys articles and books and pointed with his quill "Write down the time period you wish them for" he said professionally.

"Yes Professor" the boy nodded eagerly.

"Because only a few minutes ago you were a bloody half naked mess?" Charity tilted her head.

"I am fine now, thanks to you" Severus turned and began flipping through the pages of his schedule, trying to see this day's workload.

"I don't know if you are fine deep inside" she said meaningfully and her eyes scrutinised him.

"There you go Professor" the Ravenclaw said and gave him back the quill.

"This is not the appropriate time to discuss…" he dismissed her and began stamping the cards. His
crossed signature covering the stamp.

"Fine then…so should I go?" Charity gazed at him hesitantly.

"Please do…” he pressed his lip and pushed the articles to the boy "Good morning Mr. Pearson" he said formally.

"Good morning Professor" the boy replied and left.

"You are asking me to leave?" she smiled playfully at him.

"No I am begging you to do so…now go!” he placed his hand on his waist and tilted his head.

"Ok, ok…can I leave this list with you?" she asked and fished for a long list from her robes.

He took it and frowned "Too much company with Granger?" he offered and glared at her above his glasses.

She laughed and nodded.

"When do you need them for?" he concentrated on the list again.

"I'd like them by early noon if you can. Need them for the afternoon classes"

"Fine" he said easily and reposed the list on his desk.

"You want me to come pick them up?" Charity said and exited his cubicle.

"I have a midday break, I'll bring them over to you…” he said and began scribbling something in his notes.

"Great! Thank you Sev" she chimed and waved at him "See you later"

"Using that fucking appellation so loudly in my library…stupid witch…” he mumbled under his breath and didn't honour her with a goodbye. Instead he concentrated on his work, trying through it to alleviate the explosive emotions he had felt at the astronomy tower. Slowly his work managed to settle him down enough to function relatively well for the reminder of the morning.

****…****

"Can you please tell me what you did to my Globe?" Sinistra was hissing and trying to catch up with his long strides as they walked down the corridor to the Muggle Studies Classroom.

"Don't know…shook it back to it's senses most probably?" he whispered and rolled his eyes. He was carrying about twenty books and he was just one step from hurling them back at her. She found him at the library just before he locked up for his midday break and begun pestering him for twisting the Globe and it's orbits out of shape. Apparently Albus's news about this morning’s misadventure didn't reach only Charity.

"Severus, please…I mean I know you like going up there, and it's not prohibited, but when you cannot control your magic things happen…and this is my classroom. I need it impeccable"

"You are a witch I assume…right?" he threw back at her.

"What's that got to do with anything?" she frowned angrily.
He stopped abruptly and she almost fell on him with a yelp. He turned around and glared her indigantly "Lift your bloody wand and fix the damn thing…" his low voice took a blood curling tone.

"Don't turn things around. This is not about me fixing your mess…this is about you not messing it up in the first place!" she raised her finger at him angrily.

"You are correct, but seeing that I have already apologised ONCE, I would suggest you leave me alone, because unable as I am to control my magic, I might end up bending you out of shape also….unwilling of course" he hissed and lowered his face close to her.

She inhaled nervously and took a step back "I don't want your apologies, I want you to promise me not to go in my classroom when you are angry…just that”

"You are oversimplifying things, stupid woman…just go…go before I do something I will regret…." he warned.

"Hello Sinistra, Sev" Charity's voice grounded the thick layer of anger between them and they both looked towards her.

Sinistra pulled back and crossed her arms "Hello Charity dear, I was just having a small talk with Severus" she pointed at the man carefully.

He gave her a warning glance.

"What about?" Charity came up and stood next to him. She offered him a sweet reassuring smile that her intervention had been purposeful.

"About a mishap at the astronomy tower this morning" Sinistra straightened her pointy hat and pretended to check on her clothes. He was seething and as if sensing it Charity laid her hand on his forearm to forestall any harsh reactions that might have come from him.

"Oh, you mean the Globe getting out of shape slightly…” Charity brushed her off.

"Not slightly….it's broken in several places and the orbits are bend completely.." Sinistra begun.

"You're solely lucky it didn't explode to kingdom come…” he spat dryly.

"Severus!" Sinistra buttoned up shocked.

"Now now…Sev.." Charity's hand tightened around his "Sinistra darling, Sev here had a very hard morning. In professional courtesy won't you do him a favour and drop the subject…If you cannot fix the bloody Globe, I'll come up and fix it for you"

"It's not about the Globe, it's about him not visiting my classroom when he knows he cannot control his magic" Sinistra tightened her lips angrily.

"So that's professional courtesy to you? Sinistra …with all due respect, shut up and go away… whatever else problems you have with Sev here, take them up with the Headmistress" Charity's no nonsense voice suddenly took over and Sinistra straightened obviously offended.

"Very well, Severus, Charity…” she gave them a curt nod and turned around. She paraded down the hallway proudly dismissing them with her body language.

"Bloody witch…” Charity spat.
He didn't reply. He turned around and begun walking towards her classroom.

"How are you?" she asked after they passed the Potions Classrooms that was several doors down from her own.

Severus heard Granger's steady voice talking about the properties of Fluxweed and felt thankful their voices didn't call her at the door "Could have been better"

"Difficult morning right?" Charity continued.

"Difficult decade Charity" he whispered and almost kicked the door of her classroom open. He swiped quickly through the room and dropped the books on her desk.

A solid palm landed in the middle of his back and he tensed. He rested his hands on the rough wooden surface and lowered his head.

"Can I do anything for you?" her voice was soft and caring.

He shook his head "No, I need to return to the library"

"I thought you were going to take the midday off…want to grab some lunch with me?" she rubbed his back and he slithered out of her touch quickly.

"I lost my appetite, really thank you for standing up for me back there, but I could have handled Sinistra myself" he said and met her eyes.

Charity released him and smiled "I wasn't worried about you, but about Sinistra"

He frowned and raised his brow.

"You looked ready to transfigure her into a frog" Charity snickered and rounded her desk. She took the first book and turned it over to check it's contents.

A small smile appeared at the side of his mouth and he ruffled his hair uneasily "A banshee most probably…if only I could"

"You can" Charity looked at him above her nose and then returned her attention to the book once more.

He waved his hand at her dismissively and walked to the door "Is that all you needed?" he pointed back at the books.

"Yes, thank you for bringing them over. You sure you don't want to grab lunch with me?" she tried to offer him her company again.

He shook his head "No, need my peace for the rest of the day". As he rounded her door he waved back briefly. Then his arms went around his shoulders, his lips turned down and his back slouched. Out of her inspection he was free to look as tired outside, as he felt inside. He didn't want anything more than go back to his chamber and curl upon his bed. He didn't want to read anything, and he certainly didn't want to work the library for the rest of the day. Briefly he wondered if he could ask Professor Temeritus Shanks portrait to look after the bloody place for him today. Just to have a chance to get away from everyone. Temeritus sometimes served as library assistant, that is why Severus kept that portrait just above his cubicle, giving Shanks the chance to overview the whole place. The dead wizard had helped him various times. Maybe he should ask for the remainder of the day off from Minerva.
Immersed as he was in these thoughts he didn't notice the abrupt opening of the Potion's classroom door, that missed him by few inches.

"Shit! I am sorry Professor!" Robert Ackley, a rather robust sixth year cried and pulled back scared.

"Careful of your vile language Mr. Ackley! Keep it at bay for I will remove more points from Slytherin!" Granger hollered behind him "Now, you go to the Headmistress and explain the exact reason why you tried to throw pulverised Griffin Claw into Miss Bailey's cauldron when you knew that would explode into a pink cloud, turning her face the same colour for the next five days!" Granger continued and reached the door. That is when her eyes lifted up to him and immediately her cheeks became vivid red.

He pressed his lips and tilted his head in silent acknowledgment.

"I am sorry Professor, she called me a pussy and I wanted …." the boy begun.

"Five more points for vile language!" Granger growled at him.

"Well, how about her calling me that name!" the boy hollered back and showed at the girl that stood pale before her cauldron. All the class seemed frozen.

"I will deal with Miss Bailey in a short while, in the meantime you parade your detention filled bottom through the hallways and into the Headmistress office!" Granger pointed angrily towards the corridor.

For the first time since he woke up at three in the morning Severus felt the instinctive need to laugh...at the boy's face and at the hilarity of the situation that found Granger stuck in the middle. Not that he didn't know exactly how difficult it was to control a class full of hormonal teenagers. As the boy run down the corridor her eyes fell on him again and her shoulders immediately relaxed.

"Good morning" she whispered in a low careful voice.

"Good morning" he whispered back.

"How are you?" she asked caressing her shoulders.

He moved his head a bit, signalling that he had seen better mornings "How are you?" he asked.

"You've just witnessed part of my morning...how do you think I am..." she whispered and rubbed her forehead. She looked so much under pressure, that he instinctively wanted to assist her.

He nodded silently.

"You look pale" she observed him and frowned slightly.

"And you flustered..." he rebuked.

"Difficult morning...as I said"

"Me too" he whispered and gazed at her pink lips briefly.

"If you don't shut up in there, the next person I hear talking I will force them to drink Miss Bailey's destroyed potion, and walk around Hogwarts bright pink for the rest of the week!" she hollered and her brows creased deeply. The talking in the classroom seized immediately.

He snorted unable to stop himself, pleasantly shocked that her anger could elicit such a pleasant
reaction from him. That felt totally inappropriate, but his own bottled up tension made him unable to stop in time.

"You laughing at me?" she glared at him, but her lips held a cute side smile, that showed she was not taking this as seriously as she was showing her students.

"No, just the image of pink students in the hallways..." he tried to explain but her hand wrapped around his bicep and she placed her finger on her mouth signalling him to silence.

"Can I use you?" she whispered and looked back at her class.

He tilted his head confused "What?"

"Are you free to come in for a moment and I'll explain" she offered.

He swallowed and frowned "Uhm, I suppose so..what for?"

She pulled him by the bicep and shushed him again "You'll see". When they entered she released his bicep and walked quickly to her desk. More than thirty students looked at him terrified. Hermione's smile on the other hand showed that she enjoyed their scared looks and their shocked silence. He quietly remained at the back of the classroom.

"Now please, Professor Snape, join me" she presented the teaching desk. He hesitantly walked up to her throwing warning glances around him as he walked. Whichever student he looked, averted their eyes quickly. His reputation proceeded him, no matter that he didn't work as an active Professor anymore. He stood beside her and crossed his hands. His brows darkened as he scrutinised the whole room "Now you will finish your Polyjuice Potions, and you will try to impress this illustrious former Potion Master...with your results" she pointed at him "...who's up for this daunting task?" she said unable to hide the mean happiness at seeing them so violently subdued.

No one spoke.

"The potions that Professor Snape judges as adequate, will gain their houses five points each. The potions that are not adequate will deduct a similar amount of points....now get on with it" she dismissed them. A nervous wave of whispers overtook the suddenly animated class. Hermione crossed her arms and gazed at him carefully "And suddenly this day became much more interesting, right?" she whispered at him.

"Didn't know you had such a sadistic streak in you" he rejoined carefully.

"Didn't know either..." she raised her brows.

"Only now realising how difficult it is to control Slytherin and Gryffindor together?..." he nodded in understanding.

"Two hours with the first years, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, and three hours back to back with these ones. I want to kill them all...my head is ready to explode" she whispered and rubbed her forehead.

"Gained a bit of understanding for my foul mood all these years ago?" he observed her face carefully.

She nodded and offered him a sweet smile concealed under her palm "Indeed I did"

He huffed and shook his head "I cannot believe you drew me into this" his whisper barely reached her. The students were working meticulously, not daring look at the cauldron next to them, mainly
because of Snape's imposing presence in the room.

She smirked "Promise to use fair judgement?"

"By fair, you mean help Gryffindor win?" he looked at her sideways.

She flicked her shoulders "Would make my day a bit brighter...if you did" she admitted, already feeling a lot better.

"Will think about it..." he whispered carefully.

"Don't tell me you need a bribe..." she trailed off "Mr. Warren, if I see you raising your head from your cauldron, one more time, I will deactivate your potion!" she turned towards one of the Slytherins.

"I am sorry Professor" the boy mumbled and concentrated on his work again.

He pressed his lips and looked at her silently. Waiting to see her next move.

"Ok, If you help Gryffindor win, I'll buy a new scarf" she met his eyes briefly with a fleeting smile.

"I thought you wanted me to be fair, not help your house..." he reposed his hands upon her desk and leaned towards her.

"Well...it would make me feel better..." she tilted her head and kept her eyes on him.

"How about I buy you a new scarf and help Slytherin win" he raised his brows provocatively.

"Buy me a gift? What hell froze over?" she felt genially surprised.

"Christmas is coming...a season to offer, right? I offer my house points, and you a scarf with better colours" his lips twisted sideways and his eyes almost smiled at her.

She inhaled and frowned at him. After a couple of minutes of silent scrutiny from both sides her shoulders relaxed "Ok, strike everything out. Just be fair in your judgement, ok?"

He tilted his head sideways and offered her a nod of acknowledgement "Certainly" he whispered and turned towards the classroom again.

Whilst the students continued to work silently and the room filled up with the crackling of the fires under the cauldrons and the turning of the scoops, Hermione begun marking some essays and stealing glances towards Snape now and again. He was walking around the class calmly. Observing the boiling projects with a cold stare that was enough to unnerve the most insolent students. His motion held an airy elegance that she had never observed as a student, mostly because she was terrified to even look at him back then. Now as an adult though she had the chance to silently admire his posture and gestures, for the quiet beauty they held as he moved around the classroom. Whenever his burning eyes escaped the class and fell on her, she lowered her eyes quickly, feeling her stomach twisting in knots and her cheeks warming up.

After half an hour of silent observation from both sides, the tower bells rang and Hermione gave the signal to finish the brewing. Severus stopped in front of every station, and checked all thirty of them. In the end begrudgingly offering the victory to Gryffindor with ten points difference from Slytherin. He had debated faking the results in favour of his old house, but he had promised fairness which he delivered, no matter that he hated the look of pride from the Gryffindor side. When she dismissed the students and placed a deactivating spell upon the class until the Elves came over to clean the
cauldrons, he sat silently at the edge of her desk observing her quietly.

"Thank you for staying true to your word…" she paused on her chores and gave him a quick smile of appreciation.

He tilted his head silently in question.

"You were fair in your judgement…’ she clarified.

"You didn't expect me to be so" he deducted. Not even needing to question her further.

"No…” she smiled again and bit her lower lip.

He shook his head and straightened "No matter how enjoyable this intermission has been for me, I need to return to the library"

"Uhm…” she drew both lips in her mouth and covered it with her palm. Her eyes fell on his and remained there…seemingly searching.

"Can I help you with anything else before I go?” he asked frowning slightly at her obvious uncertainty.

"Listen…you helped me again today, without even realising how much. I want to make it up to you….."

"No need to.." he talked over her and begun walking to the door.

"Hagrid invited me and Teddy for dinner this evening. Want to join us?” she said quickly before she lost her courage.

He stopped abruptly and raised his eyes at the door. He didn't turn around. His fists tightened and he swallowed a dry throat "You don't need to do that because I assisted you today Professor" he said feeling slightly withdrawn.

She bit her lower lip and hurried to stop a possible misunderstanding "I am not doing it because I feel I owe you. I just enjoy your company…” she trailed off.

He turned and gazed at her suspiciously, but didn't speak.

"Teddy enjoys your company also, and so does Hagrid. Don't let us get into another misunderstanding. We parted in good conditions the other night in my apartments. Join me and Teddy for dinner and maybe a glass of wine. We can talk about my potion” she tried to lure him in with something that might interest him, without stopping to consider why she wanted his company so much today.

His shoulders relaxed slightly "Hagrid didn't invite me…that would be imposing"

"Hogwash! He's your friend…and I want to think I am your friend also" she waved him off feeling her heart palpitating with nervousness.

He remained silent, his eyes burning her with their scrutiny. He was trying to figure out her ulterior motives.

"Never mind, ok, I am backing off. Don't come if you don't want to…” she sighed.

He straightened and his brow rose.
"But, in case you change your mind, we are going there at seven and I would have loved your company. So would Hagrid and Teddy" she smiled sweetly at him without needing to try hard. It came naturally, even though she felt pushed away by his obvious rejection one more time.

He sighed also and licked his lower lip "I…" he hesitated "…will think about it" was all he could give her.

She nodded and offered another brief smile "Sure thing"

He gave her a curt nod and turned around. As he walked out of the potions laboratory his brows creased deeply and his fists tightened even more. He didn't know how he felt about this young woman approaching him all the time with peculiar social requests. Above all he didn't know how to feel about himself accepting those requests most of the time, with such ease. It took him off guard….all this shook his carefully structured balance, making him feel insecure. And yet, even with these thoughts, he was still considering taking up her offer for this evening.
Several hours later Hermione entered the greenhouses in order to pick up her promised supply of wormwood from Professor Sprout. Instead of finding her, she found Neville waiting for her with a smile upon his lips.

She paused by the door and forced smiled "Hi, Neville. Where is the Professor?"

"Hi, Hermione. She had an appointment with the Headmistress. I am here in her stead" his attention returned to some beautiful flowers. He was cleaning their leaves carefully.

Hermione entered "I came to get my wormwood batch…has she informed you?"

Neville pointed at the teaching desk "She left it there for you"

She picked up a small brown pouch that fell very lightweight "Thank you…" she gazed at him and hesitated…

"No problem" he waved her off.

"Uhm…how are you Neville?"

He looked up seemingly surprised "What…? I am fine"

She shook her head "Seeing as I didn't have the opportunity to catch up with you since I arrived…"

He pressed his lips "I know you've been terribly busy"

Now she felt remorse slapping her across the face "No…It's not that…Oh! come on Neville. We've know each other for years…I didn't think you would have been offended so easily"

"Of course, poor old Neville is so used to be in the sidelines, he never gets offended ….." he said dryly.

"Shit…" her shoulders slouched and she quickly approached him "Neville…you are right. I haven't been a good friend"

He pressed his lips.

"Tell me how you are, please" she sat decisively at a bench in front of him. She wanted to have his attention.

He didn't speak.

"Don't give me the silent treatment…I am getting that from one person in Hogwarts already" she rubbed her forehead admitting that this day was not going to go well.

"Oh, yes everyone knows about that" Neville said bluntly.

"About what?" her brows creased.
"About you and Snape" Neville threw at her.

Her brows disentangled and lifted up "What about me and Snape?"

"This new relationship, friendship between you two. The whole school knows…." Neville moved his hands in the air vaguely.

"Knows what? Look at me Neville. Who's spreading rumours like that?" she looked at him demandingly.

"You two are doing it yourselves Hermione. You are always in his library and he is always coming and going from your apartments. Do you think people are blind?" he looked at her pointedly "And if people are, the paintings are not" he added with a meaningful tilt of the head.

"Didn't know Titian and DaVinci painted gossips" she threw back at him.

His lips turned down distastefully.

She drew up "Even if that was the real case, I don't see how it's anyone's business who I want to befriend!"

"Of course it's not our business, but don't come out telling me you didn't have the time to come see me…" Neville spat at her, slowly losing his cool.

"I detect jealousy and I cannot see where it is stemming from, considering that friends don't get jealous of friends Neville. Unless you are not telling me everything" she pressed her lips.

"I feel sort changed Hermione. I've known you for years, we end up working in the same school and you haven't come around to see me for almost three months. How would you have felt?" Neville gave up on the need to clean up the leaves anymore and threw down his towel. His eyes were angry.

"As sort changed as you" she admitted quietly.

"I don't need you to patronise me" he rebuked.

"What do you need then?"

"To tell me if Snape's more interesting than me" Neville met her eyes steadily.

She frowned feeling truly bothered "Neville…really?"

He exhaled and lowered his eyes in defeat "I don't mean to sound jealous…"

"You do…and it makes no sense …" Hermione straightened and crossed her arms.

"I just feel that you could have done a better job with an old friend, that's all" he said quietly.

Hermione's heart pinched her and she lowered her eyes "I didn't do good by you…".

"No you didn't" he agreed boldly.

She bit her upper lip and placed her hands on her waist decisively "Can I make a try now?"

He looked at her disappointed.

"Come on…don't be like that…I am trying…even though it took me three months. Now look at me"
He didn't.

"Look at me Neville!" she commanded.

He met her eyes slightly apprehensive.

"Good, now let's not both act like children ok? I admitted I was wrong…and I am sorry…now give me a fucking chance!" she pinned him down with her honesty.

His shoulders slouched "I don't know what got into me before Hermione. I know you've been terribly busy since you arrived. It's ok, really" he tried to extinguish the tension between them.

She sighed and raised her eyes to him once more "How are you doing Neville?…really…I have talked to you so little after the war…the only thing I know is that you are assistant Professor of Herbology here and engaged to Hannah Abbot"

He ruffled his hair and broke a lopsided smile "Had the same difficulty getting over the events of the war as much as the rest of you guys, but I pulled through. I am doing alright. As long as everything is peaceful and there is nothing to remind me of that nightmare, I am doing alright"

"As always ended up in the field you loved the most" Hermione smiled knowingly.

"Yeah, well I tried Harry's job, but quite honestly I couldn't handle the constant pressure of being an Auror. Although Harry told me I was very good in offensive spells and duelling" He looked searchingly at her.

"Indeed you were. The moment you overcame your insecurity you proved a very strong ally" she agreed honestly.

"Thank you" he blushed.

"Only telling the truth. How is Hannah? Haven't seen her in ages"

"She is working as an assistant at the Leaky Cauldron and gathering money to buy half the property" he said proudly.

"Very wise choice. That place can become a stable income. It's been there for ages. Steady value"

"That's what I've been telling her"

"Any children in the foreseeable future?" Hermione observed him nonchalantly and then turned her attention to a rather bizarre looking plant next to her.

"Not yet, me and Hannah prefer to enjoy each other's company for the time being…" he replied easily and begun cleaning up his plant again.

"With a bottle of wine …close by" she bit the inside of her lip playfully. Waiting to see if he would catch up.

"Been reading that ferret Skeeter? Didn't know you could stoop so low" he frowned.

Hermione smiled widely "Come on Neville, it's not as if she was accusing you of alcoholism"

"Oh, but she was! She even hinted that several parents disagree with having their children being handled by an inebriated assistant Professor. Minerva had a rather long talk with me when that article came out" he seemed truly bothered.
"Why didn't you speak with Skeeter?"

"You know how that woman is…the moment she finds an interesting thread that might hold a hint of truth, she blows it up to a three book saga. Remember what she did to you and Harry just because you talked to him behind that curtain during the Triwizard Tournament?" he waved his hand angrily.

She sighed "I sure do…but everyone knows she is an idiot. No one takes her seriously. So calm down"

He stopped and observed her for a few unsettling moments "She takes everything that sells, and fills it with dirty lies, in order to make it sell more. Be careful Hermione” his voice was low with a hint of warning that made her frown deeper.

"Careful of what?"

"Your escapades with Snape in Hogsmeade" he flicked his brow knowingly.

She buttoned up "I told you it's none of your business what I do with my free time. If I want to meet with Snape, I will do so….what's it to you anyway?"

"I am worried…for more than one reason"

"Give me two..." she challenged him and crossed her arms "And how the hell did you know about Hogsmeade. Have you been following me around?"

"Hannah saw you guys at the coffee shop" he shook his head as if that information didn't really matter.

"Oh..." she raised her chin in understanding "very well…your reasons…I am waiting"

"Snape's case still sells. There are still articles written about him sporadically. If Skeeter catches you in an innocent escaped at Hogsmeade with him, she might blow things out of proportion. And that particular article wouldn't sit well with either Harry or Ron, don't you think?" he said carefully. Trying to make her understand where he was coming from.

"I don't have to answer to Ron particularly about anything. Not after what he's done to me" her nostrils flared "About Harry, that's another issue"

"No matter what, you should be careful the press doesn't catch you with him"

"That's no reason for me to stay away from Snape. I don't care about any possible article, from any gossipy reporter" she dismissed him, becoming gradually angry by Neville's tries to keep her away from Snape. Maybe his own fear of the man was clouding his judgement. Before she had the time to address that thought he spoke again.

"When the articles written about him speak of possible mental issues Hermione, then I think you should be careful and worried at the same time" Neville raised his brow.

"Mental issues?" Hermione's brow creased deeply.

"Minerva hasn't told you…." Neville concluded.

"Tell me what?"

"About his issues..."
"I know he has stopped using magic and therefore manipulates his environment telekinetically and that his voice is destroyed…." she said now suddenly feeling more confused than angry. What was Neville trying to tell her?

"I am not sure I can tell you then…." Neville drew back in obvious apprehension.

"Oh, you'd better tell me now that you started…." she warned him with a thunderous side glance.

"Don't speak to anyone about it, unless they bring it up first" he said and looked at the door quickly to check that no one was coming.

"I won't" she felt her back crawling with what she was about to hear.

"Suicide attempts" Neville whispered.

"What?" she whispered feeling the tips of her fingers getting cold.

"He's tried to kill himself…one too many times" Neville leaned closer.

Suddenly the cold on her fingers spread like numbness and her heart got stabbed with adrenaline. She swallowed "Suicide…" she muttered.

Neville nodded "After the war, he hasn't been stable Hermione. That's why the Ministry placed him in probation under Minerva's care. They are afraid of his mental stability. They are not sure what he is capable of especially since he has been suppressing his magic"

"They are afraid of a man that wants to die?" she frowned and jerked back from him. A mixture of shock, confusion and disgust at the Ministry filled her mind like a tornado.

"Yes…and maybe you should be afraid of him also. Instead you decide to chase after his company more than appropriate for a professional relationship" Neville offered and looked at her eyes carefully. Trying to read her emotions. Trying to discern what effect his words were having on her.

She pulled back from him quickly and stumbled on a low stool. She gasped painfully and rubbed her shank "Neville, you just told me that a man is trying to kill himself and instead of trying to figure out how to help him, you are advising me to keep away? Who are you? What happened to the Neville I knew? Is your fear of Snape so great that you do not comprehend the gravity of your own words?" she hissed and cupped her cheek feeling her back shuddering.

"You don't understand! He might be mentally unstable and dangerous to you!" Neville raised his hand to her.

"Leave me alone, Neville" she whispered and turned around quickly. She run out of the greenhouses needing to find a place to hide. She didn't know what saddened her the most. The revelation that Snape had tried to take his own life, or the fact that Neville sounded like a calculative robot? She run out of the complex and when the cold air hit her face, she stopped and leaned with her back on the wall. She rested her hands on her knees panting. Trying to pull her thoughts together. She never required that very serious piece of information from Neville, but now that she had it she didn't know what to do with it. It scared her and also saddened her deeply. She didn't want this new knowledge to alter the way that she had begun seeing Snape. She wanted to be his friend….to talk academically with him about her potion, to ask advice about Teddy, and why not share some friendly moments… she didn't want to feel sorry for him. And Neville's words manipulated her towards that direction. Feeling angry at her friend about telling her something that Snape himself probably would have never revealed she straightened and bit both lips. She had to pull herself together, because Libby was waiting for her back at the apartments. She had to pick up Teddy and head down at Hagrid's.
and maybe Snape is going to come find you there later…. her mind reminded her of the proposal she had offered to him several hours back. Her stomach gripped painfully and she winced. She didn't know if she could face him so soon after Neville's revelation and how she would react towards him. She didn't want to act out of character. He didn't deserve that…She looked up at the path and inhaled deeply. Deciding to get a grip on her emotions that were running wild she walked decisively towards her apartments to pick up Teddy. On one hand hoping that Snape would come find them, so she could test her integrity towards him now that she knew his most painful secret, and on the other hand praying that he would spare her this test for tonight.

*****…******

Snape stood outside Hagrid's hut and listened to the happy voices coming from inside. Ted's and Granger's broke out in laughter after something that Hagrid told them. Suddenly he felt so out of place, standing there in his grey stand collar tweed coat. Too formal, too buttoned up, too dark for the brightness inside the cabin. His darkness belonged here, outside the forbidden forest. A perfect match for the night, with his brows creased in a austere scowl as his eyes scanning the thick forest in front of him. Why did he decide to come down here this evening? What had he been expecting by taking up Granger's offer? That he somehow magically would fit in pleasant company? That this company would erase all the darkness that lingered inside him? That somehow through their brightness he could clear up the clouds that gathered in his mind by Albus's words this morning? This was his life, this had always been his lot…why did he expect that to change all of a sudden? Just because a silly young Professor was trying to make him feel welcome in a company that was the polar opposite of him?

He shook his head and before getting the courage to lift his hand and knock at the door, he pushed himself to turn around and leave. Go back to his chamber and bury himself under the bed covers. That is when the door flew open and a happy Granger called back "I am going to bring some fresh water Hagrid, sit down!"

He turned around and she almost fell face on him. She yelped and froze. He swallowed uneasily, but didn't dare move.

"Uhm…well hi there" she said and cleared some hair from her forehead. Her cheeks were red from the warmth of the hut.

"Hi" he whispered not knowing what else to say.

"You came" she stated the obvious.

He nodded half heartedly, not able to tell her that he was on his way to leave when she opened the door.

"What happened to your trademark pea coat? You dressed up for us?" she observed and smiled up to him.

"It was dirty" he shook his head.

She bit her lower lip and blushed when she said "This one looks nicer"

His adam's apple moved and he felt more nervous than he had been in ages "Thank you"

"I was about to get some water to add to the stew, go straight in" she kept the door open for him.

He offered her a curt nod and stepped up and into the cabin knowing that it was too late now to back off.
"Presser Snape!" Teddy yelled.

"Hello Professur!" Hagrid added with a wide smile.

"Maybe you should call me by my name, seeing as you both destroy my title" he muttered under his breath. No one heard him clearly.

"What?" Hagrid asked in confusion.

"Never mind, good evening" he said half heartedly. How could he fit inside this warm and bright company? He was going to stain them with his darkness.

"Come sit Professur" Hagrid pulled up a chair to the table eagerly.

"I hope I am not interposing. Professor Granger invited me on your behalf, but…"

She didn't give him the chance to finish "Professor Granger did invite you on Hagrid's behalf, and Hagrid loved the idea. Right?" she asked the half giant bypassing him and bringing a large bucket up to the fire. She emptied the water into the boiling cauldron.

"That' enough Mione, an' yes Professur I loved her idea. Yeh know I enjoy yeh company a lot. Only reason I didn' invite yeh in the first place was because I though' yeh would've refused" Hagrid went up and helped Hermione put the bucket down.

Severus straightened his body and nodded, but didn't make a move to sit down.

"Sit down Professur, why do yeh keep on standin'?" Hagrid went over to take his coat.

Severus took it off warily, but Hagrid slapped a large palm on his shoulder almost making him kneel down from the weight "Thank you" he muttered under his breath, but he didn't take up Hagrid's offer for a sit. He didn't know why he was feeling this embarrassed tonight.

"Come Presser, sit next to me. You can help me with the game!" Teddy beamed up to him.

He swallowed and moved solemnly to the table. He offered a silent nod at the boy and sat down gingerly.

"Care for some wine?" Granger was the one that came over to him. She was holding a bottle and she was looking at him with way more care than he felt comfortable with.

He licked his lower lip, needing to deny. Getting drunk would only make his foul mood, even fouler and these people didn't need that from him tonight. She saw his hesitation "Oh, come on. You made the trip down to this place, you might as well get warm…just one" she said and without waiting for his approval she picked up a wooden cup and filled it half way. Then she offered it to him with a sweet smile as a bonus.

"It's the wine yeh picked up fer me" Hagrid clarified.

"Thank you" he mumbled again, and somehow he imagined that he had lost the ability to use any other words from the English vocabulary.

"Oh, enough with the thank you's, right?" Granger picked up her own cup and sat down across him.

He raised his brows.

"Let's have a toast, Hagrid, come take your cup. Teddy you pick up your water" she orchestrated
them happily. Way too happily for her usual thoughtful and calculative nature. He frowned discreetly. Had she drunk a bit too much already or was it something else moving her to overact around him?

Hagrid sat down also and the floor of the cabin shook slightly. They all raised their cups and looked at him. Forced by their silent patience, he picked up his own cup and gazed at her quietly "A toast, to the best Professors Hogwarts has to offer, and to the best future students that are going to mentally suck these Professors dry a few years from now" she exclaimed and raised her glass.

"Here, here!" Hagrid raised his own.

"Yippee!" Teddy snickered.

Severus looked at her attentively for a few silent moments and finally he offered her a small agreeable nod and they all tasted their cups.

"Must admit you chose a very good wine…Severus" she gazed up at him, obviously hesitating on his name and needing his approval for using it in public.

He pressed his lips "It's pretty tolerable" he whispered bypassing her need for approval.

"It will accompany the stew perfectly" she added with a smile.

"Aye, me stew goes well with red wine" Hagrid agreed and lifted up the scoop to taste some "And bloody hell, is it tasty!" he added with a roar of laughter.

"Harid is showing me how to play Gobstones! …" Teddy pointed out trying to assume a serious attitude.

"You reek, therefore I assume that this formidable task has overpowered you…” Severus crossed his hands in front of him patiently and looked at the boy.

"What?…” Teddy sounded seriously confused.

"How many times did the stones squirt on you?" he simplified.

"A lot, and it smells!" Teddy replied with a pouting lip and tried to clean his face.

Granger laughed lightly and he turned his face to look at her. She was moving a large wooden scoop inside the cauldron. Mixing the stew that had admittedly a heavenly smell "I tried to stop them, but Hagrid takes it too seriously. I just hope I'll manage to clean the smell off of Teddy before sleep" she scrounged her nose.

Severus's heart warmed up at her cute expression.

"Of course take this seriously, Mione! Gobstones 's a serious game!" Hagrid thundered "Now come it's yeh're turn again boy" he pointed at the board.

"Ok" Teddy's tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration and he pushed the stone towards the circle. It reached the same line that Hagrid's was. Teddy ducked under the table to avoid another squirting which the stone didn't give. Hermione's laughter rang musically and Severus raised his eyes at her one more time. His own lip turning upwards slightly.

"It's a tie fer now…get up" Hagrid told Teddy and the boy sat down again obviously relieved.

Hagrid observed the board for a few silent moments and then with a proud humph he pushed the
stone that reached the middle of the circle. At that he roared happily "Tha' was the best throw I've had in years!"

Hermione approached and sat down. She gazed up to him and he quickly looked down at the board feeling embarrassed at being caught staring. Teddy stood up and went around the board checking it from several angles, trying to figure out which stone was the best candidate to reach Hagrid's. He didn't want to be squirted again. Finally he picked up his stone and got ready to shoot it towards the centre of the circle, but a large hand covered his. He looked up at Snape that was gazing at him quietly.

Severus shook his head in negation and led the boy's hand at another stone "This one" he indicated.

Teddy nodded and bit his tongue again in concentration.

"Not with too much force, and a little to the left" Severus whispered and leaned his chin on his hand, not noticing that Hermione's eyes were observing him closely.

Teddy nodded "Ok, Presser" he pushed the stone and alas it reached Hagrid's and passed it for an inch. Teddy froze for a moment and then hollered "YIPPEEEE!". The stone squirted it's smelly liquid and caught Hagrid on the end of his beard.

The half giant hoped backwards and fell from his chair making the whole house tremble under his weight "YEAH! I got a point! I got a point!" Teddy begun bunny hopping around the hut and chanting in a sing song manner.

Hermione covered her mouth and laughed. The half giant stood up and straightened his chair "That ain't fair Professur, yeh shouldn't'ave helped the boy win!" he said with his brows creased in displeasure.

"Sore loser you are" Severus whispered and lowered his eyes at the table with a lopsided smile.

"Just because yeh mom was Team Captain once, doesn't mean yeh can use yer knowledge ter help him win" Hagrid continued his disappointed nagging.

"It's just a game Hagrid, come on, you are worst than Teddy" Hermione pulled him down and he sat quite dejected. He took a napkin and began cleaning his beard.

"Your mom was Gobstones Team Captain?" she asked with raised brows at Snape.

He gazed at her with the ghost of a dry smile "Yes, quite an accomplishment, right?"

Her heart pinched her, but she didn't give him the chance to go down some pity path "You are running her accomplishment down as I see. How come you didn't follow in her footsteps?" she said feeling genially interested.

"She wanted me to. Forced taught me this bloody game during my first two years in Hogwarts. Possibly wanted me to become Team Captain one day. Walk in her steps as you say" he said dryly.

"Which you didn't do" she nodded.

He shook his head "Outgrew the Gobstone obsession, thankfully"

"But never forgot its strategy as yeh proved just now Professur" Hagrid still sounded pissed.

"Difficult to forget what you've been taught so ardently" he said and gazed up at Hermione.
"So, when you outgrew this game what was the alternative?" she asked after taking a strong inhalation that was meant to give her courage.

He raised his brows "At first of course Quidditch as most students"

"Upon which you must be very proficient, since I remember you refereeing a couple of matches" she leaned her elbows on the table and rested her chin on them. Her eyes were watching him carefully.

"Not even close to proficient, no. The few times I refereed was because of your friend Potter…" he raised his brow.

"To protect him from Voldemort's tries to kill him on the field, I remember. Nevertheless in order to referee a match, you have to have great knowledge of it" she tried to find a footing.

"Great knowledge yes, ability no. I was never truly good at Quidditch. I was a geeky type, not the athletic hero" he flicked his shoulders.

"Me think the Professur is short changin' himself, Mione" Hagrid said with a sly smile.

"I am sure he does…" she bit her lower lip and her eyes smiled up to him.

His heart twitched and he looked at his hands.

"And after the unsuccessful career at Quidditch?" she continued wanting to know more about him.

"Wizarding chess" he whispered.

"At which he is a true master yet today. Even the famous Headmaster Dumbledore had a difficulty beating him!" Hagrid exclaimed proudly.

Severus pursed his lips and tried a sip from his wine.

"Indeed?" she said with a smile and leaned closer to him.

"Geeky, bookish type, chess…” he waved his hand vaguely "Goes well together…"

She giggled and lowered her eyes "I get it"

"Teach me chess Presser!" Teddy said and leaned down to check on the stones again.

"What you need to be taught first is the ability to control your magic" he whispered and crossed his hands on the table.

"That indeed he must be taught. Which method would you suggest?" Hermione's countenance became solemn quickly.

"Of course Legilimens. He needs to be controlled by a registered wizard at the beginning" he tilted his head and took another sip.

"Which you are not willing to do yourself …" she gazed at him searchingly.

"Since I don't use magic anymore..no" he met her steadily.

She nodded "I must talk to Andromeda. She has to deal with him soon, before this gets out of hand"

"You should" he agreed.
"This one Presser?" Teddy showed a stone, after Hagrid took his turn.

"No, try that one" Severus pointed at another stone.

"Not fair me says!" Hagrid thundered again and crossed his arms above his large belly.

"Let the boy have some chance in winning" Hermione chastised him but her voice was playful.

Severus looked up at Hagrid's sore face as his eyes rolled up to the ceiling. Not honouring Teddy with a look as the boy aligned to get the proper shot. He couldn't help himself as he stood up and knelted next to Teddy. He placed his finger on his mouth signalling both him and Granger to be silent and he placed his hand above Teddy's. The boy's eyes grew large and Severus winked at him. His finger froze before the stone he had originally suggested and he gave the lethal shot himself.

Teddy's stone bypassed all of Hagrid's and stood in the middle of the circle, winning the game for the boy.

"YES!" it was Granger that stood up and applauded, but that was cut short as now all of Teddy's stones squirted on Hagrid's beard drenching him with the smelly liquid.

"Merlin's balls!" Hagrid exclaimed and stood up abruptly "I owe yeh one!" he pointed menacingly at Snape who was kneeling next to the boy, chuckling.

Hermione's hands froze in her applause and she tilted her head at the side, honestly enjoying Snape's restraint happiness. Her heart twitching warmly at this rare opportunity to see him with his guards down. That moment she didn't regret him coming at Hagrid's this night, no matter the heavy words of Neville that still stained her heart. That moment she was very happy that he was there with them…

"Yeah! we won! we won!" Teddy jumped and clapped in front of Snape and in an unthinkable moment of childish innocence he embraced Severus from the shoulders "Thank you Presser Snape!" he said and snuggled in his arms.

Severus became stone cold for a few seconds and his face sobered up quickly. His eyes fell on the wooden floor and he swallowed uneasily. One arm reached at the floor to steady him and the other hovered above Ted's back. He didn't know if he wanted to hug the boy back. Feeling Granger's eyes burning him, he raised his and gazed at her. She was burning him with a tensity that was almost unbearable. His adam's apple bobbed and he lowered his hand at the boy's back gingerly "No problem" he whispered, not daring to tighten the grip on the boy.

Hermione felt her heart melting in warm lava and a sweet smile covered her lips. She was unable and unwilling to hide her expressions from him. She wanted him to see how much this meant for her…..

"Now I'm goin' ter smell bad fer three days straigh'" Hagrid's angry voice made them all look up. They had momentarily forgot his presence.

Ted pulled from his arms and went up to Hagrid with a bunny hop "I won you over, I won you over!" he said in a singsong manner.

"Yeh didn', he did!" Hagrid pointed at Snape who was still kneeling, quite frozen from what had taken place.

"He did, he did!" Teddy continued his tirade and hopscotched around the room playfully.

"Want help?" she said in a low tone and approached him.

He pushed himself up and shook his head.
"Thank you for helping him" she said and looked at Teddy sideways.

"Believe me when I say my pleasure. I don't like sore losers" he smirked and cleaned his trousers at the knees.

"Even when they are your best friends?" she raised her brows.

"Especially then" he raised his own in reply.

"I though' we were friends, Professur" Hagrid nagged and cleaned his beard.

"We are" he nodded.

"Yeh didn't act like one…" Hagrid accused him.

"So I should have let the boy getting squirt all over his face?" he raised his brow testily.

"Nah, I don' mean tha'" Hagrid dismissed him.

"Shouldn't have I shown him how the game is supposed to be played?" he continued.

"Aye…"

"Hagrid, he just assisted Ted…"Hermione tried.

"I know" Hagrid nodded.

"Then stop acting like a big ass baboon and let me help you clean your beard" she offered.

"Nah, I got it, yeh check the stew Mione" Hagrid rebuked her offer for help.

She rolled her eyes and pointed at the table "Come sit all of you, dinner is about to be served"

Soon all three were sitting with hot steaming plates in front of them and a refill of red wine, enjoying their dinner. All except from Teddy that was chasing Fang in order to caress him, when the dog quite clearly didn't want to be touched. Apparently the boy was in no real mood for food. In the end Hermione managed to persuade him to eat a couple of spoonfuls and when he finally managed to corner Fang, he remained near the dog petting him until he fell asleep in front of the fire, quite exhausted.

An hour later found them still sitting at the table. They had all cleaned their plates. Hermione was resting her chin on her forearms and her eyes were switching between the fire and Snape who was twirling around his wine cup. His eyes lost inside it as if it held all the mysteries of the world. Hagrid was yawning while he was meticulously cleaning one of his most rare dragon eggs.

"Lovely dinner Hagrid, I can never get over what a good cook you are" Hermione said quietly and her eyes moved at the giant boringly. She felt calm and quite sated by the wine and the warmth of the fire.

"Me father taugh' me how ter cook" he replied cockily.

"He must have been an amazing cook…" Hermione smiled at him.

"Brillian' he was…" Hagrid shook his head sadly.

Hermione frowned slightly "You miss him a lot?" her voice was quiet.
Hagrid nodded "He was heartbroken when me mom left him…he never got over tha'"

Hermione pressed her lips and she gazed at Snape. He was still twirling his wine glass, but his brows were deeply creased now. She didn't speak.

"He was short yeh see…short even by human standards. When me mom saw the disappointing result in me, she left us both. Me father died because of tha'" Hagrid felt the need to elaborate, but he didn't raise his eyes to his interlocutors. The silence that drew was long between them and Hermione felt her heart heavy and her eyes stinging.

"Parental shortcomings" the cold unemotional voice of Snape made her snap her eyes towards him again.

Hagrid nodded in relieved agreement "Yeh should know somethin' of tha' Professur"

The brooding man snorted and lifted his cup. Hermione counted him swallowing two, three, four times. She licked her lips uneasily. Apparently he was not as disinterested in this conversation as he wanted to appear.

"I am sorry you had to go through all that Hagrid" she said and straightened.

Hagrid waved her off "Tis' an old tale this one, Mione….who remembers now?"

She smile uneasily and entwined her fingers. Letting a brief moment pass she then spoke again "How is Grawpy?"

Hagrid looked up at her "Aye, fine he is, always been fed by the students. Happier than ever, havin' all this company around him"

She smiled sadly "He deserves it. I am going to visit him one of these days. Will I find him at the same place?"

"Aye" Hagrid nodded.

"Does he have any memories from the war?" Hermione leaned her chin on her hand.

Hagrid nodded again "Who doesn't?"

Hermione nodded and deep sadness overtook her.

"Don't Harry and Ron suffer nightmares from those times, Mione?" Hagrid asked seriously and stopped cleaning his egg as he looked up to her.

"They do, Hagrid. Especially Ron" she swallowed hard and licked her lips. This was not easy for her, for she had her own skeletons hiding in the closet.

"The loss of Fred…” Hagrid pressed his lips and lowered his head.

"Tore the family apart, pulled them back together stronger than ever, but left thick scar tissue at their seams" she spoke in a low reserved tone.

Hagrid sighed deeply "The war destroyed a lot of people. The luckiest ones are those who dealt with their pain straight away. The cursed ones are those who still carry their pain unspoken"

Hermione's eyes immediately rose to Snape. His face was solemn and unreadable, his eyes still observing his wine, but his hand had stilled the twirling motion. He looked like a statue.
"The Weasley's were lucky. They had each other...and they shared their pain" she whispered, keeping her eyes pinned on him. Trying to read his emotions through his skin. It was impossible.

"Harry?"

"Had Ginny..." Hermione smiled bitterly.

"You had your parents and I had Grawpy" Hagrid added.

She frowned deeply and felt her heart catching at that. Suddenly her eyes stung her and she bit the inside of her lip hard enough to draw blood. Her breathing felt constricted and the emotions building up too heavy to subdue. Hagrid seemed blissfully unaware that he said something that stabbed through her heart viciously. She inhaled trying to control the tears that threatened to overflow her and pushed her chair a little too nervously. Snape's eyes fell on her quickly and his brow creased with sudden apprehension "Uhm, excuse me for a moment will you...?" her voice broke.

"Sure Mione" Hagrid nodded, quite oblivious that she was on the verge of a huge breakdown, but Snape's eyes felt burning on her back as she fixed her chair and walked to the door. She opened it and felt the cold from the snowy mountain peaks piercing her skin. She didn't want to turn around to take her coat though. She closed the door behind her and walked down the three steps. She stopped in front of the forbidden forest and took several deep breaths, trying to control the instinctive need to cry. Her arms went around her shoulders in order to warm herself up and she closed her eyes. She didn't know how long she stood out there freezing her bottom off, but when she heard the door opening behind her, she felt relief. She knew it was him, and she wanted him to come to her so much at that moment.

"What was that all about?" his whisper came as a warm balm over her heart and she sighed.

"Sometimes people say things, that hit too close for comfort" she whispered back at him, willing him to come next to her.

He did and his shoulder almost brushed hers. He stood next to her observing the tall trees of the forest "Figured as much" he replied quietly.

She nodded but didn't speak. She heard the shifting next to her and her heavy coat was placed upon her shoulders. This silent act of consideration touched her so deeply that her eyes watered. She bit her lips trying to control the welling up again. He withdrew his hands and she squeezed her eyes feeling the loss. She placed her arms quickly through the sleeves and wrapped it up around her. Relishing on it's warmth "Thank you" she exhaled.

He nodded imperceptibly and crossed his arms in front of him. Remaining a silent sentinel next to her. Keeping her quiet company. She appreciated that stillness so much in him, because it was everything she needed at that moment. She inhaled and exhaled deeply several times, calming herself down and he waited next to her. Patiently. Not requiring any explanations, nor her attentions. Just offering her his steady presence. That perfect conduct made her want to open up to him.

"Do you ever dream what it would be like...not to exist anymore?" her eyes were lost upon the darkness of the forest.

His lips pursed and he inhaled deeply "Yes" he whispered...not only dream it, but I have also tried to make it come true ...his mind continued his quiet thoughts.

She turned to him and her eyes were penetrating "Why?"

He kept his eyes silently dedicated to her for a few moments and then he turned his attention to the
"Because if I stop existing, then I won't be imprisoned anymore" he sounded reserved. It was strangely not difficult to express his thoughts to this young woman. She seemed so haunted by her own ghosts and he couldn't help but wonder what it was that troubled her so much. Making him forget his own pain.

Her lips pulled back and she nodded in understanding "Me too"

"Why?" it was his turn to ask.

The need to confide in him was so strong, there was no debate. She composed herself "When the war ended everything seemed destroyed. This castle, our homes, our families, our lives as we knew them…." she stopped to catch her breath. Her eyes watered and instinctively she let her hand drift upwards. Her fingers brushed his and he looked at her quickly. She didn't think about it clearly as her fingers slid and entwined gently with his. He felt his throat drying out and he swallowed but his hand curled carefully around hers. She needed this comfort from him, and he was more than willing to give it. Emboldened by his acceptance she nodded at the forest and continued "…many friends died, many families got mangled. I always wondered why I lived and others died. I still don't know if I was worth this second chance…"

"Your family wouldn't have thought this way" he felt his eyes burning hot with unforeseen emotion at this confidence she was offering him.

"My family…" she harked and shook her head.

He frowned and tried to find her eyes. She was looking down.

"I send my mother and father away and I wiped out all their memories to keep them from harm's way" she spoke quickly not wanting to linger long on those painful moments.

"Didn't you bring them back after the war ended?"

She nodded and a bitter smile appeared on her red lips. She met his eyes and he saw that she was crying. Her nod became a negation "I wanted to…but …". Her hand covered her mouth and she turned towards the forest again.

He remained silent, allowing her to continue at her own pace. It was not his place to push her through what seemed like a painful memory.

She gathered herself and her lips became a thin angry line of rejection "I saw them Severus…at their new house, with their new things. So lost in their love and happiness. Blessed in their ignorance..and I couldn't do it" she turned and gazed at him with pained eyes "I didn't restore their memories, because I didn't want to destroy their happiness…"

He frowned in confusion.

She pressed his hand slightly "I live in a dangerous world, that anything can happen. What if another war begun? What if I got involved in a magical accident of some sort, not few people had blown themselves to death with cauldrons or wands. You know better than me. what if…what if… anything. My death would destroy them…now that they don't know I exist, they cannot get hurt anymore…They cannot see my scars, they will not ask how I got them, they will not know the pain we all went through. They will remain blissfully ignorant…and therefore happy" her voice broke and her lips trembled. She tried to release his hand. She wanted to turn around in order to hide her tears, but he didn't allow her. His hand tightened around her and he pulled her to him. Unexpectedly his
arms fell on her shoulders and he pulled her on his body. The warmth of his unbidden embrace made her chest convulse. She leaned her head on his chest and began crying in all earnest. Her arms grabbed his back almost desperately and she felt choking from suppressed emotion.

He let her ride out her distress silently, the best way he could. His large palms caressed her back soothingly and his arms pressed her gently every now and again. After a few minutes her heartbreaking sobbing turned to whimpering and then to snivelling. Then it took several more minutes for her to regulate her breathing. Her hands were grabbing his back with the same force and her body was smothered on his. She seemed to be clutching him for dear life as she spoke again with a hushed tone.

"I was always broken after the war…because of my parents. Ron never agreed with what I have done. He never accepted my decisions. Egotistically he wanted everything to return back to normal. Maybe because that way I would be an easier partner…a wife and a mother. It didn't work out with him. He walked out of the darkness with the help of his family. I still walk in the dark…but no one knows, because I am always the composed, strong and clever Hermione Granger. I cannot be a broken one you see. I am always the one who fixes the broken ones. I am the healer…. and a bloody fool also…” she snivelled.

He rubbed her back steadily trying to comfort her. His own heart pained deeply. She head butted his chest and grabbed his sides with such force that her knuckles went white. Pulling her forehead upon his chest again and again as if to punish herself "Why am I telling you all this?"

"Because I can understand you” he whispered and her head butting stopped. She leaned upon him once more and closed her eyes. A deep sigh left her chest.

"You do.."

"And I will not judge you"

"You won't"

"Because I never saw the healer in you…”

She nodded as her tears dried up slowly "You never did"

"Because I know how it is to walk in the dark…” he whispered and caressed her back.

She raised her eyes. They were red and puffed up, but the honesty he saw in them broke through his walls. He gave a silent nod "I've walked in it for too long” he muttered. His voice the smallest of whispers.

"Thank you for making an honest effort to help a former student” her voice cracked with emotion.

"Not a former student…” he pressed her shoulder blade reassuringly.

"What then?” she dared and her heart gripped mercilessly.

He shook his head "A friend…”

The smile came easy on her lips even though her heart was still crying. The nod was too eager "A friend…yes" she whispered and timidly begun rubbing his side. Feeling the muscles prominent under his sweater.

"I am sorry I treated you so poorly when you first arrived” his voice quiet. He tried not to scare her.
She seemed ready to break with the barest of efforts.

"I am sorry for everything too..." she whispered not wanting to say anymore. She just wanted to be held. After a moment of hesitation she decided to voice that need to him "Severus?"

He looked at her.

"Can you just please hold me a while longer?"

He exhaled and his arms drew her inwards. She settled there and closed her eyes. Feeling his breath steady soothing all her sadness away. Listening to his quick heartbeat. Touching the muscles on his back under the thick material. Smelling his spice. Settling down, slowly and surely with his help. As the sounds of the forest quietened for the night, the voice of Teddy and Hagrid became more prominent. Making the warmth and pleasantries that took place in the hut a bright juxtaposition to the quietness between her and Severus in front of the dark forest. And then a small smile came upon her lips, and this time her sadness slowly edged away into the deep corners of her mind. Did he perchance understand how calming his presence was to her? Could he suspect that he was the only person she had ever confided in such depth, in a long while? Did he even comprehend that she was beginning to give this unforeseen friendship between them, more value with each passing day? And how would he feel if he knew all of the above.....She shook her head, not knowing if she wanted all the answers. Maybe this warm comforting embrace should suffice for now.

After a long time she felt his lips touching the top of her head and a shudder run down her back. She pressed her arms around him reassuringly to let him know that she appreciated that touch "Maybe we should go in, you are freezing" he whispered upon her head.

She nodded eagerly, but didn't make a move to pull away from him.

He followed her cue and only released one side of her so she could come next to him. He kept his arm around her shoulder tightly as he led her to Hagrid's door. When they reached it he finally gave in and released her with deep regret. When she met his eyes he pressed his lips and flicked his shoulders "Come on, in you go" he said soothingly.

She nodded and offered him the sweetest smile he had ever seen in years. He followed her in and the joyful environment of the hut soon shook them both off the deep connection they had felt outside, buried in each other's arms. Teddy had woken up hungry and Hagrid offered him a fresh bowl of stew. Hermione and Snape relaxed at the couch, close together, but not touching each other. Enjoying their cups of wine and easy conversation from Hagrid who was talking about how taxing it was to be teaching all about rare creatures.

Their night finished two hours later with Hermione bidding Severus a tired goodnight in front of her apartments and calling him to uphold his offer to help her with her potion. He agreed once more to visit the potion laboratories in three days, when she intended to begin the preliminary brewing. She couldn't stop herself from grabbing his back and burying her face between his neck and his shoulder. She mumbled a hushed "Thank you" and tightened her grip on his shoulder blades. The kiss came from him again and it was planted carefully at her temple. She gave him a curt nod buried as she was in his cardigan and then pushed away from him with a regretful smile. Her eyes stung her from fatigue and from her crying, but she felt more relieved than she had in years. And all this was his doing. He waved goodnight to a sleepy Teddy and soon enough they were behind closed doors.

The night found Hermione laying down in bed to sleep, but their intimate conversation by the forest haunted her for a long time. Finally after tossing and turning she came to the quiet admittance that she didn't quite see this man as a friend. Something she was so boldly declaring to him time and time again. Right there by the forest with his heavy arms around her, she wouldn't have minded at all if he
had kissed her. In fact she would have like it…a lot. She didn't know if she could dare imagine such a possibility with the most improbable person. It seemed so far fetched, and yet their close proximity unnerved her. She closed her eyes letting her imagination run away with her dreams and those dreams were too vivid.

Chapter End Notes

Forgive me from escaping canon here....I couldn't help it
"On using magic"

"Twelve copies of Mystic History of the Obsidian" Minerva's eyes looked at him above the rim of her glasses. She was holding a long yellow parchment in her hands and she was taking notes, as he was giving her the list for the new library books. Something that depended on student and staff needs, as well as the most current updates of University studies and researches "Why only twelve Severus?"

"It's too obsolete to be tampered by students and only a handful of Professors might be interested in this re-release of the ancient study from McTavish International Academy of Magical Sciences" he whispered and placed his quill on the next line "Fifty copies of Occult Philosophy" he continued.

"For Cuthbert?" she inquired.

"Most certainly" he rejoined with a slight tilt of the head.

"Next..." she urged him on.

"The Encyclopaedia of Saint Cyprian" he whispered and took a sip of his cold coffee.

"One copy?" she looked up.

He nodded "There is no need for more, it's for the restricted section"

"We didn't have too many losses this year from that section" she noted proudly.

"Nor from the elite section either" he added and glared at her above his own reading glasses.

"Indeed...you are doing a great job Severus, but I never expected anything but excellency from you" she offered him a restrained smile of recognition.

"Don't..." he shook his head in denial. He hated that she was constantly trying to get on his good side. He didn't need something like that from her.

She pursed her lips and sighed "Very well, can we take a break?"

He met her eyes coldly "No"

"My eyes are screaming in pain" Minerva rubbed her eyes with her long fingers.

"Two hundred St. Augustus, and one hundred and fifty Books of Shadow" he continued not feeling any mercy for her. She had been chasing after him to wrap up the new list for the library for almost a month. He didn't want to stop now and be forced to pick it up on a later date.

"Oh for Merlin's sake" she chastised him.

"Come on Minerva, let's get this over and done with. It was supposed to be my day off today" he huffed. Angry also because he had promised a certain young professor that he would assist her in the preliminary brew of her new healing potion. After their repeated amicable communications and the deep connection he felt with her at Hagrid's hut, a thin balanced truce had been created between them and it was something that he didn't want to disturb. It was something he was reluctant to admit that he enjoyed at times. When Granger came to his library they were easy to get involved in academic subjects that included some careful questions about each other's well being and about the child, but the tension between them was obvious and he couldn't refuse it anymore.
He didn't want to touch the cause for this, nor could he understand how he went from thinking of taking his life everyday, to almost banishing those grim thoughts from his mind completely. Maybe it was the child that was causing this sudden change in him, or maybe the woman. He couldn't really tell, but knowing that he could see Ted at any point of the day, or that Granger would walk in with a huge obscene list that would take up most of his afternoon to gather, made him focus in a new and productive way. Lately he even chased after her company. Her discreet ways made him smile inwardly whenever she walked into the library, or he sat next to her at the Head Table for breakfast or supper. He didn't know if Minerva was doing it on purpose, but they always found their spot reserved at the High Table, next to each other. Still forbidding himself to get involved in silly social jabber just for the heck of it, he couldn't deny that he rather enjoyed their talks when they were not meaningless, which was more often than not.

"And what is so important to make you hurry up through this bothersome task?" Minerva smiled slyly at him.

"Three Magia Naturalis and the same for Grimorium Verum" he glared at her warningly.

She scribbled down quickly and huffed bothered at his inability to feel any empathy for her fatigue "I am truly tired Severus, why can't we take a break?" she asked solemnly, wanting him to understand her.

"I don't want to bother with this list again..." he spat dryly.

"That makes sense, I thought you had an appointment or something, being in such a hurry" she shook her head.

He fumed and his brow creased at her insinuation that he was unable to arrange a personal appointment. As if his time was only to be dedicated at fulfilling Hogwarts needs. As if he had nothing else to care for. These thoughts alone made him raise his brow testily "As a matter of fact I do have an appointment, for which I am rather late, and you are not helping me attend to it on time by acting tired!" he hissed strictly. His eyes burned through her.

Minerva looked up surprised "Who do you have an appointment with?"

"That's none of your business...four hundred copies of Grimoire of Pope Leo, and twenty five of Wizard's first Rule" he whispered returning his eyes to his parchment. Feeling slightly exposed.

"True it's none of my business professionally, but I just asked as a friend" Minerva tried again.

"None of your business as a friend either" he gritted his teeth and rolled up his parchment. They were a few books left, but quite honestly at that moment he preferred to go find Granger and mess around her potion academically if not magically wise, than sit across this bothersome old witch.

"Poor friend you must consider me" her lips turned down.

"Well, you are not the best choice in that department..." he whispered trying not to think many years back, when their friendship broke apart after the death of Albus.

"Maybe I should send over Charity then, or even Granger. They seem to be doing a better job as friends with you" Minerva didn't want to sound bitter, but she felt it.

He tensed and glared at her indignantly.

"Ah...so your appointment is with one of them..." Minerva raised her brow and began sorting out her things.
"I still don't see how it's any of your concern"

"I care about your well being Severus whether you like it or not, and I know how many times you have tried to commit suicide already. I am guilty of placing Hagrid as your guardian, because I don't want you dead. Therefore what you do under my roof is of immediate interest to me…" her tone became heavy led and her eyes pierced him through.

"The moment you attacked me…" he begun and her solemn expression immediately broke down "…don't take on that look...The moment you attacked in order to killed me, you revoked your friendship. As for caring now…that we are in relative peace and you feel no threat from me…well excuse me for not appreciating this convenience on your part" he dripped venom.

"Severus I asked your forgiveness so many times…I didn't know then. No one did. I was blind with sorrow for Albus" she began confessing, but he stopped her.

"I don't care about your apologies..just don't try to play nice with me, when we both know how nasty you can become…alright? If the Ministry didn't force you to take me on board you wouldn't have given a second glance at my fate. Probably wouldn't have cared to see me rot in Azkaban either" he tilted his head with a gaze of pure malice that pinned her in place.

They remained like that for a few moments weighting each other when the door of the library suddenly broke open with obvious urgency and a dishevelled Filch run inside holding Mrs. Norris in his arms. Their eyes unlocked as they both looked at the panting face of the keeper.

"What's wrong Argus?" Minerva was on her feet quickly.

"An explosion…the Potion's laboratories" Argus pointed behind him at the corridor.

"The Potion's laboratories?" Minerva sounded genially confused as it was Saturday and the laboratories were locked, but Severus already knew what had happened.

He bolted out of his cubicle almost overthrowing Minerva and run past a flabbergasted Argus "Idiotic girl" he whispered as his feet carried him faster than thought possible through corridors and staircases. He could hear Minerva yelling behind him, but he didn't stop in order to explain. If his assumptions were correct then Granger had tampered with wormwood inappropriately albeit his warnings, and the fact that he got delayed for their appointment might have cost her, her life. A strong shudder run through him on the idea of Ted being in the laboratories as well. Minerva and Argus didn't know that the Potion Mistress was attempting to brew a new healing potion today, only he did and that knowledge now suddenly weighed heavily upon him with guilt.

why didn't I send Minerva away earlier…why did I have to wait for this to happen…I knew it…I bloody knew it! - his mind cursed as he found his way quickly in front of her door. The moment he approached he recognised the toxic green fumes of the wormwood explosion saturating the corridors. He paused coughing and covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve. Minerva came up behind him "Don't breathe it in! Try to contain it out of the corridors!" he ordered her with a no nonsense bark that crackled under pressure. The pain that came from his throat was for once not even noticed as he felt his eyes watering from fear about Granger's health.

Minerva raised her wand and with a couple of circular motions pushed the smoke quickly back into the classroom "What happened? Who the bloody hell did this?" she yelled behind him.

Without seconds thoughts as to his own safety he went into the toxic environment bypassing Minerva's question. He could hardly see in front of him and he had to move relative slow in order to check all around the working benches. Thankfully it didn't take him long to find Granger's body
lying in front of her teaching desk which was blown apart by the force of the explosion. He couldn’t see the remains of the cauldron that her potion was in. He kneeled down and trying not to breathe he took her in his arms and run to the corridor.

"Hermione!" Minerva hollered when he reposed her unconscious body on the cold stones. The old witch kneeled next to her and cleaned the hair off her bloody face "What happened?" she looked up to Severus who seemed to know a whole lot more about this than her.

"Not now!" he hissed and reentered the rooms. He went over them twice trying to find Ted's body, but he couldn't. Finally accepting that the boy hadn't been with her, he went out again.

"Severus she is barely breathing and her skin is becoming green! What did she ingest?" Minerva was in a complete shock.

He coughed and kneeled next to her. His fingers went to her neck artery and he felt a feeble beat. Her body had ingested a lot of toxic fumes "Wormwood" he whispered and slapped her cheek with the back of his hand. Granger didn't react.

"We need to take her to the hospital NOW, before it's too late!" Minerva cried and made to get up.

"..too late…" he whispered and looked down at Granger's face. There was truly no debate, even though the decision was humongous. He gazed at Minerva's wand for a fraction of a second, before reaching out and taking it from her hand with an urgency he hadn't felt in years.

"What are you doing Severus…" Minerva looked shocked.

He called at his unused magic with an ease that felt similar to breathing. The welling he felt blowing up inside his chest was immense and it immediately restricted his ability to breathe. The desperate need to release his power choked him like a vice, but he pushed it back with great difficulty. He needed to heal Granger, not blow her to pieces. With a trembling hand and a brow that was quickly sweating from the great physical toll this was taking on him he pointed Minerva's formidable wand on Granger and commanded it with a knowledge his mind had never forgotten. A dozen unspoken spells of great complexity run down Granger's body, quickly healing it. He cast them with a dexterity that few possessed with a stranger's wand, a deed which would have made even Poppy proud. The pain from containing his magic from engulfing Granger in its totality was bruising on his body and the pleasure from using it again was barely felt.

Minerva withdrew awestricken. Her mouth hang open and she felt devoid of the ability of speech as she saw this brilliant wizard in action after four years of magical celibacy. Slowly Granger's skin colour changed to a naturally healthy hue and her breathing eased. Severus knowledge that Granger had been cleaned from the remainders of wormwood and the relief he felt from that, was subdued from the shock his body had undergone. He was shaking visibly and he was sweating profusely.

"Severus?" Minerva touched the girl's brow when Granger inhaled and moaned softly.

His breathing was visibly laboured. When he met Minerva's eyes, he remembered that he was still holding her wand. He threw it quickly at the floor, as if touched by fire. He looked back at Granger's face and tried to pull back his magic that was knocking at the borders of his soul with fury unmatched "Is she going to be ok?" Minerva asked him.

"I think so…" he whispered feeling his heart palpitating. His hard bodily excursion came head to head with the fear for Granger's life. None could win over.

"We need to take her to Poppy" Minerva said carefully.
He nodded feeling lightheaded and truly unstable at his feet. Nevertheless he allowed no one else to touch her. It was he that kneeled down and placed his hands under her body. As he lifted her up she moaned again. Her head rolled and rested upon his shoulder.

"Lead on" Minerva picked up her wand and flicked it. The doors of the laboratories shut tightly and a blue hue covered them in order to keep the toxic fumes inside "Find Filleus and inform him, Argus. Tell him to come down here in order to cleanse the place"

"Yes, Madame" Argus bowed and run towards the other direction.

Severus moved quickly towards the hospital wing feeling the aftershocks running up and down his back, making his spine rattle under the pressure. He didn't allow himself to succumb though. He was not about to become a liability when this young woman was in his arms and they didn't know yet if she was going to be ok. His own need to understand what happened with his magic took the back sit as he strode decisively towards the infirmary. When they arrived Minerva held the door open for him and he was the one that croaked heavily upon entering.

"We need help!"

Poppy's head appeared from the door of her office. She frowned and run towards them immediately "Is this Granger? What happened?" the urgency of her voice reigniting Severus's heart that had felt frozen in time.

"Wormwood explosion" he whispered as he laid the still unconscious Granger upon a free bed with a gentleness that didn't go well with the urgency of the situation.

"That's lethal! I need to cleanse her body of the toxicity!" Poppy drew her wand and began casting her identification spells.

"I think she is going to be ok, Severus cleansed her before bringing her here" Minerva said and looked at him carefully.

He felt deeply shocked out of his comfort zone, painful, overloaded and half way out of his body. Yet, he moved to the other side of the bed, not wanting to leave Granger's side until he felt comfortable that she was going to be alright.

"You did what?" Poppy frowned at him.

He covered his mouth, but didn't reply. His hand reached out and touched the edge of her shirt. It was burned and a small piece was missing at the edge. He trapped the cloth between his fingers and lifted the shirt partly up. On her left side under her breast which he kept covered respectfully, was a large diagonal gash that run down towards her belly button. It was still bleeding. He swallowed and felt his eyes burning him. Poppy's question didn't even reach his ears. They were ringing.

"Poppy, concentrate on Granger, please" Minerva ordered, wanting Poppy's attention away from what he did and upon the sick girl.

Indeed Poppy concentrated on checking Hermione thoroughly. Severus wiped his mouth with his wide palm and felt the difficulty breathing once more. This time he knew it was not from the physical toll of containing his magic, but from a possible panic attack that was coming on. He looked at Granger's muggle jeans that were torn near her left knee. His hand released her shirt that covered her flat tummy again and scraped gently the cut on her knee. His throat felt constricted as his hand opened up around her thigh and grabbed her rudely. His fingers tightened around her leg and his eyes looked at her forehead. A smaller gash near her temple was dripping blood near her eyes.
He swallowed nervously and licked his upper lip, not noticing Poppy's prying eyes on his hand's bold declaration, upon Granger's thigh. He was thinking of Hermione and what had happened. She apparently hadn't taken any proper protection before attempting to handle this volatile agent, albeit his warnings. He felt angry at her, but most at himself. If he had left the library earlier she would have avoided this explosion, for he would have been there to stop her.

"Calm down for she is watching you with hawk eyes" Minerva's voice whispered to his ear and her hand landed on his shoulder. He shuddered at the abruptness of that contact and glared at her indignantly.

Minerva tilted her head carefully and tightened her grip on his shoulder "Let her go and follow me". The command in her voice clear.

He didn't move, but he slowly released Granger's leg.

"Come back a few steps, Severus, please" she pulled him by the shoulder.

He opened his mouth to speak but decided against it as Poppy gazed at him one more time. He took a few reluctant steps away from the bed and came to face Minerva with his arms crossed.

"Don't look at me like that, you were giving off too much info" Minerva's gaze was meaningful.

He sighed but decided against voicing his agreement with the old witch. He sufficed in licking his bottom lip and lowering his eyes on the floor partly embarrassed.

Minerva paused for a brief moment, not knowing how to approach what happened back there, nor what was happening right now "You saved her" she tried.

He swallowed and his eyes returned at the bed. He shook his head unwilling to speak.

"You used magic Severus, you saved her with your magic" she spoke in a low measured tone. Trying to make him understand the magnitude of what had happened and the possible complications from it, even though he looked far from understanding. His next words proved that to her.

"I need to see where Ted is" he muttered and looked at his boots. He was still trembling inside by the explosion his magic detonated in his body. It felt incomplete. As if a fiery tornado was now burning inside and yearned to be released.

"He is with Libby by the lake, didn't you know?" Minerva frowned.

His eyes closed and wave of relief rushed through him.

She felt his emotional pressure and she took firm hold of his shoulder again. Trying to comfort him "He is fine, don't worry. And thanks to you, she will be fine also"

He rubbed his forehead uneasily.

"Severus, you used magic…do you understand the enormity of what had just happened?" she intoned each word.

I know you fucking witch, I can still feel it in my bones- his mind growled.

"We need to talk about this…” Minerva tried.

"Not now" he whispered but didn't raised his head from his hands.
"Granger is going to be ok, but we really must speak about what happened. It is very serious!"
Minerva almost hissed at him. Her hand slipped from his shoulder and grabbed his bicep like a vice.

He pushed her away angrily "Not now" he bit behind his teeth.

"The girl is clean and she is going to be alright. She will need to stay the night. She has two broken ribs and several abrasions that need attendance, but nothing life threatening" Poppy turned to them and wiped her hands in a clean towel.

"Thank heavens!" Minerva smiled and her body loosened.

Another wave of relief stronger rushed through him. He exhaled loudly and lowered his hands.
Granger still looked like a bloody mess upon the bed. This was the first time after four years that he felt thankful for using magic, even though his body felt ready to either explode or collapse under it's weight.

"You did an exceptionally good job Severus…" Poppy's eyes were scrutinising him "…for a wizard that doesn't own a wand, and hasn't used magic in four years" she added.

"I need to go find Ted…" he whispered. The assurance that Granger was going to be alright, made his other needs appear in the front-lines with violent demand. He needed to get away from Poppy and Minerva, now. Before either could start drowning him with questions. Either about using magic, or his conduct with Granger a few minutes ago.

"What are you doing? You cannot leave now! This is VERY important!…we need to talk" Minerva's eyes were austere, but he bypassed her easily.

"Someone needs to see to the child" he rebuked with the same hardness.

"He is taken care by Libby"

"Who is nothing more than a child herself. Let go Minerva, you shall have your talk at a more appropriate time" he pulled his hand away violently.

"Severus this is really serious" Minerva got close to him and kept her tone low.

He looked above his shoulder at the pale face of Hermione and his heart tightened painfully. Tears came to his eyes unbidden and he turned around fast, looking away "It's more serious than you can imagine" he whispered and he pushed her.

Minerva jerked, truly taken aback by both his words and the fact that he was in tears. Something she was fast enough to notice, albeit his tries to hide it from her. She didn't try to stop him as his steps echoed steadily in the empty infirmary. When the door closed behind him, he felt the tears running freely down his cheeks. Not understanding why he had become so emotional all of a sudden he walked as quickly as possible towards the lake to find Ted and Libby. He needed to take action. Standing idle looking over at her bloody body was bringing on another panic attack and he was more afraid of his suppressed magical force now that he had used it. His hands were itching him to use more magic, upon anything really. On the doors, the floor, the walls and the ceiling. On the impressive fountain that was visible at the inner yard and at those two bloody students that had their tongues buried into each other's throat in the middle of the corridor.

"Miss Morgan, Mister Chapman fifteen points from each house!" he growled not even minding the sharp pain from his throat.

The couple drew back shocked. The girl hid behind the boy and wiped her mouth "Professor we
weren't doing anything!" her escort yelled in defence.

"What shall we call the archeological dig your tongue was doing in her tonsils then?…Keep it up and the points go up to thirty each!" he managed to croak and the tears in his eyes got reignited from the pain this time.

The girl pulled her boyfriend and they both began running away from him. He stood still with his hands on his waist trying to catch his breath "Don't ever let me catch you at it again!" he managed to up the level of his voice enough for it to echo into the corridor making it scary in it's mangled quality. He tried not to shiver and his palm covered his eyes that were full of tears.

I need to get a fucking grip… his mind said and he took several deep breaths. The voice of Hermione revisited him try to zone out…what would calm you down most at this moment?

"To use a fucking time turner and go back to fix this mess up" he hissed and rubbed his eyes forcefully. Running feet made him look up and he saw Charity coming towards him with Flitwick trying to keep up with her. They both looked very worried.

"What happened?" Charity stopped in front of him and grabbed his forearm.

"Didn't Filch notify you?" he whispered bypassing any discomfort from his throat.

"Yes, is Hermione ok?" her eyes were searching upon his and she certainly noticed that he had been in tears.

"She is going to be alright, yes" his whisper came out with an exhalation of relief he didn't know he had been holding.

"What kind of explosion was it, Argus was unable to explain" Filius asked pressingly.

"Wormwood, down at the potion laboratories" he shook his head dismissively.

"Dear Merlin! That's highly dangerous!" the short Professor exclaimed and began running.

"Minerva contained it..." he tried to raise his voice, but the pressure on it had been so immense that he began coughing immediately. The coughing was so hard that he had to grab Charity's arm for support until it stopped.

"What have you done to yourself?" she asked with a deep scowl.

"I am fine compared to the young Potion Mistress that's in the infirmary. Go to her, I need to see to Ted" he said and pulled his hand away from her arm.

"I think he is with Libby"

"I know, now go" he pushed her away and begun walking steadily once more. Trying to compose himself enough to leave her with some dignity. Fresh tears run from his eyes and he didn't know if they were caused by the fear for the young woman's life, the pain on his throat or the pressure his body was still partly experiencing from using magic after all these years. Without comprehending the severity of his situation he let go of the restraints on his magic unknowingly and heard a loud crack from his right. He jerked to the direction of the noise only to see in great surprise a large stone block removing itself from the wall slowly.

He stopped and his mouth dropped open as the stone slid out completely and fell on the floor with a loud crash. It rolled towards his foot and he took a step back. Another crack from the other side this
time and he saw another stone sliding out of the wall. He opened and closed his mouth. He was losing all grip upon reason. He stepped back again and another crack assured him that another stone was getting detaching from the wall. He felt his breath constricting again at the realisation that he was undoing the castle stone to stone. Trying to find the edge of his magic in order to pull it back inside he felt his tears etching his face.

He turned around and begun running through the corridors, hearing stones dragging out of the wall as he run past them. A door cracked under the pressure of the wave his magic carried and several splinters shot across the corridor. He needed to control himself. This was the first time his telekinesis didn't act in a singular incident, but kept on working on the environment as he was trying to get away. He run down the steps of the inner courtyard and several cracks and crashes sounded around him. He didn't stop to give them a chance to become worst and quite possibly hurt a passing student.

When he reached the lake he stopped and leaned his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. He stretched his ears trying to discern if he was raping nature around him unwillingly. The blessed silence made him exhale loudly. He needed to go find Libby and Ted, but he was in no condition to approach them now. He had to calm down. He had to pull back every single thread of magic he could control and calm the fuck down.

He turned around and he opened his eyes. The weather was cold, but he was too hot to notice the snowflakes that were falling around him. His eyes gazed tensely at a lonely tree by the edge of the lake…he swallowed and felt the cuts and bruises inside his throat. His eyes got lost at the moving branches and at the leaves that were falling sporadically. The bloody face of Hermione came to his eyes and he moaned softly as guilt and regret gripped his guts mercilessly. He remembered the large bloody gash under her breast and he bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

what would make you zone out this moment?….Hermione's voice spoke calmly in his mind and it was as if he returned at that coffee shop with her for a moment.

using my magic…his mind answered without too much thought his hand cupped his throat and a warmth spread there. The magical heat gave him a sharp quick pain and then immediate relief. The regret of using his force twice in a single day got overrun when he felt his soul shaking with the need for a violent release once more.

not again…

Similar to what he had felt back there with Hermione, an almost orgasmic wave passed through every single cell in his body and called out to him to release the tornado he had been suppressing inside him once and for all. Let it flatten this damn castle and free him from his probation through violence. He inhaled in panic and raised his eyes to the tree across him. His knuckles tightened and became white. Both fists grabbed grass and pulverised it. His eyes looked at the leaves that were detaching from the branches and were twirling down to earth.

zone out…zone out! - he ordered his mind and counted inwards as he concentrated upon the falling leaves. Following their slow rotation. Imagining the sound they made as they touched the earth. Soft and barely audible. Slowly the image of Granger wrapping her small arms around him, barely able to close them behind his back came to his mind. He remembered that lovely night at Hagrid's a few days ago. The silly game of Gobstones and the more than ridiculous reaction of Hagrid to losing. Hermione's scent which was flowery and sweet. The softness of her hair under his chin and how small she had felt in his arms. Slowly the fiends of his mind retreated and his magic pulled back with them. As he kept reminding himself the quietness he had felt with Granger in his arms, he began calming down and soon enough he was able to breathe again. The veins on his throat were not puffed up anymore and his knuckles loosened upon the grass.
It took him several minutes to settle down and push himself up. He remained standing for a while longer. Trying to discern if he was bothering his environment in some manner. Trying to make sure he was not going to be dangerous to Libby and Ted. He could hear them in the distance. He raised his eyes and for the first time saw the snowflakes falling upon the tree leaves that had managed to make it through fall and into the winter. He sighed deeply, feeling better by the minute. He felt a desperate need to find the kids and bring them inside. A sense of protection towards his own, towards his home, towards his herd …he didn't even know what it was, but it was overpowering. He wanted to place the kids in Granger's apartments and make sure they were warm and properly fed.

When he finally found Libby and Teddy, they were playing close to the lake, enjoying the soft snowfall. Libby had enchanted some dry leaves to act as butterflies and Teddy was running after them. Whenever he caught one, the leaf remained dead in his palm for a second before springing to life again and flying away. Something that was causing Ted to scream like crazy repeatedly. Thankfully they were dressed with warm clothing and they didn't seem to be bothered by the cold.

Feeling painful and more emotionally overburdened that he had been in ages, he approached them. Immediately Ted saw him and run up to him.

"See the little butterflies? They are leaves!" he cried and began jumping all around him.

"I see…” he whispered, trying to push back his own needs and power through this. Tonight it was required off of him to take care of others….instead of others taking care of him.

"Good afternoon Professor, we are waiting for Professor Granger to finish with her work, want to join us?" Libby asked with a serious smile.

"Yes, stay with us Presser Snape!" Teddy hollered.

"I will Ted, just give me a moment” he whispered solemnly.

The child nodded and run after a leafy butterfly.

"A word with you..please" he whispered at the girl.

"what's wrong Professor?” the girl asked truly concerned.

"Professor Granger has been involved in an accident…” he begun but her scared inhalation stopped him.

"Is she alright?” her eyes grew wide with horror.

"She will be fine. Don't let the boy know. Will you be able to remain with him tonight at Professor Granger's apartments?" he asked.

"I must have a leave from my Head of House"

"I will arrange everything"

She inhaled and nodded without any second thoughts "Then of course I will Professor!"

"I will come with you back at the apartments and stay for a while, but then I must return to the library. I will come pick up the kid in the morning so you can go to your classes" he whispered and looked towards Ted that was still chasing the leaves.

"Can I go visit Professor Granger?" Libby asked.
He shook his head "I don't think it is a good idea tonight. She is well taken care of at the moment. Let the headmistress announce the accident and then attempt a visit"

"What shall we tell Teddy?" she looked back at the boy that was happily unaware of reality.

"That she is very busy with her healing potion" he whispered solemnly and then gazed at the young girl thoughtfully.

"Alright, shall we return home then. Wrap things up here?" she pointed at the butterflies and at their picnic paraphernalia that was spread all over the grass.

He nodded curtly.

"Teddy love we are going…" Libby said and took out her wand. She began stacking up all their stuff with magical precision.

He turned around and rubbed his forearm feeling it pulling and stretching under his sleeve. Feeling very uneasy with the way his body reacted when he used magic he knew he had some answering to do tomorrow with Minerva. She was going to figure out that he created havoc across the school in his panicky retreat. He remained silently thoughtful, engulfed in these thoughts until they reached Hermione's apartments.

"Where is my auntie?" Ted asked when they entered.

Libby's eyes gazed at him questioning and worried. He shook his head curtly "She will remain at the laboratories for this evening. She has a lot of work" he whispered steadily and moved towards the kitchen.

"Who's going to sleep with me then?" Ted asked and yawned.

"I will big man…want me to?" Libby beamed down to the little boy.

"Yeah! Are we going to sleep together?" Ted asked playfully.

"You are too young to ask such things off of ladies…" Libby warned him in a similarly playful manner.

Severus smiled sadly and he begun preparing an easy meal for both children. Libby took Teddy inside and lured him into the bathroom. He didn't want to wash so she managed that incredible feat by convincing him that the bathroom was a big lake and that he was a big muddy dinosaur that loved making the waters brown and dirty. He went in happily but then she had a problem getting him out of the tub. By the moment she finished drying his hair and putting him in his pyjamas, Severus had already finished a quick chicken porridge and had two plates laid out for them at the counters. Libby offered him a look of appreciation and they both ate hungrily. Severus sat at the easy chair solemnly thoughtful about his own devious condition and very nervous about Hermione's health. The continuous guilt trip was not helping him either. He wanted to go visit the hospital in order to check on her, desperately. He observed the children as they ate and discussed quietly and then his eyes rested upon the flames.

Soon enough Libby asked him if she could go to her rooms in order to get some things she needed for the night. He wrote her an official paper that would clear her up in case anyone caught her wandering through the corridors this late and then send her off. Ted, being clean, full of food and thoroughly tired climbed up the easy chair and curled under his arm contently like a cat.

"Tell me a story Presser…" he yawned.
"What kind of story?" Severus whispered. His eyes never left the fire as his hand wrapped around the young boy protectively.

"About a boy like me?" Ted asked and settled down.

"Let me think" he whispered and his eyes got lost at the black flakes that flew upwards as they got cooled off by the air "I don't know about a little boy, but I know about a Hummingbird, that resembles you"

"Tell me that!" Ted smiled contentedly.

"Ok, let's see" Severus whispered and collected himself trying to remember the old story his mother used to tell him about obedience and prudence. Two virtues that Ted needed to cultivate in order to step his foot firmly on the world later on.

After a while, Severus stopped his whispering narration and looked down to see Ted in deep sleep, with his mouth hanging partly open and his breath steady and clear. He pursed his lips and got up slowly in order not to bother the child. He took Ted in his arms and brought him to his bed. When he rested the boy under the covers and raised the blankets up to his chin a thoughtful frown covered his brow.

His father had never tucked him in. He usually was fast asleep snoring away several bottles of booze before Severus was even close to sleep. Or other times he would push him into his room, threatening him to keep quiet while he argued with his wife behind closed doors. On the worst case scenarios Severus would be thrown into his room with several belt markings on his back and legs whilst his father beat the crap out of his mother in the next room. His heart tightened and a throb gripped mercilessly his throat choking him. He bit both lips and rested his palm of Ted's forehead.

The boy looked so peaceful and calm. He envied him partially. Ted's childhood had not been dreamy…not with both parents dead, but Severus would trade his eleven years of abuse easily with this boy's life. He shook his head and left the room without closing the door. He returned to the living room and sat back at the easy chair trying to empty his mind of all the worries, why's and how's of that day.

When Libby returned with her things he had already dozed off in exhaustion. He explained that Ted was fast asleep and bade her goodnight with the promise to return before her classes to take over the boy. She happily agreed and soon the door closed behind him. When he was out there alone, engulfed by the silence of the night and thoroughly cold under the fresh snowy assault from the mountains, he knew he had two choices as to his direction for the night. His chambers behind the library didn't even come close to winning, as he turned around and steadily walked towards the infirmary.
He found himself wandering the school corridors like a ghost. Half yawning half trembling from exhaustion, nevertheless not making an attempt to go back to his library and sleep. Finally after several circles around the infirmary he gave up and entered. Knowing that it was probably too late and Poppy was asleep in her office he moved very quietly though the beds. Thankfully the only bed occupied was Hermione's.

He lingered above her, his pale face outlined by the full moon that was playing hide and seek with the heavy clouds. His eyes were hooded and his hands were holding his shoulders tightly. He examined her calm features. The small red gush above her brow had been healed already but the remaining purple bruises along her chin and cheek made her look really beaten up. He pressed his lips and sighed. Poppy had placed an IV on her, most probably for dehydration. Her breath was easy and calm under the blankets and her sleep seemed carefree. He felt slightly intrusive with his observations and turned his head towards the clouds that finally managed to hide the moon. He approached the window above her head and mused at the heavy snowfall. He didn't know how long he remained there, hearing her breath in silent vigil but Poppy's quiet whisper shook him out of his reverie.

"She is well, Severus"

His adam's apple moved as he swallowed "I know"

"What are you doing here, then?" Poppy sounded sleepy and slightly disturbed by his presence.

"I couldn't sleep" he said as if that was enough to explain his need to stay next to the young wounded Professor.

The silence behind him drew long, but he didn't want to disturb it. He concentrated on Hermione's calm breathing once more "She was asking for you" Poppy decided to offer in retrospect.

He raised his eyes at the heavy grey sky and felt his heart sinking. Another swallow, harder than before "I am here" he whispered, his reassurance not heard by the person that was interested in his presence.

"Is the boy alright?" Poppy inquired and he heard her messing on the medical paraphernalia behind him.

He offered a curt nod without losing sight of the forest below that was slowly becoming white. Another silence drew long between them until she finished checking on her patient.

"Did you realise that what you did was very serious?" Poppy's tone was low and careful. She didn't want to wake up Hermione, nor anger this man.

Another curt nod and his hands gripped his shoulders tightly. A shudder run down his spine.

"As a doctor I have to ask you if you noticed anything out of the ordinary when you used magic" Poppy's voice turned professional.

He shook his head in negation, even though he knew how deceiving he was being with her.

"Nothing? No physical discomforts?"
He remembered the puking sensation and the explosive waves that almost bend him out of shape and he shook his head again.

"No sense of losing control over your magic?"

"Not more than usual" the sarcasm evident on his whisper.

"I don't mean your involuntary telekinesis" she clarified even though there was no need.

"I know" he joined her game with no real mood. He wanted to be left alone with Hermione….in silence.

"So nothing notable?"

He shook his head again.

"You know I cannot conclude if you are in any danger if you are withholding information from me, right?" Poppy's voice took a note of warning.

"Yes"

"I need you to inform me the moment you feel anything out of the ordinary. Suppressing magic for so long can have dangerous consequences. Some you may have not even considered" Poppy insisted.

"Like an Obscurus?" he felt the need to suppress a bitter smirk.

The silent reply told him he had hit bullseye. She was immovable behind him.

"How long has Minerva been suspecting I am a carrier?" he questioned quietly.

The repeated delays on her answers, were enough to convey to him how serious this was, and that it had taken place behind his back all this time "Since you were placed here on probation"

"That's why she placed Hagrid as my keeper, not because of the suicide attempts…" he deducted coldly.

"For both reasons" Poppy's voice was honest.

"Who else knows?" his voice was heavy.

"Charity…"

"Sweet Merlin…" he exhaled and his brow clouded.

"I am sorry Severus" Poppy was trying to sound honest, but at that moment he couldn't care less.

He nodded coldly "Does Hagrid know?". The need to clear up Hagrid felt desperate. He didn't want to believe that esteemed friendship had been an utter lie.

"No" another honest reply.

"Does anyone else?"

She shook her head silently "Some people at the Ministry"

"That's why they placed me here for my probation?"
"I think they considered it the safest option, until we could figure out if you are a carrier. The Ministry was never after your blood. They tried to have it easy on you, and so did we…"

He closed his eyes and a deep feeling of sadness engulfed him.

"Severus, we have to know if there are any physical symptoms that could betray the presence of an Obscurial inside you. If your magic has become parasitical then it's release would be destructive" Poppy's voice dropped to a threatening whisper that raised the hair on the back of his neck.

"I'll notify you, if I notice anything" he shuddered at his convincing lies. At that moment he felt angry at Minerva for keeping this from him. It was Hermione that brought this probability to his attention. If it hadn't been for her, he wouldn't have ever had this revealing conversation with Poppy.

A sigh came from his back "Alright Severus, it's really late. I need to go to sleep. You are going to remain?" she asked finally giving up on a conversation that he was killing with his silence.

He nodded curtly.

"Fine, try not to disturb her" Poppy advised and moved towards her office "Wake me up if anything happens"

Severus bit his upper lip and closed his eyes as Poppy's retreating steps echoed in the empty rooms. He remained silent above Hermione for the longest of times. Calming down himself through her steady breathing. Trying to push away what happened, at least for this night. When he felt calm enough he debated returning to his rooms, behind the library, but one look at her bruised face gave him a change of heart.

He sat down at the chair beside her and crossed his legs and arms calmly. He concentrated on her face and let time roll off his tired mind slowly. Time cunningly manipulated him to lean on her bed with his arms crossed and close his eyes. Soon enough they were both sleeping next to each other. When she saw his silver hair sprawled all over her sheets and she heard his steady breathing, her eyes teared up and her mouth gave him a tender smile. With no words her hand trailed up his arm and rested upon his shoulder blade. Her fingertips pressed on his cardigan softly. Feeling more comforted by his presence than she had felt in years she smiled and closed her eyes again. Sleep overtook her quickly.

*****...*****

Next morning when the dull light came through the window and Severus opened his eyes, he came face to face with a smiling Hermione. Her head was resting upon her hand and she had lowered herself down to his level. Her free hand was resting on his shoulder blade and it kept his skin warm under its solid weight. He frowned at her bright eyes and at her upturned lips.

"What are you smiling about?" he whispered, already feeling regret for his rude greeting.

"Good morning back at you…” she bypassed his nasty ways easily.

He pursed his lips and sighed without getting up from his reclined position "Good morning" he obeyed her silent call for politeness.

"And thank you for sleeping here all night…were you watching out for me?" she questioned with both brows raised.
"What?" he frowned deeply.

"That was terribly sweet of you…" her fingers circled on his shoulder and his muscles tightened in response.

"I never intended…I just fell asleep…I was exhausted…" his whisper was trying to bring those broken thoughts into an intelligent sentence without any success.

"I am thrice certain that you never intended to sleep next to me…nevertheless I appreciate what happened deeply" her fingers pressed him reassuringly.

His frown deepened and he licked his upper lip watering it "How are you feeling?" his whisper had a richness that she had never noticed before and vibrated through her spine because of their close proximity.

"Surprisingly invigorated and thoroughly rested, how about you?" she smiled sweetly, unable to stop herself.

"Don't you remember what happened to you?" he pushed himself up and felt all his bones cracking in hot objection.

"I remember very well, since I came to my senses after your brought me to the infirmary and Poppy informed me about everything" she pressed her lips. She didn't want to scare him away and she felt regret as her hand slipped off his shoulder.

"Everything?" he didn't want to betray his feelings, but it was impossible to hide the terror in his eyes about how much they had revealed to her.

"Everything…" she whispered and her hand slid up his forearm and took steady hold of him.

His eyes fell on her stray hand and his throat convulsed….he didn't speak.

"I know you used magic to save me….Thank you" she clarified quietly. She wanted him to understand that she was not going to interrogate him about that…only that she was immensely thankful.

He gazed up at her.

"It's ok…" she nodded with a reassuring whisper and her hand pressed his forearm.

His eyes strayed away from hers in order to hide the relief he felt when he understood that she was not going to give him the third degree. He was not ready to delve into this matter now… "Why didn't you use a more stable agent like I advised you?" he whispered and forced himself to meet her unnerving gaze.

"I felt certain that in that small quantity I could make it work…if my plan worked then my potion would be far more potent" she lowered her eyes to his black sleeve and her long fingers curled around it.

"You almost killed yourself…." he swallowed and heard it loud upon his ears.

Her eyes met him and she nodded, bewildered at how real his words were "I know….."

"You messed up…” his tried to school his voice to sound biting, but it sounded way too warm and caring.
She nodded and her thumb caressed his forearm gently "I am solely lucky you had been there"

"I came in too late" he shook his head. The regret for not leaving the library earlier, returned thousandfold.

"You saved me" she tried to meet his eyes, but he was looking at some vague place on her pillow above her head.

"I allowed you to get bruised…” he revealed the depth of his thoughts. She felt deeply touched by his honest concern.

"A few scratches won't kill me…doesn't black and blue suit me?" she smiled as he finally decided to gaze down at her. His eyes were piercing and she felt her skin electrifying.

"Don't joke about life and death" he hissed and pulled away from her. Her hand fell on the bed and she felt irrevocably sad by the loss of his warmth. He stood up abruptly not knowing what to do with himself.

"Just trying to lighten up the mood. I am ok, thanks to you..now can you sit down again?" she looked up at him.

He approached the window and crossed his arms. He shook his head.

A deep sigh escaped her and she decided that if he wanted to stand up and distance himself from her, then she would get out of the bed and try to approach him again. She didn't want to ask herself why that need was so great. She only followed the command of her heart "I asked for you last night" she spoke in a low quiet voice. She pushed the covers back and came to a sitting position. She was dressed in a long prudent hospital gown that did next to nothing to keep her warm now that she was away from the bed covers. Had the temperature dropped so drastically during the night?

"I know…” he gave her a curt nod.

"Did you come because of that?” she needed to know if he came on his own accord, or because she asked for him. Not that either answer would change the fact that he did something very considerate and kind at her time of ailment.

"I came on my own accord…but" he hesitated and the throb on his throat became harder.

"But?” she made a try to encourage him. She wanted to know his reasons….they meant a lot to her.

"…remained because you asked for me…” he drew both lips between his teeth and inhaled. He kept his breath in until she spoke again.

"Then all the more value shall I place on that deed of yours Severus" her voice came honest and solemn.

"Why did you ask for me?” he lowered his head and gazed back at her with a burning need to know also.

She twisted her body around and brought her legs off the bed. As her naked feet touched the floor she shivered "Because…because I just wanted you here…” she smiled uncomfortably at him. She looked battered and tired even though she attested to having rested properly.

He gazed at her with an intensity that bend her. She stood up slowly and tested her legs. They were working properly and she was not feeling dizzy at all "What is going on here?” he whispered never
taking his eyes from hers.

She shook her head "I don't know… but something is going on…" she flicked her shoulders honestly. She had no clue what was happening between them, but she was not going to question her need to approach him again. Listening to that need she pulled her IV close to her and walked up to him.

"You shouldn't be out of bed…" he looked at her naked feet concerned.

"Then you shouldn't have left the bed so quickly" she rejoined.

His shoulders fell in defeat "Get back in bed" he whispered.

"Not unless you join me" she rebuked, shocked at her blunt honesty. She didn't care if she sounded desperate. She wanted a hug from him and she was going to demand it soon. She didn't want a hug from Poppy or Minerva or even Teddy… she wanted one from the tall, imposing man in front of her. The one that looked scared and confused, but whose eyes bespoke of shared feelings...at least partly.

"Totally inappropriate…" his expected answer didn't phase her.

"I didn't mean join me IN bed, join next to me, like you were before. I need some comfort" she explained and shuddered visibly. Now that she was out of the bed she felt rather cold. Her hand touched his and she tried to pull him.

He winced "You are freezing"

"A bit, yes" she agreed and before she had the chance to do anything else, in front of her shocked eyes, he took off his dark blue shawl cardigan and threw it above her shoulders. Immediately she grabbed the thick lapels and drew it close to her body relishing on the warmth his body had left on it. Another shudder this time of satisfaction came to her "Thank you" she murmured and slid her chin under those lapels, letting his spicy scent enter her nostrils and make her stomach twist deliciously.

He gave her a curt nod as a response.

She smiled "Is Teddy ok?"

"When I left him with Libby last night, he was well fed, clean and thoroughly asleep" he pressed his lips.

"Did you arrange all that for him?" she felt her eyes tearing up suddenly. She pulled his cardigan tight around her body.

"Yes"

"Did you do all of the above or did Libby do them?" she insisted.

"Does it matter? We both did…" he frowned feeling annoyed.

"It matters to me… for you were not obliged….."

He stopped her "…You should have known by now that I haven't done anything towards you or Ted because I am obliged….."

"That is what haunts me…" she admitted and came at a breathing distance from him. Her head looked up "Your attitude is haunting me…" she repeated.
He gazed at her with a calm silence that tensed her whole body up.

"Did you tell Teddy what happened?" she avoided his burning eyes and looked towards his black turtleneck.

He shook his head "I didn't want to worry the child"

"Thank you" she nodded.

He waved his hand making her understand that no thank u's were necessary.

She closed her eyes feeling relieved "Lately, you always seem to be doing the right thing"

"For what?" he whispered.

"To draw me closer to you…and you are managing it very well" she didn't want to stop the honesty between them now. Maybe it would bring some light as to what was happening.

"I assure you that was never my intention…" he begun.

"If it's not then stop…because it's not fair for me..." she met his eyes steadily.

she is so beautiful…he thought and swallowed. Their close proximity was making him nervous "It was never my initial intention, but I don't want to stop" he whispered and tensed up in the expectancy of her reply.

Her sweet smile widened and she brought her arms around his shoulders. Her body leaned comfortably upon his and she rested her head on his shoulder "Good…I am glad you don't….because I don't want you to stop either…” she said quietly. His arms levitated above her for several seconds, but the warmth of her body and the softness of her touch drew him in quickly. He lowered his arms and wrapped them around her back, drawing her on him. The sigh that escaped her was received almost gratefully "I am happy the feeling is mutual" she whispered and tightened her grip around him.

He sighed and rested his chin on her head. He looked out the window. The sun was hidden behind a thick curtain of clouds that had turned the forest white during the night. Could he dare call this fragile but also strong woman in his arms simply a friend? The tight feeling that abounded in the pit of his stomach told another tale. He frowned deeply and another sigh escaped him "I must leave in a while. I have to take over Ted"

"Libby will go to her classes?" she questioned without removing her head from his shoulder.

He nodded silently.

"What will you do with him?"

"I will let him become library assistant…give the boy some purpose" he raised his brow towards the window and a small smirk appeared in his lips. He was partly glad she didn't get to see it.

She shook her head unable to believe that the man who treated her so poorly upon arrival ended up helping her more than anyone else "Thank you" she muttered.

"Can I offer my assistance in your potion making one more time?" he whispered and placed a careful kiss on the top of her head.

"Since you are offering it in such a tender way I cannot deny" she cuddled in his arms truly content.
"Is that the reason, or is it because you don't want to blow yourself up again?" he teased carefully.

"Might also be that I am after your company far more often than you think possible" she offered and bit both lips in silent expectancy. How would he take that proposal from her?

He tensed and she hurried to fix it "And now I am scaring you away. As a friend I am as giving as I am demanding. Forgive me…"

"No, it's not that…" he tried.

She didn't even hear him "…You've only known me as a student…not like this. I must make you feel rather uncomfortable with my straightforwardness right?"

"You do make me feel uncomfortable…"

"I know..see?" she nodded but tightened her grip around him. She didn't want to let him go.

"But the reasons of that discomfort are not the ones you think…" he whispered, trying in some manner to explain to her something that he didn't even want to admit to himself.

"I have intruded your carefully guarded solitude…is that the problem?" she tried to understand. She pulled her head back and tried to find his eyes.

"…Maybe…" he hesitated. He didn't know what to tell her. His hand cupped the back of her head and he pulled her upon his shoulder once more. She relaxed on him and tightened her arms in acceptance "I haven't been so close to anyone in many years" he tried to explain some of his carefully guarded thoughts. She was part of them so she was entitled to know.

She smiled and her hand pressed his back. She felt him tensing "Truth be told, I have never seen you embracing anyone ever before"

He jerked slightly and it took her several seconds to understand that it was the prologue of a laugh "I don't like hugs, no" he agreed suddenly very mindful of how intimate he felt with her.

"Should I ask how it feels now that you are doing it so much?" she dared.

He shook his head and rested his cheek on her head one more time. No you shouldn't stupid girl…his mind thought. The fact that he was pressing her in his arms and resting his head on top of hers was answer enough. What more did she want to know? He felt a warmth and a content he hadn't felt in years. Something that was confusing him to no end, but he didn't want to stop it. Now that he had experienced the beauty of an honest hug, he didn't want to pull back easily and feel lonely again. And that thought was so sad it almost ruined the nice feelings their embrace was giving him.

"You are not telling me and I am worried. Am helping your panic attacks with all this or am I causing them?" she tried once more to understand what he was thinking, even though his tight embrace said everything that was worth saying.

He smiled upon her head one more time glad she couldn't see him "At first you were causing them…now…" he hesitated and sighed.

"Now?" she pulled back and met his eyes calmly.

He looked down to her and frowned "You taught me to zone out, remember?" he whispered and looked at her pink lips briefly.
They broke in a sweet smile "Don't tell me you are using my method to calm down?" she didn't really believe him.

He nodded and his lip upturned on one side to a small smile.

Her heart warmed up at this and she caressed his back again more emboldened by his continuous acceptance "Is it working?"

He gave another curt nod and his fingers got unashamedly buried under her hair and began caressing her scalp. She shivered at the touch "I am glad I did something good for you..." she whispered trying to find her voice. His touch on her head was spreading shivers around her nape and down her spine.

"You are good for me..." he hesitated in each word but spoke them nonetheless.

"Why?" she looked at him searchingly.

"There is an understanding..." he whispered and his eyes fell on her lips again making her highly aware of his presence and at their close proximity.

She questioned him with her eyes.

He tried to draw his hand away from her head but she reached up and stopped him "Don't...I like it..." she whispered. He entwined his long fingers back in her long hair and released her back this time. His free hand came up and his fingers touched the scar on her neck softly. She closed her eyes and felt her heart picking up speed.

"We have both seen death..." he whispered.

The caress on her scar tissue and the gentle massage on her scalp made her reach up to him instinctively. One hand remained on his back to keep him there and the other cupped his cheek. His stubble scratching her soft palm "We are both mangled...is that it?" her whisper was barely heard.

He nodded not knowing what to tell her. When she finally decided to plant a soft kiss a few inches from the side of his mouth he closed his eyes and sighed. The satisfaction he felt as he held her in his arms was so total that he didn't feel his magic causing several beds to levitate around them.

"Am I scaring you right now?" she asked upon his skin, afraid that if she lost contact he would run away. Her fingers caressed his grey temple and relished at the softness of his hair. She would have never expected her body to demand this kind of contact with any of her professors, but now that this was happening she didn't want to stop it. It felt so right.

He shook his head gently and everything froze around them. The tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. She closed her eyes and her stomach twisted in delicious expectation. When he finally moved his head so his lips were touching hers, she inhaled sharply, and the grip behind his back became tightly demanding. She didn't want him to regret what he was doing and leave her.

He touched her lips gingerly, afraid that she would break. Their softness send electricity down his spine. His hand pulled her head closer and his fingers softly twisted around her hair. He let several seconds for her to understand what was happening. Giving her a chance to pull back. When she didn't slap him away he felt emboldened and he pressed his lips on hers pushing all negative thoughts away. Just enjoying this moment.

Hermione's heart raced a thousand miles per hour. She was unable to believe that he was kissing her....and she loved every second of this dream. Her hand cupped his cheek warmly and she...
opened her mouth taking his upper lip between hers. Needing to show him how much she wanted his touch. Wanting to encourage him. Her arm drew him inwards and she sighed in total delight. His lips that were soft and inviting and the roughness of his cheek were causing waves of pleasure to pass from her core.

Time stood still as they gently caressed each other, their mouths timidly exploring and tasting with half the infirmary beds levitating for several minutes. Closing the world outside and getting endorsed in each other completely.

Only the sudden opening of the main doors made them open their eyes confused and shocked. He pulled back from her the same moment she did, and that is when all the beds came crashing down violently. Hermione yelped in fear and covered her mouth. He looked around him in obvious confusion for several seconds, but the realisation was quick and the apprehension deep.

"What the hell was that?" Poppy came demandingly towards them.

Hermione looked confused around her and then her eyes fell to the beautiful man that was kissing her a few seconds ago. He looked settled in angry realisation. Had he done this unwillingly during their kiss?

"Nothing happened…" she tried to sound easy going. She straightened her hair and smiled both at Poppy and at him that met her eyes with a deep frown.

"It sounded as if all the beds fell at the floor simultaneously" Poppy looked around in order to find the source of the sound. Apparently she didn't get to witness neither the beds levitating, nor their kiss.

"Did it now?" Hermione sounded non challenging.

He glared at her penetratingly but didn't speak. What was she doing? Was she trying to cover up for him? His knuckles tightened and became white as his jaw clicked set.

Hermione noticed his distress and shook her head discreetly. No…no panic attacks now…she willed her mind to send out the message to him. The look of distress in his eyes told her that she needed to take over this situation.

"Didn't you hear anything?" Poppy asked Hermione.

"Not really" she raised both brows.

"You Severus?" Poppy turned to him.

He opened his mouth to answer the truth but his eyes met Hermione's. She raised her brows and shook her head. Telling him silently to follow her lead here. His heart warmed up slowly again and remembering the tender moment they shared a few minutes ago he shook his head curtly "No" he whispered in a low tone.

"What the hell? I thought I slept well last night…I must be imagining things or maybe it is just Peeves playing games with us" Poppy dismissed herself.

"Yes, I think I saw Peeves up by the ceiling a few moments before you arrived" Hermione was eager to grasp anything to get Severus out of that tight spot.

He sighed and closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them Hermione was looking at him waiting for a confirmation she was doing the right thing. He nodded softly and a brief smile played on his lips.
She exhaled relieved and sat back on the bed as Poppy brought her IV stand close and begun checking on her "I must talk to Minerva about that damn trolling spirit…” she bit angrily "Always messing with my infirmary he does. Wakes up all my patients"

Hermione smirked at him and he was unable to stop his own grateful smile. As she averted her eyes from him embarrassed, he felt overcome by the need to pick her up and kiss her again.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Poppy asked.

"Very well indeed" Hermione turned to him and gave him the thumbs up as Poppy was facing the other way.

The smile never left his lips. He crossed his arms and shook his head in almost playful appreciation.

"Any pain from your abrasions?" Poppy looked at her and checked on her face.

"No, nothing" Hermione said and tightened her grip on his cardigan. She didn't want to give it up, no matter that she was not cold anymore because of his kiss.

"Severus, has one of these" Poppy pointed at the aforementioned item of clothing.

Hermione cleared her throat "It's the Professor's" she spoke in a low tone trying not to look at the nurse.

"Well, isn't that kind of him..." she said and turned to him "Severus, you slept here during the night?"

He gave her a curt nod and decided against speaking unless absolutely necessary. Hermione was doing a very good job in this.

"Who is taking care of the boy currently?" Poppy turned her attention to changing Hermione's IV. Apparently she didn't want to make him feel more uncomfortable than he already was.

"I am" he whispered and straightened "I must go pick him up" he looked at Hermione feeling rather calmed down by her amazing manipulation of this difficult situation on his behalf. Once again she didn't only manage to calm him down, but she took him out of a very tight spot. He didn't want to explain to Poppy anything about involuntary telekinesis, especially now that he knew she suspected him of being an Obscurial.

"Don't you have to open up the library soon?" Poppy looked at him briefly.

"I am doing it with the boy's assistance today" he pressed his lips dismissively at her "Good morning Professor Granger. I wish you a quick recovery" he sounded formal, which was the exact opposite of what he felt.

She quickly found a way of assuring him that this formal goodbye was to lead to a quick meeting again "I will come find you in the library the moment Poppy releases me" she smiled brightly at him "To pick up Teddy of course" she added and cleared her throat.

"Who told you I am going to release you today?" Poppy smiled.

"The fact that I feel perfect?" she said out loud.

And the fact that if I can kiss my former Professor like that and enjoy it so much, then I am very well thank you …her mind added and she looked at him.
Poppy laughed and shook her head "Indeed, I will keep you here for some monitoring and by early afternoon you can go home. You recovered quicker than I had expected…but of course you had a lot of help before you even arrived here" the nurse gazed at him.

"I know" Hermione's eyes met his with a warmth he hadn't felt in years.

He suppressed the smile and turned around "I have to go, see you later Professor"

"Your cardigan?" Hermione asked and made to take it off.

He looked back "Keep it, you need it more than me" he offered and smiled at her.

Her whole face lit up and she buried her chin in the warmth of his clothing "Thank you" she murmured. He dismissed her with his arm, but she knew it was kind and caring. Her eyes admired his height and imposing figure until his steady step led him out of the door. That is when she turned to see Poppy scrutinising her. She swallowed suddenly becoming very aware how obvious they must have both seemed to the nurse.

"You are very lucky that Severus has taken over the boy in your time of need" Poppy mentioned as she changed the IV and fixed the drip.

"I am" Hermione whispered and rubbed her cheek on the lapel of his cardigan.

"And that he saved you outside the Potions laboratory" Poppy added.

Hermione met her eyes but remained silent.

"And that he gave you his cardigan to keep you warm" Poppy's brow rose to the ceiling.

Hermione inhaled and kept her breath in…and that he fixed my car, brought me in touch with an apothecary that asks for half the prices, that he changed my potion diagram with several expert opinions and that he offered to help me make it, that he brought me in contact with Libby and that he becomes Teddy's male nanny more often than thought possible….and above all that he chose me for a friend only to become my most intimate confessor….only then did she realise what he had done for her since she arrived. That made her need to see him again more dire….and repeat their kiss more demanding. Feeling kind of proud that she had caught the attention of such a man even though she was not sure she deserved all that help from him.

"It must feel nice to have all his attentions upon you" Poppy offered and checked her temperature. Voicing Hermione's innermost thoughts.

It feels terrifying and amazing at the same time…because the last thing she had been expecting was to get romantically involved with the most difficult Professor that has ever passed from her academic career. And that was both daunting and exciting, exactly because of his difficult personality.

"Yes…" she murmured lost in thought and didn't notice the stern look that Poppy was giving her. She was looking out of the window as the snowfall became very thick giving the atmosphere a beautiful serenity.
Severus stopped in front of the library doors and looked at the stone floor. It was as if it held all the mysteries of the universe and that with its help he could solve all his problems.

"Gonna open the door Presser?" Teddy was moving restlessly beside him. When he picked him up from Granger's apartment the child was asking for his aunt insistently, so Severus lured him away from Libby with the promise to allow him to become library assistant for the day.

He inhaled deeply and unhooked the keys from his belt "No, you are going to do it" he said and offered them to the boy.

Teddy's smile was huge when he took the heavy ring in his small hands. He begun counting the keys, trying to see which one fit the lock "This one" Severus pointed at the proper key.

Teddy tried to lift it up to the keyhole but he was too short to manage "I can't reach" he looked at Snape dejected.

He picked the boy up and levelled him with the door "Hurry up" he chastised. He didn't want to be caught like this in front of his doors by any student. He had a reputation to uphold.

Ted unlocked the door with difficulty and then gave the keys back at Snape "Keys are heavy" his lip pouted sadly.

"Keys in castles are always heavy. Didn't Andromeda feed you enough? Where's your muscle?".

Ted turned the handle and tried to push the door open "Granny gives me too much food, yack!" he exclaimed unable to push it fast enough.

Severus heard voices coming from the corridor so he gave up on the try and pushed the doors open himself. Ted would have fallen face flat on the floor if Snape hadn't caught him by the collar of his sweater "So, that means you don't eat enough" he deducted and pulled Ted back on his feet.

"I eat as much as I want" Ted frowned, but seeing the raised eyebrow from the older wizard he paused and lowered his head "Thank you Presser" he said in delayed acknowledgement for the help Snape offered him.

Severus gave him a curt nod and moved towards his reception "Which is not enough as you couldn't even push this door open".

Teddy remained behind and crossed his arms in front of his chest. He was frowning deeply, trying to show his displeasure "Not fair, you are tall and big…I am a kid!" he yelled.

"First off, you never yell in my library. Rule number one…you always speak in a low tone" Severus raised his finger to the kid.

Teddy unlocked his arms and looked immensely sad "Sorry Presser"

"Second, you are right. I am bigger than you so the comparison was not fair" Severus admitted after a short silent moment where Teddy was looking at his shoes.

The boy looked up happily at him.

"Third, come here, because we need to discuss your chores as library assistant" he finalised and open
the door to his reception so that Teddy could pass through. At that moment the voices became
prominent and two Hufflepuff Juniors came into the library with a happy disposition that bothered
Severus to no end.

"Good morning Professor" they both said and sickened under their hands. Something that Severus
didn't miss. His eyes followed them as they moved to the study area and he remained silently
vigilant.

"We don't say good morning to others?" Teddy asked.

Severus glared at him "What?"

"One of the rules? Don't say good morning to people?" Teddy insisted.

"On the contrary, one of your chores is to say good morning to everyone in my stead" Severus felt a
vicious smile outlining his lips.

"GOOD MORNING!" Teddy hollered. The two Hufflepuffs turned to them and after a small pause
began snickering again.

Severus rubbed his forehead and admitted that this was going to be a long day "You forgot rule
number one. Only speak quietly" he whispered.

"Oh! Sorry Presser!" Teddy said and bit his lower lip.

"Try the good morning in a hushed, quiet tone when the next person comes in, but never initiate a
good morning when one is not offered" he said.

"What?" Ted looked confused.

"You only whisper good morning to the ones that offer you that wish also" Severus gazed at him
quite dejected.

"Ok Presser. What other chores do I have?" Teddy straightened dutifully and waited for his
instructions.

Severus told him that he was to check around the library and blow the whistle on anyone acting
inappropriately towards his books, or having a bad conduct. When Ted asked him what that meant,
he explained with simple words which attitudes were allowed and which weren't, not expecting the
boy to remember half of them. After the first two hours Ted proved that he remembered all the rules
and helped clear the library of a couple of inappropriate students, which resulted in subtracting
several points from two Houses. He send off Ted to overlook the library again, with the promise to
let him stamp a couple of ID cards during lunch.

Most of the morning went by relatively easy if you excluded the various eager visits from Ted that
was always finding someone doing the wrong thing in the library. Severus weighed the
misdemeanours and attended to half of Ted's calls, but was satisfied enough to see the boy happy and
engaged in productive activity. He on the other hand wanted to sit down and as calmly as the
circumstances allowed him to be, understand what had happened since yesterday. None of the events
was easy to process and none won over in the cringe battle that took place inside his mind.

well one does…his mind reminded him and he felt another cringe coming, accompanied as usual by
heat rising around his neck that extended up to his cheeks.

He had a lot to think about, a lot to put in order and possibly label. The accident of Granger and the
numbing fear he felt for her life was one. The instinctual use of magic which he used so easily for her, when through the years he denied it for himself, was another. The deep worry at his inability to control his magic now that he had used it, was an added problem to his already burdened mind. The fact that he had to answer to Minerva about what he did to the castle, and that he had to face Charity about the Obscurial was also making him highly apprehensive. All those problems though added together amounted to nothing in comparison to what had taken place between him and Granger at the infirmary. Another cringe came on and he closed his eyes and covered his face.

what have I done to her? his mind belted him one more time.

Since that incident he had been unable to erase the memory, nor the intense feeling of being so alive with her lips pressed on his... but this girl....this girl....she was not just any girl. She was Hermione Granger, Harry Potter's friend. An old student. He knew her since she had been a child.

Admittedly she doesn't look like a child now...his mind evened things out for him...

"Shut up" he whispered and squeezed his eyes.

Nor does she feel like a child...she feels like heaven...his mind added. He shook his head and tried to shake himself to reason. What had taken over him? Why did he act so unwisely towards her? In which dustbin had he thrown propriety?

It was one thing to try and comfort her as a friend. To try and accept her as an adult...as possible company...and another to act with her like the teenagers he had caught at the corridor.

maybe you should remove points from Slytherin and Gryffindor then....his mind half joked, but he found his own joke of poor taste. What he needed to do was dig a deep hole and bury himself inside. He didn't know if he had the bravado to look into her eyes again. He knew she would see rejection and anger....yes, anger of course for what he did to her. Once she took the time to settle from her accident she would realise what took place and then she would get infuriated with him, no doubt.

but you didn't do it alone, she kissed you back...his mind reasoned.

Only because he took her by surprise. After the kiss her reaction had been protective towards him, even though he tried to get away from her as fast as possible. She didn't act like a woman that regretted anything....

It was too soon upon the deed...fuck you Severus, you used her to grab onto reality....he thought and the guilt trip joined the cringe game. No, he hadn't...he hadn't used her. He kissed her because...well because...he opened his eyes and felt them burning.

because you wanted to do that since that moment at the coffee shop....where she touched your hand....his mind betrayed him. He remembered her words when she told him that his actions were drawing her to him. Had he been acting this way to draw her in his trap and then kiss her? He shook his head and frowned at his own thoughts. No, no he hadn't. He had truly feared for her life and when he saw her bruised a strong sense of protectiveness came over him and he wanted to hold her. That embrace led to her innocent kiss at the side of his mouth.

that was not so innocent...his mind rebuked.

Innocent!...that innocent kiss which she gave to a friend and he went and destroyed things for them forever. He went and kissed her and now he didn't know how to fix all this. He felt at a loss and more emotionally confused than he had been in years and all that happened with the most improbable person alive....Not to mention the age difference. Another cringe stronger than all the previous ones
took over him.

When she kissed you, you forgot who she is and how old…you only felt her lips caressing yours and her arms pulling you to her…his mind explained and he felt flustered and angry. The need to run away and hide from her was so strong, yet he knew he had to act right by the girl. He had to remain and face her. He had to set things right.

What if you start kissing her the moment you see her again? …his mind naturally questioned.

"Fuck off…just fuck off" he cursed himself in a low whisper.

"Tsk..tsk…cursing in the library. What if Minerva heard you?"

His head shot up and as he turned around to face Charity he felt adrenaline shooting through his veins.

"I'd tell her to fuck off and so I'd say to you….interested?" he spat angrily. He had been expecting a confrontation with Charity one of these days. Unfortunately she caught him at the worst time possible. When he had Ted under his care and Granger occupying all his active brain cells.

Charity frowned and raised her brow "Well, good morning back at you"

"It's not good…so do me the favour and fuck off Charity" he gritted his teeth. With all these thoughts about his inappropriate behaviour towards Granger he had managed to piss himself off very well. So he was ready for any angry confrontation that might be required from him.

Charity raised her hands in defence "Excuse me …I just wanted to see how you were after what happened yesterday"

He raised his brow "Did you?"

"You looked like a mess when I found you at the corridor" she explained not truly understanding what had gotten into him this morning.

"And you were so interested in my well being that you waited until next morning to come check on me" he spat venom. Remembering Poppy's words only fed his anger.

"Wait a moment! I did come at your chambers, but you were not there….Where have you been all night long by the way?" she placed her hands on her waist feeling on the defence.

He paled suddenly and averted his eyes from her.

"Wait a minute, look at me" she said and placed her hand on his bicep.

He pulled his arm free but she didn't have it. She grabbed firm hold of him and turned him around "I said look at me!" she demanded.

He gazed at her and tried to assume the most haughty look he could master.

She tilted her head a little and observed him testily "Where have you been Severus?" she asked again.

"None of your concern" he whispered with menace.

"Another suicide attempt?" she asked and looked so honestly concerned that he felt his anger retreating a little. He didn't give himself a chance to calm down though. He had many things to say to
her and none was nice.

"What would be easier for you Charity? The suicide attempt or an emotional breakdown?" he whispered and leaned close to her.

"What?" she searched his eyes confused.

"A suicide attempt might end up in my demise. An emotional breakdown might trigger something much more dangerous though, right?" he whispered close to her face. His eyes were burning her.

"What are you saying Severus?"

"With suicide I will die, with an emotional breakdown you might all die from me…correct?" he never released her eyes and never pulled back from her grip that was tight enough to bruise him.

She swallowed and he saw perspiration breaking near her forehead. She remained silent, but he saw the realisation dawning in her eyes.

"You fear the Obscurial I might be carrying inside me" he manipulated his whisper to elicit fear from her.

She visibly shuddered and pulled her hand away from his bicep. She covered her mouth and her eyes quickly watered "Who spoke?" she whispered.

"Does it matter…?" he shot back.

"Severus, I am sorry" she muttered. The disappointment darkening her eyes.

"I thought you were my friend…" his brow creased and he scanned her face.

"I am…" she tried but he stopped her.

"Friend…a word only too easily dishonoured" he whispered trying not to feel choked by his own guilt about his dishonourable actions towards Hermione one more time.

"Severus, I am your friend…I didn't dishonour our friendship!" she muttered and leaned so close their noses were almost touching.

"When did Minerva reveal her fear that I was an Obscurial? Before you befriended me, or after?" he continued merciless.

"Don't do this to me…" she begged.

"Before or after?" he whispered and his nose flared angrily.

"Before…but I didn't become your friend because Minerva put me up to it…listen to me" she touched his arm again.

He didn't draw back "Does she fear me so much, that she puts people to act as my friends to keep my emotional balance in check?" the crease on his brow deepened, but the anger slowly erased from his eyes that became deeply sad.

Charity shook her head vigorously "No, yes…I mean yes Minerva has that fear. She wants to keep you in check so she placed Hagrid as your keeper. She also told me to be your friend, but Severus I never did it because she asked me. I did it because of me…" her voice broke and her lower lip trembled.
"Because I saved you at the Malfoy Manor…of course" he whispered dryly.

"Because when I looked at you, as that monster was levitating me above the table to show my broken body to his minions, I turned to you and called you a friend…remember?" she tightened her grip on his arm.

He swallowed but remained silent.

"You remember, I can see it in your eyes. I said 'We are friends Severus, please' …and you heard me. You managed to convince him to imprison me again instead of killing me on the spot, and reserve me for your pleasure after the war…you gave me back my life, because I was your friend" she licked her lower lip and nodded at him. Her eyes were streaming with tears.

He didn't take his eyes from hers. He wanted to know the whole truth "When did Minerva tell you I might be an Obscurial?" he whispered.

"At first I only knew the Ministry was placing you with us for probation and believe me I was utterly happy to have you close to me. I wanted to approach you from ground zero, to regain the friendship we had before the war. To make it stronger. Minerva came over and told me the suspicions of the Ministry. Asked me to act as your friend and try to keep you emotionally balanced until we could discover if you are an Obscurial. I cannot blame her Severus. If you carry a parasitical magical power in you, and it gets to be released, it might destroy the whole school. She has children to protect, she has staff to mind for. She even minds for you…and your well being" she whispered and wiped her eyes clean.

"leave off…" he tried to shake her hand away.

She kept firm hold of him "No, listen to me you silly man! She wanted me to be your friend for her own agenda, yes. In order to protect her school, but I was your friend long before that and you know it. Nothing changed because I suspected you were an Obscurial and above all my friendship never wavered towards you"

He didn't speak.

"And even though it might seem too far fetched, I do believe that deep down Minerva cares for you also" she tried when she saw his anger retreating under her intense pleads.

"No" his whisper was heavy and he drew his hand away from her. He turned around and begun searching nervously through the papers for his glasses. He wanted to find something to make him seem occupied. Charity's words were weighing too heavily on him but he was finding himself eager to believe her. He wanted to belt her, to take off all his frustrations on her, but she was stopping him.

"Listen to me…" she attempted.

He turned around so fast and leaned in so close she took an involuntary step back "Not another word about Minerva" he warned her.

She swallowed and nodded half heartedly "You are not ready for that yet, alright…" she paused until he retreated from her personal space. When she saw him turning towards his papers again and wearing his reading glasses she attempted to speak one more time "What about me though Sev? Do you believe me?" she didn't care if she sounded needy to him. She wanted him to believe her. It was very important to her. She never had such a close friend as Severus and she valued him more than she ever let on. She didn't want him to believe her a traitor.

He shuffled through his papers silently. Acting like she was not next to him, perspiring like crazy for
his answer.

"Not the silent treatment. Not now, unless you want me to set your library on fire!" she admonished feeling her emotions bruised.

"You have some nerve…" he looked at her sideways "You acted two ways around me all this time"

"How?" she threw her arms down and came over to him.

"You knew about the Obscurial…and never told me" he told her coldly.

"If I had told you, what would have been different?" she rebuked.

"I would have known the truth you stupid witch! I would have known that half of Hogwarts was scared that I might explode and take you all down with me! I-would-have-known…and I am the most concerned party of you all!" he hissed and showed her his teeth.

"Half of Hogwarts….exaggerating much?" She tried to lighten up her tone even though she didn't feel it.

His glare was dismissive and he remained silent.

She shook her head sadly "It would have made you even worst Sev…" she spoke quietly. As if the need to defend herself had been satisfied.

He shook his head.

She swallowed and crossed her arms "Did you feel better when you didn't know the truth or now that you do?" she attempted another approach.

He harked and glared at her angrily "How can that even be a question?"

"It is…tell me" she insisted.

His brow rose haughtily and he observed Teddy coming over at the reception with purposeful steps "Before I felt despair…" he trailed off.

She felt her heart catching "and now that you know?…"

"Despair and anger….towards all of you that patronised me" he gazed at her steadily and their eyes remained tightly locked until Teddy opened the door.

"I never patronised you…" her features broke.

"There is a boy that threw a book at another boy and when I told him to stop he called me snooty nosed trouble and told me to leave before he turned me into a wet rat…" Teddy pointed at the back of the library with a pouting lip.

Severus offered her a warning glance to keep silent and then turned towards the child "Where is he?"

"Behind the third aisle Presser at the ….thing where they all sit and read" Teddy tried to explain.

"The third aisle study…what colour was the badge on his robes?"

"Severus we had a very important conversation…." Charity interposed unable to believe that he would stop their talk to mind with minor matters.
He raised his finger at her warningly and she stopped with a sharp inhalation of disbelief.

"Red and orange" Teddy crossed his hands and shook his bottom impatiently "Are you going to tell them off Presser?"

"No, you are" Severus looked boringly towards the aisle.

"How?" Teddy frowned.

"With your magic" he answered with quiet simplicity. The anger that Charity had elicited from him was slowly retreating and the anxiety about his situation with Granger was also taking the back sit as he decided to concentrate on Ted for now. Take things one at a time….

"He is not allowed to use magic. He is an unregistered wizard, Sev" Charity frowned, but curiosity got the best of her and she approached them.

"He has used it several times already" he brushed her off.

"Yes, and as I remember you were the first one that stopped him"

"I won't stop him now" he pressed his lips and lifted Ted upon a stool. The boy sat and waited patiently.

As if only now noticing her he waved "Hello Presser Charity" he said happily.

"Hi, love" she smiled and then turned at the older wizard "Severus? What are you doing? Minerva won't agree with this"

"Minerva was searching for a good Legilimens to help the boy control his magic"

"Well, yes" she agreed.

"Give me your wand" he showed her his palm with a lofty stare.

She frowned and pressed her lips confused, but didn't hesitate as she fished her wand from her sleeve and gave it to him. He weighed it between his long fingers and twirled it a couple of times before giving it to Ted.

"Hold it and point at the place where the boy sits" he whispered.

Ted did as he was told.

"What are you doing Sev?" she felt deep apprehension.

"You will channel your magic through this wand. You won't let it slide out of your body uncontrolled, alright?" he whispered at Ted quietly.

"Ok, Presser"

"You will think of the boy, and say Aqua Eructo" he continued.

"What the hell Sev?!" Charity seemed abhorred at the idea.

"Do me the favour to shut up" he gazed at her warningly.

"But…"
"What?...but what? I am giving Minerva a good Legilimens to control the boy, I am clearing my library of trouble and also I am zoning out..." he whispered back at her.

"Zoning out?" she frowned.

"You want me to control the possible Obscurus inside me....you want me to be calm, right?"

"If there is an Obscurus, of course I want you calm, yes" she agreed.

"The only thing that would calm me right now, is to use my magic" he raised his brow.

"But Sev...you haven't used magic for four years..." she looked totally taken aback.

"I used yesterday" he met her eyes boldly.

"What? How...why?" she fell on him and grabbed his shoulder. Her face came only inches from his.

"To save Granger..."

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Her brows creased in deep apprehension.

"You afraid this will release the Obscurus you are certain I am carrying inside me?" he bit coldly.

She shook her head slightly not knowing what to answer to him "Sev, it's not that...I mean it's that too...we need to talk before you do anything that we will all regret"

"I am not an Obscurial Charity...you all need to lay off of me" he whispered in disgust.

"Sev, don't try this outside a controlled environment. You have been under magical celibacy for four years. This could be potentially dangerous" she tried to reason with him.

"If I managed to avoid the total annihilation of Hogwarts yesterday evening, then I can do it today also" he dismissed her.

Charity shook her head but remained silent. Her eyes were scared, but she backed off from him. Giving him the chance to prove that he was able to control his magic.

He turned towards Ted again "You ready?" he asked the boy, but the question was addressed at himself also.

"Aqio Arecto?" Teddy asked and almost flicked his wand.

Severus wrapped his large hand around Ted's and pointed the wand steadily down the aisle "A-kwa ee-RUCK-toh"

"A-kwa ee-RUCK-toh" Teddy repeated in a whisper.

"You think of water"

"Water?" Teddy frowned.

"Yes, son" he smirked and quickly dived into Ted's mind. It was easy for him to do so, because Ted hadn't placed any protections. Access to him was easy "Do it" he commanded the boy and mentally found Ted's magical thread which admittedly was very strong for a boy his age.

"A-kwa ee-RUCK-toh!" Ted said and flicked Charity's wand. Severus grabbed hold of Ted's power
and kept it at bay. He released only the amount required for the spell and directed it as appropriate. A jet of clear water shot out of Charity’s wand and slithered masterfully between the aisles to find it’s target.

They heard shocked screams and then gargling yells that resulted in loud laughter. When Severus felt that it was enough he pulled back Ted’s power "Enough" he whispered at the boy. The water jet retreated back to the wand, leaving everything around them dry, except from the boy in question.

The moment he pulled back from Ted’s mind the explosive feeling he had felt yesterday when he used his magic came back but much more subdued. He still felt the welling in his chest and the need to release the force that was hiding inside him, but today it felt easier to control. A headache slowly begun throbbing at the top of his head, but the feeling of helplessness was not as consuming.

Nevertheless he couldn't deny that he felt sick to his stomach and that mildly unnerved him. He had used magic twice in two days, but that was not enough to prove his magic hadn't become parasitical. Why did the use of magic felt so sick to him when once it had felt so natural?

Severus straightened and deciding that he was not allowed to break down today with Ted in his care he looked at Charity for a couple of thoughtful moments. Debating if he should divulge to her what he felt. His mind frowned angrily upon that thought, reminding him that Charity had known about the Obscurus along with Minerva and Poppy and that she was the last person he should confess to.

He took the wand off Ted’s hand and offered it back to Charity who was scrutinising him intensely "Thank you" he offered.

"Sev….are you alright?" Charity muttered. She looked flabbergasted as she placed her wand back into her sleeve.

He didn't answer to her because Mr. Boyle, a Gryffindor senior, came from the aisle dripping from head to foot. He was walking quickly and many students were following him and laughing "If I find out who did this, I am going to kill them!" he hollered.

Severus looked at the boy calmly above the rim of his glasses "You will keep your voice down in my library Mister Boyle, or the fact that you look like a large wet rat will be the least of your problems" he whispered calmly.

His comment fired up more laughter and the boy went red in the face "He looks like a wet rat, he looks like a wet rat!" Teddy begun laughing and making fun of Boyle.

"What the hell, did you do this?!" he pointed at Teddy threateningly.

Severus pressed his lips and looked at his timetable nonchalantly "Five points from Gryffindor"

"What!" Boyle cried.

"Your voice, Mister Boyle" he whispered, shuffling through his pages.

"Professor, did the boy do it?!” the boy insisted.

"Ten points…” Severus continued the cold tirade.

"NO!"

"Fifteen points…"
"Why!!" Boyle run up to him in despair as his classmates were losing their laughter slowly and were looking at him angrily. He was loosing them points very quickly.

"Continuous disobedience…" Severus glared at him.

"What?"

"Silence…Mister Boyle…silence" Severus indicated dryly.

The boy looked at his angry classmates and tried to clean his wet hair from his face "Professor, did the boy cast a water spell on me?" he whispered carefully. He didn't want any more points lost.

"Don't be ridiculous Mister Boyle. The boy is an unregistered wizard, and now that you reminded me of the incident, also twenty points from Gryffindor for use of magic in my library"

"Whaaaaaaa….?" Boyle's mouth dropped open "Don't do this to me, they are going to kill me!" he whispered and his eyes pleaded with the older wizard.

Severus looked at him coldly "You got thirty five in total, I would suggest you keep your mouth shut if you don't want this number to go up. If you have an objection take it with the Headmistress. Now out!" he pointed towards the door.

The boy lowered his head dejected and run out of the library. After a few minutes most of the students settled back to their work, in utter silence and angry faces.

"He looked like a wet rat, he looked like a wet rat!" Teddy begun chanting again but Severus tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder and shook his head in negation.

"Not now" he whispered.

Teddy stopped and nodded eagerly "Ok, Presser"

"I don't believe what you just did" Charity said and he gazed at her.

"Used magic?" he asked her.

"That's an issue I want to address with you later on….I meant bullying that Gryffindor senior" she said, but the sly smile that appeared on her lips betrayed that she was not taking this as seriously as she wanted it to appear.

"He shouldn't have bullied a four year old child…” Severus raised his brow at her.

She snorted "A bully, bullying the bully"

He flicked his shoulders "That's how things roll. You wanna reason with them, do it in your classroom. I don't work this way" he said coldly and turned his attention upon his papers.

She sighed and gave his back a soft smile after a few silent moments "Can I dare assume that everything is ok between us even though we didn't finish our conversation?"

"We have nothing more to say to each other about that matter" he dismissed her.

"And…the verdict is?" she bit her lips.

He looked at her silently.
"Guilty your honour?" she said sadly.

He inhaled deeply "I don't know yet Charity" he said honestly.

She nodded "I see"

He looked at Teddy and exhaled "Let me be for now" he spoke quietly. Not feeling anymore anger towards her.

She gave him a soft nod "Ok, Sev, you know where to find me, and you know I will always consider you my best friend. No matter what you may think of me"

His lips pressed uneasily "Just go…". The wish to be alone was suddenly too strong.

Her silence was followed by the rustling of her robes as she walked out of his library. Sadness threatened to overtake him and it was Ted's voice that grounded him one more time.

"What do I do now Presser Snape?".

He gazed at the boy thoughtfully for a few seconds.

"Help me stamp" he whispered and offered Ted the auxiliary stamp and a white piece of paper so he could occupy himself for a while. The need to put his thoughts in order before he saw Granger again was dire.

Their morning passed quickly with Severus following his tight schedule and Ted trying to help all the time. At noon he decided to skip lunch at his chambers and took Teddy at the High Table, which was something that surprised both staff and students.

In the afternoon he reopened the library. Not wanting to overburden the boy with duty again he decided to take him at the muggle aisles to choose an easy children's book. When they returned to his reception, he read it once and then told Ted to start copying the easiest of the words, letter by letter. During his time off from all his other duties he patiently explained the letters to the child, their sound and how they were written properly and asked him to repeat them a couple of times.

When evening came, he allowed Ted to lock the library and took the boy to his chambers until Libby could come to take over him for the night. He wanted to check on Granger and see if she was released from the hospital, but he didn't want the boy to suspect anything. Only thing he could do was patiently wait as he cooked some eggs for both himself and Ted. They ate and Severus passed most of the evening re-reading the book to Ted, again and again until his tongue felt sore.

Just when his eyes were beginning to sting from exhaustion and he was ready to throw in the towel, he heard a soft knock on his door and his heart felt relieved. He went to open the door to Libby, but froze in place when he came face to face with Hermione. Her messy auburn hair was caught in a bun on the top of her head. Her cheeks were rosy, her lips red and her eyes bright. The gash on her temple looked like a complete mismatch upon her beautiful face. She was wearing a long grey woollen dress. It's hem reaching just under her knees and a pair of black flat boots. She wore his cardigan above her dress and she was holding it tight as it was big enough to twist twice around her small body. Her Gryffindor scarf was around her neck and a pair of black gloves on her hands. Apparently she had taken the time to dress up for him, not to mention came to find him in his chambers. Feeling the need to invite her in, so she could get warm, he looked back at his cramped chamber and instantly felt embarrassed. He hadn't been expecting anyone and he was not sure he wanted her to see all his mess. She must have felt his uneasiness.

"Good evening" she smiled.
"Good evening" he barely exhaled.

She pointed behind him "You are a bachelor…I won't misjudge you" she offered him a smile and her cheeks flashed crimson at the look he gave her "The snow caught up with us early this year…" she added waiting for him to pick up.

He swallowed nervously.

She tilted her head a little and pointed in his rooms. She had to take the initiative, because he was not doing a very good job as a host "It's cold out here in the corridor…may I come in please?"

As if slapped into action he pulled back and opened the door wide for her "By all means" he offered with delayed politeness and as she brushed by she gave him a soft smile and then looked immediately at Teddy that run to her.

"Auntie!" the child embraced her and she kneeled at the floor to take him in her arms.

Severus drew both lips in his mouth and sighed. There was no way to back up from this now. He had to face her. Along with that, he had to face what he did to her at the infirmary and any possible accusations that would certainly arise from all that. He closed the door not knowing if he was certain that he wanted to do all that, or take this opportunity to tell her he was too tired and push her out with his usual coldness. He gazed at the couple silently. She was caressing Ted's green hair and his small fingers were curling up a loose tendril at her nape. He looked at his hands and pressed his lips. No, he had to face her...he had to do right by her. She didn't deserve his coldness. She deserved his most heartfelt apologies.
"Did you make your potion auntie?" Teddy asked and caressed her hair, making her bun even messier.

"Complete disaster Teddy, I will restart it the next few days" she kissed Teddy's cheek and the boy wiped it clean with obvious disgust. Hermione giggled.

"Are you going to stay away for the night again?" Teddy's voice was mildly worried.

Hermione shot a sad glance at Severus who was observing them quietly.

"Not this time my love. I will have help this time" she forced a smile and looked at Severus again as if asking for confirmation.

He raised his brow and the soft tilt of his head was enough of an assurance.

"Where did you hurt your head auntie?" Ted frowned and touched her temple.

"In class, from reckless students" she reassured the child, trying to make him understand that everything was ok "Professor Snape has had many accidents from his students also. Correct Professor?" she turned searchingly and caught him trying to tidy his cosy, but small space. He turned around with several articles he had picked up from the coffee table.

"What?" he asked having not heard her question. His mind was running on overdrive, trying to find ways to excuse his lack of propriety around her in the hospital. Trying to get a step ahead from any accusations she might throw upon him. At the same time he felt terribly embarrassed of his chambers and was trying to clean whatever he could. He was picking up articles from the coffee table and idly taking them on the counter, from which he was picking up books and was leaving them messily on a library that was bending under all that merciless weight. Not really cleaning anything. Merely moving things from one place to the other.

She felt her lips upturning in a sweet smile and her heart warming up "You really don't have to act tidy for my shake….your place is a bookworm's paradise"

He placed his articles back on the coffee table and sighed. He remembered well the nickname her friends had given her when she was younger and he appreciated that she was trying to make him feel better.

"Really, it's ok…I like your place a lot" she said with an honesty that made him frown, but her eyes looked around the small living room/study with an appreciation that couldn't be faked.

He pressed his lips and forced himself to attend to her needs and forget his messy rooms "Can I offer you a cup of tea or coffee perhaps?" he tried to tutor his whisper to sound steady even though in his ears it was too shaky.

"Cup of coffee would be nice, thank you" she gave him a quick smile and then turned her attention to Ted again "Now tell me, how was your day?"

"It was perfect! I was assistant librarian all day!" Teddy yelled and released her. He run up the couch and began jumping on it.

"Get down from there!" she admonished with a heavy frown that stopped the child cold in his tracks.
"Let the boy have some fun" Severus whispered. She tried to capture his stare surprised at how lenient he was becoming with the child, but she failed. He was looking down at the coffee he was serving her.

Teddy upon hearing his agreement begun jumping on the couch again "Do take a seat, if you manage to find an empty space" he looked briefly at the couch that was scattered with books also.

"Don't worry, I'll make some space" she said and began piling up the books. She reposed the pile at the side table upon more books and sat down. She rubbed her hands together and without waiting for an invitation she took off her boots and gathered her legs under her, rearranging her dress to cover her knees.

His eyes flickered at her disposed boots and at the comfortable way that she was sitting on his couch and he frowned deeply. Wasn't she supposed to be chastising him for that despicable kiss? Why was she acting so at ease when she should have been angry and cold towards him? She noticed his prolonged look and she hurried to explain "Your place is very warm…I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty to become more comfortable?"

He shook his head and offered her the coffee "No"

She smiled and avoided his searching eyes "Can you place it at the side table for a minute?" she asked and took off her gloves. Next to come off was her scarf and now he could see her naked neckline under his cardigan. His heart throbbed and he lowered his eyes admonishing himself for acting indecently again. He tried to find a place to put the coffee but the book pile was too high. She saved him from another embarrassing moment.

"Here, I am free now. Give it to me" she opened her hands.

He pressed his lips and gave her the coffee. Quickly he turned around and picked up the large book pile and brought it to the library again. Unable to find a free space to place it, he gave up and put it on the cupboard next to the door. Where he always left his keys and his shoes. Feeling abruptly overwhelmed by the demand of this meeting and all that had happened the last two days he stopped and rubbed his forehead "You really must excuse this mess…I cannot fix it for you" he said honestly and closed his eyes.

"Hey..." she spoke in a low tone.

He didn't open his eyes.

"Hey, look at me" she insisted.

He gazed at her tiredly "I told you before that I like your chambers, just like the way they are. I love books". The smile that came on her lips extended to the lines at the end of her eyes.

He exhaled partly in relief "You should drink your coffee before it gets cold"

She nodded and took a sip although in the pit of her stomach abounded an uneasy feeling. The Severus that said goodbye to her that morning was not the same with this Severus. Maybe she needed to approach him from a different angle. Apparently expecting him to sweep her off her feet upon arrival and throw her in bed was too much for his reserved nature. Trying not to feel disappointed she straightened her dress and rubbed the sleeves of his cardigan "Coffee is lovely although your cardigan did a better job in warming me up" she tried.

He gave her a fleeting smile and quickly grabbed Ted that fell on him and wrapped his arms around his waist "Can I tell auntie about the water? Can I? Can I? Can I?" he jumped, making him jerk back
and forth.

He winced not knowing if he wanted to open up another whole chapter of sensitive topics with her. Their personal issues seemed plentiful "I suppose so" he whispered not in any real mood to get into this.

Apparently Ted didn't have such a hesitation. He embarked in a detailed description of his use of magic in the library with Snape's assistance and with the wand of Miss Charity, that made a boy look like a large wet rat. When Hermione's brow creased in displeasure and she called Ted a young bully the child tried to explain that the older boy had bullied him first. Something upon which Severus intervened half heartedly to assure her that the Gryffindor's comeapence had been well deserved and so was the loss of thirty five points from his house. Hermione felt both happy that Severus defended Ted and sad that it was her house that caused all this mess.

Above all though she felt mildly concerned about Snape's use of magic. Something that she wanted to address with him…after they had settled this weird formality between them that didn't match his sensual kiss a few hours ago.

"So you bullied a Gryffindor" she drank a sip from her coffee and felt warm enough to shed his cardigan also. When she did so, she caught his burning stare on her cleavage and she felt a tiny bit better about his coldness. His stray eyes had a mind of their own and were not as cold as his attitude. Whenever they were looking at her they were warm and almost inviting, but also looked scared and embarrassed. Was he feeling regret about their kiss? What was all this about?

"You should hang out more often with Charity" he hurled at her "You're both saying the same things"

"I actually like Charity a lot" she admitted and fixed her neckline, not to make it more revealing, but just to see if his eyes would stray there again.

They did for the briefest of moments and she exhaled in controlled relief "Did you inform Libby not to come tonight?" she asked.

He took a seat on the arm chair in front of the fire, regretfully bypassing the empty space next to her "No…damn" his eyes shot at her with sudden realisation that he had done something totally stupid.

She sighed and drank some more coffee "Good" she flicked her brow at him. She wanted to get him alone tonight and not necessarily in order to get physical with him. She simply wanted some alone time to discuss with him. Set some things straight.

"So I shouldn't cancel Ted's sitting?" he asked with a thoughtful brow.

She shook her head "No, I need sometime alone after yesterday's events"

"Of course" he nodded trying not to feel disappointment at her words.

As if feeling him pulling back she crossed her arm calmly above her stomach "I want to be alone with you…in case you didn't understand"

His eyes shot at her with an intensity that made her back curl inwards. He remained silent.

She nodded "…there is something in the air tonight…and it seems too cold for my liking. I want to remain with you and find the cause of this coldness, if you don't mind".

Her words shocked him into another silence, but he forced his head to nod.
She smirked and looked at Teddy "Do you mind sleeping with Libby again tonight honey?" her voice lost the depth that made his spine shiver and gained on playful consideration.

"Are you working again tonight auntie?" Ted asked with a yawn and laid down in front of the fire where Severus had a small grey sheepskin rug.

"Yes, but not on dangerous potions" she kneeled down beside him and gathered her legs under her. She arranged her dress so her knees were covered and tried to catch Severus checking her out. She was successful and he quickly averted his eyes and became very interested in the calluses of his palms.

"On what?" Ted asked and stretched upon the rug.

"Academic issues with esteemed co-workers" she smiled at the boy and cleaned his deep blue hair from his forehead.

"Ok, auntie" the boy closed his eyes looking very relaxed.

"Did you eat anything?" she asked him and run her finger around his face calmly.

"Mmm…hmmm" Ted nodded.

She raised her eyes quietly at Severus who was still watching his palms. He nodded as if sensing her eyes searching for his "He ate a couple of eggs with bread and drunk a glass of milk" he whispered.

She remained silent with her eyes on him, willing him to look up. After a few seconds he did and their eyes locked steadily. Her lips broke in an invisible smile that showed better in her eyes "Thank you" she whispered.

His own lips upturned in a genuine lopsided smile. A soft nod, made her understand that she didn't need to thank him for anything.

"What's that?" she touched the book that Ted was holding in his arms as he was dozing off in front of the fire.

"Presser Snape gave it to me" he yawned again and stretched.

"Another book?" she gazed at him gratefully.

"I work in a library…” he flicked his shoulders not knowing what else to tell her.

She opened her mouth to thank him again, but his brow rose and his finger stopped her "Don't" he warned.

That is when the door knocked and they both looked at it in unison "Must be Libby" Hermione felt a rush of expectation pass through her stomach.

He nodded and stood up "Get the boy ready" he told her and he went to open the door.

Libby tried to hide her surprise in finding Professor Granger inside Professor Snape's apartments, sitting bare foot on his rug. What was missing was a glass of wine in her hands and that would have been the perfect romantic setting. Like the ones she was reading on all those silly fan fictions, on her mom's computer when she was visiting from school. It was one thing to read them on a computer though and another to see them in reality…between two Professors she knew well. She shook herself into serious mode and tried to avoid too much eye contact with either Granger or Snape, from fear
that they would figure out her thoughts. Was she going to child sit Ted tonight, so they could get into each other's pants?

Her eyes fell briefly at Snape's solemn no nonsense countenance and at Granger's calm features and she chastised herself for her inappropriate thoughts. There was no way these two were doing the perpendicular tango. Maybe she should stop reading romantic frivolities…her mom always told her so. She coughed herself into reason and inquired about Professor Granger's health. Something that was met with a lot of appreciation from the Potion Mistress. She assured Libby that everything was alright and that she needed sometime to rest today and discuss with Professor Snape about some potions.

Libby took Teddy very happy that her original assumptions had been so stupid and that everything in the world was still in order….and that her Professors were not banging each other behind closed doors. Ted followed her willingly with a big sloppy kiss on Hermione's cheek and a rather tight hug on Snape. Soon enough the door closed behind them and they were alone.

******* …*******

The thing that Severus feared the most since he left the infirmary that morning was coming true. He remained with his hand on the handle not wanting to turn around and face her.

She sensed his hesitation and coughed lightly "I don't think the door handle is going to offer you any answers" she said softly.

He pulled his hand away and turned to her. She was looking at him steadily "I know" he whispered.

"Only people can give answers…and I am the only one in your apartments tonight" she raised her coffee in a silent salute.

He walked solemnly towards the counter, not wanting to approach her. He leaned his hands on it and bit his lower lip. He didn't even know how to start this.

"Severus…the counter doesn't hold any answers either" she said calmly and took a sip from his coffee.

He exhaled and closed his eyes briefly "Give me a break…this is hard for me" he whispered.

"I can see" she nodded in agreement.

He pressed his lips and decided that staying away from alcohol this evening was not helping him at all. He reached out for a bottle of firewhiskey feeling no remorse. Not caring that he was about to get drunk in front of the woman he kissed this morning. Only needing enough to build up the courage to look at her. He couldn't even do that now that they were alone. He filled a glass and took a large sip. Upon taste he took a couple of more, feeling the burn sliding down his throat.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked and stood up. She reposed her coffee cup on the table and crossed her arms in front of her stomach.

He shook his head with fervour "No"

"You are not even looking at me" she licked her lips and frowned.

He gazed at her and his throat went completely dry. He forced himself to keep her demanding eyes.

She tilted her head "I challenged you…you didn't do it on your own"
"Hermione…please" he felt his body deflating and averted his eyes from her once more.

"What are you begging me for?" she asked and took some calm steps towards him.

He drank a couple of more sips and moved away from the counter. Needing to get away from her once more. His fingers played nervously with the glass on his hands and he reached for his window. He stood in front of it and his eyes moved to the distance at the mountains that he couldn't visit anymore. His heart gripped mercilessly "For your forgiveness" he whispered and held his breath.

"Whatever for?" her voice came close up behind him one more time.

"I bypassed all propriety with you this morning. Forgive me" he whispered and pressed himself to look at her.

She was leaning at the window casing, looking at him confused "That's your problem?" she asked with a deep crease on her forehead.

He nodded imperceptibly not knowing what else to tell her.

"You think you offended me…with that kiss?" the confusion in her eyes and voice still evident.

He gave another half hearted nod. His hands were freezing upon the glass.

"Or did you regret it?" her brow went up and her eyes became inquisitive.

"No…that's not it" he was quick to clear that possible misunderstanding.

She raised her hand and stopped him "Weren't you participating in that kiss fully Severus?" she asked quietly.

He nodded and swallowed heavily. He raised his glass and took another sip of firewhiskey.

"Didn't you feel me respond to you then?" she asked and looked at his glass.

He began shaking his head in negation, but that turned quickly into a nod "I did"

"Thank heavens. I thought I had been kissing someone else and you see currently I don't want to kiss anyone else" she said and a sly smile broke at her lips.

He felt his heart stopping and as her hand reached out to take his glass, his heart broke into a sprint "What?" he whispered unable to believe that not only she hadn't chastised him about that morning, but she was openly declaring that she wanted a repetition. He didn't know if that scared him more than having her aggression to deal with.

She raised the glass to her lips and took a hearty sip. She felt the burn down her throat and her eyes watered "That's heavy" her voice broke and a small laugh escaped her.

His own lips upturned in a confused smile and he felt out of shorts, but he was unable to deny that she was still there with him. Dressed in that adorable woollen dress, with no shoes on and cheeks red from the fire and the whiskey. His heart twitched and as he had foreseen his body tensed with the need to take her into his arms and kiss her again. Especially after her revelation a moment ago. He didn't dare do something that would ruin that beautiful moment between them though. He waited for her to decide what she wanted to do next.

She gave him the glass back and shook her head "How can you drink that?" she asked half jokingly.
He looked at it and his heart sunk a little "Helps me deal with this hell sometimes" he whispered and moved his hand vaguely around him.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at him "Hogwarts you mean?"

He sighed and emptied the glass. Then he left it at the ledge of the window and crossed his arms quietly "Yes" he nodded.

She pressed her lips and a small hand slithered under his bicep until she locked elbows with him "This place is killing you doesn't it?" she asked solemnly.

He lowered his eyes thoughtfully but remained silent.

She inhaled and tried to gather her thoughts "I know that this situation between us seems demanding Severus, but believe me I was as much surprised as you. I know you are burdened enough and I don't want to burden you even more, but I cannot deny that I want this…” she tightened her elbow on his.

He looked at her head sideways and his heart warmed up. He nudged her to reassure her that he wanted this as much as she did.

"I want this…here…between us. I don't know where it's going to lead and frankly I don't care. Never believe that I didn't want your kiss this morning though, and know that I am here if you want to speak to me. I have a feeling that you have a torrent hiding inside you…” as she spoke softly her head leaned on his shoulder and her body reposed softly on his.

He swallowed and felt a welling in his chest that was difficult to push back. The frank dedication this woman was showing to him was enough to bend him out of shape at that moment. He didn't really care that she was Potter's friend, or that she used to be his student once upon a time. Right now she was leaning on him for support, but in reality she was ready to support the unbearable weight of his emotions "It's hard for me to speak …" he couldn't finish.

about the things you are asking me for…his mind added and his eyes fled to the mountains that were barely visible behind the thick white curtain that fell from the sky.

"Then don't speak…just know that you don't have to walk in darkness alone anymore" she nudged him again and a sweet smile appeared on her lips.

He huffed "My darkness is several tones darker than your own"

She looked at his profile briefly and his sad eyes betrayed all the heaviness that abounded inside his heart "How can you live like that?" she couldn't stop the honesty of her question. She tightened her grip on his elbow. Wanting to feel him throughout this.

"I have no choice. I don't know how to step into the light anymore" his whisper was barely heard. She saw his eyes glistening and her heart gripped painfully.

"No wonder you are always in a bad mood. You live in perpetual hell" she muttered and felt her own eyes tearing up.

"I live inside a prison Hermione" he met her eyes and his stare was burning.

"This place you mean?" she tried to understand.

He nodded "Under probation…inside the last place I ever wanted to be. Under a magnifying glass in
order to prove myself safe for the magical world" he huffed deeply pained by the reality of his words.

She couldn't speak even if she wanted to.

"All because I have been born a wizard. How much different would my life had been, had I been born a muggle…" he nodded at his own thoughts.

"Yet you live like a muggle now" she tried to keep his eyes, but they got lost into the darkness outside.

"It matters not anymore. I carry too much dark magical history. That will always burden me, no matter my own need to be free of everything" he frowned.

"Being free means a lot to you" she spoke quietly not wanting to scare him.

"Peace and freedom is all I need, at any cost" his voice turned cold and calculative. Something that worried her deeply.

"Any cost?" her brows flickered in sadness. She remembered Neville's words about the suicide attempts.

He swallowed and sighed deeply but remained silent.

"You've lost all hope" she whispered.

He nodded softly and his lips upturned in a bitter smile.

"Doesn't this give you any hope?" she tightened her elbow on his.

He turned at her and she saw that his eyes were wet, but he was keeping his tears back "This confuses me to no end. Quite honestly I don't know how to deal with you Hermione" he said honestly.

She appreciated that honesty from him. Especially since he was so open and vulnerable "Me neither" she assured him with a soft smile.

She leaned onto him again and this time he unlocked his elbow with hers and his arm came gently around her shoulders to embrace her. Her own arm went around his waist and her head came to his chest. The content she felt there was quickly voiced "Finally…I thought you'd never do it"

He huffed and his free hand came up to her cheek. His fingers run softly down it's length and ended on her jawline. She closed her eyes. They remained silent for the longest of times. Simply enjoying each other's warm embrace. Hearing the wood crackling under the hearth and looking at the snow falling. Her hand wrapped around his stomach and grabbed his waist "What are you looking out there? There's only darkness" she muttered sleepily.

"No there isn't" he frowned.

"What else is there?" she opened her eyes.

"The mountains" he spoke dreamily.

She remained silent and heard the steady beating of his heart.

He felt the need to elaborate on that "I cannot visit them…"
"Why?" she frowned and opened her eyes.

"They don't belong in the grounds of Hogwarts. I cannot step foot outside of the castle's borders. I can only go as far as Hogsmeade".

She pulled back and felt her heart sinking "Are you serious?"

He smiled sadly and nodded "Yes"

"This is just a prison. An elaborate prison…but a prison nonetheless" she felt adrenaline pumping through her blood at this new revelation.

"I never claimed the opposite" he shook his head and tried to move away from the window.

Her arm landed on his bicep and she turned him around "That's why you need your freedom…you are truly in prison"

He nodded "I know". He felt slightly confused at this sudden shift of the serene atmosphere between them.

She looked around her and a sense urgency took over her "Are you sleepy?" she asked him suddenly.

"What?…no" he mumbled confused.

"Go get your gloves, hat, scarf, coat…the whole lot" she ordered him and her teeth begun worrying her bottom lip as her thoughts run wild. She was not going to let this one go so easily.

"What?" the crease on his brow deepened.

She looked at him for a second and then walked decisively up to him. She took firm hold of his shoulders and taking advantage of his momentary shock she tilted her head a little and planted a soft kiss on his lips. It was meant to be a motivation to get him to move, but when she felt the softness of his lips once more she sighed in satisfaction and pecked him softly. Her hand cupped his rough cheek and caressed his jawline, wanting to enjoy him a lot more. The moment he begun retaliating the kiss and attempting to wrap his arms around her, she grabbed his hands and pushed him away.

He frowned deeply and the confusion became more prominent in his eyes "We have time for that…now will you dress, or am I going to dress you?" she said and looked towards his bedroom "I suppose that's where you are keeping your clothes, right?" she made an attempt to go there but he pulled her back.

"Give me a moment, crazy woman" he offered her a lopsided smile that made her twitch with the need to kiss those lips again and walked to his bedroom.

Soon enough she was running through the corridors of Hogwarts with his hand tightly clasped in hers. Not wanting to tell him anything until they reached the gates. They dodged several students and a few of the staff with the final one being a slightly tipsy Hagrid that was talking to Fang as he was taking the last round on the grounds. She managed to slip him out of the gates before Hagrid arrived and locked them.

Severus remained shocked into silence as she pulled him behind her cloaked car. She kneeled and made him kneel next to her until Hagrid left them and everything around them fell quiet. He looked at her buried under her grey beanie and wrapped with her orange Gryffindor scarf and all he wanted was to kiss her. She pulled his hand and took him out of his reverie.
"Come on" she urged him on and uncloaked the car. She fished for the car keys and thankful that she found them easily she unlocked the door and got quickly in. He remained standing in front of his own door "Come on" she hissed and waved her hand at him urgently.

He lowered himself at her window "What are you doing?" he asked truly unable to figure her out.

She fired up the engine and it's sound was too loud for the serene surroundings. She lowered her window and smirked at him "I am taking you to see the mountains. You don't have to use any magic…and it's me breaking the law. They won't go after you".

The shock he felt at that was clearly visible in his features. His mouth dropped open and his heart contracted vividly. He was unable to speak.

"Are you going to come in, or are they going to get us before we manage to pass Hogsmeade?" she asked and drummed her fingers on the passenger sit.

He looked at her unable to believe that she was willing to risk so much for him. He swallowed and looked at the road in front of them. The decision was fairly easy to make and her spontaneity rubbed off on him, quickly raising his spirits. He didn't have to think too long…even though she was the one driving the car the only one that would get caught and punished from this, would be him. He didn't intend to tell her that, mainly because for the first time in many years he wanted to let himself free to enjoy one beautiful moment.

To hell with everything…you can go see the mountains….his mind enticed him, but his soul was already up there.

He opened up the passenger door and got in. She looked at him and fired up the heater in order to warm them up and turned on the headlights "Are you ready to see those mountains?" she asked with the most tender smile he had ever seen.

He nodded with a huff "Do it" he whispered and she pressed on the gas pedal. Making the tires spin upon muddy snow for a few seconds before the car shot quickly down the road.

He silently observed her driving for a couple of miles after Hogsmeade. She was admittedly a very good and steady driver even in the difficult conditions of heavy snowfall. He tried to forget all those times he had ridden a car with his father and mother amidst fighting or physical abuse and tried to enjoy this unique moment between him, this beautiful woman and nature all around them. She drove a while longer in comfortable silence, offering him fleeting looks every now and again. Mostly to make sure he hadn't regretted their law breaking trek.

On the other hand he had a permanent smile printed on his lips, his eyes not wanting to miss anything around him. He hadn't been in these roads for more than four years and an overwhelming feeling of freedom captured him. It was the first time after a very long time the he wanted to laugh out loud. Get out of the car, open up his arms and laugh and breathe in deeply the frozen mountain air and yell a monumental "Fuck off" at Hogwarts.

His thoughts were broken off as she pulled at the side of the road and softly hit on the breaks. They came to a stop and he turned to her searchingly. She pulled the handbrake and put the gear to neutral, but let the engine run on idle.

"What are you doing?" he asked confused.

"You seem too big for this small car" she smiled sweetly at him and her hand cleared some hair from his temple.
He took hold of that stray hand and planted a soft kiss on her palm "I feel fine" he assured her.

She pulled her hand and opened her door. To his never ending surprise she came around the passenger sit and knocked on his window. He opened his door "come out" she said.

"What for?" he asked.

"You are driving the rest of the way" she smirked at him and raised her brow in provocation.

"What?" he couldn't help but feel his heart rejoicing at the possibility of driving again after so long.

"Don't you want to?" she flicked her shoulders.

He quickly got out of the passenger seat and kept the door open for her until she went in. Then he closed it and went to take his place on the driver's seat. He met her eyes steadily.

"How long since you've last driven?" she inquired and put her seatbelt on.

He smirked at the insinuation and bit his lower lip "Too long, buckle up" he whispered and before she had the time to respond he pressed his foot on the gas pedal and the car drifted quickly on the road making her squeal.

He drove rapidly, but with an expertise that took Hermione by surprise through the slithering roads that led up to the mountains. At first she was hanging off the handle above her window, her ass half off the seat and her foot pressing down on imaginary breaks every now and again in a desperate need to control the car instead of him. But as he manipulated the car perfectly through the storm and between the narrow roads she understood that she had to do with a very good driver here, and not a man that had minimum contacts with this muggle machine. Something that she should have understood immediately after he managed to fix it so easily. She slowly relaxed and soon enough her hand reached out and wrapped around his. He looked at her calmly and then his fingers slipped between hers and pressed her tightly. She drew his hand on her lap and cupped it with her other hand. Wanting to have a part of him pressed closely on her. To her ultimate surprise he didn't remove his hand to change gears. Instead he used his wheel hand to do both chores with an easiness that made her smile appreciatively.

They reached a clearing upon the mountains that Severus knew from his days with Voldemort and he parked close to the edge, where they had a clear view of the valley, the river and Hogwarts. He drew the hand brake and killed the engine, never removing his hand from Hermione's lap. He looked around him at the beauty of nature and sighed deeply. He hadn't been up here for so many years that he needed to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. She didn't disturb the silence around them. Respecting his emotions…this trek was done for him solely….she simply wanted to be his company even if they didn't speak at all.

She observed his calm face and tried to read something in his expression, but she was unable to. Her hand caressed the back of his hand and he pressed her to make her understand that he was still there, body and mind. After a while he finally decided to speak as quietly as possible. He didn't want to disturb the heavy silence around them"I used to come here frequently when I was working as a spy"

She turned to him "Apparated up here?"

"Flew" he smirked and his forefinger caressed her skin.

"Broom?" her teeth sparkled as she smiled widely.

"Just me and the sky…never with a broom" he shook his head and his eyes rolled easily upon the
hills below them.

She nodded "I don't know which ability of yours I find more impressive…"

He looked at her fleetingly.

"That you can fly like a bird or that you can drive like a professional?" her teeth worried her bottom lip and his heart mellowed.

He snorted "I child sat a whole day and I didn't collapse. That's my most impressive ability"

She snickered and pressed his hand with a thoughtful nod "Did this place calm you down during those times?" she decided to turn this to the serious tone he had set a few minutes ago.

"Hmmm…" he nodded skeptically "It was the only place I felt free from all my obligations"

She sighed deeply "Your freedom means so much to you…"

"I was never free" he whispered quietly.

She swallowed and her eyes passed from the amazing view in front of them.

"Did they give you a hard time when you used magic to save my life yesterday?" she asked quietly.

He flicked his shoulders "They are afraid of me…so yes"

"Afraid?" she frowned.

"You are not the only one who thinks I might be carrying an Obscurus inside me" he explained as if this was nothing to him.

She frowned "That's the reason that they're making your life a misery?"

He shivered "More or less. They think I might be a liability"

"And that's why they are keeping you in probation?" her voice now sounded more angry.

"No, I gave them more valid reasons, than a parasitical sickness, to keep me imprisoned Hermione…" his own whisper became heavier. More solid.

She looked at him searchingly.

"I worked for Voldemort" he shook his head not understanding why she needed that one spelled out to her.

"And for Albus…" she rebuked him.

"The good that men do is oft interred with their bones. The evil that men do lives after them" he rejoined.

She bit her lips, trying to remember where she had heard it before.

"Muggle literature, Shakespeare, Julius Caesar" he helped her out.

She smirked "Indeed…" and then her smirk got erased and sadness covered her eyes "So now I feel proud and happy that I made you break their rules. They are unfair" her voice was no nonsense.
"The forever just Granger" he pressed her hand and then drew his free to her regret. He opened up the door and got out. Leaving her to muse after his imposing figure as he walked and sat at the hood of the car. The snow covering his head, and turning his silver-black hair slowly to white.

She got out and was immediately attacked by the piercing cold. She wrapped her coat close around her body, grateful that he agreed to pass from her apartments so she could take it. She pulled the lapels up and buried her chin and nose in her scarf "The view is breathtaking". She came close to him but didn't want to bother his musings. He seemed much less affected by the cold than her.

"You risked a lot by bringing me here tonight" he gazed at her tensely then. Taking her by surprise with his seriousness.

She flicked her shoulders "You're worth it". When she said those words she felt her eyes watering and she averted them from his stare quickly.

His long arm wrapped around her shoulder and drew her upon him sturdily. She pushed his legs open rudely and stuck her body on his, demanding his solid presence to warm her. Her hands grabbed his back tightly and she buried her head on his chest feeling complete.

"Thank you for what you did" he whispered and she felt his breath on her hair. It send shivers down her spine. She was barely feeling the cold there in his arms.

"Believe me, it was my pleasure" she caressed his back reassuringly.

His fingers found her chin and he lifted her face up to him. Before she had the time to open her eyes his lips touched hers one time gently. As if asking for permission. Her lips opened a little and her fingers tightened on his back "Yes" she exhaled on his mouth. Wanting him to understand how much she wanted this. In answer to her request his mouth opened up and his tongue trailed along her lips. Immediately her tongue twirled around his and quickly their mouths sealed. They both exhaled and pressed tightly against each other, getting immersed in the sensations of the moment. Kissing deeply and with passion. Searching, tasting and feeling each other. Not caring about their past, nor about their names or their ages. Not even caring about tomorrow. Only caring about the invigorating blast of heat that swept them both into a private world of beautiful sensations. His fingers brushed the side of her neck sending shivers down her spine and got entwined in her hair softly as his mouth explored hers deeply. When his other hand traced her side and landed on her upper hip she gasped gently without breaking their kiss. Emboldened by her reaction his hand took hold of her hip and pulled her on him. The passionate demand of that action melted her core and she sighed, positively enthralled that he was unfolding his needs to her. One of her hands grabbed his shoulder blade forcibly enough to bruise him and her other cupped his nape securing him on her. As his tongue danced around hers and his teeth bit on her lower lip sensually, her mind begun fogging up. She embraced the easiness with which his kiss had woken up every single cell in her body and wanted to see more from him. This kiss under the snow with the view of Hogwarts in the distance had nothing to do with the questioning touch of that morning. This kiss…this kiss was breathtaking, passionate and domineering. In a manner that made her melt against him and showed her clearly that he wanted more. Something that she wanted also and she made sure to let him know by pressing her hips on him. He exhaled in her mouth and she felt his lips upturning in a smile. His hand massaged her hip and lower waist as they kissed for a long time, not caring about the cold.

After a little while, he was the first one to draw back and he pressed his forehead on hers. He bit his lower lip and looked at her lips. They were red and puffed up from his ministrations "You are so beautiful" he whispered and pecked her lips softly.

She was slightly breathless and felt her cheeks and body on fire. Her fingers got buried under his hair and she caressed him gently. She opened her mouth to speak, but she had no words good enough to
describe her feelings that moment. She opted on showing him by giving him soft brief kisses and running her hand along his side and down his back. After a few more moments they both settled and he pushed her softly "Come, let's get in the car before you catch your death"

She snickered and pulled back from his arms with deep regret. She wouldn't have minded to stay out there getting beaten by a bloody blizzard if that meant that she could be in his arms again. When they both got in she was quick to reveal her needs to him "I want a hug" she muttered.

He reached out and pulled her on his lap. She hesitated for a moment but then sat on him sideways with both her legs resting on the passenger sit. Her head rested on the crook of his neck and her arms wrapped around his shoulders. She pressed her body on him and sighed contently "Who taught you how to drive? You are brilliant"

"I suppose partly, my father" he tensed and she felt it since her body was stuck on him like a barnacle.

"Through abuse?" she attempted quietly and her forefinger begun creating small circles upon his turtleneck near his collarbone.

He shook his head calmly "No, the abuse was to make me learn how to fix it, but the driving part was mostly my own doing. I loved it. He just showed me a couple of basic things at the start"

"I am sorry you had to go through all that…" she reached out and gave a soft kiss on his collarbone and her body immediately tensed just because her breasts were pressed upon his chest. He was not touching indecently to cause any excitement. It simply abounded at the pit of her stomach almost constantly since his kiss. Something that was coming in contrast to their quiet talk at that moment. Trying to simply listen to what he had to say to her.

He rubbed his palm on the middle of her back and send a small creek of warmth to trickle down her spine towards her waist "I used to sneak out and steal the car from right under his nose. I went for long drives…they used to calm me down"

"Didn't they ever catch you?"

"He was too wasted to notice….My mother caught me a couple of times, but I suppose she understood the reasons behind my constant need to flee. She needed to flee also"

"The police?"

"On two occasions. I was charged with misdemeanour. My mother paid for the fees, but I worked during the summer to make up for the lost money" He looked at her briefly. She was devouring him with her eyes "Everything has it's price" he added thoughtfully.

"Never would have thought you a delinquent. You are so much the calm, quiet, bookish type. Like me" she smiled sweetly.

"I was the bookish type, just not so calm and quiet. That came later on with age" he smirked and his thumb caressed her jawline near the lobe of her ear. She closed her eyes enjoying his gentle touch.

"Was your father drinking?"

"Constantly" he tightened his arms around her for a brief moment and she retaliated enjoying the feel of the taunt muscles of his back and upper arms.
"So at the end of the day, you taught yourself how to drive this skilfully…" she buried her nose on the fabric of his turtleneck and inhaled his spice, identifying again the smell of the forest after the rain…underlined with a musky undertone. His scent was doing funny things to her.

"For the most part. I had some friends at the neighbourhood back then, and we all sneaked out together to go for a drive. We taught each other by looking at muggle car races on the TV"

"Off road rally?" she smirked, half hidden on his chest.

"Surprised me with this deduction"

"I saw how you drove through the mountain roads. That was off road style"

He nodded "Then surprised you even know what that is..."

"I like races too…don't act so superior just because you are a man" she admonished

"Indeed I should not, for you drive very well"

She paused and snuggle on him again "Coming from you, that's a great compliment"

"Don't suck up" he pressed her playfully.

She paused and enjoyed his warm touch for several more moment before deciding to speak again  "Where all your friends muggle?"

"Yes"

"Do you still have them?"

"No…"

"Because you came to work in Hogwarts at such a young age? What were you back then…twenty three?"

"Twenty one, just fresh from school…no it was not that. I…decided to blame all muggles for the attitude of my muggle father at some point Hermione" he said, briefly pausing through some words. It was obvious that it was difficult for him to speak about that.

"Did your parents die?" she asked quietly and her finger begun circling his collarbone again. Trying to offer him some tenderness.

He sighed deeply "No…at least I don't think so…” he let the sentence unfinished.

She remained silent for the longest of times. Waiting for him to pick it up again if he felt the ease.

He did "When I was about sixteen, I returned home for vacation at Christmas and found it empty. They had taken all their stuff, minus my things, the kitchen appliances and the books in the living room. Never saw them again…"

She tensed and her breath hitched "I am so sorry" she kissed his collarbone and pressed her forehead under his neck.

"You shouldn't be. They did me a favour….what I am uncertain off is the fate of my mother. She was just an abused woman trying to find a way to escape. As for my father…I couldn't care less….I hope he is dead"
She sighed disturbed by his confessions "You are parentless, like me"

"Yes, I suppose we both chose to be without families, although I will never agree with your reasons…"

She tensed, but he hurried through that "But I will always respect them"

She deflated and smiled sweetly "Thank you…who knows…one day I might feel safe enough from the darkness of our world to return their memories to them…"

He nodded "You should…there is no danger now"

"I live for the day that I can press them in my arms…"

"You are punishing yourself…"

She tightened unexpectedly "Maybe I am…"

"Well, stop doing that my beautiful witch" he kissed her cheek and his face got buried at the crook of her neck. Making a jolt of electricity pass all through her spine.

She smiled and drew his head upon her. Making him press his lips upon her skin. He gave her a couple of innocuous kisses that caused ripples of shivers to run all over her body and then he drew her upon him one more time "Thank you for confessing to me"

He nodded "Thank you for bringing me out here"

She nuzzled near his neck and kissed the fabric of his turtleneck again "You should wear something less confining next time" she tugged it playfully.

"Yes, you need to keep company with Charity"

"She's told you too?"

He nodded.

"Well, I dare assume my reasons are more physically driven than hers" she attempted.

He snorted and tightened his arms around her. She laughed lightly and then closed her eyes. For a long time they remained like that enjoying the serenity of the mountains. She was the first one to talk as an idea popped into her head.

"Would you like to come with me when I take Teddy back to Andromeda? I leave in two weeks, when the Christmas vacation starts officially"

He gazed at her calmly "I cannot leave. I am under probation remember?"

She pressed her lips trying not to feel too disappointed "It's a pity. I would have loved your company. We could share on the driving"

He nodded and sighed "Lovely thought. I am sorry I cannot come"

"It's ok, but let's imagine you free. Would you have come with us?" she asked and tightened her arms around him.

He smirked "I certainly would"
She sighed and nuzzled near his neck "Good". A soft shudder run down her spine when she imagined them sharing a bed in some sleazy motel after they had dropped Teddy off. He misunderstood the reaction of her body.

"Are you cold?" he asked. He had fired up the engine the moment they went in and the car was very warm. Add his embrace to that and Hermione felt boiling hot.

She shook her head "No…are we leaving?" she murmured, not really wanting to get off his lap. She didn't want to return at Hogwarts right now. She didn't want to break the spell between them.

"Do you want to go?" he whispered and his hand caressed the side of her neck, sending goosebumps down her spine.

She shook her head and planted a kiss on the spot between his neck and shoulder line.

"Then we don't have to go yet" he assured her and his fingers circled around her scar tenderly.

"Thank you" she whispered.

"For what?" his voice was low, barely heard.

"For making me feel so lovely today" she pulled her head on his neck and pressed on him.

He tightened his arms around her "Feeling is mutual" he reassured her.

She nodded and snuggled against him. His arms wrapped protectively around her and his eyes got lost behind the snowfall that had eased up a little, down at the valley and at the dark outline of his prison. Feeling more grateful than he could have ever admitted to Hermione he cradled her tenderly in his arms for a long while. They were both silent, enjoying each other's solid presence. Listening to each other's steady breathing and the idle rolling of the engine. Without even wanting to, Hermione slowly dozed off into a deep sleep and her arms relaxed around him. He understood that she was inside the world of dreams by her breathing and he kept her in the same posture immovable for a long time. Not caring that his arms were going numb. He didn't want to break her repose. She was still recovering from a serious accident that almost cost her life, and instead of taking the time offered to rest, she had used it to give him a present.

A small taste of freedom….

The best present he had ever got in his life…and he cradled her like that almost till the early hours of the morning, letting the gas of the car burn to keep them warm and enjoying her weight on his body. Loving the fact that she was sleeping so unbothered. Avoiding the fact that he had to return at Hogwarts and face a probably severe penalty for taking this trip with her. At some point he dozed off also and the last thing he saw was a full moon coming out behind some clouds that opened up above the castle. It's eerie light covered the land with a magical silvery glow and he got lost inside a world of dreams also.
Unwelcoming Committee

Severus's hands tightened around the steering wheel and the leather of his gloves made a noise that was too loud for the silence inside the car. His jawline tightened and he bit back the sudden adrenaline rush that came over him when he parked outside the gates. It was not as if he hadn't been expecting a comeuppance for breaking his probation. He shouldn't have been so surprised when he saw a group of people walking quietly towards the car. What he found unexpected was that they didn't chase him up in the mountains, but waited for him at Hogwarts. His eyes fell on Minerva… that was probably her doing…

She was wearing a black heavy cloak and her trademark hat. Her arms were crossed and her face was set in hard determination. Hagrid and Charity were escorting her, which was expected as they were the closest people to him inside this prison. His eyes turned boringly at Borovic, a heavily build Auror who had been placed as his warden at the beginning of his probation. Assigned to him by the Prime Minister himself in order to keep him in line. One of the most violent and unstable Aurors under the Ministry's command. He had a rookie next to him, probably dedicated to do his every bidding.

They stopped at a respectful distance from the car and waited for him to get out. He swallowed and turned towards the passenger seat, which he had reclined so she could sleep properly. He looked at her closed eyes and his gaze rolled down towards her neck where a vein was pumping blood steadily. He had to wake her up to his great regret. He rested his body on his elbow next to her shoulder and run his free hand at the side of her temple gently. She stirred. He leaned over and gave her a butterfly kiss.

"Mmmm" she mumbled and smiled under his lips.

A soft smile brightened his eyes and he slid his mouth towards her neck where he planted another careful kiss. Her hand run up his arm and took hold of his shoulder "Wake up" he whispered near her ear.

"Mmmm….what time is it?" she asked sleepily.

"Time for me to go" he whispered and kissed her cheek gently.

"What? Why?" she opened up her eyes quickly. Confusion was evident upon her freshly awoken features.

"I have a welcoming committee waiting for me" he explained. His finger caressed her nose and then slid across her cheek. How he loved the softness and the warmth of her skin.

"Committee?" she frowned.

He pushed himself up and pulled her with him "I really need to go" he whispered and turned to his window. All of them immovable, as if they had just walked out of a painting.

Hermione peeked from behind him and suddenly her hand tightened upon his shoulder "What are all these people doing here Severus?"

He opened the door without answering and slid out before she had the chance to stop him. Her hand fell at his empty seat and she looked up suddenly very apprehensive as the wind blew his hair away from his face. He buttoned up his tweed coat and walked calmly towards Minerva.
She took a step towards him steadily "I couldn't stop them Severus, I managed to persuade them not to come after you at the mountain. I knew you would return…but the Aurors…"

Borovic's piercing stare caught Severus, but he rebuked the threatening look calmly "Enough Headmistress, this is now out of your Jurisdiction. He belongs to the Ministry. Mister Cross, the handcuffs please" he raised his wand towards Severus.

The rookie approached him with a warning gaze that didn't take any bullshit and pulled his hands behind his back violently. Severus jerked and pressed his lips as he felt the magical handcuffs running around his wrists.

"Wait a minute! What is going on here!?" Hermione opened her door and run towards them "Are they arresting him?"

"Apparently" Borovic smirked dryly at her.

"What the hell for?" she met his stare angrily.

Borovic turned to her, but kept his already drawn wand towards Severus who was looking at him with eyes that emitted the very fires of hell "He broke his probation Madame and he is getting arrested"

"No, you don't understand" she cried and raised her hands "This man didn't leave the grounds alone. I was the one that broke the law. I took him at the mountains!"

"You are not under probation Madame. You are free to go where you want, he is not" Borovic raised his brow coldly.

"Yes, but I persuaded him to do so! I instigated his escape!" she cried.

"Hermione!" Severus bit angrily and made a move towards her in order to stop her, but the rookie pulled him back violently. His hair covered his face and he turned his head to Borovic "She had nothing to do with it" he hissed.

"How touching…" Borovic's smile was void of emotion "…nevertheless I couldn't care less about you lady. I am after one of the Ministry's prisoners. Take him away Mister Cross, and if he attempts anything don't hesitate to curse him to submission! Never forget, he is a Death Eater".

"If you misuse this gross appellation again or mishandle him in anyway I will take this far above the Minister!" Minerva warned and made a move towards Borovic.

He raised his wand to her "Cool your horses Headmistress. You are out of your league here"

Hagrid placed his large hand on Minerva's shoulder to hold her "I am escorting this prisoner as my right. I am his employer and his keeper. I will not let him come alone to the inquisitor!"

Borovic pressed his lips dryly "It's within your rights, but don't attempt anything. Assisting the escape of a convict will land you in Azkaban, but I will make sure you suffer before you even reach that place" he said calmly.

"Don't yeh dare talk ter her like thar!" Hagrid made a move towards him.

Minerva pushed him back "His empty threats don't faze me Hagrid"

"Keep the half giant in check Headmistress. I think we had an agreement. I trusted you and waited
for the return of the convict, but leaving him here was not part of that deal. He will be taken to the
Ministry and you will all abide by the law or face the consequences!” Borovic said almost in pleasure
and looked at Severus to see the effect of his words.

Charity wrapped her arm around Hermione's waist as she was watching the word exchange frozen.
That movement animated her. She tore herself away from Charity and run to Severus. She fell on
him demandingly, wrapped both hands under his hair and crushed her lips on his. Wanting to declare
to all of them that this man was hers and that she was going to do anything in her power to help him.
He was getting punished for something he didn't do. When she told him yesterday that she was going
to take the blame he didn't say anything. She took his silence for an agreement…yet that was never it…

Was it?

Her lips opened up and pressed his with a fervour and a demand that was hard to control. Her breath
came out trembling and her nails dug on the skin of his neck "You knew?” she whispered on him.

He nodded as his lips dragged intensely at hers. He squeezed his eyes tight.

"Why didn't you tell me?!” she frowned at him and her fingers pulled him back. She wanted to see
his face desperately.

"Because I wanted to come with you…" he exhaled and opened his eyes. They were wet, but a soft
smile appeared on his lips.

Her eyes watered and her chest welled with unforeseen emotion. The rookie jerked Severus away
from her and her breath hitched painfully "No" she muttered.

He crashed with his back on the rookie that turned him around and pushed him forth aggressively.
Feeling the last traces of happiness leaving him, he raised his eyes and tried to find Charity. She was
looking at him with a desolation that stung. His eyes pleaded her wordlessly and Charity immediately
understood. She run up to Hermione and caught her by the waist again before the young witch could
make another attempt to run towards him.

"Very touching indeed….for a murderer” Borovic whispered and pointed his formidable wand
playfully at Severus.

"Leave me, I have to help him!” Hermione tried to push her away.

"This is not the way to do it. The Aurors will take him at the Ministry and we don't have the legal
right to stop them. Let Minerva handle this and settle down, or you might make things worst for him”
Charity said near her ear.

Severus felt the rookie's hand bruising his bicep with his tight grip and tugged himself free with an
unexpected force that threw the rookie on the ground. Borovic tensed and tightened his grip on the
wand "Now now, behave Snape…I got my wand on you”

"Tell your lackey to ease his grip on me, before I break off his arm” Severus's angry whisper was
hair raising.

"You are in no position to threaten anyone” Borovic revealed his teeth with obvious hatred.

"The prisoner is coming willingly with you, he didn't resist arrest. If Mister whatever his name is,
causes even one bruise at my Professor, I am going to make sure he loses his job” Minerva
intervened coldly. She came and stood next to Severus. Her eyes met Borovic steadily and she thrust
her chin up.

Borovic observed her calculatively for a couple of seconds and then turned to his assistant "On your feet Mister Cross. Escort the prisoner please"

The rookie stood up and spat away. He cleaned the snow from his clothes and approached Severus with a raised hand. Severus's hair covered his face, but his fire spewing eyes gave the rookie a pause. He swallowed in obvious hesitation and took hold of the magical bounds on Snape's hands instead. Trying to avoid touching him for good measure.

"Satisfied? Is your Professor is well handled now?" Borovic asked dryly.

She tilted her head slightly.

"Are you coming?" Borovic begun moving to a portal that appeared a few feet away.

"Tell Filius to take over the school whilst I am away" Minerva turned to Hagrid.

"Aye, everythin' is goin' be ok Professur! We are all with yeh!" the half giant said and raised his hand to wave at Severus.

Severus lowered his eyes and felt the rookie pushing him steadily. He raised his eyes to the portal that opened up before him. He had faced the hell of the Ministry before…the arrays of accusations, the mishandling …he was going to do it again with dignity. He heard the fast footsteps of Minerva coming up next to him and he felt the heavy presence of the violent Auror behind him.

"Are you alright?" the old witch asked in a low tone as they approached the portal.

His adam's apple moved and he turned his steady gaze at her silently. He hoped that was enough of an answer for her. His eyes looked at the portal and the last thing that passed from his mind as he stepped into it was the precious feeling of freedom he had felt with Hermione in his arms last night. That alone was worth all the humiliation that he was going to go through.

**** ..... ****

"Let me go" Hermione muttered and pulled herself away from Charity's grip. The portal closed behind them and she remained looking at it like a statue. Her eyes were streaming with tears and her heart was throbbing in pain.

What have I done to him…?

"Mione, I think yeh should come down ter me house for a cup of hot tea…" Hagrid said with his calm deep voice.

She shook her head "I don't want any tea"

"Come on dearest…there is nothing we can do now. Trust Minerva…she knows what to do" Charity's hand landed on her back and rubbed her.

She turned and gazed at them "What have I done to him…" she whispered and more tears run down her cheeks.

"Nothing, you did nothing to him…come please. Let's follow Hagrid's advice and get some tea. This morning has been heavy on all of us" Charity reasoned.

"I want to go at the Ministry and talk to Harry. He is that asshole's boss…he can put him in order"
Hermione wiped her tears away angrily and set her feet at the ground decisively.

"Borovic was not acting out of jurisdiction...Harry cannot do anything to him. You will only make Sev's position worst. Listen to me please" Charity turned her around "Minerva knows what she is doing. Everything is going to be alright. They are going to return by evening the most. Ok?"

Hermione nodded half heartedly. She needed desperately someone to convince her that everything was going to be ok.

"Ok, how about that cup of tea then?" Charity smiled uncomfortably.

Hermione nodded one more time and as Hagrid and Charity led her to his house, her tears began running again uncontrollably. She couldn't understand how she went from being on top of the world, possibly literally, to being so scared about Severus's life. Their small escapade was not supposed to end up like this. She had imagined it ending in various ways after they got into the car and she snuggled in his arms...maybe in a dark corridor upon arrival...those were her last thoughts before falling asleep. So how the hell did the world turn upside down? How did he end up getting arrested and she was miserably mopping her way into Hagrid's hut for a cup of pathetic tea, unable to do anything to help him?

As she entered Hagrid's cabin the overwhelming smell of meat and burning wood attacked her senses. She moved towards the couch that Severus had occupied the night she had seen him for the first time with the half giant.

She sat down heavily and covered her face with her gloved hands. His musky spice was trapped in the cloth of her gloves and entered her mind, taking her back to their beautiful night together. Her heart gripped painfully and she gritted her teeth angrily. If she had known...if only he had told her the dangers of such an escapade, she would have never taken him for a ride.

that's why he didn't do it...her mind reasoned and she felt her eyes tearing up again. He chose to take this small trip with her, following her stupid whim, without caring about the consequences. She supposed she shouldn't have been so surprised at his nerve. The life he had led up till then required a good measure of nerve and boldness. Apparently the fact that he was suppressing his magic didn't also mean that he had lost those qualities of his personality.

"I need to know how he is" she whispered and looked around her nervously.

"I can attest that right now, he is pissed off as hell" Charity turned around from the fireplace. She had just placed a small cauldron there to boil some water.

"He has every righ' ter be so!" Hagrid spat and for the first time Hermione noticed that the half giant was very emotional and rather angry.

"I know" Charity agreed.

Hermione observed his two friends. Both of them trying to accept this situation according to their own dispositions. Charity was trying to serve some tea and Hagrid took out some dry meat that was hanging from a hook near the window and slapped it upon the table. He began banging it mercilessly with his fist. His eyes contorted in anger and his mouth a thin line of disapproval.

"I swear, if you give me a headache I am going to curse you bald" Charity bit back at Hagrid as she took out three wooden cups and emptied some tepid water in them.

"I can' stop it. Takin' him off like tha'. Like he's some kind of criminal" Hagrid continued pounding
the meet.

Hermione sniffled "Hagrid, stop it please" she muttered. Somehow her low voice was heard over the pounding.

He stopped and looked at her sadly "I am sorry Mione. I was tryin' ter soften this meat fer Fang"

She nodded and wiped her cheeks clean with the back of her hand "Not about the meat" she said softly.

Hagrid deflated and he threw it at Fang who run up to him immediately. He sat down heavily and the cabin shifted under him. He nodded without words.

"Girl is right, you are not making things better by acting like an overgrown baby" Charity chastised him and placed his cup of tea in front of him.

Hagrid rested his head on his palm and remained silent.

"Here you go my lovely" Charity smiled at her.

Hermione took it with a thankful smile.

Charity went over and took her own cup. They all drunk some tea and after a brief silent repose it was Charity that spoke again "Well, aren't we a happy party?"

Hagrid glared at her sideways "Don' expect me ter be happy today"

Hermione sighed. Charity looked at her "You won't be a happy camper either….right?"

She shook her head "I am sorry, I cannot…."

Charity nodded "Don't worry darling, if there is someone excused to be downright miserable, then that's you"

Hermione looked up to her guiltily. She felt warmth spreading on her cheeks upon remembering how desperately she had kissed Snape in front of all of them. Now they knew…everyone knew. She coughed to clear her throat "I think I must clear up what happened back there, before questions begin arising" she tried.

"I think it is pretty obvious what happened" Charity smirked and raised her brow.

Hagrid gazed at Hermione and huffed dejected.

Hermione felt suddenly on the defensive "I mean that I don't want any of you, to come questioning either me or him about what you saw". Her voice was austere.

"What's going on between you two, is none of our business. Don't worry" Charity waved her off and drunk some tea calmly.

Hermione looked at her searchingly for a brief moment and then sighed "Even though questions might arise from people that know us and those questions might be up to a point excused…I still wish for all to respect our privacy"

"We will Mione" Hagrid looked at her and offered her an assuring smile.

Charity gazed at her above the rim of her cup and smiled knowingly but didn't say anything.
Hermione closed her eyes and pressed her lips. She felt her body deflating with the need to excuse both herself and Severus especially in front of Hagrid, who knew her since childhood "I mean I know it might all seem strange…unexpected…unbelievable…but these things are …you know" she couldn't pick out the proper words to make them understand.

"Unexpected as you said…these things don't follow the rules sometimes….that's why they become unexpected. I suppose that's their beauty" Charity smiled.

"I know, right?" Hermione looked up quickly and felt her heart pinching her.

"They come out of nowhere and they grab a tight hold on you…making your head spin and your stomach fill with butterflies…" Charity continued.

Hermione smiled sweetly and sighed "Thank you… I needed this" she whispered.

Charity waved her off "Don't worry, I can understand you pretty well. You see you are not the only one having a crush on Sev…I am glad in your case he wasn't totally blind though, as per usual"

Hermione's smile melted into a confused frown "You sound as if you speak from experience"

Hagrid looked up quickly at that "What?"

Charity didn't seem fazed at all "Indeed I do" she smiled smugly.

"You have a crush on him? I am so sorry!" Hermione's face fell in shock and the need to draw back this conversation was only too strong, but it was too late to rewind and delete.

Charity laughed out loud and shook her head vigorously "Had a crush…many many years ago. Actually before the last war"

"And?" Hermione didn't want to sound like a nosy low life. The need to rewind and delete got scratched out when Charity revealed that her crush had taken place when Hermione was a child. Now she wanted to know everything that Charity was willing to share about Snape's past.

Charity flicked her shoulders "Nothing, he was working in espionage, always up to his neck in trouble and I was invisible to him. As colleagues we became friends, but never more than that. He never understood anything back then"

Hagrid begun laughing then. His belly shaking with his mirth "I bet his jaw'll drop ter the floor if he ever found out".

"I told him at some point, when I felt my feelings empty enough to be safe. There was no need to hide the past. Whatever happened was long gone" Charity waved him off with an appreciative smile on her lips.

"And?" Hermione felt that this was the only word she could say.

"And what? He accepted the revelation with his usual level headedness and told me that I had been infatuated by the mystery that surrounded him during those dark times. Flattened the whole thing down with his logic…didn't seem surprised at all. Usual Severus really"

Hermione's eyes turned sad "Did you feel bad?"

"Now, no of course not. It was a confession of a ten year old dead feeling. I spoke with the security that this meant nothing to me anymore. Not very brave if you ask me" Charity flicked her shoulders.
"Back then?" Hermione asked.

Charity raised her brow "Well….

Hermione raised her hand and stopped her "You don't need to answer…"

"I think most people know how it's like to be rejected…even worst to be ignored" Charity head tilted thoughtfully at the side.

Hermione's lips twisted and she nodded "Oh, yes". She remembered how many times Ron had rejected her…no strike that..how many times Ron ignored her existence as a girl and how bad she had felt. It didn't matter that they got together later down the road and then split up. Those feelings of rejection were still vivid. She sighed deeply and smiled at Charity "Thank you for confessing to us"

Charity raised her cup to her "Just trying to make you feel better darling…let you know that it's ok. We are all boiling in the same emotional cauldron….whether that is Hagrid the half giant, an old espionage master, a young Potion's Mistress, the students of Hogwarts or me….those things are common to all of us. I dare imagine Albus and Minerva have common stories to share too."

Hermione nodded with a knowing smile "Did you get your happy ever after with someone else?" she asked after a few moments.

Charity shook her head "No darling. Not every story has a nice ending"

Hermione's lips turned down and she looked at her tea. A shiver run down her back and her heart sank. No, not all romantic stories got a happy ending and she didn't want to jump to the end of their story, because she was afraid of what she would get to see there.

"Mine didn'….either" Hagrid rested his chin thoughtfully on the palm of his hand.

"You mean Madame Maxime?" Charity's eyes turned to him calmly.

Hermione picked up her cup and moved to the table. She wanted to be closer to them. Felt much warmer, a bit calmer and very interested in how this conversation was evolving. She took a sit and Charity winked at her.

"Aye, Olympe …remember?" Hagrid smiled wistfully.

"Who could ever forget her" Charity raised her brow and drunk some tea.

"Whatever happened with you two?" Hermione was unable not to ask. She rubbed her hands and then wrapped her arms around her stomach protectively.

"Olympe never accepted tha' I called her a Half Giantess" Hagrid lowered his eyes and nodded thoughtfully towards his cup.

Hermione tilted her head sideways confused "I remember Harry telling me that she didn't want to admit it. Always said that she was big boned"

"Big boned me arse!" Hagrid rumbled and crashed his hand at the table. The cups jumped and Hermione caught hers just in time before it spilled all over her woollen dress "She was a Half Giantess alrigh', she was just te proud ter admit it"

"I am sorry Hagrid" Hermione said with a regretful smile.

"I just though' tha' was me last chance in love, yeh know?" Hagrid said and wiped his eyes quickly.
He sighed audibly and then stood up and acted occupied by serving them some biscuits.

"Love isn't everything in life" Charity looked at his back solemnly and for the first time Hermione saw a darkness passing from the eyes of the usually pleasant witch. Maybe her own experience with Snape had cost her much more than she was willing to admit. Something that Hermione didn't feel like tampering with more deeply. It felt inappropriate, especially now that she was involved with Snape herself.

"Of course it ain't! I got me dragons and me cabin. I have a happy life 'ere" Hagrid smiled sadly and placed the biscuit tray in the middle of the table.

Hermione felt the need to ask their forgiveness. She felt that she was the one that turned what was supposed to be a pick me up mood, to something rather heavy. She cleared her throat and they both looked at her "I …guys I am sorry. I don't think I am the best company for tea this morning. I am ruining the atmosphere" she tried.

"Wha' are yeh talkin' about Mione? The already ruine' one?" Hagrid looked at her with a dismissing frown and sat down heavily. He rested his forehead upon his hand and exhaled deeply.

Charity reached out and offered an open palm to her. Hermione hesitated for a moment but reached out and clasped the older woman's hand. Charity smiled at her sweetly "This wasn't supposed to be a happy tea gathering darling. We came together to comfort each other about what happened today. Just because we are trying to be pleasant doesn't mean we are not worried. It's natural that this company will end up becoming rather grim at first chance"

Hermione nodded and rubbed her forehead "I cannot stop worrying…"

No one spoke, but Charity pressed her hand.

"What do you think will happen to him?" she finally took up the courage to ask the question that was clawing at the walls of her heart painfully since they took him away.

Charity sighed and lowered her eyes at the table. Her finger begun scratching a splinter off the surface and she bit her lower lip. Apparently there was something that she wanted to share with them, but was hesitant.

Hagrid betrayed those worries instead of her "It's Borovic yeh're afraid off, righ'?" he gazed at her searchingly.

Charity looked over at Hermione thoughtfully for a few seconds before nodding and lowering her eyes at the table again.

Hermione drew her hand away from Charity and leaned over at the table "Who's this Borovic anyway?"

Hagrid's wince revealed his teeth. He shook his head and refused to answer to that question.

"Charity?" Hermione asked, sudden apprehension crawling up her spine.

Charity gazed at her briefly and then straightened upon her chair. She cleared her throat and her fingers entwined nervously on the table in front of her "Alexander Borovic, was born in England from a Yugoslavian father and a British mother. Lived here all his life, studied at Hogwarts and later was hired as an Auror. He was outstanding in this job, but always a bit on the rough side. Unfortunately during the last war his wife was murdered by Death Eaters. After that he lost it completely. They say he is mentally unstable, but has Minister Kingsley's support, because of his
stupendous abilities. They just pass him through psychological evaluation every six months…"

"What the hell for?" Hermione's brow was deeply creased.

Charity winced "He has tortured and killed two Death Eaters in Azkaban shortly after the war"

"What?!" Hermione roared and grabbed the table for support. Her heart was thrown in a frozen lake suddenly.

"He blames all Death Eaters for the demise of his wife and people think he has sworn to kill every Death Eater remaining alive today…one way or another" Charity continued.

"And they still employ him as an Auror?!" Hermione's fingers stretched on the wooden surface nervously.

"He's gone through a trial, but was not found guilty. Eventually they blamed those deaths to prison quarrels, but truth is someone was covering up for Borovic. It's just that during those first days after the war such violent acts were partly excused…someone decided that it was ok for Borovic to kill a couple of murderers. Not such a big loss…" Charity shook her head, showing Hermione that she didn't agree with this logic.

"You mean to tell me that this possible psycho has taken Severus under arrest?" Hermione's brow lifted to the top of her head.

Charity pressed her lips "This possible psycho is Sev's permanent warden. He is always on Sev's tail whenever something goes wrong and he will be his jailer if our beloved Librarian ends up in Azkaban"

"What?!" Hermione thundered and stood up quickly. Suddenly this small hut couldn't keep her fear contained inside its thick walls.

"Yes, lovely isn't it?" Charity agreed quite dejected.

"Why the hell did they put this hardcore psycho over Severus? Weren't there any real dangerous Death Eaters in Azkaban that needed such a jailer?" Hermione began pacing up and down the small space. Suddenly her freezing hands had gotten hot and she felt the need to shed off her coat and gloves. Adrenaline was pumping quickly through her.

"Apparently Minister Shacklebolt thinks that Sev is very dangerous and in need of a short iron leash" Charity meant those words sarcastically, but Hermione took them literally.

"You cannot be serious!" she glared angrily at her.

"I am not…" Charity returned the look calmly "the Minister fucked up. Albus and Minerva have been trying to change this deal for years, but Kingsley is unwavering in his decision"

"Why?"

"He believes that Sev is hiding a power of such magnitude that could end up dangerous if released. So he placed the hardest Auror over him"

"You mean this silly case about the Obscurial…” Hermione trailed off.

Charity nodded.

"Harry never told me anything. He respects Snape, he would have never done such a thing to
him…” Hermione begun muttering under her breath.

"I don’ think Harry had a choice in this Mione" Hagrid intervened.

She spun quickly towards him "Of course. The Minister gives all the calls…doesn't matter that Harry is Chief Auror…”

Charity nodded.

"What do you think Borovic will do to Severus today?" Hermione felt the blood draining from her cheeks.

"Nothing, Minerva is with him and they are taking him to a grand inquisitor. Borovic won't act violent in front of witnesses. He usually does these things behind closed walls…in Azkaban, where the screams cannot be heard outside the thick walls and the sounds of the angry sea" Charity looked at Hermione worriedly. She wanted to assure the young witch that everything was going to be ok, even though she was not certain herself.

"That doesn't make me feel much better" Hermione tilted her head and looked dismissively at Charity.

"He won't do anythin' with the Headmistress there" Hagrid nodded "Sit down" he motioned her to the chair.

Hermione paced up and down and drummed her fingers against her temple "I must talk to Harry…”

"You must remain here. You have classes to attend and Teddy also. They will be back by evening the most…this has happened a couple of times before" Charity tried to reassure her.

"It has?" she gazed up, a small spark of hope rekindled in her heart.

"Of course. What? Did you think Sev's been a good boy the last four years?" a slow knowing smile spread on Charity's lips.

Hermione emptied herself on the chair and opened her mouth to say something. Instead a lopsided smile appeared on it.

Charity nodded "He's given Borovic a run for his money. I wouldn't worry about our Librarian so much dearest. Drink your tea and remember my words. They will return at night and Sev will give you a detailed description of how easily he pissed off Alexander once again"

"Dare I believe you?" Hermione gazed at her carefully.

"You should…” Charity smiled.

"I need to…” Hermione admitted and felt her eyes filling with tears. Half of them induced by fear about his safety, the other half by the solace Charity's last words was offering her.

"Come drink, the bells are going to ring soon and classes will commence. Before we head back to the castle you should cloak your car again" Charity raised her cup in salutation.

"Yes of course" she gave soft thoughtful nod. Even though Charity's words had calmed her down a bit, she was not sure she would be able to take over the classes with such ease of mind today.

"Did the car run well Mione?" Hagrid asked after a few silent moments.
"Uhm...yes" she muttered, her mind already running on overdrive with suppositions of what was going on at the Ministry, as they were speaking.

"Sev took the opportunity to drive did he?" Charity chimed in.

"Yes of course" she replied mechanically.

"Wish either of you guys could teach me" Charity added.

"I'd teach yeh...but I know only in me bike" Hagrid's voice sounded more spirited than before.

Hermione nodded not even listening to them anymore. Her mind travelled back to the mountains last night. Where he kissed her so passionately and pulled her so demandingly on his body. A wave of fear mixed with anticipation pooled at the pit of her stomach, making her feel sick and confused. She rubbed her hands nervously and then her eyes. No, today she would have a great difficulty acting all normal for her students and Teddy, but she was going to power through this day. Hoping that at the end of it she would have some good news about Severus...most preferably from him in person. Hermione silently decided to visit Harry at the Ministry and learn about Severus, if he didn't return by four o clock. Only that resolution was able to calm her down enough to work through the difficulties of this day.
Severus sat at a chair in the antechamber of the inquisitor offices. His arms were still bound behind his back making his shoulders suffer. He glared indignantly at Borovic that was discussing with his assistant. He was damned if he was going to betray any discomfort to them. He tightened his teeth decisively and looked at the other side where Minerva's silhouette was visible behind a foggy window. She was discussing with one of the secretaries, probably trying to find a way to get one of her friends to question him. She had done the same routine before. Sometimes her tricks and connections worked, sometimes didn't.

Today he didn't want to think what would happen if the Headmistress didn't manage an audience with the friendliest inquisitor. This parole breaking had not been trivial. They could easily throw him in Azkaban without the need to question him much or need anymore excuses for their decision. No one, but the most positively tuned officer, would care to ask him the reasons for this brief parole breaking. No one would care that he didn't intend to escape. That he only grabbed the small chance to see the mountains, along with a woman that brightened up his miserable existence with her alluring life force. Who would ever believe that he acted with spontaneity together with a former student in a small romantic escapade?

He sighed and closed his eyes briefly. He tried to mute the constant mumbling around the secretarial offices. He wanted to bring back the peace he had felt in the car with Hermione in his arms, but that was simply impossible and also unfair. He didn't want to taint that lovely memory with the nasty feeling of being trapped once more under the crushing wheels of the judicial system…that was going to tear him apart. If they failed to do that through their questioning and humiliation, then Borovic would manage to do it with more unconventional manners.

"What you're thinking there Princess?" Borovic's heavy voice whispered close to his ear. He almost jerked back surprised…..almost…because he was not going to give this man any satisfaction. He remained silent and glared at the Auror steadily.

His bold manner erased the sneaky smile off Alexander's face. He sat down next to Severus and crossed his arms "Still not speaking much are you?"

Severus looked towards a blonde secretary in front of them who was wearing a pair of red pointy glasses. She looked as if she had jumped out of a sixties magazine.

"It's for the best…your voice sounded like choking frogs back there at the gates" Borovic drawled.

Severus's lips upturned in hateful side smile.

"Nevertheless your feeble croaking declaration of that woman's innocence didn't fail to capture my attention" Borovic continued unfazed.

Snape tensed and the other man noticed quickly.

"A former student of yours, isn't she? Friend of my Chief…what's her name…I always forget"

Severus swallowed and concentrated on the blonde secretary, needing to keep his face blank for the man next to him. No matter that Borovic's interest in Hermione was making him rather nervous.
The Auror snorted "As if you'd ever tell me….doesn't matter. I don't care about her name, but do tell…is she a good fuck?"

Severus's nose flared up and his jawline tightened. His hands twisted behind his back.

"Nah, nah…stay still Snape. If I catch you fiddling with the restraints I will stop you with whichever spell comes to mind first….and you know I am not a good boy" Borovic took out a chewing gum and threw it in his mouth. He begun chewing loudly.

Snape turned and offered him a deadly glare. Borovic raised his chin and his hand "Gum?" he asked calmly.

Severus's had to swallow down the saliva that he wanted to spit on that man's face. He turned around and pierced the young secretary again that noticed his attentions and misunderstood their meaning.

"Did I touch some sensitive thread there, old boy?" Borovic chewed like a goat and relaxed back to his chair "What feels pricklier to you? That you are fucking an old student or the fact that she drew my interest?"

His jawline moved in tension and he blinked towards the girl who straightened her skirt and looked at him uneasily. He inhaled deeply and tried to zone out. This was not going to end up nicely and considering that lately his telekinesis was getting frequently out of control, then this could end up with the whole building crashing down around them.

"Do tell…is it common Death Eater practice to fuck young women…moreover old students?" Borovic continued his taunt.

Severus had to physically restraint himself from pulling apart the magical restraints. The Auror was quickly getting to him and it was difficult to remain calm even though he had seen this game performed again. The main difference this time was that the subject of Hermione was too sensitive for him. It was difficult to act as disinterested as he usually did.

"Yep, probably is…did you rape lot's of them during your Death Eater days?" Borovic spat near his ear.

Severus shuddered both at the accusation and at the dirty breath that brushed close to his ear. He tried to zone out without the use of any magic. Tried to control any probable instinctual reactions that would arise from this situation. It would only make his problems even worse. His eyes burned through the secretary, passing beyond her at some invisible point at the end of the corridor. She frowned and passed her hand from her impeccable hair once, to check that nothing had gone astray.

"Does it feel better to fuck young girls or rape them?" Borovic whispered close to him.

Every muscle in Snape's body tightened simultaneously and he tried to keep his hands together in order not to bother the bounds. He clasped his fingers behind his back and tightened his jaw.

"I bet it's raping them…those squeals must feel very…arousing" Borovic's voice sounded way too excited for Snape's tastes.

That sentence eradicated the last drops of hard won silence from Severus. He gazed at the Auror and his eyes squinted in menace "You sick motherfucker…." he hissed with barely controlled disgust.

He had been half expecting Borovic's reaction to that. The Auror punched him with the back of his fist straight on the cheek. His head jerked sharply to the side and he immediately felt the taste of blood in his mouth. He swallowed it all down and turned boldly towards the Auror again. He
lowered his head and his eyes burned through Alexander's with an audacity that was difficult to bypass.

The rookie made to approach but an almost transparent movement of Alexander's head stopped him. The blonde secretary stood up and tried to check on them "Everything is ok dove, sit down" Borovic reassured her with a calm wave of his hand. The girl sat down again, but gave fleeting looks at both men.

Severus kept his eyes burning the side of Borovic's face. The Auror had relaxed back as if nothing happened and was looking at the secretary himself this time "Next time be certain I will try to kill you..." he whispered indifferently.

Severus felt his chest swelling with suppressed adrenaline and his hands were physically trembling with the need to break the restraints and then mash this man's face in. He gathered blood in his mouth and spat on Borovic's trousers. Then coldly he turned around and looked at the secretary, feeling his cheek and temple on fire. He casually relaxed back not caring that his shoulders were screaming in pain from the way his arms were trapped behind his back. He crossed his legs and snorted.

That rebellious attitude rubbed off on Borovic who drew his wand and coldly pointed it at Severus's chest. He crossed his arms and relaxed back also "One more move fucking Death Eater and I am going to make you eat your own vomit" he whispered with hair raising coldness.

"Try harder..." Severus whispered back at him haughtily.

"I am not passing through your thick skin am I?" Borovic gritted his teeth.

"Not even close" Severus spat loftily.

"Indeed, all you psychos got trained by the best, to rape, torture and kill innocent women and children. Like my wife. Why would a punch and a couple of well earned accusations, make your skin crawl? I didn't accuse you of anything you haven't already done..." Borovic raised his brow at the room in general and his voice held an unemotional quality that could unnerve the most bold man.

"I didn't kill your wife" Severus whispered and twisted his head around, hearing his nape crackling under the pressure. Contrast to what he was saying, Borovic had gotten deep under his skin and he was afraid that he was going to begin moving the environment around him soon enough. He could feel the unused magic in him pushing on the boundaries of his body.

Borovic tensed next to him and turned around so fast that Severus jerked back slightly unable to hold back his physical reaction to such menace "One of your friends did...I don't care which one of you did the dirty deed. You are all going to pay for it" he hissed and Severus felt the wand poking his side almost under the armpit.

He shook his head and winced feeling truly disgusted at the instability of this man. He wanted to open his mouth and declare again and again that he had never killed any women and children, but the few words he had uttered were more than enough. Borovic had already taken him through trial, thrown him in Azkaban and was ready to execute him. He was going to get nowhere by opening up a logical discussion with a purely unstable individual. Instead of speaking he opted to close his eyes and try to control his involuntary reactions.

He felt the chair next to him shifting as Borovic stood up and Severus opened his eyes in time to see Minerva approaching. He exhaled, not wanting to admit relief although he felt grateful that she returned at that point. He was not sure how things would have ended if Borovic had continued his tirade.
Minerva stopped in front of him and frowned deeply "What's this?" she asked and her hand extended to his cheek.

Severus involuntarily pulled back.

She glared at Borovic and her brow rose critically "Did you hit him?" she was not afraid to throw the accusation at him.

"Old boy tried to break the magical bounds. Had to restrain him" Borovic tilted his chin at her and chewed indifferently.

Minerva huffed and sat down next to him "Did you try to break the bounds?" she asked him in a low tone.

"Properly? Not yet" Severus spat and his jawline moved angrily.

Minerva's hand landed on his thigh and she pressed him warningly "Don't give him a reason to do something to you. He is dangerous"

"I know" he whispered with a curt nod.

"I talked to the head inquisitor and they agreed to give us an audience with Caroline Uffelman. She an old friend of mine. We studied together at college. She a levelheaded witch and a good person. She is our best chance" she sighed and relaxed at the seat next to him.

He nodded and his eyes rested on the secretary again "Thank you"

"Don't thank me yet. Wait till I get you out of this tight spot. What the hell got into you last night….can you tell me? You knew this was going to happen…." Minerva sounded accusing.

He snorted and shook his head.

"Don't give me the silent treatment…I am on your side, even though you might think the opposite" she admonished.

He pressed his lips, but remained silent.

"Was your need to see the mountains so great…or did all this have to do with what's happening between you and Granger?" she continued after a short pause where she gathered her cloak close to her body.

"Both…if I don't manage to get a few days out of this prison I am going to explode and take you all down with me" he whispered coldly.

Minerva sighed "Albus has a hearing in three days time. He wanted to present your case at the Wizengamot and gain you two weeks off probation, but your small trek might have cost you that small chance"

He tensed.

"Yes, now you realise….what you guys did was reckless and uncalled for. We may have had a chance to offer you some time off, upon good conduct. How are we going to do that now, tell me?"

He didn't reply.

"You are being accused of breaking parole…" she continued and her fingers drummed nervously on
her leg.

"I will take full responsibility" he whispered.

"And you will loose what small chance you have for some time off" she raised her brow at him.

"What do you want me to do..? Turn back time?" he spat and looked the other way.

"No, I want you to do what you know best…” she hissed at him and grabbed his thigh again.

He gazed at her questioningly.

"Remain silent and let me handle this. Don't play brave in there and take on any responsibility! Don't act foolishly with Borovic and don't give him reason to hurt you. Let me do this my own way. I am the most collected one of our company" she warned him and her hand tightened around his thigh.

He sighed deeply and nodded.

"You sure we have a deal?" she tilted her head at him.

He gave her a curt nod.

She pressed her lips and relaxed back at the chair. After a brief moment her head turned to Borovic that was talking with his rookie a few steps away. He gazed at her sideways and she shuddered at the glint in his eyes. She looked back at Severus and saw the purple bruise forming at his cheekbone.

"Does that hurt?" she asked in a low tone, not wanting to betray any emotions. In this environment it was dangerous to show anything.

He shook his head and remembered that he wanted to wipe out the blood from the inside of his mouth. Instead he swallowed the reminders of it and sat calmly. Waiting for his questioning and hoping that Minerva knew what she was doing.

Half an hour later they called them all in Uffelman's office. First to enter was Minerva and then him. They were followed by Borovic and his assistant.

"Headmistress McGonagall" a middle aged woman of exceptional beauty said. She had silver hair and large expressive blue eyes. Upon first contact Severus felt a small glimmer of hope that today's misadventure might end up relatively good.

"Caroline" Minerva said and shook her head "Nice to see you"

"Do take a seat please" Uffelman offered to Minerva.

Borovic came in and stood next to Snape, their shoulders brushing with a couple of inches difference. He looked up to Snape and then at the inquisitor "I bring you prisoner N.28765"

"What's he accused for?" Uffelman asked.

"Breaking parole". The assistant gave Borovic Snape's file and he gave it promptly at Uffelman.

She wore her glasses and sat down "All of you sit down, please"

Severus remained stubbornly standing, not wanting to give Borovic the advantage to be stand above him. The Auror moved and stood next to the inquisitor's office. He kept his wand drawn, but he crossed his arms peacefully. His eyes fell on the prisoner and remained there scrutinising his every
Minerva sat down and gave up on the idea of convincing him to take a seat also. Mr. Cross sat down next to Snape. Uffelman studied his case file for a few silent moments during which Severus unlocked eyes from Borovic and turned towards the large bay windows at the side of her office. He was unable to see any mountains, but the view of the city was breathtaking. The sky was grey and heavy rain was beating upon the windows.

Uffelman sighed and looked up from the file "You broke parole yesterday Professor?"

He turned to her and swallowed. He nodded curtly "Yes"

"Might I ask your reasons?" she said calmly and closed his file.

He opened his mouth to reply, but Minerva was quicker "I asked him to do so"

He turned abruptly at her and his mouth hang partly open…what?…

"Why headmistress, since you knew he was going to be punished for that severely?" Uffelman clasped her hands in front of her chin.

"As you have already read his file, you know that Severus is a possible Obscurial. Three days ago he used his suppressed magic and I feared any emotional outbursts that might occur from that. I have a school to protect. His emotional state after using magic was not very good. He caused some minor damage at the structure of the castle. I knew that the only thing that would calm him down was a visit at the mountains. Weighing the pros and cons, I chose to allow him a brief visit at his beloved place in order to avoid a total emotional breakdown" Minerva said calmly.

Severus bit the inside of his lip and remained religiously silent. She had said the truth for the most part. The only difference was that she took responsibility for the action itself. She took it off his and Hermione's shoulders. He couldn't but admire her at that moment.

"And you trusted him to return?" Uffelman raised her brow.

"I trust this man with my life. He would have never betrayed the trust I have shown in him" Minerva said unwavering.

Severus felt his breath catching and his eyes burning. He looked quickly towards his boots.

Uffelman nodded imperceptibly "Why did you use magic after four years of magical celibacy, Professor?" she turned to him.

He inhaled and got ready to answer, but Minerva intervened once more "Forgive me for intruding once again, but knowing him…he is not going to reveal the truth. He is too proud to admit that he has a heart of gold…" she traced off.

Borovic's lips twisted angrily and he pierced Severus with his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Uffelman looked confused.

"He used magic to save another Professor's life" Minerva said with simplicity.

Uffelman raised her eyebrow at him "You did?"

He swallowed and nodded once more.
Uffelman lips pressed testily "That was very altruistic, but also very dangerous. If you are carrying an Obscurus inside, then you may have triggered a possible release"

"We don't know yet if he is a carrier" Minerva intervened.

"We have been trying to get this information for four years now" Uffelman shook her head dejected and begun scribbling at a paper "As your file informs me, you were not alone in this small escapade Professor. Who was with you?" she continued.

He inhaled deeply "Professor Granger" he whispered and glared warningly at Borovic whose lips upturned in a self satisfied smirk.

"A friend?" Uffelman looked at him above the rim of her glasses.

He frowned unable to understand why Hermione had a place in this questioning. To his demise Borovic decided to intervene this time.

"His lover" he spat with twisted lips. If he had the chance, he would have spat at Snape's feet.

Severus felt adrenaline pumping his veins and his hands twisted behind his back. His eyes threw daggers on Borovic.

"That was totally uncalled for!" Minerva chastised.

"So this was a romantic escapade, endorsed by you Minerva" Uffelman seemed partly amused, partly bothered.

"Allowed by me, for the reasons I disclosed before" Minerva straightened upon her chair.

"Nevertheless you are not Professor Snape's warden. You cannot control his parole. You all broke the law. These are not matters to play with" Uffelman sounded austere "It matters not that I've known you for years Minerva. You don't play with the system"

"I know and I am asking for your forgiveness. I acted out of heart for him. You know full well what this person has done for the Order of the Phoenix and the Ministry before and during the second magical war. I cannot treat him as a common criminal and neither should any of you. He was placed in probation not because of his past crimes, but because of the Obscurial suspicions. Letting him go free for a few hours, at a place where he could find temporary solace didn't seem dangerous to me. On the contrary containing him against his will felt a lot riskier under the current circumstances. I must inform you that Albus has a hearing in three days time to offer this man two weeks off probation. He needs it and during these four years he hasn't given us any reasons to doubt that he is safe to be around." Minerva spoke calmly.

"You minimised his chances for this vacation, by allowing him this brief law breaking trek" Uffelman pressed her lips and scribbled something again on the papers.

"I will beseech you to take into consideration the reasons I did that as seriously as the law itself Caroline" Minerva spoke solemnly.

Uffelman gazed at her and raised her brow "I will, now allow me to question the Professor"

"Certainly" Minerva crossed her arms calmly.

Uffelman met his eyes and opened his file again "Member of the Order of the Phoenix, worked in espionage for many years, offered a lot of information about the enemy to the Ministry officials with
great risk upon yourself. Would have been nominated for an Order of Merlin First Class thrice hadn't you been a former Death Eater. Master of two academic subjects and Master duellist. Suspected to have greater magical skill than originally filed in the Ministerial records. Wounded during the war and retreated as a squib after you recovered…” she placed her finger on the paper and read some more silently.

He sighed.

"That's an impressive file you got here Professor" she looked up at him calmly and closed the said file.

He kept his eyes steadily on her.

"Killed Albus Dumbledore, raped and killed dozens of civilians in his career as a Death Eater, tortured and mutilated even more. Played slave on both Masters so at the end of the war he could always bid on the winning side and get out clean. Is considered almost as dangerous as Voldemort had been, if not equally. Is suspected to hide most of his abilities, because their magnitude could be classified as highly dangerous and land him in probation behind prison bars for life. His knowledge of the Dark Arts is so extensive that he is a walking TNT with the exploding mechanism buried inside that unstable mind of his. Through all that he plays tepid Librarian to one of the most prestigious schools of the magical world and he is taking care of our children Caroline. Your granddaughter will attend next year and this man will be lending her books. Do you really trust him? Who even placed him for probation inside a school?! He should have been behind bars…along with whoever allowed him to work at Hogwarts" Borovic's voice was so calm and calculative that it rattled Snape's nervous system.

He straightened his body at all those accusations and gazed the Auror with a steady and bold eye. He squared his shoulders and tightened his jaw line.

Minerva stood up quickly and pointed at the Auror "My Professor has been cleared off all these charges by the Wizengamot, Master Alexander. Are you trying to make a negative impression? Do it on your free time and not during this questioning. All of us here know very well that this man sacrificed himself to help our cause. He sacrificed his freedom all these years to bring down Voldemort and this is the thank you we are offering him? Probation without any parole for four years and instant arrest in the smallest of causes? As if he is the worst criminal out of Azkaban? You and your illogical ethics disgust me. Especially since they are pointed towards a man of such value and braveness. This man enabled you to be alive here Sir, in order to accuse him of all those despicable crimes he had never partaken in. Even the death of Albus had not been a murder. We all know that by now. Caroline, I must insist you put this man in order". When she finished she was slightly panting from the effort.

"Master Borovic…” the inquisitor began, but she was stopped short.

"This man enabled me to be alive?" Borovic's eyes flashed in anger.

"Yes indeed!" Minerva threw her chin forth provocatively.

"This fucking Death Eater and his blood sucking mates killed my wife…” Borovic took two steps towards Minerva and immediately Severus got in front of her with some delayed sense of protection towards the only person in the room that mattered to him. Although he was uncertain in which manner he was going to achieve that, by been all hand tied through magic.

"This man never touched your wife Alexander, get a grip on it! I know you are in pain and I am sorry for your loss, but Severus never killed your wife!” Minerva pushed Snape out of the way and
moved closer to Borovic.

Snape's head tilted a little to the side and his eyes squinted when he saw sweat breaking on Borovic's brow. His eyes gazed lower at his unstable hands that seemed to be trembling and at the formidable wand that was pointing somewhere between him and Minerva.

this is not good….

"Minerva…" he tried to warn her, but his whisper went unnoticed.

"Master Borovic, please let's just all take a breather. Master Cross, call for the deputy Auror Chief please" Caroline looked at the rookie. He stood up and left them with obvious hesitation, but he couldn't bypass an inquisitor's orders.

"They killed my wife…they killed the love of my life. They ended MY life…” Borovic pointed at Minerva with his trembling wand and a taut jawline. He bore his teeth at them like some wild dog upon it's prey.

"Watch out whom you are pointing your wand at Alexander" Minerva tried to lower her voice slowly when she saw him trembling out of control. His eyes were glistening with a hint of paranoia.

"This man is dangerous to be outside Azkaban my Lady. I have been placed as his warden by the Minister himself exactly because we all know how dangerous he can become. We cannot allow him to return to that school and endanger our children. Haven't we lost enough people during that war? What are all these Death Eaters doing alive, tell me? Shouldn't they have all been sent to the gallows when the war ended? Shouldn't they have been executed as war criminals? What are they all still doing alive?" Borovic muttered under his breath, his eyes never leaving Snape's.

Severus kept his stare steadily, not intending to provoke, but not wanting to back away either. He moved slowly again and covered Minerva partly. His eye flickered down at the wavering wand.

"Minerva…” he whispered again, but she was turned towards her friend. She didn't hear him.

"Caroline I think this is getting out of hand” Minerva's voice sounded austere.

"Minerva do shut up and let me handle this. Just contain your Professor!” Caroline chastised.

"Contain him? He is hand bound. Your Auror is the one who is loose with a wand pointed towards us” Minerva rebuked.

Uffelman ignored the Headmistress "Master Alexander let me handle this, please. Lower your wand, this is uncalled for. This will end up in a formal report from me to your Chief!” she tried the logical approach.

"This man broke probation! He is a dangerous escapee!” Borovic turned his unstable wand towards Snape.

"He is not an escapee, he is an escapist!” Minerva hollered, proving to Severus that he was not the one that needed to control his temper around Borovic, but her "He just used this small trek to escape reality…that's all there is to it!”

"Minerva PLEASE!” Caroline stood up nervously.

"I am not doing this…he is!” Minerva pointed at Borovic.
Severus kept his eyes steadily on the Auror. Observing every small movement. Trying to predict his unpredictable reactions.

"He escaped reality with one of his former students. He taught Granger when she was a child. Did you fantasise about her when she was ten and twelve years old you filthy Death Eater? Did you want to rape and torture the child then? We should notify her...she might be in danger!" Borovic gritted his teeth and took a step closer to Snape.

Severus felt his back crawling and a wave of adrenaline washed over him. Suddenly the need to predict Borovic got washed down the drain and he became the unpredictable factor in the room. Those words were the last draw in a line of crazy accusations. They were what pulled the pin out of the grenade that was abounding in his mind. He felt his temple burning and his jawline squeezing painfully. His whole body tensed and the muscles of his back pulled apart. "I would never hurt a child! I would never hurt Hermione!" he growled with a broken voice, feeling so wrongfully accused that his heart tightened dangerously. The magical restraints on his wrists begun pulling apart with a sound of spewing matter. Borovic's eyes fell on Snape's back. When he realised that Severus was trying to break the magical bounds he lifted up his wand and pointed it wordlessly at him.

Severus didn't hear the word, but the excruciating pain that tore through him was clear enough to identify the Cruciatus curse. Hot knives pierced his skin making every available surface scream in pain. The small traces of logic left in him backed away violently and left the steering wheel to his basic instincts as the pain clawed it's way into his mind and slashed through every nerve receptor. Normally by then any wizard would have been on the floor screaming his lungs out and squirming in pain.

Severus was not just any wizard though. He had served under death himself for so many years. He had taken onto his skin the Cruciatus so many times that he knew how to keep himself upright. He felt his knees buckling and his mouth opening up, but he shoved that scream back down his lungs.

He steadied his wavering legs and took a step backwards without kneeling to the floor. He took in a ragged breath as Borovic held the curse on him silently with eyes bright with delight. Thrilling with the idea that he could bring Snape down and see him suffer.

Severus's breath hitched and he released a soft moan as his body began trembling and jerking uncontrollably from the intensity of the pain. His arm begun bleeding and so did his nose. His eyes streamed with tears, but he was still not kneeling down. He was not going to offer that sick motherfucker the pleasure to see him broken.

Borovic's pleasure begun turning to rage as he saw that Snape was not bending for him and his eyes grew larger than life and filled with hatred. Minerva took a few moments to realise what was happening, mainly because Borovic never spoke the curse and Severus never showed the proper symptoms.

At first she and Caroline stood in frozen confusion as Borovic pointed his wand at a Snape that seemed to be slightly trembling. Only when his breath laboured audibly...only when she saw his arm and nose bleeding did she realise that Borovic was holding him under some heavy spell and even then her mind didn't go to Cruciatus. Her eyes saw the first drop of blood splashing on the floor and that is what kicked her mind into action.

She drew her wand and pointed it at Borovic "Protego Horribilis!" she cried and her protective charm enveloped Severus. The dark magic of the Auror rebounded on her shield and back onto his wand. He hollered in angry pain and threw it far away from him as if touched by fire.

Severus's body almost collapsed upon release. He backed up with loose legs and leaned over. He
was panting heavily and felt his head dizzy. He was disoriented and had all but forgotten where he was. All sounds around him were muffled up and every movement seemed to draw for ages in slow motion. Minerva wrapped her arm around his back and drew him to the chair with difficulty "Are you alright? Severus talk to me!" she tried to clean the hair away from his face.

He emptied his body upon the chair and felt another wave of pain rushing through his body. This time he was unable to stop the groan that escaped his throat. He looked between his legs were a small pool of blood begun gathering, but he couldn't understand where he was bleeding from.

"Caroline, his restraints, help me!" Minerva called.

Uffelman raised her wand and silently released Snape's arms. He brought them forth and wrapped them tightly around his stomach. His forehead touched his knees and he closed his eyes. He felt the blood flowing steadily from his nose.

"What the hell have you done Alex?" Caroline asked shocked.

He was cradling his hurt arm with his hand. He was looking mesmerised at Snape. He didn't seem to understand what she was telling him.

"He cursed my Professor! This man almost killed Severus!" Minerva abandoned him for a second to raise her hand at Borovic with menace.

"Did you use Dark Magic inside the Ministry?" Uffelman asked with a heavy crease on her brow and raised her own wand towards the Auror.

He shook his head and opened his mouth "They killed my wife…they killed my Lisa" he muttered. Now that all the anger had left his body, he looked like confused boy, looking around him seemingly lost.

"What spell did you use?! Speak!" Minerva turned at him angrily. Her hand tightened protectively on Severus's shoulder.

He felt another painful wave coursing through his body and shook uncontrollably under her palm. Slowly he began remembering what happened. He raised his head and looked at the inquisitor that held her wand towards the Auror. The pool of blood was growing by the second under his legs.

"Place your head back…put it back!" Minerva pulled his head up and held him there with her cold palm.

He shuddered and swallowed a lot of blood, something that made him want to vomit. He coughed and pushed Minerva away. He mumbled something to her, but he didn't think he was managing all that well. Another wave of pain tore through him. He squeezed his eyes tight and his teeth gritted uncontrollably.

"Did you use Dark Magic?" Uffelman approached Borovic.

"Keep your head back!" Minerva pulled him up again and he felt warmth entering his face. She was casting a tourniquet spell on him. Instantly the blood flow stopped from his nose. The same warmth got repeated on his arm. He closed his eyes and felt her releasing his forehead.

He swallowed the remains of blood on the back of his throat "I thought you were supposed to be the collected one here" he whispered and a small sad smile turned the side of his mouth up.

She observed him for a few confused moments and then an invisible smile passed quickly from her
"I would never harm a child...." his eyes became immensely sad and dark suddenly. He shook his head feeling his heart sinking "I would never hurt Hermione and I didn't want to kill Albus" he whispered and the remains of his voice broke. Only Minerva was able to hear his pained words.

Her eyes watered and she pressed her lips "I know Severus...bloody hell why are you telling me something I already know?! This man is mental...don't give any notice to his crazy ramblings" she pressed his shoulder in order to intone the gravity of her words.

He shook his head, but the movement fired up the steady waves of pain the cruciatus was giving him every now and again. He squeezed his eyes tight and revealed his teeth with a wince that betrayed his suffering.

"Caroline, you need to release my Professor. He needs medical attention" Minerva turned to her friend.

"One moment Minerva! You are in big trouble Alexander" she turned to the Auror again with the same shocked expression.

"What hex was it?" she asked him.

"Crucio" he whispered and another shudder shook his body.

"What?!" Minerva hollered "This man used an unforgivable on my Professor. He used the torture curse!" she walked decisively towards Borovic and drew her own wand "I want to hex you so much right now. Give me a reason!" she tightened her teeth.

"Minerva get out of the way!" Caroline walked towards her.

"No, you fool" Severus looked up and tried to straighten his broken body "No...!" he tried to force his voice out, but it failed. The certain by now painful wave rushed through his mind making him lean over his knees again.

"Did you use an unforgivable inside the Ministry? Did you dare do this inside my office?!" Caroline bypassed Minerva and pushed Borovic back.

He snapped his head up and suddenly the broken man vanished, leaving in his stead the cold unemotional psychotic man that cursed Severus so easily a moment ago "He tried to break the magical restraints. Yes, I did" he spat with unprecedented audacity.

"Carol, you can be sure that this is not going to be contained within these walls. This will reach the Minister and since Kingsley has been responsible for placing this unstable man as a warden to my Professor, he is up for a good smudging on his impeccable reputation. The Press is going to enjoy this" Minerva gazed at Uffelman with a raised brow.

That gave the Inquisitor a long pause "Wait a moment, let's not rush into things that we might all regret. Give me a moment to sort things out with Alexander, please" she added with a forced smile.

"I have to bind you, stay still Alexander" Uffelman raised her wand to hex him on magical bounds, but the Auror ducked very quickly and caught his wand.

Severus pushed his eyes open and saw the back of Borovic a couple of feet away from him.

"No one is going to tie me down. I had every right to control this man. He was ready to break the
restraints and he is extremely dangerous. I had to contain him! Call the Minister down here now!"

"You used an unforgivable upon a member of the Order of the Phoenix... upon a war hero! You are psychotic and too dangerous to be allowed outside a mental hospital. You can be certain I will not allow this to continue anymore. I want a hearing with the Minister of Magic now, and I want to speak to the press!" Minerva's authoritative voice echoed upon the wooden panels.

"I cursed a rapist, a molester, a dangerous Death Eater and I would curse him again and again to death to save that poor woman that he has seduced into his bed! She is my Chief's best friend and he must know the danger she is in..." Borovic spat angrily.

The last thing anyone expected was Severus to stand up so abruptly that his chair would tumble back violently. The last thing Severus expected of himself was the ability to reach Borovic in two steps, turn him around with a tight grip on the shoulder and plant such a strong punch to his face that he would feel the bones of the Auror's nose breaking apart under his knuckles.

Borovic growled in pain and landed face down with a thud, like a sack of potatoes. Severus grasped his bruised knuckles and hissed as another painful wave tore through his body. This time he was unable to keep upright. He crashed to the floor next to Borovic as the excruciating pain run through every nerve ending again and again.

"Severus!" Minerva run to him and dropped on her knees next to him.

He closed his eyes and tried to keep back the scream that was hiding in his chest since the cruciatus assaulted him. He cradled his hand like a baby and moved back and forth trying to control the pain and the possible telekinetic reactions that were going to arise from all this. He could hear it already happening. He could feel it moving threateningly around him.

They all heard glass cracking and long fissures appeared in all the bay windows. Minerva looked up and a knowing look of apprehension covered her features "No, not now... Severus pull back in" she whispered close to his ear.

Uffelman looked at the unconscious Borovic and then at her windows "Is he doing it?" she turned around with a heavy brow.

Minerva looked at her steadily "Yes, he is... don't you find him excused Carol? They all but accused him of the worst crimes possible and cursed him with an unforgivable. Quite honestly I am surprised he hasn't brought the office down already" her voice was serious and steel was lacing it's every thread.

"Tell him to stop it" Uffelman went to her door.

"I cannot... he is unable to control his telekinesis" Minerva replied to her solemnly and then turned to him. Her voice took a caring tone that surprised him "Please Severus, can you pull it back?" she whispered at him "Don't make your position here more perilous please"

"I don't know..." he whispered and kept on moving back and forth, trying to soothe himself in some manner. The pain from the unforgivable was still coursing through him making it impossible to concentrate long enough to stop the flow of magic that was slipping just out of his grasp.

The fissures grew longer with an ominous crack "Come here... in here quickly!" Uffelman's scared voice echoed in the corridor.

Mr. Cross and Harry Potter himself entered the office. Cross saw his boss on the ground and raised
his wand to Snape immediately. Potter fixed his glasses and moved quickly towards Minerva and his former Professor.

"Tell that boy to draw back his wand. The Ministry has enough problems as it is already, don't you think Carol?" Minerva admonished.

Harry kneeled down next to them and raised his hand above Snape's shoulder. It levitated there as he was uncertain if it would be wise to touch the man "What happened Headmistress?" he asked with a confused voice.

"Your Auror cursed Severus with Crucio and I won't mention the accusations he flung onto him in the meantime, not to mention that he struck him across the face outside at the reception!" Minerva looked up at Harry angrily.

"Crucio…bloody hell…Professor…Professor can you hear me? Are you alright?" Harry tried to communicate with him.

Severus squeezed his eyes tight and cradled himself….zone out …zone out….his mind was not convincing enough.

"What is he doing?" Harry asked and licked his lips nervously.

"Currently he is trying to stop himself from breaking all the windows in this office. Carol release us now! Give the order so I can take my Professor back at Hogwarts, because I cannot answer for his actions from this point on" Minerva stood up and looked at Carol angrily.

"He hit an Auror, that is a crime!" Uffelman admonished.

"The Auror cursed him with an unforgivable. Wanna take both crimes in front of the Wizengamot and see which one is the worst? I am on!" Minerva rejoined sternly.

Uffelman pressed her lips and glared at them. The feeling of getting cornered was so intense that she took a step towards her office. Towards a place of security.

"Professor?" Harry asked quietly and landed the hesitant hand on his shoulder.

Severus that heard all, shuddered visibly and winced. He opened his eyes with difficulty "Either let me go, or contain me…" his voice was barely heard.

"What?"

"Release me or contain me in your deepest dungeon….now Potter" he hissed and swallowed heavily.

"What's going on?" Potter looked up as the fissures reached the ledges and the windows begun vibrating quickly.

"I …cannot…control…it" Severus whispered and felt his voice breaking. He was sweating heavily and the pain on his body felt unbearable. The magic that had welled up inside and was pushing to get released was flaring up the pain. He felt like he was dying.

"What happened to my boss?" Cross asked and tried to attend to the bloody face and unconscious body of Borovic.

"He got his comeuppance, now Carol release us…or this will become the best story against the
Ministry the Press has gotten it's hands on for many years” Minerva stood in front of her with her brow raised.

Uffelman looked at the crackling windows behind her "I cannot let him go, he might be dangerous"

"He is only dangerous to you, as long as he remains here. Release him and I won't talk to the press about what your Auror did to a war hero...." Minerva tilted her head.

"What should I write on my report?!" Carol threw her hands in the air.

"That you found Professor Severus Snape not guilty of breaking parole....simple as that" Minerva dared her.

"I cannot do that Minerva, I cannot lie" the inquisitor lowered her head solemnly.

"Of course...and I cannot lie either...about what took place in this office then" Minerva rebuked.

Silence drew long between them and it was only broken by the slow cracking of the window panes.

"Professor, get up. I am getting you out of here" Harry said decisively. He pulled Snape up with a lot of difficulty.

"What are you doing Chief!?!" Uffelman hollered.

"I am taking this man out of here...unless you want to take responsibility for the damage that he will do to his surroundings. The Headmistress is right...he needs to leave now and I am taking full responsibility for his release if you cannot put your signature on it!" Harry looked at her angrily. Daring her to stop him.

"This is a mess...a right old mess!" Uffelman threw her hands in the air.

"Decide...now" Minerva pressed her lips.

Uffelman looked at the unconscious Borovic and Minerva intervened upon her thoughts "I won't say a word about the psycho you have all placed as Severus's warden...if I speak many jobs will be on the line. Think about what he's done. He used an unforgivable inside the Ministry to torture a prisoner"

Uffelman shuddered and looked at Chief Auror Harry Potter supporting the broken body of a trembling Snape. She looked at the vibrating window panes and rubbed her face angrily "Get out of here. All of you, before I change my mind!"

"You won't regret this" Minerva smiled at her briefly and made to leave.

Uffelman's hand stopped her "Don't speak about what happened to the press please" her voice sounded pleading.

"I won't, but I will speak to the Minister..." Minerva rebuked.

Uffelman nodded and then looked at Harry "Take this man out of here and make sure he is not dangerous to his environment back at Hogwarts before you return to the Ministry Mister Potter" she ordered.

Harry nodded and tightened his grip around Snape's back "I will. Can you walk Professor?" he asked gently.
Severus nodded and his arm wrapped around his stomach. The need to vomit was so strong that it took his breath away for a moment.

"Headmistress are you coming?" Harry tightened his grip on Snape with a groan.

Minerva came over and immediately a loud crack filled the office as they all disapparated. Uffelman exhaled loudly as silence covered the air. She looked sideways at her cracked windows that had stopped their violent vibration.

Cross stood up and raised his brow at her "What now?" he asked.

A small piece of glass got detached from the window and crashed on the floor. As if giving an answer to the heavy question of the Auror. Uffelman jerked nervously and closed her eyes.

"Now, you place handcuffs on your boss and take him down at the cells. He needs to pass through psychological evaluation and I will revoke his Auror licence, hoping that Minerva will keep her word not to speak to the press about this mess"

She gazed coldly at the Auror "You take over now, Cross. Don't mess this up". Her eyes returned to the broken glass at her floor and at all the large fissures running along the whole length of her windows. She covered her eyes with her palm and sighed deeply.

She didn't see the look of hidden satisfaction on the rookie's face as he cast magical handcuffs on the hands of his boss. Her mind was running circles around what had happened and that she needed to inform the Minister immediately.

Severus, Minerva and Harry apparated in front of the gates of Hogwarts. It was snowing heavily and the moment they touched ground Severus drew away from Harry's grasp.

"What are you doing Professor?" Harry made a move to catch him.

"Please, stay away from me..." Severus whispered and raised his hand to them, forbidding them to come closer.

"Severus you need to be checked by Poppy" Minerva said unable to control her exasperation at this man's stubbornness.

"No, I am alright. I need to get to my chambers" he backed off quickly.

"Severus you need medical attention" Minerva's voice became authoritative, trying to order him to stay in place.

It failed "I need to be left alone" he whispered and began walking as steadily as he could towards the viaduct.

Minerva looked at Potter and sighed deeply with a raised brow "Wait for us" she called behind him, but he didn't slow down.

They reached him easily and winged him on both sides, without trying to touch him though.

"What happened back there?" Harry asked quietly as they walked slowly under the heavy snowfall.

"Borovic proved his psychopathic nature once again. That's about it. Tell me Mr. Potter, was it so difficult to use your power as Chief Auror in order to revoke Borovic from Severus?" Minerva sounded both dismissive and angry.
"I cannot bypass the Minister. Shacklebolt was dead set in his decision, although I dare assume that after this evening's cruel events he won't have another chance to save Borovic. He will have to revoke his Auror licence officially" Harry pressed his lips thoughtfully. He gave a sad gaze at Snape that was walking silently. Shudders seemed to run through his body in regular intervals, but he was sustaining the remains of the curse like a trooper "I am sorry you had to go through all that Professor" his voice was honest and more emotional than Severus wanted to hear it.

He shook his head dismissively and pressed on. They were close to the main gates. All he wanted to do was reach his chambers, close and ward the doors heavily and collapse on his bed. Hopefully to never wake up ever again. End his torture in some manner or another. The pain came more widely apart as time passed by, but it's intensity was not lesser. He needed an antidote, but he refused point blank to be placed in the infirmary to be ogled by all the staff members like some ill oddity. He didn't want anyone's pity.

"It's the Minister who shall be sorry for all that's happened Mister Potter. You can be certain that I will make his life very hard for this!" Minerva barked and they stepped into the archway that led to the small plaza in front of the main entrance.

Minerva saw Professor Sinistra at the door waving at them. She had a smile on her face that disappeared as they approached and she was able to see Severus properly. He was wet from head to foot, his cheek and temple were heavily bruised and he was full of dried blood on his lips and chin. He was cradling a hand full of bloody torn knuckles and his coat was bloody both at the chest and on his left sleeve. He looked heavily beaten up and ready to collapse.

"What happened to him!" Sinistra covered her mouth in shock.

Severus tightened his teeth at this first pitiful reaction towards his dire state and push past her angrily.

"Severus you need medical attention! Where are you going?!" Minerva cried after him.

He pressed himself to climb the stairs as quickly as possible "I am going home, let me be" he growled and his voice cracked under the pressure. Trying not to collapse in a heap of tears, blood and humiliation he huffed and bit the inside of his lip in order to press on until he reached his chambers.

Harry made to run after him, but Minerva stopped him "What are you doing? We cannot leave him alone" Harry flung his hands around.

"Should I call Charity?" Sinistra approached the Headmistress with wide shocked eyes.

Minerva swallowed "Call Charity and Granger"

"Who?!" Harry turned quickly at her confused.

"Got it!" Sinistra nodded in hurried agreement and run up the stairs.

"Call who?" Harry insisted.

Minerva's brow rose up critically "You'd better come into my office Mr. Potter. There is nothing we can do right now and we need to have a talk"
I am sorry I am overflowing you with chapters, but today is my day off work. Tomorrow I start again and it is very demanding so I want this out of my hands as quickly as possible. My other story is in progress so it's going to take time anyway. I want the completed one out of the way.
Severus leaned back to the wall of his bedroom unable to keep upright. He had sustained the effects of the Cruciatus far longer than he had expected. He made it to his chambers trying not to be seen by any students or professors, locked and warded his door, but his try stopped right there.

The need to get to the bathroom to clean himself was too strong, but he was unable to sustain his weight any longer. Especially now that he didn't feel the need to put on a strong facade for any spectators. He decided to collapse on his bed instead, but his body fell backwards and the wall caught his inevitable collapse. He sat down next to his bed, feeling unable to move anymore. His arms hang lifeless and his legs opened up in abandoned V shape.

He closed his eyes and felt his breath deep and strained. The painful waves were coming further apart and remaining as motionless as possible was helping him keep them at bay. Quickly he drifted off to unconsciousness, because no one could call this sleep. Even though time rolled by him for what seemed an eternity, at one point his eyes opened up at the sound of an urgent voice. The image was blurred, but he knew who it was and he jerked back, hoping this was some kind of nightmare instead of reality.

"My Gods…Severus, please talk to me…” the voice spoke clearer this time and he winced. He tried to pull his face away from Hermione's hand.

"How the hell did you get in?” was the only thing his mangled voice was able to whisper at her.

He felt the pause in her, but her palm cupped his cheek and her finger caressed his bloody chin "Your wards were not strong enough to keep me out…In sort I broke into your apartments and thank Merlin I did. Look at you!” she rejoined.

"Get out…” he whispered and tried to move away from her "…please".

"What the hell are you talking about? I am not going anywhere…open your eyes. Come on…open them" She tilted his head up from the chin.

He shuddered and felt a painful wave passing from his body "Just go away…” his hand wrapped it around hers. He wanted to push her off. Her wanted so much to send her away, but his hand was not obeying him. His fingers curled around her wrist, not wanting to let her go.

Apparently her need to remain next to him was equally strong. "I am not leaving...Let me help you…please” her voice was soft and caring.

Severus's heart pinched him again and he closed his eyes. "No, not now. Not like this…” he whispered stubbornly.

"I did all this to you…don't kick me out…let me stay please” her voice broke mid sentence.

...she did all this to me?...what the hell was she thinking? That she was the instigator of this situation? Suddenly the need to get her out and protect her from seeing all this mess, got crashed under the solemn need to make her understand that this has not been her fault. His fingers that had never released her wrist, tightened painfully around it. She paused in confusion for a moment. He pulled her down on him and she got forced to straddle him in order to avoid falling down.

"Severus!” She exclaimed surprised.
He wrapped his arms behind her back and embraced as warmly as his exhausted body would allow him. After her monetary confusion at this sudden change of heart from him she settled on his lap with a sigh of relief and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders "What got into you? A second ago you wanted to kick me out…" she whispered onto his hair "…not that I am complaining, mind you…"

"Easier to shut you up than kick you out…you are uttering obscenities…and I don't have the energy to raise a debate..." he whispered and shuddered at how true that felt to him.

Her hand left his shoulder and began caressing his silver-black hair "Where did they take you?" she muttered and felt her chest welling up once more.

"The Inquisitor offices" he responded.

"Did that man do all this to you?" her palm cupped his jaw line and tried to push him back in order to see his eyes.

He nodded tiredly.

"Why? For goodness sake why?" her voice became soft in its inquiry, making his heart reach out to her.

"Borovic's got a very unstable hand and wand…he is easy on the trigger"

"Did you provoke him?"

"Yes"

"For fuck's sake, we have to report all this…we have to talk to Harry, we have to…” her mind began running away with her thoughts as her hand tightened around his shoulders.

As she was thinking of a way to make the man that caused him all this hell pay, he was getting slowly drawn into another nightmare. Just by holding her in his arms, the painful words of Borovic resounded upon his ears like gunshots.

Abusing, killing women and children…did you ever abuse a child in that school? Did you fantasise about your former student when she was a child?….

His body shuddered hard and his lips turned down in disgust. He was holding that former student in his arms, and his embrace was not intended as friendly. He shuddered at how true and how false the words of the Auror had been at the same time.

"What's wrong…Severus?" she looked down at him with mild apprehension when she felt his muscles becoming stiff.

"You know I would never hurt you…” he whispered and felt his soul pulling into darkness, even at the suspicion that someone might have thought him an abuser….

She paused and swallowed "What are you talking about? Of course I know you would never hurt me…”

He squeezed his arms around her and stopped her "I used to teach you…”

"Yes, many years ago…” she tried with a confused frown. She couldn't understand what he was telling her. It sounded like a mixture of remorse and an apology, which had nothing to do with his
current ill condition.

"Yet, I used to be your teacher…and now…now what?" he whispered and his jawline tightened upon remembering the words that had triggered Borovic's final attack.

Her arms moved around his back in a soft caress "You sound full of remorse"

He felt his throat going dry, but couldn't answer.

"Why would you feel remorse about something we both want? What does all this have to do with what's happening to you now?" she attempted to understand where all this had come from all of a sudden.

"I don't want you to feel like I am taking advantage of you…" he whispered.

"Severus this thing between us is consensual…are we both agreed on that?...and can we focus on your health for now?" her arms wrapped around the back of his neck.

"Just know that I would never do anything to harm you" he insisted.

"I know…" she tried to comfort him. He was going through some personal hell and she didn't know how to make him understand that she was there for him. That it was ok…

He shook his head drawn deeper and deeper in Borovic's hell "I would never harm anyone, moreover a child..." he muttered mostly at himself. For a second forgetting she was there with him.

Her heart froze still and a slow, hair raising, realisation dawned at her "Severus…..look at me…" she pulled back. She cupped his chin and lifted his head up gently "What did that man accuse you of?" her eyes were penetrating, a shadow of darkness just touching her brow.

He felt his eyes burning and closed them just in time. He didn't speak.

"Severus, I am not a child anymore. I am not your student anymore…" she swallowed heavily and frowned at him as her fingers tightened upon the stubble of his cheeks.

"I know" he nodded, but didn't open his eyes.

"And the child that you do have in your company lately, could attest that you are the exact opposite of what that asshole probably accused you off" she kept her voice equanimous, trying to be the steady pillar he needed next to him at that moment, but anger was shimmering under her skin. Just from the suspicion that someone might have accused this brave man of such dark deeds.

His eyes opened and he gazed at her steadily.

She nodded "Did I hit bullseye?"

His adam's apple moved as he swallowed, but he remained silent.

"Did that man tried to break you through psychological abuse? Did he call you a child murderer…or something close to that?" she licked her lips uneasily.

His eyes avoided her.

"He did, didn't he?" she shuddered.

"Forgive me" he whispered.
She cupped his cheek and pulled him up. Her eyes were full of tears as his was. Her forefinger wiped out a tear that rolled down his cheek "I have nothing to forgive, for you have done nothing" she whispered back.

He closed his eyes and tried to pull his head away from her. She kept him in place stubbornly. Wanting him to understand her.

"I am sorry you had to be reminded of how cruel the world can be…because of me" she whispered and felt her own eyes tearing up.

"Not because of you. You had nothing to do with this..." his hands run up her arms and closed around her securely.

"I am so sorry….so sorry" she mumbled and felt her emotions one step from emptying on him. The last thing he needed right now was to comfort her….he was the one in dire need of a helping hand. She had to put her own pity party at rest and assist him.

"I would shut you up all these apologies, if only I could..." he spoke low close to her ear.

"All promises and no actions..." she smiled sadly.

He winced disgusted at his inability to kiss her silent, because of his bloody mouth.

"Are there any wounds that need healing right now? I cannot see with all this blood..." Her fingers touched his bruised cheek softly.

He shook his head "Minerva healed me".

The relief he was feeling in her arms was short lived. A delayed wave of pain washed over his body taking him by surprise. He tensed under her and jerked back to the wall with a painful groan.

She felt her heart catching and she wrapped her arms around him protectively. This was not a reaction that was coming from any minor wound "Severus what's wrong!?" she cried at him.

He tightened his teeth as the painful waves flared up every inch of his skin.

"Stay with me…tell me what's going on!" she took hold of his head and tried to make him open his eyes. This…this reminded her of something she has seen before. She knew these effects…the knowledge just danced at the edge of her panicky mind.

That is when his bedroom door opened up and Charity came running in "I was notified by Minerva…oh! Shit…sorry!" she stopped short and turned around covering her face in obvious embarrassment.

Hermione looked at her partly confused partly angry "What are you doing?!!" she admonished.

"Caught you at a bad timing..or something?" Charity pointed behind her vaguely.

"Turn around you silly woman and help me…he is convulsing…! I need help!" Hermione almost hollered.

Charity turned around shocked and run up to help them, as she realised that her original assumptions couldn't have been more wrong.

"These are the after effects of some curse and he is not telling me which one" Hermione tried to restraint his arms.
"Get off me" he growled and tried to move.

"Tell me which curse it is!" she cried on his face.

"Crucio!" he spat.

"We need to notify Poppy!" Charity said.

"No!" he shook his head. He could withstand the painful waves, if they just stopped moving him all the time.

"I have an antidote in my apartments, remain with him. I will be back in a moment!" Hermione stood up and run out of the bedroom quickly.

Charity kneeled in front of him "Severus?"

"Get away!" he whispered imperatively.

"I am not going anywhere" her arm touched his back gently.

He shuddered and his mind fogged up "Get...Hermione...Out...Of...Here..."

Charity's fingers tightened upon his back "what are you talking about?"

"Tell her to stay out, please" he struggled to meet her eyes.

"You feel for this girl, don't you? You don't want her to see you in this mess..." her voice was barely a whisper, nevertheless her words passed through to him.

He felt his eyes burning and gave her a curt nod, which was accompanied with a twisted wince as a new painful wave tore through him.

Her eyes watered up and a few tears run down her cheeks "I won't send her away. I am going to assist both of you"

"No" his pained groan filled the room.

"Yes! Listen to me...." she tried to find his eyes.

He shook his head negatively to her. He didn't want to listen to her. He wanted them both out of his rooms. He didn't want Hermione to see him like this. He didn't want to cause her anymore pain. He didn't want her guilt ridden, because of this. He wanted to protect her and the best way he could at that moment was by keeping her away. Until he was healed at least.

"Listen!" she commanded with a voice that didn't take no for an answer "When I was suffering under Voldemort's dark magic, I searched for your eyes Severus...and when I found them I knew I could count on you. I saw the loyalty in your eyes" she leaned closer to him.

His eyes gazed at her painfully.

"Can you see it in my eyes now?" she asked with a heavy frown. Her eyes were set upon his.

He didn't answer.

"You are my best friend Severus...and I love you. I will not leave you alone tonight. I will never leave you alone and neither will I tell the young woman, that has captured your heart, to leave you
alone. For once in your life stop this self destructive behaviour and realise that there are people around that care for you...deeply. For once in your life stop curling inwards for comfort and reach out to us. Reach out to me" her hand opened up in front of him. Strong and decisive.

His eyes fell on it as he felt the new wave of pain arriving quickly on his body. He bore his teeth both in order to withstand the pain and to face Charity's demanding attitude.

"This time you must reach out to me as I did to you in Malfoy's manor. This time you must reach out for me and trust me that I shall take your hand and help you. Reach out to me...I am here for you!" she said steadily.

As the wave hit him like a freight train, he needed to believe her words and his hand shot out and grasped hers with a power that made her wince. He groaned and doubled down, pulling her with him. Her arms wrapped around his back as he leaned his forehead on her knees.

He never let go of her arm, that was offered with such honesty. For once he not feeling alone in his suffering. First by the tenderness and acceptance of Hermione and then by the honest demand of Charity he felt like he was not alone...or maybe this had always been the case, but it was the first time he was realising it.

Charity felt her heart catching when she felt his need to connect so strong. When she saw him for the first time openly reaching out to any kind of help, without any grumpiness and trying to shun her away from his presence. Her free arm wrapped his waist and she cradled him silently until Hermione return to the bedroom like a youthful hurricane holding a large bottle.

Charity smiled at the younger witch's energy that swept through the bedroom, realising for the first time how she had also swept Severus off his feet.

Hermione kneeled next to her "How is he?" she questioned with eyes burning with worry.

Charity nodded with a knowing smile "He's better than he's ever been..."

"What?" Hermione frowned confused at Charity's mysterious words.

Charity pulled back in order to give her the place she deserved "He needs you" she whispered.

Severus was not letting her go of her hand, though. Only when Charity whispered "Hermione is here to look after you, let me go" did his iron grip release her.

Hermione reached out to his hand, but before she had the time to take it, he grabbed her with a force that took her breath away. It felt as if he wanted to hang onto her for life itself. She pulled him inwards and kissed the top of his head with unforeseen emotion.

She uncorked the bottle "I am here, don't worry. I have you. Drink up...drink up" she whispered gently close to his face. His breath was coming in short violent gasps.

The trembling had briefly stopped again, but his eyes seemed lost as he gazed up"Drink, it's going to help you. Please...drink up" she whispered.

What has this Auror done to you? What have I done to you?

Guilt threatened to push her over the edge.

She mouth fed him the potion and when he finished she drew his head protectively on her chest "It's going to be ok...you are going to be ok, I am here" she muttered and rocked him gently.
Charity pulled back and looked at them sadly. She sat down at the floor cross legged and bit both lips as time rolled by. Hermione kept rocking him back and forth, counting inwards, trying to feel any changes on his body that indicated that the potion was working on him. Silence drew long inside the room and they barely moved. Only the crackling of the fire and the ticking of the wall clock at the living room were animating the scene.

Almost forty five minutes later found Charity dozing off upon her hand. Hermione had leaned upon the wall with him on her lap and her arms around him. What alerted her that something had changed, was the first deep sigh that left his mouth and scorched the naked skin of her cleavage.

"Severus?" she whispered.

He nodded softly.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked carefully.

Another nod.

"No more pain?" she pulled back softly and tried to find his eyes.

He shook his head and opened up his tired eyes.

Charity looked up and straightened "Is he ok?"

Hermione nodded "The Potion worked I think. Isn't that right?"

He closed his eyes briefly and nodded.

"That fucker Borovic overdid it this time…” Charity uncrossed her legs and walked on all fours towards them.

He shook his head "I need to rest" he spoke at both women.

His words pushed Hermione into action "Of course, but I want to assess any other damage on you" she checked at his bruised knuckles "You are so bloody I don't know where to start"

"You need to take a bath Severus" Charity agreed.

"Not now" he glared at her and tried to push himself up.

Hermione pulled him up "I'll use a cleaning spell on you"

"Just let me rest" he whispered feeling at the end of his tether. He didn't care if he was going to make a mess out of his bed. He just needed to fall on it with his bloody clothes and all and close his eyes. Try to forget the pain he had been feeling since he left the Ministry, try to block out the accusations of Borovic that sounded all too real in his ears now that he was vulnerable.

Hermione tried to lower him down slowly, but he let himself go and emptied his tired body above the covers. He didn't even take off his boots as his legs spread on the clean duvet. The moment his head touched a pillow his eyes closed tightly and sleep swept upon him like a dark blanket. Within seconds he was in another world….not so much sleeping as falling unconscious.

Hermione pulled off his boots, but didn't try to move him around to take off his clothes. She didn't want to bother him. With a heavy heart she cast a cleaning spell on him and all the blood got removed. She turned at Charity and the sadness was obvious in her eyes "I guess this time he didn't come home as easily as you had been expecting him"
Charity lowered her eyes briefly "No, he didn't"

"I think he managed to piss of Borovic pretty well" Hermione whispered and the back of her hand wiped a few tears that escaped.

Charity nodded imperceptibly "I am sorry Hermione…no one can know how things will turn out at the Ministry, especially with this man"

"Did you just tell me all those comforting words this morning, to make me feel better?" Hermione sniffed and wiped her cheeks clean.

"No, I meant every word, I am just not omnipotent. I thought he was safe with Minerva there next to him. I was wrong…." Charity sounded honesty and deeply pained also.

"Crucio….what the hell is wrong with that man…." Hermione shook her head angrily and sat at the edge of the bed. Her eyes fell on his crumpled body and at his quiet, but bruised features.

"We have to talk to Minerva, she is currently at her office with your friend Potter" Charity said thoughtfully.

Hermione looked up quickly "Harry is here?"

Charity nodded.

"I need to talk to him" she bit her lower lip.

"Go on then"

"What now?" Hermione looked up.

"Yes, what better chance than this?"

"I don't want to leave Severus" she explained.

"I will remain with him until you return…." Charity offered.

Hermione's eyes grew large "You will?"

"Sure, sat with him through many painful nights. What's one more" Charity flicked her shoulders.

Hermione shook her head with fervour "Thank you, I will be back soon!"

"Sure darling…go take care of business. I'll be waiting for you" Charity smiled at her sweetly.

Hermione before leaving, opened up his cupboard and she pulled out an extra duvet. She tucked him well under it and when she felt certain that he was warm she caressed his temple gently "I'll be back…sleep" she whispered at him and then turned at Charity "Thank you" she repeated with an honesty that touched the older witch.

****...****

Hermione left the room with a lot of guilt burdening her shoulders and regret tugging along with her. She walked quickly to her apartments to ask Libby if she could stay the night. Unfortunately the girl was very tired since she had child sat all day long. Hermione nodded and told her that she would return to pick up Teddy in half an hour. She was going to bring him in Snape's chambers and let him sleep on the couch, while she looked after the older wizard. Then she made it quickly to Minerva's
office. Only when her hand knocked on the door and she tried to fix her teaching robes around her, did she realise that she had lost them at some point during this hectic evening.

She looked up as Minerva opened "Is Harry here?" she tried to look above Minerva's shoulder.

The Headmistress raised her brow critically and Hermione cleared her throat "I mean good evening…"

"No need to stand on typicalities. This night is anything but typical. Come, your friend is here" she made room for her to pass.

"Harry!" she exclaimed and he stood up. She run up to him and buried herself in his arms. He embraced her with the same warmth she remembered from their school days.

"Hi" he tightened his arms around her.

"Are you ok?" she pulled back and her eyes bespoke of worry.

"Yes, are you?" he rejoined.

She began nodding and then her nod turned into a negation. Tears began falling from her eyes and her lower lip trembled. There in front of her best friend she felt all her restraints collapsing and the worry about Severus came out with the most expected way possible "No" she muttered.

Harry winced and drew her in another warm embrace "Everything is ok…shh…calm down"

"He is not ok Harry. What did they do to him? Why is he such a mess?" she said and pulled back.

He looked at her with unbearable sadness.

She gazed at Minerva "Why did they treat him worse than an animal?". She was trying hard not to let her voice break.

"Borovic is unstable…he is unpredictable…” Minerva tried to explain, but Hermione didn't let her finish. She pulled out of Harry's grasp.

"Why didn't you help him?!" this time her accusation was clear.

Minerva frowned "Who told you I didn't?!"

"Then how in the name of Merlin did he end up convulsing under Crucio?!" she pointed towards the door, with hair raising tension.

Minerva sighed and pressed her lips "It's not as simple as that"

"Isn't it?" Hermione crossed her arms defensively "I thought it'd be pretty obvious to see a Crucio been cast…easy to stop it, if you are there. Were you there or not?"

Minerva "I was, but….."

"Then why didn't you stop it?!"

"Because Borovic never uttered the curse or moved his wand and Severus never showed any real symptoms until it was too late. Because both wizards are highly trained and very experienced in Dark Spells. Because at that moment I was arguing with the Inquisitor on his behalf….not everything is black or white Hermione!" Minerva rebuked with a seriousness that made Hermione take a few
steps back.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and more tears run down her cheeks.

"Silly wand waving and crying out CRUCIO! with a threatening glare is not what happens usually at such advanced levels of magical users as Borovic is. A simple thought can channel the curse silently through a wand. Moreover not every wizard writhes in pain on a floor screaming his lungs off to betray the curse. Especially wizards of Severus's calibre who have undergone through severe training, with high pain tolerance as a prerequisite. In short… I didn't realise in time!'" Minerva's voice was prickly.

Hermione felt her heart collapsing at the image that got created in her mind as Minerva spoke. She shook her head "Forgive me" she muttered.

Harry wrapped his arm around her shoulder "Minerva did the best she could for the Professor. The first thing I saw upon entering was her defending him to the bone"

Hermione nodded "What happened to that sick bastard, Borovic?"

"I am not sure yet, but I don't think he will get out of this one unharmed. He used an Unforgivable inside the Ministry, in order to torture. It's one thing to peruse the Unforgivables in Azkaban and a whole different thing to do it in broad daylight at the offices of the Ministry. He is doomed, I dare think" Minerva sat down. She looked absolutely exhausted.

"Oh, he is doomed alright" Harry said.

"Why didn't you doom him earlier? Why did you have to wait for something like this to happen? Why wait for someone to die in order to revoke his licence then Harry?" Hermione pulled back and this time attacked her friend. Her need to find a culprit for Severus's dire condition was so strong, that she blindly attacked anyone she could.

"Borovic has the support of Kingsley, because of his substantial magical ability. Truth be told he is the most powerful Auror the Ministry has"

"And also the most insane!" Hermione barked and crossed her arms.

Harry fixed his glasses and nodded "Insane doesn't do him justice. I have been trying to find a reason to get him fired since I became Chief. I think today's events have given me more than a good reason. This one cannot be covered, even by the Minister"

"So Severus had to be sliced and diced, for you to get your chance…nice" she shook her head.

"I didn't get him arrested Mione. I wasn't the one that took him up to the mountains" Harry said carefully.

She turned abruptly and gazed at him angrily "Well…" she whispered not knowing what else to say. Apparently he got well informed about how things stood by the Headmistress. She turned at Minerva "Wasn't that a bit intrusive on your behalf?"

Minerva shook her head "The whole school knows your situation…I didn't betray any major secret"

She turned her attention to Harry again "I did take him up to the mountains and I don't think I will be able to apologise to him enough for the punishment that he got for it. I should have taken the blame…instead he did…and you cannot image how bad this feels…." she begun talking angrily, but throughout her speech her heart began crying inside and her eyes followed closely.
Harry's shoulders slouched when he saw her this broken and he tried to pull her back in his arms. She resisted "I am sorry Mione…I didn't mean it. I had to stop you somehow. You were trying to find a scapegoat between us. Truth is, today's events are no one's fault but Borovic's. No one else is to blame. Not Minerva for failing to understand the curse on time. Not me for failing to fire Borovic years ago as he had the support of the strongest man in the magical world. Not yours for taking a … uhm…friend.." his hesitation obvious.

She looked up at him with searching eyes "More than…"

He nodded carefully "Ok…taking your more-than-a-friend up to the mountains. The only one to blame is butt-crazy-Borovic….can we at least all agree on that front?"

Minerva exhaled and nodded curtly.

Hermione sniffed and wiped her nose again with her hand. Harry fished a tissue from his pocket and offered it to her "I can understand that you feel terrible, but blaming one of us is not going to make you feel any better. We are your friends…and his also"

"No matter that he cannot comprehend that, even under the most dire circumstances" Minerva said thoughtfully.

Hermione shook her head and blew her nose.

After a short reprise Harry spoke "How is he?"

Minerva looked up.

"A mess…really a mess" Hermione's lips smiled sadly as she wiped her face clean.

"Did you give him an antidote?" Minerva asked.

She nodded "of course"

"Did he take it?" Minerva raise her brow inquisitively.

Hermione frowned "Yes"

The Headmistress sighed in relief "Thank heavens"

"What are you going to do about this Borovic?" Hermione asked no one in particular.

"I'll get him fired, if they haven't revoked his license already" Harry answered.

"I'll use him to have a good talk with Kingsley and set some things straight. I'll use what he did as a leverage to our advantage" Minerva rejoined.

"Use him to ask for some days off for Severus, if not to revoke his probation completely" it was the solemn voice of Albus from the painting and they all looked at him simultaneously.

"That's a blindingly good idea" Minerva's eyes sparked.

"You can use him for anything really. He made such a mess that you hold the Ministry by the balls. Excuse my language Professor. How are you?" Harry smiled tiredly at Albus.

"Very well Mister Potter and how are things in the Auror barracks?" Albus smiled back at him.
"As you can hear, not very good…” Harry shook his head dejected "Such incidents smudge our impeccable reputation"

"Alexander should have been committed to a mental institution years ago. Reminds me of Barty Crouch and his son. Similar case…” Albus pressed his lips dismissively "Kingsley is such a wise man. Very cooperative. Don't know what got into him with Borovic"

"His monumental abilities…far superior to the usual Aurors. One of the most experienced magical duellists the Ministry can offer. Would have been Chief already if it wasn't for his emotional instability" Harry rejoined.

"Kingsley is not a wise man if he placed this psycho over Severus" Hermione frowned angrily.

"Don't forget that Kingsley believes Severus to be of equal abilities to Alexander if not greater. He needed a strong Auror to keep the reigns on our Librarian" Minerva raised her brow.

"Not that he was wrong on that count" Harry pursed his lips.

"Harry?!” Hermione exclaimed truly pissed off.

"He is strong Mione. You're -more-than-friend- is bloody strong" Harry rebuked her.

"Boy is exceptional with magic…indeed" Albus nodded.

"That doesn't mean he is dangerous. He has never bothered anyone with all this power and knowledge you attest. He's only used it to help us" Hermione cried.

"That's true Albus, the boy never gave us cause to worry. Kingsley acted unwisely in this case” Minerva agreed.

"And can you not call him my-more-than-friend, all the time Harry? You are pissing me off!" she glared at him.

He raised his hands "I am sorry…just a bit of humour in a very heavy situation, that's all"

"Just don't" she crossed her arms.

"Sorry, truly…” he attempted.

She huffed and looked at her boots.

Minerva took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to contain the headache that was starting to develop there "We are all too overburdened this evening. If you don't have a problem I think we stop this conversation. Currently we have more important issues at hand. Mainly the health of Severus. You said he took the antidote, Hermione?"

She nodded and looked fleetingly at her friend that was avoiding her eyes.

"That's very important. Mister Potter, you can return at the Ministry and rest assured that tomorrow first thing, the Minister will do well to expect me over"

"I need to check on Borovic anyway" Harry agreed and took off his glasses. He wiped his forehead with his palm.

"You Hermione, I assume, will remain with Severus?” Minerva turned to her. Harry did also.
She didn't hesitate "Undoubtedly" her voice was unswerving under the heavy scrutiny of her mentor and her best friend. The only one that seemed unbiased about the whole situation was Albus.

"Very well, I need to consult with Albus…so if you two could…” she waved her hand at them, like she was shooing away a bunch of flies.

"Certainly, see you later" Harry said with a small respectful bow.

"Goodnight" Hermione said feeling weary to the bone.

"If anything changes with his condition during the night, be sure to inform me" Minerva told her before they closed the door.

Hermione nodded and soon they were standing in front of the staircase. A long uncomfortable silence ensued, that was broken when they both talked at the same time.

"I am sorry.." Harry attempted.

"Harry don't…” she took a handful of hair away from her face and kept it back. She closed her eyes.

"I don't know what to say" Harry muttered.

"Anything that will get us over whatever hell this is…” she opened her eyes and looked at him angrily.

"This is not the best moment to talk about this, as I see"

"No moment will be best, because this …" her finger created an imaginary circle in front of him "...is what it is. It's not going to change just because you, or Ron, or Ginny or whoever else, might have a problem" her voice was strict, no nonsense.

"Hermione, listen, it's not that I have a problem, it's not even that I have the right to judge anyone ….it's plainly awkward for me" Harry raised his brows.

"And this is becoming plainly uncomfortable for me" she rejoined.

"What can I tell you…where shall I begun, where shall I finish?” he asked truly at a loss for words.

"Tell me nothing…why can't you just tell me nothing? I need you to understand me, not tell me things. Nothing you say can change the way I feel right now” she exhaled and crossed her arms.

His brow creased "Hermione…I…”

She shook her head "No, Harry, just no. Go…leave…I need to get back to him"

He sighed "We need to talk"

"Not tonight…just please…not tonight" she closed her eyes already feeling drained by the demands of this day.

Harry remained silent for a moment and then offered her a small nod. Without words he approached and took her in a warm embrace. She reposed her head on his shoulder and began crying in all earnest "Just understand me…I require nothing more out of you" she whispered.

He nodded and caressed her back. When she had settled, he gave her a soft kiss on the cheek and walked down the corridor.
She remained bemusing after him, still feeling the tears overflowing her eyes. Her hands cold and her heart pinching painfully. When the silhouette of Harry disappeared into the night, she turned around and walked towards her chambers to pick up Teddy and then to go find Severus and Charity. This was going to be a very long night indeed and she was certain that she was not going to get any sleep out of it.
Severus felt the sunlight passing from a small gap that was left by his curtains. He winced and tried to stretch, but the heavy feel of his clothing stopped him. Slowly his eyes opened up and looked at the aforementioned gap for several seconds before closing again in resignation. Slowly the memories of last night returned to him and he felt his heart catching.

She had found him...right there next to his bed, leaning upright like an invalid...she had found him in all his wholly mess and contrary to every anticipation she had touched him gently and she had reassured him that she was still there for him. That all this was not enough to send her running away. She had replied to his half dazed declarations of innocence with a gentleness he had never felt before. She didn't just understand him coldly and calculatedly like Albus had done in the past. She drew his broken pieces upon her bosom and she had cradled him until the pain from the curse had retreated and until his personal hell that Borovic has woken up, begun drifting away.

After her soft and comforting words he didn't remember much. He fell asleep with his bloody clothes on and slept straight to the next morning. He sighed and looked towards the bloody palm print on the wallpaper across him. A shudder run down his back. He never meant for her to witness him so broken. He wondered if she had returned to her rooms to rest with Ted, but the question was quickly answered by the shuffling of clothes behind him.

He tensed involuntarily and froze in place.

Is she here?

Did she stay the night, or was it Charity? After a few contemplative moments he decided that it was pretty pointless to play asleep. Whoever that was they have figured out he was awake by now "Good morning" he whispered to the unknown occupant of his easy chair.

"Good morning" her voice made him feel relief. Somehow knowing that she remained with him through the night, made him feel an unaccustomed ache in his heart "Did I wake you up?" she continued with the same steady and warm voice.

He shook his head "No"

"Something interesting down there at the wall?" she spoke calmly.

"What?" he frowned slightly.

"Since you woke up, you haven't taken your eyes from that spot" she explained.

He drew his eyes away from the bloody palm print guiltily "No" he whispered.

The feeling of wearing all his clothes in bed and the heaviness of his body began bothering him to insanity. He needed to get up, somehow make it to the bathroom and clean himself up "Did you stay with me all night?" he whispered, suddenly in need to have this answered for him. Even though the answer was obvious enough.

"Yes" the quiet response. She didn't make a move to approach him.

He nodded "Thank you".

Without any real difficulty he sat up in bed and his shocks touched the ground. She had taken his
dirty boots off. He winced disgusted at his decaying state and swallowed uneasily.

"You need help?" she asked.

"I need to take a bath"

"Need help with that?" the careful tease in her voice, made him gaze back at her for the first time since waking up.

He frowned in curiosity. She was sitting on his easy chair cross legged, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her, under the warm colours of the fire.

She raised her palm to him "Joking" she tried to erase the seriousness from his face. He hadn't woken up in a very good mood apparently.

He pushed himself up and shook his head at her.

"Need me to fix you some coffee?" she attempted as he passed in front of her without stopping to offer her a kiss or a hug. Something that she waited for impatiently all through the night. She tried not to sound disappointed and wondered if she should have slept next to him last night. Maybe if they woke up embraced today he wouldn't have felt so distant and cold.

He shook his head again and walked towards the bathroom "No, thank you" he muttered.

When he closed the door behind he felt a momentary pang of guilt for not greeting her properly, but the need to get cleaned had felt too imperative. He undressed and got rid of all his bloody clothes. He looked briefly at his image on the mirror and his lips twitched in disapproval. He looked like he had a collision with a freight train even though someone had cast a cleaning spell on him and he had no blood on his face and body.

she did it…

The job of taking a bath was slow, but not as difficult as he had originally thought. Hermione's potion had stopped Borovic's hex and the only pain he felt now was from his abrasions, which were not that serious. When he finished he tied a towel around his waist and came into the bedroom.

He didn't even turn to look at Hermione who was still sitting cross legged on his easy chair in front of the blazing fire. He opened up his cupboard and felt his back exposed at her scrutinising gaze that was burning him up. He swallowed and felt one of his larger diagonal scars that was extending from the top of his shoulder down to his waist, tingling. The scar tissue felt too sensitive under her heavy gaze.

He reached for a t-shirt and a pair of black sweatpants "Enjoying the view?" his whisper was heavy and the knowledge that she was witnessing one of Voldemort's magical whipping experiments gone wrong, made him feel strongly embarrassed.

"Actually I do" she murmured behind him. Her voice was deep and contemplative.

He frowned in deep rejection at his own image and turned his head sideways to her "Turn around" he whispered quietly.

He heard the shuffling behind him. She had turned her back to him, but had not covered up her eyes. He removed the towel and dressed slowly. When he finished he sat at the edge of the bed and gazed at her intensely, for a few silent moments. Her hair was loose from her usual bun and was reaching down to her waist in heavy curls. He swallowed and looked at his own naked feet. Grateful that he
didn't taste blood anymore, he cleared his throat "I'm done".

She turned around and her eyes immediately fell on his body, checking him out with an audacity that upon any other moment would have aroused him. Now though, he only felt tired and exposed "I suppose you want to ask questions about how I managed to destroy my body so badly…" he whispered and gazed at her through hooded eyes.

She swallowed and placed her feet on the floor. She walked slowly towards him with calm steps "If I didn't feel so compassionate towards your state from last night and if I was not so full of guilt for making you go through all this hell, I would have actually admitted that you look downright sexy right now…" she trailed off and approached him carefully.

The crease on his forehead deepened as she stood in front of him and placed her hands on his cheeks "As it is though, I will only check on your bruises…if that's ok by you of course" she added.

He sighed in obvious relief and closed his eyes "Thank you" he whispered.

"For checking your wounds?" she asked quietly.

"For much more than that" he met her eyes with an intensity that made her spine melt.

She placed her finger on his mouth to shush him. He smiled appreciatively and kissed her finger.

"How are you feeling today?" she smiled sweetly.

"Better"

"Any remainders of the Cruciatius?" she asked with a soft frown of concern.

He shook his head.

"Any pain from the wounds?"

"Mild" he offered her a soft smile.

She drew her wand "Why did that bastard hit you?" she asked and passed her hand carefully from his bruised cheek.

He swallowed a dry throat "I called him a sick motherfucker" he said with such a non challenging coldness that she snorted in reaction.

"Good for you…" Her wand warmed up his cheekbone and the throbbing retreated quickly. Then, her hand touched his bruised knuckles "And how did these happen?" she inquired quietly.

"Broke the motherfucker's nose" he whispered and tried to stop the content smirk from rising on his lips, but failed. Today, far away from all the pain, he could enjoy that he inflicted some pain back at his tormentor.

The same warmth spread on his knuckles. Bereft of pain now he was able to concentrate on other things. Mainly her soft presence in front of him.

"Will you ever forgive me?" she questioned him gently after a moment of silence.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her "Why do you keep doing this?" he whispered.

Her eyes watered and she pressed her lips "Because, I never wanted to hurt you in anyway…"
He shook his head "You didn't…the Ministry did. They always search for an excuse to throw me in Azkaban. This time they failed…one of these days, they won't"

Her hand rested on the side of his head and her fingers entwined in his hair "Don't speak like that"

"I am telling you the truth, Hermione…they won't let me go that easily. This time I was lucky that Borovic lost his temper…next time…I don't even know, if there is going to be a next time" he whispered and turned around. His lips kissed her palm softly.

"I won't let you come to harm" she said way too seriously.

"Who signed you up as my guardian?" he offered her a reserved smile.

"I did….do you mind?" she smiled back at him.

He inhaled and pulled her inwards. Her arms wrapped around his head that leaned upon her breasts. He closed his eyes and exhaled, feeling the torture he had felt at the Ministry further and further away from him. Her fingers found the scar tissue from the bites of Nagini, that was embedded at the side of his neck. She felt her own throat convulsing with unforeseen emotion "You are so similarly branded to me" she whispered thoughtfully and caressed his scar.

He took hold of her hand and pulled it away from that place "I am far more branded than you are….and far more exposed, right now"

"That's why you always wear turtlenecks, isn't it? You want to hide your scars….the ones on your back are easily hidden, but the one on your neck…" she trailed off.

"I cannot hide them from you now" he frowned at his own weakness.

"Do you hate being exposed to me?" she caressed the side of his head.

"I hate you looking at my scars" he admitted with difficulty.

"Whilst you have seen mine…is that fair?" she caressed his temple.

"No, you are right" he gave a soft nod.

She cupped his cheek and pulled his head up "If I tell you that I honestly find you very attractive, with scars and all, will you believe me?"

"No" he shook his head with a lopsided smile.

"If I tell you that I had to refrain from ogling your half naked body, when you came out of the bathroom and tried to order my brain to check for any wounds instead, will you believe me?" a small sad smile begun spreading on her lips.

"No" he shook his head again. His hand cupped her nape and pulled her down to him.

"If I tell you that I almost died from worry yesterday, will you believe me?" she whispered close to his lips.

He nodded and gave her a single lip kiss "I am sorry, I worried you" he whispered softly at her, making her knees melt.

"I don't regret the night I passed at the mountains with you…as it was the best date I have had in years" she smiled at him and bit her lip "…but I am regretting the fact that I took you up there and
caused all this to happen to you…" her smile got lost slowly under her sad eyes.

"I know" he whispered and kissed her softly again.

"I wanted to come after you, but Charity didn't let me. She said, you were going to be fine. That you have done this many times over…” she pressed her arms around his neck and her lips drew slowly along his.

"It's true…" his tongue touched her upper lip gently.

"She lied…” she exhaled and her own tongue came out to search for him.

"No…” he deepened the kiss for a brief fiery moment, winning a breathless gasp from her "…she didn't lie…this wasn't the first time" he drew back.

"But it could have been the last…” she looked at him with an intensity that took his breath away.

"Hermione…this…here…what happened…it's nothing unusual for me…” he whispered and looked at her red lips hungrily.

"You mean to tell me that this psychotic Auror has tortured you before?” her brows creased heavily and her palms cupped the side of his cheeks. Keeping him close to her.

He snorted "He's tried…keeps failing…” a lopsided smile appeared on his mouth.

"You call all this mess failing?” she looked around his bruised face and remembered his heavy convulsions from the Cruciatus last night.

He nodded calmly "Yes…Borovic needs to amp up his game, if he wants to compete with Voldemort. I am used to far more intense psychos"

His painful confession sounded even more dark, in the presence of that large scar she saw on his back a moment ago. Her eyes teared up and she pressed her lips trying to control her emotions that seemed to be running amok "Severus, I am so sorry" her voice broke.

His hand caressed her side and stopped under her armpit as he pulled her inwards for another single lip kiss "What for this time?” his words got lost inside her mouth.

"For luring you in this silly trek and giving a reason to the Ministry to treat you like this…” she whispered and closed her eyes as his lips caused ripples of shivers to run down her back "…again" she added and tears run down her cheeks.

"Shut up for once…” he smiled on her and gave her more single lip kisses.

She exhaled in relief mingled with anticipation and her arms locked around him, tightly. Her fingers run on his back and she felt the large scar under the thin material of the t-shirt. His tongue stopped the slow sensual exploration of her mouth and he inhaled in doubt. He waited to see her reaction, of this ugliness upon him. She pressed her lips on his decisively urging him to resume his fiery kisses. Her fingers run above his scar tissue gently and he shuddered at her acceptance.

His strong arms drew her down on him and she was more than eager to open her legs and straddle him. When their bodies touched, it was like the fuse box of her mind blew out. Everything blurred at her outer vision. She could only concentrate, on how her body reacted to his touch and how his moved under her. How gently, yet firmly he demanded more intimacy, by letting his lips draw down her chin and gaining access to her neck.
Her arm locked tightly around his head, asking for his lips to kiss her. He opened up his mouth and his tongue painted hot wet trails on the side of her neck, then his teeth followed to bite and his lips closed around the sensitive skin, sucking, in all earnest. Marking her with his love bite. Her breath hitched and her fingers entwined in his long hair, pulling him on her as ripples of pleasure run down her side, at his furious kiss. She wanted him to eat her alive if possible, not just bite and suck on her.

Her body instinctively pushed on him, trying to get some kind of relief on her aching core and she sighed in satisfaction when she felt him stirring hot against her. His arm pulled her against him, locking her in place. She crushed her lips on his ear and whispered "If I tell you, that I want to make love to you, will you believe me?" she said playfully.

He released her neck and his tongue worried the small crevice under her throat, where the two clavicles came together "No" he exhaled on her, but one of his hands cupped her bottom. He drew her down, pressing her on him, offering her the relief she was seeking a moment ago. He did it, with a rudeness that seemed so unlike him, but at the same time was so arousing to her.

She gasped and smiled. Her lips drew along his cheek and found his mouth "What must I do to convince you?" she whispered.

He smirked devilishly and his arm moved her sideways, emptying her in bed, in an unexpected move that took her by surprise. She squealed happily and pushed herself up to his pillow, with her legs. He bit his lower lip and crawled to her, on hands and knees. She covered her chest protectively and squealed again, kicking him away. The feeling of getting sexually pursued, only made her more excited and aroused, but above all crazy ticklish.

"Don't tickle me! Don't tickle me!" She screeched and tried to stop his hand that was already coming with nasty intentions, towards her side.

He snorted, unable to stop the laughter that bubbled in his stomach and also unwilling to stop himself from doing exactly what she didn't want. The need to see her break apart under him in laughter was as strong as his arousal. He covered her body with his to stop her squirming and his fingers got buried on her ribs. Her hips bucked off the bed and she giggled loudly. She closed her eyes and trashed her head, trying to kick him off "No, no! Stop it please!" she tried.

He laughed honestly at her reaction and it was the first time she heard that whispery laugh and she saw those eyes uplifting in happiness. It made him look so much younger that her giggles slowly died down, to leave behind a soft tremble of the chest. Her eyes gazed at him lovingly and her teeth worried her bottom lip, as her heart warmed up with a tenderness towards him, she had not anticipated. On one hand she wanted to cradle him like a child and on the other she wanted to kick him away "You are so silly…" he whispered and his smile grew wider. His hand left her over sensitised ribs and reached her face. His fingers tucked some hair behind her ear.

She snorted and released her chest. His eyes drew down to her and she felt his appreciative gaze firing her up "Yes, I am…so please don't tickle me again" she laughed and pulled him, now more than anything needing to feel him pressing her down on the mattress with his weight.

"If I tell you, that you are the most beautiful woman I have seen in my life, will you believe me?" he whispered close to her mouth.

"Yes" she smiled and drew him in.

The smile melted away from her lips as he kissed her, softly at first, but then demanded entrance to her mouth with a growing passion, that was hard to control. She accepted his intrusion with a gasp of pleasure and his body leaned on hers carefully at first, but as their kiss grew deeper and more
demanding, so did his body. His leg slid between hers until his lower thigh pressed at the most sensitive part of her body. Her breath hitched and she pushed back up to him searching for more contact. A knowing smile spread on his lips, as his hand traced up to her hip. He pulled her leg up, close to her chest.

She moaned into his mouth, as his hips ground on her playfully, trying to elicit a vocal reaction. Her mind fogged up completely "Stop torturing me…please" her voice broke and her breath caught as he pushed hard on her, one more time. His tongue found her cleavage and begun worrying the tender skin on the top of her breasts. A sigh of pleasure left her mouth and she smiled at the ceiling. She wrapped the leg he had allowed free around his waist pulling him down to her. When his hand passed from the band of her tights and got buried under her shirt she felt her whole body tensing in hot anticipation. One hand pulled on his hair, trying to crush his lips on the tender skin of her upper breast area and the other one got buried under his t-shirt, clawing him roughly. Trying to show him that she needed more…she wanted more from him.

His hand reached just under her breast and his finger traced the soft skin there, making her twitch in need. Just as she was about to give up on him and lead his hand under the bra herself, a perky voice spoke outside his closed doors.

"Auntie, you in there? I want some milk!" Teddy spoke and a vocal yawn escorted that statement.

"Shit!" she hissed and her eyes flew open. Her sexual arousal came crashing down violently along with her body that got pushed out of the bed and onto the floor by a confused Severus. She looked shocked up to him "Did you just throw me out of bed?!

"Is Ted here?!" Severus hissed back at her and got out of the bed quickly.

"Yes! For fuck's sake Severus, my hip hurts….you just threw me on the floor!" she exclaimed and then turned towards the door "Be right out honey, give me a second!"

"Are you mental?! You wanted us to do...all this...with Ted in the apartments?" he raised his hands to her angrily.

"He was asleep when I left him…lower your voice! And what's so peculiar about this Severus? Our parents made love, whilst we were asleep. That's how we got created in the first place...ouch...this really hurts, you bloody asshole" she whispered and rubbed her upper hip.

"Don't even go there…I don't want to know" he closed his eyes and fixed his sweatpants and t-shirt "Fuck Hermione, you are going to cause me a heart attack…"

"And you caused me a large bruise most probably!" she rebuked feeling rather bothered at his reaction.

"Well, forgive me, but I was taken aback by the presence of a young child just a door away from seeing me stark naked above you!" he barked and made it for the door.

"He wasn't going to open the door!" she rejoined.

"Why did you bring him here?" he hissed and lowered his angry face close to hers.

"Because, I needed to look after you for the night and Libby couldn't stay with him. She was tired from child sitting all day. Ok, now? You are really pissing me off Severus..." she shook her head and felt defensive all of a sudden. Her sexual arousal was now buried under a heap of bitterness, about the rough way he was treating her.
"Did it ever cross your mind that I don't want the child to see me in this mess?" his whisper became softer upon seeing her reaction.

She met his eyes and her heart mellowed down a little when she understood that his problem had not been Ted finding them in bed only, but that he didn't want to worry the child with his wounds and bruises "I had no other choice…I wanted to remain with you and no one could look after him".

"How the hell are we going to get out of the room together….? He is going to figure out everything" Severus looked lost at the door handle.

She felt her anger taking another step back at his childish reaction about all this. Her hand landed on his shoulder "He is too young to understand everything, but even if that's the case we were doing nothing wrong and he saw nothing. Now, do you want to go back to bed and rest? I will take care of Ted and you can come out whenever you feel better" she tried a milder approach.

He shook his head and he frowned at the floor "No, it's fine" he said and opened it up.

Ted was sitting on his couch with his pyjamas. He looked up as they came out and yawned "Did I wake you up Auntie? I was hungry, it's morning" he said and fell face down again. His arms stretched and his legs hit the couch playfully as his eyes looked at Hermione and Severus standing in front of his bedroom door like statues.

"Hi Presser" Teddy smiled at him and waved.

That kicked the frozen Severus into uneasy action "Good morning Ted" he cleared his throat and walked calmly to the kitchen. He needed a cup of coffee or a glass of fire whiskey…anything to calm him down, really. Anything to take his mind off the immense arousal he was still feeling and the need to throw Hermione in bed again. He prepared the coffee machine and reposed his hands on the counter as he waited for it to be done. His eyes fell discreetly below his lower stomach and he tried to see if his fading erection was very obvious. He didn't want the child to suspect anything.

Hermione's hand landed on his bicep and he met her eyes as she passed behind him to take some milk for Ted. She came over to the counter next to him and poured the milk on the glass. Her eyes fell at the same place his were a second ago and she smiled knowingly "You're fine" she reassured him.

His brows rose in disbelief and his fingers flexed with the insatiable need to throttle her to reason. She snickered at his reaction and offered him her back. She came over to Ted and gave him the milk "Do you want anything to eat darling?" she asked and cleared some hair from his forehead.

"I want some bread rolls with honey…can I have?" Teddy looked up happily.

Hermione looked at him and Teddy looked over also "Can I have Presser, please?"

"I'll notify the elves. Do you want anything for breakfast…" he asked her, but on afterthought he stopped and sighed "I mean, are you going to stay for breakfast or do you have anything else to do?" he tried to sound more composed than he felt.

His timid way of asking her if she intended to remain with him for the rest of the day made her heart warm up with a sweetness that came in total contrast to the arousal he had ignited in her body a few minutes ago "Got nowhere better to go today. It's Sunday…I'll stay here, if that's ok with you" she said softly and then caressed Teddy's pink hair, as he was sipping his milk messily "I mean we are both going to stay here"
He felt his shoulders relaxing and he smiled at his cup as he served her coffee. He nodded "Glad to have you both"

believe me…

"Tell the elves I'd like two eggs hard boiled and a toast, please" she gave him a fleeting playful glance and then concentrated on Ted again.

"Sure" he nodded and scribbled something on a small piece of paper. He walked over and gave it to her along with her coffee. She drank a sip and threw the paper in the fireplace where it lit up green for a brief moment as it travelled down to the kitchens.

"Do you think I can lent a t-shirt from you? Maybe a pair of sweatpants?" she looked at him above the rim of her coffee cup.

"Take anything you want, although I don't have any pants that could stay on you" he leaned to the counter and took a sip of his own drink.

"I'll keep my own jeans, just a t-shirt would be fine, unless you can stay with Ted for a while so I can go pick some staff from my apartments"

"Whatever you feel comfortable with, is fine by me" he flicked his shoulders feeling more at ease now that he had drunk some coffee. He looked towards the window where the snowfall was very heavy again. The sun he had briefly seen upon waking up, was long gone behind the heavy clouds.

"You want anymore milk, love?" Hermione asked Teddy.

"No, I am hungry now" Ted said and took the glass over to the kitchen.

Severus made way for the boy to place it in the sink. Teddy begun scratching his nose "What happened to your face, Presser?" he asked.

"Tissue, Ted" he raised his brow.

"Oh, yeah!" the boy remembered and tried to get some tissue from the counter. Severus reached out and brought the pack closer to him. Ted took one and blew his nose.

"The bin…" Severus reminded him and waited patiently until Ted had disposed of the tissue.

"So what happened to your face?" Ted remembered.

"Accident" he replied calmly.

"Like my Auntie's?"

Severus shook his head "No, she had it worst than me" he smirked at the boy.

"Does it hurt?" Ted continued his third degree.

Hermione sighed and her eyes began checking him out hungrily as he was talking with Ted. He was much more muscular and well defined than his slightly overlarge cardigans, ever let on. Right there, in front of the counter with his loose sweatpants and short sleeved t-shirt she was able to admire him and admit that this kind of casual clothing made him look far younger. Even though his hair betrayed that he was not in his young days anymore, his body didn't, as it looked youthful and strong.

Her eyes fell on the scar tissue of his arm and at the bite of the snake. She remembered the various
scars on his back and assumed there were even more on his torso. Yes, he was full of scars, but somehow those created a more appealing image for her. They were his proof that he had fought in his life and had won. He was still there with them. That made him so brave in her eyes.

She looked at his flat stomach and stopped at the band of his sweatpants where his arm was resting. Then she gazed back up, to his face. His bruise was still dark purple, but the swelling on his cheek seemed to have come down a bit. His stubble was much longer and darker, which meant he hadn't shaved for several days. His hair longer than she ever remembered them, were reaching the middle of his back. All in all, she saw in him a very attractive man, whose attitude was the only thing that won over his physical appearance.

"A bit" Severus calmly said at Ted.

"How about that one?" Ted pointed at his arm.

Severus looked at his arm scar tissue and shook his head "No"

"How did you get that one?"

Hermione looked at him warily, not knowing if he was going to react nicely to Ted's interrogation about these old wounds. Now she understood why he kept himself covered up all the time.

"Just the reminders of an old wound" he spoke quietly.

"Cannot it get better?" Ted reached out and touched it.

To her surprise he didn't pull back "No"

"Why?"

"It's got some powerful magic behind it" Severus offered him a restricted smile.

"Maybe I can fix it when I grow older!" Ted's eyes grew larger as the idea came to him.

Severus nodded "That's a good idea" he encouraged the child.

"How about that one?" Ted pointed at his throat.

Severus frowned slightly and his large hand covered his scarred neck. He swallowed and hesitated for a moment. He felt Hermione's eyes burning him and looked up at her. She was looking at him regretfully.

"A large snake bit me" he said steadily.

"WOW! it must have been huge!" Ted's eyes grew larger than life.

Severus raised his brow and the tension he felt momentarily, backed off quickly under Ted's spontaneity "Yes, it was" he agreed.

"What colour was it?" Ted tried to look at his wound closer.

Severus placed his coffee down and took Ted up in his arms. Immediately the child placed both hands on his wound and began checking it out "You see, I don't remember" Severus frowned at his own inability to remember Nagini's colour.

"Colourless…” she whispered.
Both him and Ted met her eyes.

He nodded quietly "Colourless indeed…".

"That beast was colourless…” she repeated never taking her eyes from him.

"Is it alive?” Ted asked.

Severus lowered Ted back down without taking his eyes away from hers "Professor Longbottom killed it many years ago” she said and offered him careful smile. He smiled quietly back at her and slowly the conversation turned into more safe topics and away from the scars of either Severus or Hermione. When Ted got busy describing to them his weird dream that involved snowy midgets that build ice castles upon the window ledges of children that had been good, Severus felt much calmer and much more composed. Even though he talked about the bite that almost killed him at the most innocent inquisitor of his life, he felt calm and peaceful.

When the door knocked and the elves brought them breakfast, they all ate together at the small kitchen space. As it was Sunday they both had this day off, so they took everything at a very slow pace, which Severus appreciated since he felt very tired and in need of repose. She got involved with some of her projects on a theoretical level and got buried in her papers perusing his office, which he offered her with no regrets. He, on the other hand, found a great opportunity to take things easy by teaching Gobstones at Ted who proved to be a surprisingly patient student.

At some point Hagrid and Charity visited to check on him. He invited them in for a cup of tea, which they all took together at his small living room. Hagrid was unable to manage his huge body properly in his small cramped chambers and he threw down several books, a lamp and the easy chair more than once. After an hour they excused themselves and left. Charity, by telling them that she needed to prepare about tomorrow's classes, but Severus knew that the old witch was doing it in order to leave them alone. Hagrid, with the valid excuse that he couldn't fit in there and asked them to come tomorrow evening at his hut for tea. Something to which they all agreed with Ted being the most enthusiastic participant.

Surprisingly Minerva didn't bother him, but he knew that he had to talk to her tomorrow after breakfast. The rest of the day passed easily for all of them and late evening found them sitting around the fire. Hermione and Ted were sitting upon his sheepskin, close to the fire. He had excused himself off the floor and had laid down on the couch at one point. He still felt too tired and needed to repose his body more often than not. He had his hand trapped under his head and he was enjoying the conversations and games of Hermione and Ted in front of him. She was currently trying to explain to them a game that she used to play with Harry when they were freshmen here at Hogwarts. Ted was trying to pay attention to her in order to understand.

"So it's a magical game as I told you guys. We each draw ourselves in a piece of paper…”

He intruded "What if we don't know how to draw?"

"I can teach you, Presser!” Ted chimed in with a happy smile.

"Do you know how to draw?” he lifted his brow.

"Yes!” Teddy took the pen from Hermione's hand and made a small stick figure on the paper "Draw a head and four lines like this…see it's a boy"

Hermione smiled.

"I can draw like that, but I thought you knew better" Severus whispered.
"I draw perfect!" Ted frowned at him and his lip pouted.

"Yes you do, now give here" Hermione took the pen impatiently and then looked at them "Now, silence both of you!"

"Auntie!" Ted said angrily.

"Want to play the magical game or not?" she raised both brows and leaned her head down to his level.

"Yeah!"

"Then shush your little mouth" her fingers closed and she snickered behind her hand.

Teddy's laugh rung clear inside his chamber and he felt his heart filling with a sweetness he had never felt before. He smiled at the interaction between them.

"And don't you laugh!" she raised her finger at him.

"Sorry madame" he shook his head and acted taken aback.

She bit her lower lip and looked at him playfully before concentrating on her paper once again "Now each of us takes a paper and draws on it themselves and an image from their childhood. Something nice they remember. Then Hermione does a little magic and everything comes alive. Wanna try it?"

"YEAH!" Teddy picked up a pencil and a paper and leaned over becoming deeply concentrated on his drawing.

"How about you?" she met his eyes warmly.

"Why not…give me" he said and took a pencil and paper she gave him. He leaned back and laid the paper on his knees. Hermione drew on her own paper. After a while they had all finished and gathered the three papers between her and Ted.

"Ok, yours goes first, Ted"

"Yeah! Mine goes first, mine goes first!" Ted squealed happily.

Hermione took out her wand and waved it above Teddy's drawing. It had two stick figures on it and they were in what looked like a forest. At the end of it, he had drawn two crooked squares. One square had the name Lupin in and the other Andromeda. Hermione bit her lower lip and looked as the stick figures came to life. One was walking in the forest and the smaller one was running. The smaller one run to the squares and did a couple of happy circles around them before returning to the forest, where he began climbing on trees and scaring away the birds. The taller figure reached the squares and left what looked like a flower in each one before going back to the small stick figure that had reached the top of the tallest tree and fell off. The big stick figure caught the small one in her hands and put him down, only to have him run up to the tree again soon after.

Hermione felt her chest contracting painfully at what she was seeing and her eyes searched for Severus's. It was as if he was waiting for her to look at him. She was at a loss for words. She had intended this game to be easy and fun for them, but this here was nothing close to fun. Except that Teddy was laughing like crazy upon seeing the magicked figures performing for him "That's you and Andromeda?" Severus took over when he saw that Hermione was unable to speak.

"Yeah, me and Granny! Look, I am climbing that tree!" Ted pointed at the picture.
"You love climbing trees…” Hermione whispered and felt her heart sinking.

"What are these squares, son?” Severus looked carefully at his drawing.

"Mommy and Daddy" the boy flicked his shoulders "Granny takes me see their graves, that's what she calls these squares. She puts flowers to them and I go climbing the tallest tree of the forest. I can scare birdies from up there. I love it!"

"A lovely memory, indeed" Severus whispered quietly and reposed his head on his hand again.

"Did you know my mommy and my daddy Presser?” Ted asked suddenly and pulled his knees up to his chest.

Severus nodded silently.

"Do I look like my Mommy or my Daddy?” Ted looked beseechingly at him.

"You got your father's bearing and your mom's hair and eyes" he replied without too much thought.

Ted beamed up to him.

"And your father's boldness, if you climb such big trees at such a young age” he continued feeling Hermione pulling in on herself. He looked at her quickly. She was looking at the drawing with heavy eyes.

"Was my father very brave?” Ted asked him.

Severus pressed his lips and looked at the fire thoughtfully for a couple of silent moments "Yes, he was" he said quietly.

He felt Hermione exhaling next to him. He met her grateful eyes and he frowned slightly. Had she been expecting him to speak bad about Lupin to his son?

Hermione avoided his stare and took away Ted's drawing "Now, enough with your memory. It's the Presser's turn"

Severus snorted at that silly appellation and she looked at him fleetingly with a sad smile. Apparently Ted's happy memory had affected her more than she wanted to show. She pointed her wand at his drawing, which was much more detailed than Ted's. It had a small boy drawn on it and a dark house behind him. When the drawing got animated they saw the sky full of stars and the small boy half levitating, half climbing upon the roof top. He sat there and observed the night sky. That was it. Nothing else happened for a few more moments and Hermione begun wondering why this was the most pleasant childhood memory of Severus.

He felt the need to explain at least partly "I loved watching the stars as a kid…I still do. Albus will attest that the astronomy tower has always been my favourite spot in Hogwarts"

She met his eyes and smiled at him "Beautiful"

"Anything but…” he whispered, but he didn't have the time to finish. In his drawing the house under the boy got suddenly animated. A light turned on at the first floor and two figures appeared in front of the window. They seemed to be arguing and one of the figures struck the other one on the face.

Severus's big hand wrapped around the paper and crumbled it under his fingers "Enough with my memories" he whispered and threw the paper in the fireplace.
"Why did you go to the roof Presser? You liked climbing like me?" Ted asked and rocked quietly back and forth. He was beginning to look sleepy.

"That too…and it was also very quiet up there, very peaceful" he looked at the boy thoughtfully.

"Who was fighting in the house Presser?" Ted asked.

"Two very tired people"

"Why were they tired?"

"Because they were trying to find something that was never there" he whispered.

Hermione shifted next to him.

"What was that?" Ted insisted with the innocence of youth.

"Trust and love" he said quietly and his eyes got lost in the fire.

He felt Hermione shifting again and her shoulder touched his hand as she needed at that moment to have some kind of physical contact with him.

"I love my granny!" Ted yawned.

"And I love you Ted" Hermione smiled sweetly at him "Now you guys ready for my best childhood memory?"

They both nodded.

She opened up her drawing. It was the most detailed of the three and the most well drawn. It was herself as a kid and her parents. She had drawn the kitchen of her house and her garden outside. A kite was caught up in a tree. She flicked her wand and the figures animated. The child run to the kitchen with her pigtails bouncing back and forth and sat on a chair. She took what looked like a cake and devoured it as her mom was washing the dishes. Then she bid her mom goodbye and went out to find her dad. He brought up a ladder and untangled the kite. Hermione and her dad begun flying the kite anew, under a bright sun.

"Such a beautiful memory…” he whispered.

She huffed "Every Sunday my mom would make these amazing vanilla cakes. They didn't have much sugar, my parents were dentists so…you know.." she showed them her teeth, which were mildly crooked. A part of herself she had never been proud off, but never tried to fix them. Her parents accepted her as she was, never forcing her to do them over, something that she loved about them.

He nodded and Ted screeched "I love cupcakes!"

"They were more like very soft, mildly sweet bread cupcakes. I was waiting for them, all week long. So every Sunday morning I would run down to the kitchen and have two cupcakes with warm milk. Then, my dad would be waiting outside for me to fly the kite. He was teaching me, but I had led that kite upon that tree so many times, that at one point it tore apart. I was devastated. Was crying the whole week for it. Guess what? Next Sunday he bought me a new one…." she said feeling deeply reminiscent of the beautiful days of her childhood.

"Couldn't you have fixed it with magic?" Severus asked her.
"Didn't know yet that I was a witch" she flicked her shoulders.

"Can you teach me how to fly a kite auntie?!" Ted cried.

"Of course, darling" she caressed his cheek.

"Can you make me mildly sweet cupcakes?"

"Sure, I still got the recipe from my mom" she smiled at him.

"Can't your mommy make them?"

"I bet she still can"

"Why can't she make them for us?" Ted yawned again.

Hermione felt her throat going dry "She is not here, love"

"Are your parents dead like mine auntie?" Ted asked suddenly.

Her smile got erased and her face fell blank "No" she whispered.

"Where are they?" Ted continued.

"Far far away" she suddenly felt like crying, but a steady large hand slid around nape and found her cheek. She closed her eyes briefly and tried to push back the tears that threatened to betray her to the child. She leaned her head to the side and her forehead touched his.

He slowly begun caressing her cheek, her jawline and her neck. Wanting to offer her some comfort. Knowing that this discussion about her parents was going to ignite pain in her heart. Needing to show her that he was there. She leaned onto him so eagerly that he wanted to draw her inwards. A soft sigh escaped her and she nodded softly, letting him know that she appreciated his gesture deeply. He looked at the fire and for several moments they all remained silent. Ted laid down on the sheepskin and turned his head towards the fire. His legs went up and down unstoppably, betraying the energy the boy still had in him.

Hermione's hand slid up and found his that was caressing her neck softly. She entwined her fingers with his and sighed deeply. Ted, turned his head to them and yawned again "Are you going to kiss Presser Snape?" he asked with that embarrassing childish innocence that always took them by surprise.

She smiled a little and her fingers tightened around his "If I did would it bother you?"

"Yack!" Ted looked totally revolted.

Severus smiled at that reaction.

"Were your mommy and daddy kissing?" Ted's eyelids were heavy.

She nodded "Yes, that's what people do when they love each other"

"Do you love Presser Snape?"

Ted's question fell heavy on the silent room. She frowned deeply and Severus's eyes got lost into the dancing flames of the fire. Ted's eyes closed down slowly as the clock ticked steadily. She didn't know what to say, didn't know what to answer to the boy, but above all she didn't know what to say
about the man that was behind her, caressing her so tenderly. She inhaled and closed her eyes not wanting to speak anymore, feeling under deep scrutiny. He proved her fears unfounded, almost immediately. His fingers pressed hers reassuringly and his forefinger caressed her cheek gently.

That small comforting action showed her that she didn't need to answer Ted's heavy question and that she was not going to lose the intimacy she felt with him at that moment. She pressed his fingers and her free hand touched his face. She caressed the rough stubble on his cheek. Not wanting anything more from life at that moment. Just being there with him felt like heaven. They remained like that silently caressing and offering comfort to each other for a long time. Only when Ted began snoring lightly did she stir.

"He's asleep"

He nodded quietly.

"We should put him to bed" she whispered and turned her head to him. He was looking thoughtfully at the fire. He looked so handsome to her at that moment that she couldn't stop herself. She pulled up and gave him a single lip kiss.

He smiled at her and his forefinger passed over her lips making her shiver. He pushed himself up and helped her with Ted. They laid him on the couch. Hermione fixed the pillows and tucked him in properly whilst Severus tidied up the place as quietly as he could. When they both finished he went and stood by the bedroom door.

She approached him and he quickly pulled her in his arms. He cradled her head close to his chest and caressed her hair softly "Let him rest" he whispered peacefully.

"Are you going to sleep too?" her arms tightened around her waist.

He nodded "Yes…you?"

"I'll transform the sheepskin into a small bed, I'll manage" she smiled.

"Or you can sleep with me" he whispered.

She felt her body tensing involuntarily "What?"

He got out of her embrace and took hold of her hand. He pulled her in his bedroom and she followed more than willingly. When she made to close the door he stopped her "Don't shut it, maybe the boy will need something during the night"

Her teeth worried her bottom lip. He cupped her cheek and looked at her with a sweet smile "What ails you?"

"Severus, in the morning you caused a big fuss on Ted catching us on the act…and now…sleep with you…with the door half open?" she seemed confused.

"I don't intend to do anything to you, with the boy in my chambers Hermione. I will be a perfect gentleman, tonight. I asked you to sleep with me, not make love with me" he whispered close to her.

She bit her lower lip and felt her back curling inwards at his words. A smile brightened up her face.

"Not that I don't want to do that with you, all night long" he kissed her softly.

She exhaled and closed her eyes. A soft nod let him know that she understood exactly what he was
saying.

After a few soft kisses that made her knees loosen under her, he pulled back softly and walked towards his bed "It's your choice, really" he whispered and got in.

She felt cold and in need of his embrace so badly. She felt vulnerable against him. When he lifted up the covers and looked at her she didn't hesitate one bit. She run and almost jumped into the bed happily.

He slithered an arm under her neck and the other above her stomach and drew her back to him. She felt his body covering her back completely. She felt safely tucked inside his arms and she took hold of his arm that was under her neck and drew it towards her chest. She wrapped her arms around it and held it tight against her bosom. A satisfied smile covered her lips.

"I am sorry about the magical game…I wanted to make us have fun…but…" she said softly and kissed the scar tissue of his forearm that was under her chin.

"All those memories are who we are Hermione. They are what shapes us" he whispered and she felt his warm breath raising the hair on her back.

"I would have never thought that my happiest memories would at some point make me feel so sad"

"Do you regret them?"

She nodded "Yes, now that I don't have my parents anymore" she felt her eyes burning again.

His arms tightened around her and a soft kiss landed on her shoulder blade "Never regret them, for they are what created you. You, the beautiful, charismatic, clever and unique, Hermione Granger"

She shuddered "The broken, Hermione Granger…"

"Even that has a beauty of it's own inside. It has given you empathy incomparable…"

She tightened her grasp on his arm and pushed her body on his trying to get lost inside him. She nodded "Thank you".

Her heart was full of unspoken emotions and the heavy question of Teddy was lingering in her mind. She felt her heart losing it's pace and she wanted to open her mouth to tell him. It was too difficult and too soon to say anything though, so she closed her mouth again and she rubbed the back of her head on his chin "Goodnight" she whispered.

A soft kiss landed on her shoulder line "Goodnight" he whispered and she remained silent until she heard his breathing becoming steady behind her. Only then was she able to close her own eyes and sleep, and this turned out to be the most peaceful sleep she had in many years.
Forever yearns the soul

Severus walked musingly through the snowy path down to Hagrid's. Hermione and Teddy were walking a little further off, playing and running after each other. Filling the air with their laughter, making him smile sweetly after them. He crossed his arms tightly around his chest and his smile lingered as his eyes fell on his boots that picked up snow with each step.

How long has it been since he had felt anything close to happiness?

Have I ever felt happiness?…he wondered and shook his head. This, here, with Hermione and Ted's voices ringing around the castle inside the frozen silence of the mountains, was what he had been searching for, all his life. This sense of serenity felt so precious, he was afraid it was a dream. That someone would pinch him awake and he would find himself trapped inside his usual hell. The never ending torment of his imprisonment, both in the physical world and inside his own skin, emotionally. Out of which, he tried so many times to escape in the past through suicide. Something that now, seemed so improbable and unthinkable.

How was it even possible? How could she have managed what everyone else had failed to do all these years? She pulled him slowly out of the darkness. Not that he was out completely, he doubted that he would ever manage that, but she pulled him to a safe place where suicide was not a thought. Were he could walk peacefully towards a tea party, with a smile permanently printed on his lips and his soul feeling less heavy, if not free.

Yet, this sudden realisation that he could feel something more than, guilt, regret, pain and anger was beautiful. He felt almost human, like he could trust other humans, like he belonged amongst them. His darker thoughts always intervened at those moments of momentary bliss, reminding him that expecting to be happy forever was not part of universes's plan for him. He didn't mind. Even if that small happiness lasted a few moments each time, it was worth all his painful journey up to this point. It made him feel that all his sacrifices hadn't been in vain. That his existence had a meaning finally. If humanity had something as beautiful as Hermione in it and something as innocent as Ted, then everything he did to help it was not for nought. He had torn himself to pieces all these years, for something as beautiful and worthy of reverence, as what he was seeing right now. The crystalline laughter of a beautiful woman and the giggling abandonment of a charismatic child. Both alive, safe and well inside a world void of Voldermort's darkness.

He felt his eyes burning hot and he frowned, suddenly captured inside emotions he never called upon.

The world didn't seem dark with Hermione in it. Her light was so bright it blew all that darkness away whenever she was near him. He felt so much depended on her brightness, that he was also afraid. Afraid that if she ever left him, then he would wither onto nothing in the blink of an eye. Still, he didn't want to hang onto her, so she could breathe life onto him. That was too egotistical, too unworthy of her. She didn't deserve an insecure, over depended old man that would suck on her brightness like a bloody vampire. He was not going to be that for her and if that meant that he had to battle himself on many fronts everyday to manage to stand on his feet with dignity, then so be it. She was worth fighting for, she was worth suffering for, in order to offer her the man she deserved. If, at the end of the day, she decided that he was not that man…then…

That's always a possibility…life is a rolling stone…

Then before withering away, he would have made himself a better man. Even in defeat, she would have bettered him. He was not anymore an empty human shell, waiting for death, in order to gain
freedom. Now he had a purpose. He raised his head and looked at them as they begun throwing snow balls on each other. He could enjoy a beautiful day in the company of friends, he could rest calm inside her warm embrace and feel the softness of her skin as the rarest of gifts for his tired hands. He could smile spontaneously with Ted's innocence, with his oblivion of how dark the world could get. For once, not needing to crash that innocence under heavy sarcasm as he always did in the past, when he hated children that were less poisoned than him. With Ted, he felt that he could allow the child to be just that….because, without innocence, youth was only an illusion, and dreams were nothing but a name. Once upon a time, he had lost his innocence and his dreams. During his school years he killed the dreams of others, thinking he was only doing them a favour, because life was hard and never fair. Now?

Now, he needed to see Ted's innocence flourish, because through him, he could envision how another Severus could have lived. Inside another family, possibly. It showed him, what Hermione's bright existence did. That life was not black or white, it was not all good or all bad. It was all shorts of shadows of grey and maroon, blue, pink and green…He wanted to see the child blessed and kept safe forever, because he was representing life and for the first time life didn't seem so bad. His eyes lowered down again and his mind took another contemplative journey as he approached Hagrid's cabin. He didn't see that Ted and Hermione were gone from the path and he didn't hear them as they approached him from the back. He was so deeply immersed in his thoughts that when the first snowball fell between his shoulder blades, he barely stopped and looked back. Hermione's aim though was much sharper and her throw much harder. She caught him on the cheek and his head jerked back violently.

She gasped and covered her mouth, for a moment loosing her laughter as she thought him hurt. Ted picked up another snowball and looked at him with wide eyes expectedly. "Are you ok?" she muttered behind her gloved hand. Her eyes wide.

He turned around and gazed at her pointedly. His brow rose slowly "This-is-war" he whispered. She lowered her hand and stuck out her tongue to him playfully "Catch me if you can!" she hollered and took a step back, getting ready to run.

He stomped his foot down to her direction and she squeaked. She took three more steps back, but seeing that he was just testing the waters she remained. Her laughter filled the air again, making his heart fly.

Ted giggled and threw his snowball catching him on the leg "Who's side are you on?" Severus pointed at him.

"Hers!" Teddy cried and dropped down to gather another snowball.

"Two against one, you cannot win!" she exclaimed and begun making her own snowball.

I can't believe they will draw me in a snowball fight…his mind said, but he was already resting on his heels picking up a ridiculous amount of snow, that his large hands were able to form into an imperfect, but terrifying looking snowball. He turned first to Ted who giggled and run a a few circles around himself in order to avoid an invisible enemy "Now to decide, which one of the two to drench…" he whispered and then gazed back at Hermione.

"Don't you dare! Mine was small!" she hollered and pointed her finger at him.

"It stung like hell" he rejoined and weighted the snowball carefully. Then he begun walking
decisively towards her.

She squeaked and hopped like a rabbit just out of his reach, or so she thought "Severus, not this one, it's huge!" she objected half heartedly. Her smile was bright as the sun.

"Run…" he hissed at her and got ready.

She yelped and turned around, fleeing. He felt another snowball falling at his back and knew that Ted was trying to stop him. He lifted the huge snowball, tried to find the best direction and threw it with all his might. It caught Hermione at her waist and threw her face down at the snow. Her fall was as graceless as a rag doll's and he felt the laughter that was boiling at the put of his stomach, releasing finally into a hearty roar.

She lifted herself up and she looked like she had a white beard around her chin. Seeing that made him laugh even harder. Something amazing felt around his eyes and with delayed surprise he knew they were tears. He was crying from laughter, something he had never done before. His whispery laugh begun dying slowly away as he saw the revenge in her eyes and he kneeled to gather more snow quickly.

A long snowball fight ensued between the three that filled the valley, this time with all their voices and laughers, combined. They played for a long time, partly forgetting the initial reason for being out there, their tea with Hagrid and Charity. Only the appearance of a group of Ravenclaw girls that walked quickly past the cabin made them stop.

Hermione begun cleaning her clothes that were going to be drenched when the snow melted. Her eyes fell at the retreating Ravenclaw group that turned around and looked at them. She knew they were gossiping and she shook her head.

"What's up?" Severus came over and gazed at her vividly red cheeks.

"They were looking at us weird" Hermione moved her head to the Ravenclaw's that left their sight.

"Children tend to do that, with teachers" he whispered quietly.

"Look at me" she muttered and sighed unable to find a place that was presentable upon her.

He caught a long tendril between his pointer and middle finger "I cannot stop looking at you" he whispered.

She paused and bit both lips. Her cheeks became even redder "I look like a flower girl. How can I command respect from my students?"

"The difference between a flower girl and a lady is not how she behaves, but how she is treated" he said quietly at her and took a step closer. He pushed that long wet strand behind her shoulder as his eyes adored her whole face.

She gazed at him with such intense gratefulness, but his beautiful words had managed to silence her again. Her hand cupped his cheek and she came closer, wanting to kiss him in order to show how much she appreciated his tender words. "Wow" she muttered and had barely touched his lips, when…

"Auntie, yack!" Ted made her look down. He was looking at them with a completely disgusted expression.

She rolled her eyes "Ok, Teddy, we got it"
He huffed and pushed her gently away. She lowered her eyes and took firm hold of his hand instead. "Can I hold his hand at least?"

Ted looked at them critically and after a moment nodded with monumental seriousness "Yes!" he said and walked towards Hagrid's cabin. "Now, are you guys coming?" he said.

She smiled brightly and begun grooming him and cleaning the remaining snow from his hair and scarf.

He tightened his hand around hers "OCDing on me again?" he whispered and wrapped his hand behind her head. When those long digits got buried under her hair and started massaging her scalp she shivered in pleasure.

"Mmmm… do you mind?" she whispered gently and offered a fleeting look at Teddy that had reached the door and was banging on it with all his heart. He was not looking at them.

His hand turned her around quickly and his mouth covered hers. The sweetness and warmth she felt as his wet lips opened up was unbearable. She retaliated the kiss with all her heart, but before she had the time to enjoy it thoroughly, his fingers tightened around her hair and pulled her back, gently. She purred the question "Why?" with teasingly disappointed eyes.

Severus tilted his head towards the cabin, where Charity was waiting for them at the door patiently.

Hermione snorted in understanding why he cut their kiss short and pulled him by the hand. Soon they were welcomed inside. The first thing that struck him upon entering was the large and messily ornamented Christmas tree that stood between the fireplace and the kitchen. It was also the first thing that Teddy noticed, as expected. He was already in front of it messing with the wooden ornaments.

"What can I get you darling? Some butter bear? Coffee?" Charity asked from the kitchen.

"Butter-bear will be lovely" she smiled.

"Look Auntie! A Christmas tree! Santa Claus will come to Hagrid too! Can we make our Christmas Tree tonight?"

"Uhmm…Ted… you are right. With this and that I forgot that probably today they have fixed the greatest and tallest indoor Christmas Tree, you have ever seen in your life! At the Great Hall!" she leaned over and caressed his nose with the tip of her finger.

"Can I go see now!?" Ted's eyes became huge.

"No, we are on a visit now. You will see it tomorrow" she rejoined and gave her coat at Severus with a thankful smile.

"Ok, can we make our tree tonight? Can we? Can we? Can we?" Ted begun jumping in pure glee at the prospect.

"I am too tired tonight honey" she said with regret "Besides in a week from now I am taking you back to your Granny. She will have a huge tree waiting for you at home!"

Severus looked quickly at them and felt his heart sinking for a brief dark moment. They were leaving in a week from now. It was not as if Hermione was not going to return, but he felt a small pang of loss that was unexpected. He was not a free man. This misadventure at the Ministry had not assisted him anywhere. He was still under probation and unable to go with them as she had asked him, three days ago.
"You need to check the car with a mechanic before you attempt to drive at the motorway" he spoke prudently.

"Won't it last with what you did?" she looked back at him.

His eyes fell on Hagrid's long leather shirt and he pursed his lips "No".

"Ok, I will, although I hope you'd come along with and help us out" she sat down at a chair and took Charity's offer for a cup of butter-bear.

"Wish I could" he whispered disheartened.

"Butter-bear, tea, coffee…?" Charity asked him with a sweet smile.

"Warmed up, red wine" he surprised her.

Hermione looked up wistfully °Scratch that butter-bear! I want what he's got!" she pointed at him.

Charity laughed °You guys are impossible, ok…Hagrid, you got any red wine, or do we have to go to the kitchens to get some?"

"Sure do!" the Half Giant moved about the kitchen and dug up a bottle.

"Where did yeh remember the old boiled wine Professur? We haven't had tha' in Hogwarts since I can remember" Hagrid turned at him truly interested.

"You haven't had it" Severus whispered and took a chair at the table.

"Speaks the alcohol connoisseur of the school district" Charity chimed in more playfully than not, but his brow rose to the ceiling.

Hermione winced and sucked in air as she felt the insinuation of Charity's words, but wanted to flatten them under a more playful attitude.

He shook his head dismissively and looked at Teddy that was trying to bury himself under the tree.

"Don't worry darling, Severus knows that I am teasing him. He's not so easily offended by me…right?" Charity looked behind her back as she put the wine on a small cauldron in order to bring it to a mild shimmer.

"Right…" he whispered and gazed back at Hermione, whose face lit up with a bright smile.

"Did yeh see tha' Professur?" Hagrid sat down heavily and a newspaper landed in front of Severus.

He picked it up and read the title. Immediately his lips pressed testily °Saw it, read it, had a good talk with Minerva about it"

"What's that?" Hermione tried to lean near him to see, but he threw the paper to her, as if he wanted nothing to do with it.

"That was the reason Minerva called on you first thing after breakfast?" Charity looked over his shoulder and served him the slightly warm wine. Then she served Hermione and herself.

"Me too!" Hagrid raised his cup and she served him.

Severus nodded.
Hermione read the article quietly for a few moments. It spoke about Alexander Borovic, the strongest and most capable Auror of the Ministry having his licence revoked for inappropriate use of Dark Magic upon prisoners. The article spoke extensively about the Auror's history with the Death Eaters, the death of his wife and that he was suspected of emotional and psychological instability for decades now, since the first war. Minister Shackelbolt was declaring how surprised he was by this gruesome turn of events. He was going to make sure Borovic was thoroughly checked by the psychiatric ward of St. Mungo hospital and afterwards come into a heavy questioning by the internal affairs about what happened, by orders of the Chief Auror, Harry Potter. The name of Severus was thankfully nowhere. She sighed and placed the paper on the table, face down.

"Thank Gods, Harry delivered" she flicked her head, partly avenged for Severus's condition. She gazed at the bluish bruise on his cheek.

Severus was observing thoughtfully his forefinger, that was drumming at the table. Upon that, he gazed at her for a moment sideways.

"What did Minerva say?" Charity drunk some warm wine.

"Hagrid! Can I take down the train and play down here?" Teddy's happy voice chimed in. Hermione looked up. He was pointing at a small hand made wagon that was hanging with a thread from the tree.

"Sure yeh can" Hagrid smiled widely behind his beard.

"Yipee!" Teddy said and brought the train down. He got buried behind the tree and Fang came out to smell him and figure out what that small human was doing.

"So?" Charity sat down never forgetting her question.

Severus took his cup and rolled it between his fingers "Minerva was full of grandiose words of vengeance and justice, as always. All this matters little" he whispered.

"How can you say that? The man that abused you, was committed in a psychiatric ward" Hermione frowned unable to understand his coldness.

"So I must derive some kind of perverted pleasure from that? Where does that help my situation?…" he looked at her solemnly.

She inhaled in understanding and remained silent.

He gave her a curt nod "Nowhere"

"At least he cannot harm any other people" Charity shook her head.

"Well, excuse me for being adolescent here…” Hermione gazed at him pointedly and he met her eyes steadily "but, I for one, am happy that he is out of the picture"

He took a hefty sip out of his drink "I would have preferred a few days off my prison as payment for getting beaten up by him" he whispered quietly.

She bit the inside of her lip and felt her breath catching.

"Not that you didn't mess up his visage…in turn" Charity turned the paper to show Borovic's picture as he was wrapped up around a nose that looked double it's original size. The purple bruising from the internal bleeding inside his skull was all over his lower eyes to the middle of his cheeks.
Admittedly for one punch, he had delivered quite a strike, there.

Hermione snorted and covered her mouth, notwithstanding that Severus seemed seriously moody at that moment.

"I assure you, he just slipped and fell on my fist" he whispered with a lofty side smile.

Charity nodded and waved him off "Did he aim for the nose in particular, or was it accidental?"

"I think he aimed it, exactly" Severus begun feeling a bit better as the conversation took a more playful tone.

"Choo…Chooooooooo!" Teddy said and came over to them on hands and knees. Fang followed him and begun barking.

"Here, boy, sit down!" Hagrid said and Fang came over to him for a second, before coming next to Severus and placing his head on his knees.

He scratched it's head inattentively "Ted?" he whispered.

Immediately the boy stopped and looked at him "Yes?"

"Why don't you challenge Hagrid on a game of Gobstones?" he said with a devilish smirk on his lips that Hermione understood immediately.

"Yeah!" Ted said and stood up quickly.

"A challeng' Professur? Wha' will the looser do?" Hagrid asked and got up to bring the game. He placed it at the floor as the table was occupied by them already.

"Drink a cup of warm wine each time he looses" Severus raised his own and emptied it easily.

"Teddy drink wine?" Hermione's eyes popped up.

"He drinks two sips of coco" he winked at her and gave Charity the signal to refill his cup.

Hermione nodded happily and tried to imitate him. She begun gulping down her wine only to stop after four sips and fan her mouth "How can you do that?" she whispered.

His hand reached out and landed on her thigh, focusing her attention on the gamers "Hagrid doesn't know, you've been tutoring the boy, he is going to loose and get drunk" she tried.

Severus nodded and drunk some more. A small snort came from him.

"You are the devil" she snickered and felt his fingers tightening around her thigh. A touch that she was enjoying thoroughly.

"Yeh are not gonna get involve' Professur?" Hagrid pointed at him warningly.

Severus shook his head with a serious face "No"

Hermione turned around and looked at Charity who winked at her and mouthed "Boys". The younger witch giggled and so the time passed by easily for all of them.

Hagrid and Teddy didn't play one game, but ten. Hagrid lost indeed five to six and by the end, he was totally drunk and Teddy was at the top of the world. Truth be told, Severus had drunk an equal
amount to Hagrid, but he seemed totally unaffected and Hermione...well...she was slightly tipsy as she was finishing her fourth cup. The only one still having her wits about her was Charity, who took over the role of house keeper for Hagrid. After dinner the Half Giant sprawled himself upon his couch, not sleeping, but not really with them either.

Ted was playing with Fang catch the stick, that Hermione had magicked. The three of them were still sitting at the table and Hermione was telling them a story about her childhood years that got instigated by Charity's question "What was it that made you such a book lover?"

To which Hermione answered without even stopping to take a breath "Was not a popular kid in my neighbourhood. I had all these bushy hair and crooked teeth..."

Charity shook her head "Slightly and they give you such a unique and pretty smile"

Hermione waved her off "Kids used to make fun of me. Said, my hair was so puffed up that a strong gust of wind would pick me up and fly me to China. I was very thin, so up to a certain age I believed them. Not to mention that they said I could open cans with my teeth. So I turned to my family, my best friend Layla and my books. Layla wore glasses and she was slightly overweight, so as underdogs we found company in each other. She also loved books. We used to have a book convention every second Sunday. We each brought a book that we wanted the other person to read and made a deal to finish it during the week. Some kind of race to the next Sunday so to say. That made me learn how to read fast, but begun enjoying books more and more. So there you have it... ended up a larger version of myself. Not so bushy hair anymore, since they are down by the waist, still crooked teeth and a unsurpassed love for my books"

Severus had another question for her and didn't seem to care about her bodily insecurities. He didn't seem to have even noticed them "When did you first start using magic?"

Her eyes brightened up "Remember when you asked why I didn't fix the kite that tore by magic?"

He nodded.

"Truth is at some point I got pissed with another kite that was stuck up on a tree and I brought it down by using magic without understanding it. I also brought down the branch on my poor dad's head" she winced and hissed.

Charity covered her mouth "Oh, dear"

"Fifteen stitches" Hermione nodded regretfully.

Charity laughed and shook her head.

"Were your parents able to explain what happened?" Severus smiled at that memory of hers.

"No, thankfully the letter from Hogwarts came fifteen days later and my agony ended" she rejoined.

"Agony?" he asked.

"I thought I was possessed by a ghost" she leaned over to him and spoke secretively. A small giggle escaped her when she saw his solemn expression.

His hand wrapped behind her nape and he smiled sweetly at her "You gave your parents a lot of trouble"

"What? You thought that I was easy, because I am quiet? You have no idea" she smiled brightly at
him. Not even caring about her teeth. In front of him she didn't feel that she needed to hide any part of her body she didn't like. He was accepting her exactly like she was and that was so beautiful and fulfilling. His fingers caressed the small hair on the back of her neck and his eyes passed from every inch of her face for a few silent moments, were she felt her stomach twisting deliciously at his solemn attention.

"Think we should go?" he whispered quietly at her.

She nodded and turned her head sideways and caressed his forearm with her chin "If you want".

He nodded softly.

She turned to the child "Teddy, love, it's late. I think we should let uncle Hagrid and Charity rest now, ok?"

Teddy stopped running after Fang and looked heavily hurt "Nooooo!" he whined.

"Come on now! Be careful how you act. We've talked about this before. When I say the visit is over, then it's done. No debates!" she moved her finger steadily in negation.

"Come on Auntie…I wanted to sleep at Hagrid's for once!" Ted cried and fell on his back dejected.

"Of course not, we haven't even asked Hagrid if he wants you for a sleep over!" Hermione kissed Severus's forearm and stood up to take their coats and pick up Teddy.

The child run to the Half Giant and climb up on his stomach "Can I sleep with you uncle Hagrid?" he said and moved up and down on him.

Hagrid coughed "Sure yeh can".

"Hagrid, don't encourage him, for heaven's sake. We'll never be able to get him out of your place, if you say such things" Hermione turned thankfully to Severus who held her coat in order to wear it.

"So what?" Charity was the one that spoke this time from the kitchen.

"Yeah! Why not! Uncle Hagrid lets me sleep!" Ted chimed in with a pouting lip.

"I haven't arranged this …I don't think so…no" she shook her head.

"You've got a problem to a having a night off, since Hagrid is available?" Charity asked wiping her hands on a towel.

Hermione sighed "I mean, I wouldn't have a problem, but Hagrid is half drunk out of his wits. He cannot care for the boy"

"Yes I can!" the Half Giant said and as if to answer her worries, he sat up and looked at her through hazy eyes.

"I'll remain and make him my strong coffee. I'll make sure they are both ok, before I retire. Will that do?" Charity smiled knowingly at her.

Hermione hesitated obviously and turned at Severus. He shook his head and flicked his shoulders. It was her decision to make. She turned at Teddy.

"Can I Auntie, please!" the boy whined again and then giggled as Hagrid tickled him.
"He's gonna be fine 'ere, Mione" Hagrid said with a laugh of his own when the boy tickled his sides.

"Uhm, I don't know…I mean, if you are ok with this Hagrid, I guess so" she said with some hesitation. She didn't want to burden anyone with the care of Ted.

"Go, rest, both of you need some time off….enjoy each other" Charity winked at them both and turned them towards the door "The boy will be fine here" she repeated.

"I mean, if you are sure" Hermione tried to look behind her.

"Goodnight Auntie!" Ted run up to her and she embraced him.

"You will listen to uncle Hagrid, be a good boy and I will pick you up first thing tomorrow morning ok?" she caressed his blue hair.

"Yes!" Ted beamed up to her. Then he run and hugged Severus tightly.

He caressed the child's hair also "Goodnight, son" he whispered with far more care than he gave himself credit for.

****…****

Soon after Charity kicked them out, they walked through a very quiet castle that was reposing to her apartments. When she unlocked the door, he didn't let go of her hand. She turned and looked at him confused for a moment. He pulled her back and kissed her softly. She entwined her fingers under his hair and melted onto him forgetting that they were doing that at the corridor.

He pulled back and his finger caressed her cheek softly "Take care to rest well tonight" he whispered at her.

"What do you think you are doing?" she asked with a small frown.

"Bidding you a proper goodnight?" he asked with a small crease on his brow and his eyes fell on her lips.

"You intend to go back to your chambers?" she asked still unable to believe that he wanted to leave her.

"I thought that would be appropriate, yes" he whispered.

"What am I going to do with you?…" she asked mostly at herself and then pulled back from him.

He looked at her mesmerised for a few seconds, but she didn't allow him the time. She took hold of his hand and pulled him into her apartments "Come, there is something I wanted to show you" she said.

When they were inside she ignited the fire magically and got rid of her coat, scarf, gloves and shoes. Then she moved past the living room and to a smaller room next to her study. He was till standing in the middle of the room.

She stopped by the threshold and pursed her lips "Coming?" she raised her brows.

He followed her and they entered what looked like a small laboratory. It was a small guest room that she had turned to a working station. She had a small cauldron above a magically sustained fire that was already in stasis. She was in the process of making a potion. He walked in and unbuttoned his coat "You've done wonders to this place" he said in admiration and took off his coat. He reposed it at
the back of a chair and picked up some of her papers and begun shuffling through them with pure academic interest.

She giggled and unfroze the ongoing potion. Immediately the fire blazed and the sounds of bubbling liquid brought the room to life "I've started making the new healing potion. I used your recommendations for a steady basis and currently I am in the middle of the process"

He looked up from the papers and raised his brow "Very wise of you Miss Granger" his whisper took on a professional tone she remembered so well from school, although in view of their current relationship, it affected her in other more physical ways now.

She took two bezoars from her working table and crushed them under the flat of her knife "Thank your Professor Snape" she tried to sound as professional as he was. She dared a look behind her. He was gazing intensely at her from above the papers. Her heart skirted. She bit her lower lip and smiled slyly at him before returning to her work.

She heard the shuffling behind her and instantly her body tensed in anticipation. Did he even comprehend how much she wanted to be left alone with him, all this time? She decided to test the waters with him "You know, I think Charity wanted to keep Teddy on purpose, this evening"

"Do you?" he whispered quizzically.

She threw the mashed bezoar into the cauldron and took up the scoop. She remembered the steps by heart and she had to stir clockwise twenty times, before cutting the leafs of a mandrake in very small pieces and then adding them "Yes, I think she wanted to give us a chance to be alone" she mentioned non challantly.

"Did she?" he whispered and approached behind her.

She tensed and felt her throat going dry. She nodded, suddenly very aware of his presence so close up behind her. She found herself unable to speak.

His strong arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her softly until her back was touching him. She felt a strong shudder run through her. She saw her own notes sliding in front of her at the table and the hand that was above her stomach pointed at something on the page. She squinted in order to see better. His right hand slid down her arm and took hold of the scoop above her hand. He stilled her motion.

"What?" she asked confused and tried to discern her letters at the notes that he was pointing.

"Anti-clockwise…” he whispered close to her ear and she lost all capacity to concentrate either on her notes, nor at her potion.

"Shit, did I just destroy it?” she wondered, not really caring. Her eyes were already half closed. She was blissfully aware of his hot breath as his lips dragged softly on her earlobe and then planted a careful kiss under it.

"No, but I would suggest you put the potion in stasis again. You are in no condition to work on it tonight" he exhaled and his lips dragged on the tender skin of her neck slowly, tormenting her.

She released a soft moan and closed her eyes. Her head rolled back to his shoulder in abandonment and her hand flicked towards the potion, putting it in stasis.

"Did you?" he asked suddenly and his tongue rolled out. It traced along her neck, raising the hair on her body and making her push back to him.
Her hand went back in search for his head. She tightened her grip on his hair and pulled him in "Did I, what…” she mumbled totally confused.

"Want to find a chance alone with me, tonight?” he asked and kissed her collar bone.

Her head nodded instinctively "Yes” she exhaled.

One hand kept her on him by the waist and the other run up her stomach and reached her breasts. He found the edge of her shirt and opened up two buttons. She stilled in expectation with her mouth open. He pulled the shirt back and she felt the air hitting the warm skin of her breast. His fingers slid softly on her and she swallowed hard. When he found the edge of her bra and pulled her breast above it with no hesitations, her inner muscles tightened hungrily. Her peak stood on attention before his forefinger and thumb pinched it gently and twisted it, and her out of reason.

Her breath hitched and her fingers twisted painfully on his hair. Her free hand went back and clawed his hip, locking him upon her. Needing to show him, her intentions "Severus…” she purred.

"I wanted to get you alone since yesterday” he whispered and his own breath was laboured. His mouth opened up and sucked her neck in all earnest. She felt like she was loosing her mind as his fingers twisted her nipple making her writhe in agony and his lips sucked her demandingly. She melted under him.

"I want to hear you tell me” she muttered and pushed back to him, trying to feel him above their clothes. She needed him more than she had ever needed a man and she wanted him to know it, too.

"I need you” he whispered to her and pinched her nipple hard, sending electricity down her spine.

She gasped and felt her eyes rolling inside her head "Say my name” she tightened her grip on his hair, pulling his lips to her ear again. Her stomach twisting around itself and her lower region tensing and contracting even at the idea of making love to him.

"I need you tonight, Hermione” he whispered and his voice broke when she pushed herself back to him in response.

"Me too…you don't know how much…” she muttered, unsure he had even heard her. It felt more a thought than actual words. She turned around and looked at him through the haze that his touch had created upon her vision. His eyes were dilated and so intense, her core melted under them. She slowly pushed him back towards the living room. She pushed him towards the couch until it caught the back of his knees. He sat down heavily and she bend over him.

She kissed him hungrily, almost desperately, never wanting to loose him again. Somehow that action was her physical declaration upon is existence in this world. Her fingers entwined in his hair and tightened up painfully on him. He gasped in her mouth and she straddled him quickly, not wanting to give this a chance to stop again. As their bodies touched she felt him stirring hot against her and whimpered.

His arms came up her sides and he drew her inwards. This time it was his kiss that melted the smile away from her mouth, into a soft sigh of pleasure. His hand trailed up her thigh and passed from her hips, as his mouth worried her neck. Her nails clutched his shoulders and she hissed as his hands begun unbuttoning her shirt.

She bit her lower lip and opened up the knuckles of her hand that seemed tight as hell on his shoulder. She brought her hand down his chest and stomach and placed it between them. The sharp intake of breath from her made her smile as she took firm hold of him, above his trousers. She
pushed her hips above her hand.

He swallowed and his hand got buried in her hair. His lips crushed on her with such a bruising need that she felt her core exploding in heat. Her hand moved on him steadily and she felt his tongue pausing for a second at her ministrations. His hands opened up her shirt and pulled her other breast above the bra. His large palm cupped it and tightened it’s grip gently around it. Her breath shuddered at his touch and she pressed her torso on his hand desperately searching for more skin contact.

"Get off these fucking clothes" she muttered and pushed away from him. She drew her sweater above her head quickly and at the same time his hands uncapped her bra which she threw away. In messy unison they took off his turtleneck and t-shirt.

They both paused for a second to look appreciatively at each other. He was very well build and lean, with prominent muscles on his arms and shoulders, but his torso was full of scars also…her eyes watered. He saw, but didn't allow her to lose momentum.

He pulled her on him and cradled her face "Will this ugliness stop you?"

She frowned and pressed her cheek on his "Nothing will…” she whispered and then found his mouth again. Claiming him, her hands unbelting him in passionate anguish. She wanted everything he could give her and this time she didn't want anyone to bother them. No doors knocking or opening, no arrests happening, no Teddy to wake up and ask for milk…they were alone in there with no one to stop them. The anticipation throbbed into pain between her legs as she freed him. She run her tongue on her palm and reached down to him. Her mouth got buried on his neck, trailing hotly around his scars. Enjoying the tremble and the hotness of his breath near her ear as she was the one controlling his pleasure. Feeling the calluses of his palms scratching her nipples sending jolts of electricity down her spine that wounded up in the pit of her stomach.

One stay large hand pulled back her skirt and found her pantyhose "Fuck" he hissed near her neck and released her breast to put both hands on that damn piece of clothing. Two fingers got buried in it and drew it apart easily and she purred. Her hand momentarily paused on him. She concentrated at his palm that cupped her free mount now above her underwear. She felt her own wetness spreading inside the material and pushed against his palm eager for some relief. That aroused her even more. He pulled the material aside and his long finger spread her apart deftly. Her eyes rolled in pleasure and her body convulsed as his finger dove inside her and then spread her liquids over her centre. Her mouth opened up and her hand tightened around him desperately.

He hissed and tried to find her lips. Upon touch her tongue rolled out and gained access deep in his mouth. She didn't want anymore foreplay…she just needed him inside her. With no words needed she moved her pelvis up and pulled him to her entrance. In one swift move she buried him inside her. They both gasped upon unison and she bit her lower lip. Her eyes squeezed tight and she felt him stretching her in a way she hadn't felt in a long time. She wanted to remain motionless, wanting to keep him trapped there forever, but her body betrayed her and begun moving instinctually, seeking pleasure from him.

His arms wrapped around her back and his face got buried in her breasts. She felt each strained pant upon her nipple, making her core twist deliciously around itself. Her hands grabbed his shoulders for support and her cheek rested on the top of his head as they moved slowly at first trying to get used to each other. Hermione got lost in the feelings of her body and in the reactions of his, listening to his pants and small gasps when she plunged herself deeper, feeling the sweat running down her back and spreading around his forearms. Sensing his legs opening up under her and his hips grinding upwards on her, trying to gain even more access. The smell of chamomile coming from his hair and their softness upon her forearms as their pace slowly increased and became steadier.
As their pace joined quicker, the sounds around her became thicker, more sharp in her ears. As if all her senses were coming ablaze. His breath felt scorching hot on her breast and she tried to make his mouth come in contact with it. He followed her cue and she felt his tongue trailing around that peak of nerve endings. Her body immediately picked up speed and he followed her closely. They moved like that in front of the fire for a long time in unison. Their clothes rustling as their bodies ground upon each other desperately and their breaths came in sharp gasps.

He wound her up closer and closer to the edge with his furious kisses and his deep steady thrusts, until finally her pants became small sobs and her fingers tightened painfully around his shoulders. She felt her body tightening like an arrow upon a bow and she couldn't stop but mumble to him "Please…don't stop".

Her own body moved on him more vigorously and after each thrust she felt her core a inch closer to tipping over the edge. When finally her release came on she opened her mouth and her guttural cry got buried on his shoulder line along with her teeth. Her body convulsed around his, with an intensity that made her eyes water and she sunk her teeth even further. Wanting to eat him alive. He continued his fast pace as she was coming down from the heavens and soon enough she felt him swell inside and she knew he was coming apart for her. She released his bloody shoulder and crushed her lips on his ear "yes…". He groaned heavily and kissed her deeply as he released his passion for her again and again inside her. They kept moving slower and slower with the reminders of their sexual arousal, thoroughly sated, until they finally stopped.

Even then they didn't want to let each other go. They held tight for a long time, caressing each other. Her legs were beginning to hurt, but she was unwilling to get off him. She felt the heat of the fire on her back and sweat running like water between his arms and her spine and she didn't mind. She just wanted to remain like that forever. It was not as if she hadn't made good love with Ron. She had been thoroughly satisfied in the past, but this, here…She felt her heart fluttering. This felt so much more than satisfaction of the flesh. This was beyond simply reaching the wanted climax, which happened with such an intensity, it blew her mind away. All this echoed inside her soul…the way they held each other, the sound of his heart mixed with her own. The unsurpassed need to be one with him. She sighed deeply and a sweet smile spread on her lips "Be still my heart" she whispered and her fingers caressed his scalp that she had clawed so brutally a few minutes ago.

"I couldn't have felt better…" she squeezed him wantonly "You?"

"Breathless…wordless" he whispered and his fingers run up her spine, making her shudder.

She kissed his cheek and as she turned she saw his bloody shoulder line and her heart gripped. She bit her lower lip in regret and her touch on the wound was as light as a feather "I hurt you quite a bit, here, forgive me" she muttered, not knowing what to say to him. She hadn't realised how hard she had bit down on him when she was reaching the heavens.

"Just a love bite, don't fret" he said quietly and kissed her cleavage.

"That'a love chunkfull…Severus, I almost took a big bite out of you" she declared, surprised at the ferocity with which she was claiming him.

"Do you see me complaining?" he moved and laid her down to the couch.

"Let me fix it for you" she tried to get hold of her wand that was discarded along with her clothes in front of the fireplace.
"No useless wand waving on me, please" he smiled sweetly at her and he cleaned some hair from her sweaty forehead.

"Useless? There is a huge bloody bite mark there…that's still mildly bleeding!" she exclaimed and pointed her wand on him.

He took hold of her hand and pinned it next to her head. He held her gently, but decisively "I'll give you a couple of bite marks and then we'll be even" he smiled close to her mouth.

"So deep and bloody?" she cringed, but was unable not to smile at his playful nature. He was the last man she would have thought as playful in bed, yet here he was coming down to her neck and softly biting her, making her screech and try to get out of his grip.

"Whatever comes out…I don't know" he whispered and then went lower and bit on her cleavage. She yelped and laughed this time, trying to slither her wrist out of his hand, but he kept her still.

"Severus, I am getting ticklish…!" she giggled.

"I'll fix that immediately my lady" he whispered and the next bite he took, made her loose her laugh and throw back her head. As his mouth opened up and took her breast, she felt her eyes rolling back and gasped. She forgot all about healing him. He dragged his mouth on it and when it was almost out his teeth bit lightly on her peak, rolling the top of it around his tongue.

She hissed and arched her body up to him, feeling her inner muscles twitching in need again. Her stomach tightened in excitement and the wand fell out of her hand "Oh, fucking hell…" she whispered and her leg wrapped around his hips, bringing him down to her.

He laughed lightly and released her breast, something that she objected audibly upon with a groan of disappointment. He moved down her stomach and before she could understand what was happening he turned to her side and took a big bite out of that. She hollered and jerked her body off the couch "No! Get off, get off, get off!" she giggled loudly.

He took hold of both hands and pined them at the couch next to her body, keeping her immobile "Shush your little mouth, they are going to hear you out in the corridors" he whispered and released her side, letting her pant in relief.

"I don't care! I am going to kill you for this!" she warned him playfully.

"I wonder if you are ticklish on your thighs" he whispered thoughtfully and worked his way down there.

She squealed and tried to move out of his grasp. Her legs tried to kick him off "Yes I am, if you don't stop I am going to yell bloody murder!" she tried.

"I am sure, you'll try" he said and reached the top of her thighs.

"Try? I'll do it! I promise!" she said and tried to look at him from her inclined position.

"I don't think you'll have a breath in order to do that" he said mystically.

She frowned and tried to understand what he was doing "What?", but then her mouth opened up in a surprised O shape and her movements all froze in place, as he buried his mouth in her most intimate place with no hesitations. Now, she understood what he meant about being breathless, because as his mouth and tongue started working her up, everything around her turned to black. Her legs that were trying to kick him off a moment ago then opened up and wrapped around his shoulders and back,
pulling him in. Her hands that were trying to twist out of his grip got released, only to be buried in
his hair, pulling his head on her. Her body arched out of the couch not in objection, but in growing
passion. Her gasps were sharp like whips and her countenance was contorted in the ultimate pleasure
as he led her quickly and deftly to her release. Making her groan and moan loud enough to be heard
outside, making him not want to silence her, but make her moan louder still. When he was satisfied
that she had no breath left indeed, he got up on her body and entered her swiftly for the second time
that evening, making her gasp a loud "Fuck!" at his sudden intrusion.

He made love to her, taking his time. Caressing and kissing every inch of skin he could find available
as his thrusts worked her up inch by inch again from zero. She let go to him, letting him use her for
his pleasure and for hers. She abandoned her body completely and enjoyed the way he worked her
up slowly this time, dragging her moans along with his steady thrusts that seemed to go on forever.
Her body obeyed his command and slowly it worked up into another fiery inferno that consumed
her. Just when she thought that it was simply impossible to climax for a third time, her body surprised
her and she fell off the edge of the world with every limp wrapped tightly around him. He followed
soon after.

An hour later they were both dozing off there at the couch, covered with a duvet that he brought
over. Her eyes were half closing as she was watching the flames. Feeling blissful and thoroughly
satisfied, but above all cared for. That was the reason that few tears escaped her eyes and rolled
down her cheek, staining the pillow. She sighed and closed her eyes, letting a few more tears go. The
she kissed the palm of his hand and snuggled back to him. She didn't even felt the need to say
goodnight. She knew he was half asleep already by the sound of his steady breath near her ear. She
closed her eyes and let go, feeling the safest she had ever felt in years.
"Here, they are here, Presser" Teddy pulled him by the hand. They reached the questionable aisle and Severus looked at the scene that had made Teddy come running to him.

A small group of two boys and two girls, all of them Slytherin. One of the boys was holding two bottle bottoms that were magicked away from the bottle itself, in front of his eyes. His shirt was out of his trousers and colourful ribbons were sticking out of his hair. He was walking about crookedly and was trying to imitate Professor Trelawney's voice. The spectators were giggling.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva. But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous" the boy was trying to manipulate his voice accordingly.

The rest of the kids began laughing out loud.

Severus crossed his arms and raised his brow critically. That is when two spectators that were closest to him, noticed and tried to inform their friend.

"Rob…shit…Rob!" the girl offered Severus a regretful smile, which he shunned away by raising his brow even higher. The girl pushed the one in front of her who turned bothered "Tell him to shut up!" she said and pointed behind her with her head.

The other girl paled and bit her lower lip "Robert!" she cried loud enough to notify the whole library.

The boy turned around holding the bottle bottoms in front of his eyes. He saw the distorted outline of Severus and threw them quickly at the floor. Then he took as many colourful ribbons as he could out of his hair and tried to fix his shirt "Professor, Uhm, Hi" he muttered knowing that he was in deep trouble.

"I suggest you try to make your excuse, phenomenally good" Severus whispered.

The boy looked for support from his audience, but they were already acting like they were occupied with their books. Not wanting part of what was going to happen.

"I am waiting" Severus said and uncrossed his arms. He stood above the most vocal supporter of the clown and raised his brow critically when he saw that she was trying to study meticulously a book that was upside down. He reached out, feeling sort of temper and pulled the book from under her. The girl jerked nervously and looked at him confused. He raised both brows daring her to speak. She lowered her head and prayed for invisibility.

"We were just having some innocent fun Professor" Robert Brighton mumbled and took a step away from Severus.

"You were making fun of Professor Trelawney" he cleared out and when he heard the girl next to him hicked with uneasiness he smacked her with the book on the back of her head.

"Ouch!" she cried and cradled her head.

"You cannot hit us!" another boy tried to act brave in front of his friends.

"Says who?" he glared at him sharply.
"The rules?" the boy seemed uncertain under his heavy scrutiny.

"I don't play by the rules" Severus whispered menacingly.

"If my parents find out your hit me…" the offended girl begun, but his warning stare made her stop.

"They will what Miss Slater?" he drawled.

She shook her head not knowing what to tell him. He smacked the book on her head again, but this time she didn't dare say anything. He turned towards the clown that was pale as a sheet by now "Thirty points from Slytherin Mr. Brighton…".

The boy hissed and lowered his eyes "and you'll be lucky if I forget to mention the incident to the Headmistress", then he turned at the girl he had smacked twice "and five points from you Miss Slater"

"Why?!" she asked with wide pleading eyes.

"For laughing out loud in my library" he raised his brow daring her to speak.

She didn't.

"Pick up your books and get the hell out of here, before I hex you back to your parents, with those bottle bottoms permanently stuck on your eyes!" he hissed.

They moved in confusion, picked up their things and scuttered quickly out of the library with scared looks behind their backs.

He pressed his lips and placed the book down feeling on edge. One thing that he couldn't abide was students making fun of Professors. Especially Sybil, who didn't carry a full deck, to begin with. His day had started out rather heavily, as it was the first day back to work after the Ministry incident. He woke up in Hermione's apartments with her buried in his arms, but he didn't get the chance to enjoy the warmth that embrace offered him. She made him get up and get dressed as it was the time for him to open the library and for her to go get Teddy from Hagrid. Her class begun at the second period. When he asked her what she was planning to do with the kid until late noon when she finished, she couldn't answer to him. At which point, he told her calmly to go take a shower, get dressed and have proper breakfast. He was going to go pick up Ted and bring him at the library with him, as usual.

She embraced and kissed him thoroughly, wanting to thank him not only for taking care of Teddy this morning, but also for giving her the chance to take a bath and some coffee, before her hectic day begun. Wanting to enjoy more than a few kisses with her, he pushed her into the bathroom regretfully and walked down to Hagrid's to pick Teddy up. Thankfully, Hagrid offered him a quick cup of coffee and that is how he ended up immersed in his chores with Ted as a helper one more time.

"I liked it when you smashed that book on her head!" Teddy laughed and tried to climb up on the stool.

"I liked it too" he admitted with a smirk and picked Teddy up. He placed him on the stool and turned to his papers. He put on his glasses and began shuffling through some book lists that needed sorting out at the restricted section. He didn't want to take the boy there though, he had to do it at some other time.

"Who were they making fun off?" Teddy asked and began scribbling on a white piece of paper.
"One of the Professors" he looked sideways, above the rim of his glasses and pointed at the paper "Try to write down the word BOOK" he whispered.

"Granny says we mustn't make fun of anyone" Teddy said and bit on his tongue as he concentrated on the chore given to him.

"Your Granny is right"

"Only rude people, make fun of others" Teddy continued.

"Bullies"

"What?" Ted looked up confused.

"That's what they are called…bullies" Severus looked at his writing "Not Bukes, use double O instead of U" he said carefully.

Ted nodded "Auntie called me a bully when I threw water on that kid" Teddy said.

"In order to treat bullies, you must become one…” he whispered and looked up when he saw movement at the entrance of his library. Minerva pranced in holding a rolled up parchment tightly on her hand and bearing a haughty smile upon her countenance.

"So you are a bully too?" Ted asked.

Severus looked at the correct word "BOOKS" on the paper and nodded calmly "I am the worst of them all".

"Good morning, Severus" Minerva said and leaned her elbows on the ledge of his reception.

"Good morning" he rejoined.

"Is this correct Presser?" Teddy beamed up to him.

"Very good" he raised his brow and offered him a curt nod.

"I see you are tutoring the boy" Minerva smiled appreciatively at what she was seeing.

"I am trying"

"You are managing very well, indeed" she said.

"Don't need any compliments to make my day" he waved her off.

"Not a compliment my friend, just an observation. You are almost constantly taking care of Ted. Far more consistently than Miss Libby, or his Aunt" she noticed.

"Professor Granger has much more work than me. Cannot compare a Potion Mistress to a Librarian…I am just killing time”

Minerva raised her brow "You are putting yourself down and you are very protective of Hermione"

He raised his brow silently and scribbled something on his notes.

She exhaled and a soft smile appeared on her lips "Hello Teddy darling, how are you?"

"Fine" he replied without turning around. He was too caught up in the work that Severus assigned to
him. He was trying to rewrite the word with better letters.

"What are you doing there?" she looked at his work interested.

"Learning how to write, madame" he replied politely.

She raised her brow appreciatively "Teaching him how to read and to use proper manners, not to mention tutoring him on how to control his magic…by using yours". She gazed at him intrusively.

"Just killing my time, as I said before" he brushed her off.

"Andromeda will be pleasantly surprised with all the changes in you, when she sees you in five days time. Do you feel happy that you are leaving us?" she inquired and checked on Severus's reaction from the corner of her eyes.

He stiffened, but continued his work, careful not to betray the coldness he felt in his heart.

"No, I don't want to go" Teddy's lip pouted sadly.

Severus gazed at the boy thoughtfully …neither do I want you to go….he thought and his heart clenched in disappointment.

"Nevertheless, I am certain that you want to see your Granny, correct?" Minerva continued, unfazed by the shift of the happy atmosphere between them, to a slightly darker tone.

"Yeah! I love my Granny!" Teddy clapped his hands happily "But I don't want to leave my Auntie and the Presser" he then added sadly.

Severus looked up again and offered the boy a constraint smile "Don't worry Ted, I'll find a way to come visit you". He felt surprised at the easiness with which he assured the boy of a future visit, as it came out unexpectedly.

Minerva seemed as much surprised as him "Here, my Lord, pinch me, for I think you have started to feel for this boy" she smiled.

He tilted his head and pursed his lips. He remembered another boy he had felt for, a boy that never learned how much all those years of protection developed into heartfelt care. That boy was now a man, that didn't need such reminders. Now, it was Teddy's turn to enjoy his attentions and that charismatic child deserved them fully. He raised his brows at her, but remained silent.

Minerva shook her head "Far more sentimental than you ever want to let on, always" she said quietly.

"And you are far more bothersome than Albus had ever been" he whispered with the same quietness.

She smirked "How do you feel?". Her eyes fell on his bruise.

He caressed it and shook his head "Fine"

"That had been a very close call…"

He gave a curt, but silent nod.

"I hope you do understand that what you and Hermione did was reckless and very dangerous" she drew up and crossed her hands austerely.
"Yes" he drawled and pinned her down with a heavy glare.

"You are lucky it ended as bloodlessly as it did. Borovic is highly dangerous" she continued telling him off in a calm and collected manner.

"And very locked up, now, thanks to what happened" he said and signed the papers he was holding.

"Indeed, that happened way too late into the game, but at least it happened" she nodded in agreement.

"Do you know, whom they will place as my warden now?" he looked up inquisitively.

She shook her head "No idea, yet"

He nodded and reposed his hands next to his papers. He rolled the pen between his fingers and the table for a couple of recollective moments and then he gazed up at her "I never thanked you for standing up for me at the Ministry" he whispered, never taking his eyes away from hers.

She sighed and nodded "You are welcome"

He lowered his eyes, feeling that he had said everything worth while.

Apparently though she didn't think that this was enough to close this chapter down "I know you may not believe me, but I am on your side Severus. I have always been on your side"

"Always?" he drawled and looked at her dryly.

"After I learned your true loyalties, yes I have been. I know you don't care much about it, but I am doing my best to help you. Not just with what happened at the Ministry, but I am working for you behind the scenes" she said carefully.

He pursed his lips "I don't want to go there…"

"But I do…I know you feel trapped here. I know you need your freedom. Do you think I enjoy keeping you behind these walls?" she asked with a deep frown.

He gazed at her thoughtfully for a couple of moments and then shook his head dejected "No"

"That's right, I don't. I am trying my best to get you out of here, no matter my own need to keep you close" she said.

He looked up quickly and raised his brow critically.

"Yes, keep you close…Severus, I appreciate your presence amongst the school staff more than you may think possible. I don't want you to go, but if that is your wish, I will do my best to make it happen"

"How will you ever manage that impossible feat?" he asked and crossed his arms patiently. Her honest declarations didn't leave him unaffected.

She hesitated and unrolled the paper she was holding "Step by step" she said and gave it to him.

He took it in obvious confusion, but as he started reading everything cleared up slowly and his heart began pounding under his chest with adrenaline. He read it once and then as if that was not enough he read it again and again, until the message had settled in his confused mind "What?" was the only thing he was able to say as he gazed at her intensely.
"As it says my boy. The Ministry gave you two weeks off probation, due to good conduct. The only restriction is that you cannot leave the country." Minerva sounded satisfied and looked cocky as she pointed at the piece of paper he was clutching in his hands.

"Is this a joke?" he whispered still unable to believe his ears, or his eyes.

"Not in the least" Minerva smiled knowingly.

He shook his head still partly confused and trying to hold his mind together "How in the name of Merlin did you manage this?" he whispered and came close to her.

"Albus did half the work, I mustn't take all credit, but I will say that Borovic's stupid attitude helped us a lot" she smirked loftily.

"Did you and Albus threaten the Minister?" he said and a small smile formed on his lips.

Minerva shook her hand quietly "Kind off…let's say we used forced persuasion"

"Does the word Press-Release, played into that persuasion?" he raised his brow.

She flicked her finger to him and smirked.

He sighed and smiled widely "I can't believe you did it"

She nodded "Are you pleased?"

"Am I?" his mind was already racing with the possibilities of this small freedom they were offering him. Suddenly he needed to use his magic now, more than ever. He wanted to use it for getting out of here, even for a little while. Just to test how much of what she was telling him was true "So…" he paused and licked his lips "…If I ask you to take care of Ted for a while?" he asked still uncertain that this was even possible.

"I will"

"And I can…go?"

She nodded happily "Sure"

"Go, further than Hogsmeade?" he tilted his head.

"Of course" she smiled brightly. His constraint enthusiasm was rubbing off on her.

"I can just pick up my things…and go…" he repeated in a low careful tone.

"As long as it is for two weeks and not outside England…yes" she nodded trying to reassure him, that he was indeed free.

"And you'd let me do it?" he looked at her carefully.

She nodded with the smile never leaving her lips "You can go anytime"

"Now?" he asked testing the waters.

"Sure"

He drew up and swallowed feeling his heart beating out of control "Can you keep an eye on Ted,
She looked at the boy and nodded "I'll take him at my office until Hermione finishes her classes. Timerius can take over the library for now, right Professor?" she looked up at the painting.

"Of course, dear woman! My pleasure" the old Professor said and fixed his glasses smugly.

"Where are you going Presser?" Teddy looked partly worried.

"Have something to do son, will you stay with the Headmistress?" he gazed at the boy thoughtfully.

"Ok" the boy seemed disappointed, but Severus needed to confirm Minerva's words. This all seemed so unbelievable that nothing could have kept him there….he needed to leave…just to see if he could do it.

He picked up his tweed coat and buttoned it up quickly and messily. Missing on buttons and then redoing them. Minerva smiled at his innocent need to flee as quickly as possible. He looked like a bird that was just released from his cage. Standing there at the railings of the balcony confused for several minutes. Not knowing if it could fly away from it's prison "So…I am leaving now…” he warned her. As if giving her one more chance to stop him.

She didn't "By all means…have fun" she showed the door with her open palm.

He took a few steps towards it and then stopped "How about this?" he asked with a frown and showed her the parchment.

"Keep it, give it to me, burn it. It matters not. There is an official paper signed by Kingsley back at the Ministry. No one is going to come after you, no flares are going to warn any Aurors…for the next two weeks" she tilted her head at the side sweetly.

"I'll keep it" he clutched on it protectively.

She nodded "Just tell me one thing before you go Severus…” she trailed off.

He straightened in apprehension, as if fearing that his answer could revoke this small chance to freedom. He waited with his heart pounding.

"You've used your magic several times after Hermione's accident, correct?"

He nodded silently, slowly perspiring.

"Did you feel anything dangerous enough to be labelled an Obscurial? I want you to be very honest with me. No pussyfooting this time. I did my best to please you, to offer you what you need the most, if only temporarily. Me and Albus are going to try for a proper release for you, but you have to be honest with us. About everything concerning the Obscurial" she said solemnly.

He sighed "I felt an abnormal tension that drew hard on me the first time I used magic, but in the end I managed to control it. It was not an Obscurial" he said honestly, not wanting to keep anything from them, now that he saw their equally honest try to help him out.

"After that first incident, did you feel the same abnormal tension every time you used magic?" she asked with a small questioning frown.

"No, each time it was lesser and lesser" he whispered.

"You are being honest with me?" she warned.
"Indubitably" the hard answer.

She scrutinised him for a couple of seconds and then nodded "I think we have a good chance of withdrawing your probation completely this time, Severus. Just keep up the good work of controlling your magic. Can you do that?"

"I will try"

"Try it out, use it, slowly at first and give me and Albus the chance to present your case in front of the Wizengamot, ok?" she took a step closer to him.

He sighed and lowered his head "I will" his voice was decisive. That small freedom gave him hope for the future. He wanted to try and help himself, now that he knew he had a chance to be free again. The never ending circle of torture had an opportunity to be broken.

She smiled satisfied and shooed him away "Go"

His lips upturned in a restricted smile and he looked at Teddy who ran up and hugged him tightly "Be careful Presser" the boy said.

Severus caressed his turquoise hair and smiled "I will and you listen to what the Headmistress tells you, ok?"

The boy nodded, eager to please him "Yes!"

He released the boy and walked quickly out of the door. Not wanting to stop and look back at the child, because his heart would stop him upon his tracks. Not wanting to look back at Minerva and give her the chance to stop him either.

****….***

He reached the astronomy tower after a quick walk through the school hallways. For the first time in his career, not caring about students that were breaking the rules, or were outside their classes. He bypassed everyone, not really looking at faces. Simply concentrating on his dire need to flee this place. To grab this freedom by the hair and use it to it's fullest potential. When he stepped up close to the railings he forced his destroyed voice to grumble a broken "Albus!". He gazed around him, wanting that bloody ghost to come to him, eagerly.

He walked back and forth in front of the railing, still clutching the parchment on his hand. Feeling the air blowing around his coat and messing his hair. Counting inwards, repeating the name of the previous Headmaster, trying to push his voice to call as loud as humanly possible. When the voice of Albus replied behind him, he had to keep himself from jerking and crying out loud. Even though he had been expecting Dumbledore, his mind was already flying away from here and he was taken by surprise.

"Hello, son"

Severus looked at him and opened his mouth, but was unable to form the words. He looked like a fish out of water.

"Everything alright?" Albus smiled knowingly when he saw the parchment clutched on his chest.

Severus begun shaking his head slowly "Thank you" he whispered.

Albus crossed his arms in front of him peacefully "Don't even mention it. I've been trying to achieve
that for four years. Borovic, gave us the chance"

"Yet, you could have bypassed the opportunity, you were not obliged…” Severus trailed off, not knowing how to express himself.

"Never obliged of course. It was something that I wanted to do" Albus smiled.

"You don't know what this means to me…” he whispered with a slight frown.

"I think I have a pretty good idea…” Albus trailed off and on seeing Severus remaining solemnly silent he pressed on carefully "…You think all those suicide attempts left me unaffected?’"

Severus remained silent, but his eyes began burning.

"You think, I didn't know how hard it was for you to be locked up in here? On not using your magic? On feeling unable to control the explosive telekinesis that derived from all those depravations you forced upon yourself? On the loss of your voice? Even at the constant bleeding of your forearm…” Albus sighed and looked towards the mountains on the horizon, behind the thick snowy curtain "You always reminded me of a Nightingale locked inside a golden cage, full of scars and wounds” he said thoughtfully.

Severus leaned upon the railings and his hands tightened painfully around them.

"Hogwarts was just your golden cell. An elaborate prison, but a prison nonetheless and you were withering locked up here. When we were given the opportunity to take you in, or let your rot in some mental institution or even Azkaban, there was really no choice for us. Me and Minerva were adamant to bring you in as soon as possible. The Ministry was certain you were an Obscurial, they wanted you contained inside a safe environment. We had great difficulty convincing them that we could control a possible Obscurus inside you"

"How were you so certain that you could?’" he whispered and his eyes got lost towards the mountains also.

"I was certain that you didn't carry such a parasite, but I couldn't convince the Ministry easily”

Severus nodded.

"I knew you were always safe for the world Severus, but you were dangerous to yourself. Having you close by, gave me the opportunity to keep you safe from yourself” Albus sounded guarded and way too quiet, on these painful revelations.

"Why Hagrid?’ he whispered.

"Why did I place him as your guardian?’"

Severus nodded.

Albus inhaled deeply "I can see how improbable the choice might seem to an outsider, but he was the only one with a small chance to connect with you. You had nothing against him, whilst me and Minerva…well…”

Severus shook his head and swallowed.

"You didn't want anything to do with us, but you needed people close to you. Charity did all the work herself, although Minerva tried to put her up to it. She was not aware that you guys had a
deeper bond, from way back….back into those dark days"

"I am sorry I didn't understand earlier" he whispered and the crease on his brow grew deeper.

"You were not ready to see the truth back then. You were so immersed into the darkness, that it had saturated your soul" Albus said kindly.

"I gave you all such a hard time…and I am still not out of it" he shook his head feeling emotionally overburdened by Albus revelations.

"Once again you think of yourself as a burden, when you were never one. We have only been trying to help you, because we care" Albus tried.

Severus gazed at him with hair raising intensity.

"We cared, but we couldn't approach you Severus. You were always distant and so silent. You never told us how you felt" Albus eyes were portraying the sadness in his heart.

"I know" he whispered.

"Why were you so silent? Why didn't you reach out?" Albus eyes questioned him intensely.

"My most dire need to reach out, was back then, when you were using me against Voldemort. I told you once, that I didn't want to keep going. I was at the end of my tether, yet you wanted to use me to my last drop"

"You had too" Albus said solemnly.

Severus nodded "Correct, therefore do you think that if I screamed, anybody would have heard me?"

Albus sighed and lowered his head, but his eyes remained on him. He didn't speak.

"Nobody would have heard my screams…so I pushed them so far down that in the end silence became my only solace. Guess what….life awarded me and in the end I lost my voice completely. I can't scream now, even if I want to" he whispered feeling his heart tearing up at the confessions that had been buried between them for decades now.

"You can break that silence with your whispers…they can be powerful…” Albus said.

Severus gazed at him solemnly but didn't speak.

"Smash that silence….we are listening to you…." Albus said calmly.

Severus nodded and sighed. He had already smashed that silence by confessing, hadn't he? If not completely, he had created a small dent on that solid body of silent solitude that was surrounding him all these years "I am already doing that" he frowned.

"How does it feel?"

"Painful" he whispered honestly.

"Reaching out after all these years, should feel painful, but you are doing the right thing. Even though it might seem improbable to you, me and Minerva, we care for you. You did the best you could to atone yourself of your sins all these years. We came to care even for your constant broodiness and bad temper" Albus smiled sweetly and pointed towards the mountains "All you wanted to do since you were locked up in this castle, was to get away, correct?"
He nodded heavily and his hands tightened around the railings.

"You tried to do that through suicide more than once" Albus's voice became heavy.

He swallowed uneasily, but remained silent.

"You are free to go now. It's only for a fortnight, but no one is going to be on your tail. You can go…" Albus waved towards the mountains.

As if taking the message and feeling his heart both heavy and light at the same time, Severus pushed with his hands and placed one foot upon the railing "You are right" he whispered.

Albus frowned and pulled back a little "What are you doing?"

Severus balanced his foot and drew himself up slowly. When he straightened he placed his other foot down and raised his head. The wind blew his coat away from his body and his hair stuck at the side of his face as the snow storm became heavier by the minute. He stood up there, on the railing motionless, balancing on a tightrope, just a step away from an impressive drop "I always wondered how it had felt to you, falling above this railing and onto your death" he whispered musingly.

Albus frowned and licked his lips uneasily "What are you talking about son?"

"Your death, by my wand" he continued his internal debate.

"A death, I begged for…I just told you, that you are free. What are you doing?" Albus sounded mildly worried.

"You cannot imagine how it felt to see you fall into the abyss…"

"Voldemort killed me, not you. You helped my passing on" Albus raised his ghostly hand towards him, trying in vain to pull him back down.

"I killed you…and one cannot compare killing an enemy to killing a friend" he whispered and gazed back down at Albus.

"I asked you to do it, come down Severus!" Albus became serious then.

"Do you know how it feels to kill a friend?" Severus frowned and felt his eyes burning, the air flowing angrily around him and his hair sticking to his sweaty forehead, even though the cold around him was numbing.

Albus froze "I do" he said quietly.

Severus gazed at him silently for several seconds before nodding "I know" he whispered and then turned towards the mountains.

"Can you step down now?" Albus's voice had signs of trepidation.

"You know what I miss about my magic the most?" Severus's brows flickered thoughtfully.

"What?" Albus approached him more.

"This…” he whispered and let go of his body. He let go of all his limps to the whims of the air and gravity. He felt himself going over the railing and falling backwards quickly. The ground was rushing up to him. He saw the ghostly face of Albus crying out something that got lost amidst the howling of the air. He felt the ground approaching fast and his stomach tightened in frightening
expectation.

His eyes closed and for a split second he debated the choice that was presented to him. He tried so many times to commit suicide and failed. This time it was impossible to fail, but this time he didn't want to die. The scales of the debate tilted abundantly to his favour and he felt the flow of magic around him. Within fractions of a second he transformed in a dark grey cloudy mist that touched the ground, raised up snow and then flew up to the sky skilfully. Not really feeling surprised that he had never forgotten how to fly like a bird, he swished close to the astronomy tower and elicited a happy howl from Albus's ghost "Go!"

He heard the echoes of that encouraging voice fading away as he flew above the Gryffindor tower and circled the Hogwarts flag post twice, before tearing the flag away and letting it fall defeated down the side of the castle walls.

use the wings of the flying Universe…

He dove down, towards the Quidditch field that was empty. He passed through the loops feeling his misty body spreading with the wind and then gathering back towards the centre, keeping him from disappearing into thin air. He always wondered what would happen, if during this transformation he let go of the magical power that held his airy essence in one place. If he would disappear forever, if he would become oblivious of whom he had once been in life. If people would inhale him as they inhaled oxygen. Could he live inside the air particles forever?

He flew above the forbidden forest, catching a brief glimpse of Hagrid getting out of his cabin and then directed his flight upwards…far above the clouds. Above the snowy curtain and the cold he felt around him. He wanted to desperately see the sun, and his need got satisfied as he flew between the clouds, mingling with them briefly before emerging out of the other side. There he paused mid air, admiring the breathtaking view. The sun was bright and the sky blue and clear. It was as if he was in another place altogether and not above Hogwarts territory. On that thought he resumed his flight determined to push past the old borders of his probation. Not even knowing, now that he was not seeing the land, where those borders were.

He flew for what seemed like an eternity above the clouds towards what his internal compass was pointing as the North. When he finally decided to dive under the clouds and check his position, his breath was taken away for a second time. He looked with invisible tears in his misty eyes the peaks of the tall mountains just under him. The mountains of the North…he had reached them. After four years, he was finally here. He flew close to the rocky steepness of the tallest rock and when he reached it he levitated for a moment above the thick snow. His misty fog transformed into a black boot and when he touched ground he slowly changed back to his human form.

He looked around him mesmerised, slightly panting. He felt as if someone had slowed down the world for him to enjoy it properly. He gazed towards the tall firs at his back and the thick forests that covered miles behind him, licking the back of the mountains and covering them with their thick fauna. How long had it been since he had last seen a fir tree? The ones that only grew in very high altitudes. He swallowed and felt his eyes tearing up, for the first time in his life feeling thankful for something that Voldemort taught him. The gift of flight, without the assistance of magical or muggle paraphernalia. The ability to change and belong to the sky, amidst the birds, to be one with the clouds, to be able to touch the moon, or melt under the sun’s warm rays, like Icarus’s wings.

The frozen air of the high altitude penetrated his skin and numbed down his fingers to the point of pain. He didn't hesitate this time from using his magic to create a warm bubble around him, to protect himself from the harsh environment. Mainly because he didn't want to leave this place, ever. No one had followed him when he broke the borders of his probation. He was free…even if it was only
and my magic...his mind thought as he sat down at a large stone near the edge of the steep cliff. His magic worked almost effortlessly both times. Every time he used it, it became easier, felt more natural. Right then, he regretted that he was not owning a wand, and at the same time felt peaceful in the knowledge that he was not an Obscurial. He had used his magic so many times, that if it was parasitical it would have shown by now. Strengthened by that, he inhaled deeply the clean frozen air of the mountains and heard the absolute silence around him. He could only hear the wind howling as it was passing through the steep cliffs and the ravines. As it was gliding between the tall trees and hitting the flat rock faces. The animals were silent, hiding from the snow. The only other sound apart from the wind and his deep breaths, were the two eagles calling as they flew above him, searching for food.

He closed his eyes and felt tears of relief falling down his cheeks. Then he settled and inside the stillness of nature, he tried to quiet down his soul. He tried to calm down the torrent of emotions that threatened to overbalance him. He wanted to stand up and cry out his freedom. He wanted to hear his voice echo against the cliffs with the need to declare that he was not in prison anymore, but he knew his voice wouldn't obey him. That loss felt lesser on him now that he was up there, with the company of the eagles.

The thought of transforming and flying away from this beloved place felt peculiar, but his need to use his freedom to the maximum and not return for two weeks, was very strong. He wanted to flee from everything, but he remained. Silent and still, letting the minutes roll by and settling down his pounding heart. He let the minutes become hours as his teary eyes dried up and his trembling hands steadied. He enjoyed the sun as it moved slowly to the west, drenching the cliffs and the snowy trees with an orange hue that passed through the gaps that some clouds left.

He felt warm, safe and above all alone up there with no one to wait for him, to expect from him, to need him, to chase him or demand out of him. His soul yearned to remain like that forever, but his heart spoke otherwise. After several hours, he finally decided to open up his eyes and convinced himself that the first thing he would see, that the first thing he would feel, he would follow. Without any regrets or hesitations. Letting his instincts take over the decisions that his heart was unable to take.

Instead of watching straight ahead where the eagles flew hours ago, at the large gap between the huge cliffs, his eyes fell down. Close by, near his leg. He looked at the soft snow gathering around his warm bubble, not touching him. A small snow flower was next to his boot. It looked beautiful, but bend with the weight of the snow.

Hermione would have liked this...his mind thought calmly.

A deep crease covered his brow and suddenly he knew exactly what he wanted to do with his newly found freedom. He didn't want to fly away from Hogwarts. He didn't want to disappear for two weeks, happy to see the last of them. He didn't want to remain above the clouds forever, admiring the sun alternating with the moon above the silent lands. He didn't want to feel the tall snowy firs surrounding him and the eagles flying free.

He reached and cut down the snow drop. He shook it lightly making the snow fall away from it's white petals and drew it inside his warm bubble. Immediately the snow melted and the small flower glistened under the fading light of the setting sun.

All he wanted to do, was fly back at Hogwarts, find Hermione and give her this small flower. All he wanted was to see her smile at it, letting him enjoy the small dimples near her mouth and the redness of her cheeks. He needed to caress her hair and plant a soft kiss on her lips. Maybe even confess to
her that he had the chance to go away, but he didn't take it. As long as he had her back there, waiting... he didn't want to leave. Feeling his eyes burning anew he transformed quickly into his misty form and flew straight back to Hogwarts. This time not choosing to fly above the clouds, he flew close to the grounds, choosing the straightest path to reach home, before the sun finally set down.

When his foot touched the snowy ground upon the viaduct it was already dark around him. He walked quickly towards the entrance, feeling invigorated by his small trip, but also anxious to talk to Hermione about what happened. Maybe even offer her the possibility of his company on her trip once more, along with the small snow drop that was quickly withering in his warm hands, away from the refreshing cold and that kept it alive. He didn't want to use any magic to revive it. It held all the magic in the world inside it, as it represented his need to be next to Hermione, instead of flying away free. That unexpected decision confused him, threw him off his tracks. Nevertheless the hesitation was nought as he came through the main entrance. In front of the great clock that was ticking six, he almost crashed upon Minerva.

She reached out and stopped him "What are you doing back here?" she asked with a deep frown.

He pressed his lips and silently removed his arms from hers.

"I thought you left us for two weeks" she continued in obvious confusion.

"So did I" he whispered honestly and felt his fingers getting cold with anticipation.

She frowned deeply "What brought you back?"

He looked at the flower for a moment "A small snowdrop did" he whispered and then gazed up at her, in calm realisation of how much Hermione meant to him.

Minerva tilted her head and opened her mouth "What?" she asked confused.

He didn't answer. He turned around and walked quickly towards the Potion's classroom. Wanting to get to her, before she left. Now, his need felt imperative somehow. When he reached it, the doors were already open and the students were filing out. He controlled his walk and swallowed heavily as he came in front of the entrance. She was inside talking to some students, but immediately her eyes fell on him. A soft reassuring smile, let him know that she would be happy to be with him in a moment. He leaned at the back of the wall observing the students leaving with low murmurs that concerned the assigned tasks for the next day and waited patiently for her. He came back from the highest mountains to bring her a flower, what would five more minutes do to his fragile patience.

Hermione escorted the two girls to the door and waved them off "And as we said in class, don't use pulverised snake fangs as they will reverse the magical potential of the potion. Use them only in thinly cut strips and when the potion is done, remove them completely. Draw only the essence from them"

Both girls turned around and nodded "Thank you Professor Granger" they said and quickly scuttered off.

She scrutinised him momentarily and then a sweet smile appeared on her lips "Hello handsome" she said quietly.

He felt himself blushing and he frowned angrily at his instinctive reaction. He touched his flushed cheek and felt the wildness of his hair around him. Apparently his flight had truly messed up his countenance. Something that she seemed to appreciate, contrary to his expectations. She reached out
and entwined her fingers with his "Missed you" he whispered.

She smiled widely and drew him inside the classroom "Missed you too" she said and closed the doors behind her.

He stood momentarily with his back to her, observing her teaching desk. Travelling for a brief moment at his own dark past. Her arms that wrapped around his waist and clasped in front of his stomach dispersed any dark images from the past. He turned around and rest his arms on her shoulders "Do you mind that I came to find you here?" he whispered and entangled his long fingers in her hair.

She shook her head and came on tiptoes in order to rub her nose to his tenderly.

"I couldn't wait to see you back at your apartments" he whispered and leaned over to kiss her softly.

The moment his lips touched hers, her fingers got buried in his hair and tagged him painfully. Her breath hitched and her mouth opened up demanding something deeper. She kissed him with such need, that fire exploded inside him and he lost all ability to approach her calmly and logically. Now all he wanted to do was eat her alive. He pushed her upon the wall and the door shook heavily behind her back. He kissed her passionately and she wrapped her leg around his hips making him understand that she was all for it.

"Thank Gods, you got the message quicker this time" she smiled under his lips. Her hands drew him on her.

"I couldn't stay away…" he whispered mystically "I had to come back to you"

"What are you talking about?" she asked confused.

He kissed her again and she responded with equal need, their breaths gasping simultaneously "I could leave, yet I came back to you…” he said mostly at himself as he kissed her softly.

"I am honoured, even though I still don't know what you are talking about” she arched up to his touch, as he kissed down her neck.

"Do you want company at your trip to Andromeda?” he asked and gazed at her eyes steadily. Forgetting his sexual attack for something far more important.

She smiled confused "Your company?"

He nodded and caressed her temple gently.

"I'd love for you to come, but the probation?” she looked at him searchingly.

"I am off for two weeks" he smiled timidly at her.

"What?” she raised her brows truly surprised.

He lifted his hand and presented her with the unexceptional flower. She frowned "What's this?"

"It's called a snow drop"

"Where the hell did you find a flower in the middle of a snow storm?” she asked feeling her cheeks catching on fire and her heart melting at his gesture.

"At the top of the mountains” he said and kissed her lips softly. Wanting to taste her confusion.
Wanting to drink every drop of tenderness she was offering him. Needing to feel the muscles of her thigh squeeze tightly around his hips.

"When did you go there?" she looked at the flower confused.

"Before I came over to you"

"They are going to arrest you again!" she grabbed his shoulders with force. She looked absolutely terrified.

He shook his head "I have two weeks off probation"

She paused and checked on his lips "You were telling me the truth a moment ago, then?"

He nodded and caressed her cheek.

"How did you go up to the top of the mountains?" she asked in an afterthought.

"Flew" he flicked his shoulders.

A small smile appeared on her lips and she caressed his bruised cheek tenderly "You used your magic to fly up in the mountains?"

He nodded and kissed her nose.

"You are free to go anywhere you want for two weeks?" she insisted.

"Yes" he wrapped his fingers under her hair.

"And you chose to come back here and bring me a snowdrop?" she looked at the flower mesmerised.

His fingers tightened around her hair and he pressed his forehead on hers "Yes" he admitted, gritting his teeth. He felt so vulnerable, yet he appreciated this vulnerability more than any freedom, because it made him feel alive.

Her arms wrapped suddenly around him and she pressed him tightly "Thank you" her voice sounded broken and he felt warm tears running down her cheek.

"Why are you crying?" he whispered and tried to look at her.

She didn't let him "For choosing me, instead of your freedom"

"Was there ever a question to that?" he asked the crease deep on his forehead.

She shook her head and rubbed the flower under her nose "Severus…you don't know how you are making me feel"

"Want to show me?" he whispered gently to her.

She took hold of his hand and opened up his palm. She placed his hand above her chest, where her heart was. He gazed at her intensely. She covered his hand with hers and pressed it "Can you feel this?" she whispered.

He nodded gently and his stomach twisted mercilessly under the honesty of her eyes.
She shook her head and opened up her lips to take him in a soft and giving kiss, that loosened up his legs. Her hand caressed his and he felt her heart beating under his skin. His own heart felt swelling with unexpected warmth and tenderness. He kissed her with renewed fervour, forgetting the beauty of the mountains, all in favour of her warm skin and her flowery scent. The need to flee far away from this place, got momentarily pushed at the back sit, as he manipulated her towards the small cauldron apothecary, enjoying her soft gasps of surprised agreement with what he was doing.

"Teddy-is-going-to-be-ecstatic" her breath became laboured and the words came out with difficulty as he kicked the door closed behind them and lifted her up on a counter.

"Good, how about you?" he whispered and kissed down her neck, wanting to enjoy the whole of her, inside this forbidden dark room of his past kingdom. Somehow erasing through their love making the bad feelings that conquered him each time he entered the potions classroom.

"I …am…blissful…" she muttered and then gave out a surprised yelp that turned into a long drawn moan, as his hands cupped her breasts. She closed her eyes and a content smile spread on her lips as she got ready to enjoy this sudden encounter, not caring that she hadn't locked the door of the classroom. She didn't want to stop him and she didn't want to lose momentum. Everything narrowed down to his touch. Soon she lost the ability for any logical process, apart from the need to protect the small snowdrop and her fingers closed around it protectively.
Once upon a December

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione put two sweaters into her suitcase. Upon revision she scrounged her lips and returned to fix them properly. Just because Harry was bugging the hell out of her since he arrived that morning, didn't mean that she was going to mess up her packing. She had a long way to go, and unpacking wrinkled clothes, just because of Potter's inconsistent mumbling was not part of her plans.

"And Merry Christmas to you too" she muttered under her breath as she fixed the sweaters way more forcefully than needed.

"Don't take on that attitude with me, Mione" Harry sounded angry.

"And don't you raise your tone to me, Harry!" She turned around equally pissed off and and rested her fists on her waist.

Harry rubbed his forehead "Ok, forgive me, but have you been listening to anything I am saying?"

"Don't have a choice" she shook her head and turned around to pick up some trousers.

"Oh, now you mean that you would prefer for me to go?" Harry sounded both cross and hurt.

She half nodded "Yes and no"

"Mione!" he exclaimed.

"Leave off Harry!" she turned around quickly "I have heard every single, goddamn word!"

"And?" his eyes seemed imploring for an answer from her.

"No…"

"No?!" he crossed his arms defensively.

"Nope" she shook her head and fixed her trousers.

"Why not?"

"Because I am not in the mood to see Ron again and I don't want to have to explain to Mrs. Weasley what an asshole her youngest son is. I want to pass this Christmas with people that I feel comfortable with"

"Meaning Andromeda and Snape" Harry inhaled trying to draw patience from the oxygen around him.

She looked back and raised her brow "And Teddy, yes"

Harry nodded "You haven't heard a word I said" he concluded.

She hissed "Give it up will you!?

"Disentangle yourself from this situation before it's too late. I talked to Andromeda. She can come
pick up the child from the train station. You don't need to take him. Moreover you don't need to go on vacation with Severus bloody Snape!” he said pointing towards the door.

"I don't need to go…I want to go" she said stretching the word and her eyes. Not understanding why it was so difficult for him to accept her situation.

"You can come at the Weasley's for your holidays!” he continued unfazed.

"I don't want to!"

Harry positively fumed "You are killing me"

"And you are becoming a true asshole. Why do you want me to stay away from the only man that made me feel so lovely lately? Tell me that…." she said and sat down at the edge of her bed. His attitude was wearing her out.

Harry opened up his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She saw him going distinctly pale.

"You cannot even find a reason, correct?" she raised her brow.

"My reasons run too deep and are too painful" he bit back and looked away from her.

Suddenly her heart twitched and she bit her lower lip "I am sorry for making you feel so uncomfortable Harry, but my heart is not asking for your permission"

He turned around sharply "Your heart?" he hesitated on the word.

She nodded musingly.

His face became almost livid "This isn't some second rated rebellious choice, that derived from your break up with Ron, is it?" he whispered.

She felt her eyes tearing up, as she shook her head slightly.

"It's not your need to shout out against the unfair isolation of love affairs that have a rather noticeable age difference either, is it?"

She felt her lips upturning in a sad smile and shook her head again "For fuck's sake, no" she muttered, half amused, half bothered.

"Not simply blowing off steam?" he tried finally.

She frowned deeply and shook her head vigorously "Women don't work that way, Harry!" she abolished.

Harry's shoulders deflated and he emptied himself on her easy chair "Bloody hell, girl" he muttered.

She sighed and picked up a green dress. She caressed it with her fingers and didn't know what else to tell him, that would make him understand that this situation was not her being a brat to her friends.

He sensed her inhibitions "What am I going to do with you?" he wondered.

"Tell me why you feel such a strong need to draw me back from him" she rejoined steadily.

"Told you my reasons are not …"
"...superficial, I know. But I am your best friend and this is not simply a whim on my part. So talk to me...and then maybe we can lay whatever hell this is, to rest" she said trying to control her voice.

"I cannot take my mind off you and Severus together...I just can't Hermione, forgive me. It seems too out of place, too impossible!" he said dismissively.

"Me and him together, or simply him? I don't think you would have cared much if I chose another boyfriend ...and I mean any other than Snape" she hurled back at him.

He glared at her and his cheeks became fiery red.

She tensed involuntarily "Shouldn't you be caring more about Ted who is your godson, instead of Severus? His history may lay heavily upon your mind, but reality is...you two have nothing in common Harry"

"I do care about Teddy" he rejoined angrily.

"Severus cares more about your godson, than you do...you've visited Hogwarts twice and you haven't been to see him. How many times have you visited Andromeda to see the kid?" she sounded strict.

"I have a lot to do at the Ministry..."

"Harry, leave off...you are acting indifferent. Take on your role more responsibly and help raise this child....and get off my and Severus's back" she raised her brow at him knowingly.

"You just shifted the interest upon Ted, to stop me from chastising you about your choices" Harry retorted.

"You have no right to chastise me about anything. I am an adult and decide as one. What I do is none of your business!" she rebuked and closed her suitcase truly pissed off.

"Even though the man you are bedding used to love my mother for years on end, and sacrificed himself for her....and subsequently for me?" he asked and his deep voice resonated through her spine, making her stomach turn.

She inhaled and turned around "I can understand your emotional connections to this man, but don't dare bring your mom into this. Don't you dare stain my emotions with the memory of your mother...don't you dare suggest that he could never love me, as he loved her...once" she hissed and felt her eyes burning and her heart exploding. This sudden attack and those revealing words make her throat contract and she felt her breath constricted. She had never expected herself to sound so angrily jealous of a ghost.

"Hermione?" Harry sounded regretfully as he approached her.

She fumed "Why are you trying to hurt me Harry?"

"Hurt you?...What's going on Mione? Are you feeling so much for him?" he frowned truly confused.

"I don't know what I feel, but you are making me angry and you are hurting me with your words. Why would you even try to make me jealous by bringing your mother into this?" she exhaled a shuddering breath.

"I never intended to do that...." he tried.
"To hell you didn't! You know we are involved. Why mention to me how much he loved your mom? Don't you think I know it? I have seen his bloody memories. You have shown them to me. You still keep that bloody vial next to your bedroom stand. Don't know which is most twisted according to you…the fact that I decided to get involved with an older man or the fact that he used to love your mom to death? According to me it's more twisted that you still keep that man's most private memories next to your nightstand! Let go of your past Harry Potter, because you are dragging me down with you!" she accused and stood up not knowing what to do with herself. His words had woken up a torrent of emotions and right now she wanted to remain alone.

"Hermione I cannot change history, it's you that decided to get in the middle of this!" he said.

"In the middle of what?" she turned around abruptly.

He frowned.

"In the middle of what Harry? I am between which two people? Him and your dead mom?" she felt her knees loosening up under her and her eyes filled with unbidden tears.

Harry shook his head.

She nodded knowingly "I get it…I got between you and him…between what you think is some special ethereal bond. After you saw his memories, you became obsessed with him"

"Do you think me wrong?" he asked getting pale.

She inhaled and bit her lower lip "I think you are taking this a step too far. He has the right to get on with his life, Harry. He is not obliged to worship your mother's ghost until his death. He doesn't have to act so altruistically, so you can value him more. Under all that outstanding bravery and skill, under all that abundant ability to love so deeply, he is still just a man….and he needs to move on with his life. Can we agree on that?"

Harry hesitated before forcing himself to nod.

"That must have been hard on you. Fine, we agree. So, he is moving on with his life….with me at this point. What is your problem?" she asked gazing at him intensely.

"That he chose you to do it. You are my best friend. It is difficult for me to accept all this" Harry admitted and emptied himself on her easy chair again.

She gazed at him for a moment "How do you know he chose me and not the opposite happened?"

Silence stretched between them heavy "You mean…" he trailed off.

"I mean that it's ridiculous to think that Severus lured me into this….I have a mind of my own and when I take a decision you can be sure, it's been well thought beforehand" she replied strictly.

Harry sighed and nodded "I know that…"

"Therefore don't place the weight of that decision on that man's shoulders. Besides you are old enough by now to know that it's the female that chooses her mate…not the other way round" she raised her brow.

Harry pressed his lips and didn't answer.

"Doesn't feel good on your male egotism does it? It's the truth though and you'd do well to accept it.
Ginny, chose you…you didn't choose her” she raised both brows, slowly her anger retreating. She was thoroughly enjoying, making him feel uneasy.

"I chose her too…it was mutual"

"No, you pursued her…and she chose to accept your advances and mate with you…like it or not Harry, we are animals deep down. When it comes down to the nitty gritty, we work with animal instincts” she continued.

His lips curled bothered.

"You don't like it, but it's the truth. Severus tried, subconsciously I am certain, to pursue me, but the final decision was mine. I allowed him into my bed. Never, ever doubt that for a single moment!” she raised her finger strictly to him.

He exhaled "Damn…" and rubbed his forehead, feeling at a loss.

She twisted her lips "I am not some stupid ignoramus. I knew what he was trying to do, long before he knew it himself"

Harry looked up partly amused.

She waved him off "He is not the type to pursue younger women, believe me. All this took him by surprise, but I suppose one cannot control one's heart. So I knew very well what I was getting myself into, when he was trying to help me out and when he was giving me those long burning looks"

"I don't want to know" Harry winced.

"You should, for then, you might remove your mom out of the current equation" she pointed out.

Harry hesitated "You knew and you didn't draw back?"

She shook her head "No, because my body and my heart loved every minute of it. You see therefore Harry? He didn't lure me into some kind of erotic trap, the poor innocent creature that I am…this happened with full knowledge, on my part from the beginning"

"On his part?"

"After a point he knew exactly what he was doing, and he was damn good with it' she offered her friend a cocky side smile.

"And now?” Harry looked at her.

"Now?” she asked confused.

"What happens now?"

"We are currently enjoying each other…thank you very much” she said and stood up. There was no need sitting idle anymore. She had things to do as they were leaving in a couple of hours.

"Is it serious?” he asked reserved.

Her hands stopped on the snaps of the suitcase and she looked towards her bed "I cannot answer, what I don't know yet Harry” she said softly. She was telling him the truth.

"If I told you now, to meet more men….in order to decide” he attempted.
She froze inside "No…I wouldn't" a deep crease appeared on her brow.

Harry sighed and nodded silently.

She turned around slowly and gazed at him "No way" she muttered mostly at herself and felt slightly embarrassed at admitting to more serious emotions that she wanted to ever admit to her friend, or maybe even to herself "But then…I was never the one to randomly meet new people in order to get to bed with them" she added trying to sprinkle some humour into what seemed like a very serious declaration.

"That's true and that's also very unsettling. You never get in bed with anyone you are not in love or at least infatuated with" Harry said quietly.

She felt her heart squeezing hard and then she huffed indignantly "You don't know me as well as you think" she tried.

"I know you better than anyone…even the one you are currently bedding" he said and raised his brow meaningfully.

She finished with the snaps and drew her suitcase close to the entrance "Even if what you are saying it's true, that doesn't mean anything. It simply validates that I choose my partners very very carefully" she said in a calculative manner that rattled her nerves.

"It is telling me, that what's going on between you two, is not as simple and calculative as you are trying to make it sound" he said solemnly.

She exhaled and felt her shoulders slouching "I don't know Harry..I told you before that I cannot answer that for you…I don't even know how he feels for me, but it's true. Neither him, nor me, get into relationships easily. Want to take that scenario and make a whole dramatic plot out of it? Be my guest…just don't bicker when I refuse to read your manuscripts"

He couldn't stop himself from breaking into a small smile "As always ready with disarming answers" She flicked her shoulders "Just don't take me for some stupid female that's ready to fall into the arms of the first available candidate, just in order to feel safe"

Harry shook his head "I wouldn't dare…especially after this conversation"

"Not after knowing me for years?" she looked at him pointedly.

"You were always the most grounded of the three. I suppose that is what made this decision of yours, so difficult on me. Exactly because I know you are very prudent and never take such steps hurriedly"

She shook her head "I didn't hurry through anything…and I am taking my time now"

"Is he?"

"He is more prudent than me…so much so, that he is driving me crazy sometimes" she admitted with a small smile.

He looked at her for a few moments and then nodded his half hearted acceptance.

She exhaled somehow relieved "Can we lay this hell to rest…?"

He nodded "I suppose"
She crossed her arms and observed him carefully for a few moments "How is Borovic?" she asked carefully.

"You care about his health?" he looked up surprised.

"I care about him remaining locked up and away from Severus for many years…can I hope that will happen?" she raised her brow testily.

He pressed his lips "He is under psychological evaluation and was transferred to the St. Catherine Mental institution for now"

She nodded and sighed "Good…do you know who they will place as Severus's new warden?"

Harry gazed at her silently for a while and then broke into a soft smile "Me"

She opened her eyes surprised "What?"

"I asked Kingsley for the job. He was hesitant due to our mutual history, but in the end he agreed. Borovic's stupid reaction with the Crucio helped not only Minerva and Albus in offering your boyfriend some time off probation. It also helped me, take over that probation” he admitted smugly.

She broke into a bright smile "Damn…!"

"Happy?" he asked.

"Ecstatic! Does Severus know?"

He shook his head "Not yet, I will let the Ministry inform him officially"

"That's absolutely wonderful!" she clasped her hands.

"I don't think he will see it that way though" Harry looked at his knees and sounded disappointed.

She hesitated "You cannot know…"

"He's been avoiding me all these years…what do you think might change all that now?" he looked at her and seemed absolutely hurt.

"This really means a lot to you, doesn't it?" she frowned and approached him. She sat at the arm of her easy chair and rested her arm on his shoulder.

"More than you can understand. He is the most intimate link to my mother" he said and took out his glasses. He rubbed his eyes.

"Forgive me for making this harder on you Harry…” she said feeling a blanket of sadness covering her.

He looked at the fire "It was forever hard between him and me….your situation has nothing to do with mine as you clearly told me a while back. And you are right…”

She pressed his shoulder and remained silent next to him for a long time.

"I think I should go. You are leaving in a couple of hours” he said and his voice sounded deeply tired.

"I think you should go to Minerva and see Teddy…how about that?” she reminded him as quietly as
He looked truly embarrassed, his cheeks caught fire "I don't have any gifts for him" he said.

"Take him out for the rest of the day and play. That would be the best present" she smiled.

He nodded and sighed "You are right, I will do my best to become a better Godfather to the kid"

"You'd better Harry Potter, because I will be on your case like a harpy!" she threatened him and he laughed. She embraced his shoulders and rested her temple on his head, trying to settle down her emotions. This had been a very hard conversation, but also very necessary. Not only to clear up the waters with her best friend, but also to come into contact with her own emotions, that were jumbled up and confused, but always present and very intense.

*****….*****

Four hours later, found Hermione driving her little blue Corsa away from Hogwarts. Teddy was sitting at the back, on his booster, trying to take off the seatbelt. Something she shunned away by raising her voice more than once. She had magicked all their suitcases on her small backpack, so they had plenty of room in the car.

Harry went to Teddy, after their long conversation and admittedly had a lovely afternoon with him. He took the boy outside to play with the snow and they made a huge snowman that had a cucumber nose and small oranges for eyes. Harry placed Hagrid's hat on his creation and magicked the snowman to life. The huge snowy statue escorted them into the forbidden forest, where Harry met the centaurs to Teddy and then back at Hagrid's hut where they had dinner and hot chocolate as a bonus. The snowman melted to Teddy's disappointment, but Harry promised to go visit him at Andromeda's house, in order to build a new one. He also promised to be there on New Year's eve to bring him presents. Teddy asked for a large train set with three magical trains that resembled the Hogwarts Express. Harry promised to bring it over along with Auntie Ginny. When he returned Teddy to Hermione's apartment, Severus was there.

They greeted each other politely and Harry kept the conversation calm. Severus thanked him for helping him at the Ministry, but his end was too cold for comfort. She decided to end the awkwardness by reminding Harry that they had to leave. He embraced the boy and promised to see him soon, and kissed Hermione with a soft whisper for her to be careful.

Now she was driving rather nervously, feeling her emotions very burdened by the demanding conversation with Harry. Teddy's happy voice that was counting the red cars that were passing them by, did nothing to alleviate that tension from her. Severus's quiet presence was next to her, constantly reminding her of Harry's heavy words about the love he once had for Lily. Traitorous little words, whispering that Severus could never feel so strongly for her. She swallowed and changed the gear to fifth as she accelerated. Wanting to make those thoughts lose their grip upon her mind with the help of the speeding car, and slip away from her.

"Are you ok?" he whispered and she felt her heart seeking his attention.

She sighed and gave him a brief glance. Enjoying briefly the silver streaks that run through his hair and his set calm features. The need to rub her cheek on the dark stubble of his jaw got suppressed, as she concentrated on the road ahead. She forced herself to nod "Yeah, I am fine". She didn't sound convincing.

He didn't elaborate on anything though. He simply took hold of the hand she was resting on the gear box and drew it upon his thigh. He entwined his fingers with hers and pressed her reassuringly. She
felt her eyes burning at this small comforting gesture. Somehow she could imagine him telling her that he was not with Lilly in the car, but with her. It was her hand he was clasping so tenderly and it was her, he cared about now. She shook her tears away and looked at him briefly with a sad smile. She pressed his hand and nodded "I am fine…", but the ghosts of Harry's conversation still lingered….flying above them with the speed of the car. Haunting her…

He didn't seem convinced, but he turned quietly towards his window and rested his chin on his hand, as his eyes feasted on the vast valleys and the thick forests that were alternating each other. His fingers began caressing her palm as he felt her tension thick and vibrating. He couldn't surmise without fault what it was that bothered her so much. Maybe she had regretted inviting him over? Maybe she wanted to go alone with Teddy at Andromeda? Maybe he shouldn't have forced his presence like that upon them? Maybe it was something completely different. He knew, she and her friend Potter talked rather extensively that morning. The afternoon visit didn't seem tense between them, but the moment they got in the car and began driving she became somehow darker. More immersed in her thoughts. This introverted attitude concerned him deeply, but he didn't want to pressure her. That was not the proper way to resolve a problem.

He listened Teddy's voice claiming that the fifth car of red colour was now following them. Something she chastised by telling him not to turn around and mess up his seat belt. He sighed and closed his eyes, hoping that it was not him that was causing all this tension in her. Instead of drawing back from her, something that he would have normally done, he tightened his fingers around hers, wanting her to understand that he was there for her. Quietly attentive to her every word. She squeezed him back in response and he sighed deeply. Maybe he could find a way to turn this mood around somehow….his eyes got lost in the amazing view as his mind tried to find ways to fix all this.

It was the car that gave him the opportunity one and a half hours later. When he first felt the unmistakable kick of the engine he turned at Hermione. She looked much calmer, but still quiet. At some point she had reclaimed her hand back, as she didn't feel as easy driving with one hand as he did. She looked at her dashboard confused.

"You're not doing that…" he said quietly.

"No" she shook her head and looked at him perplexed.

"Pull over" he said and pointed at the shoulder lane.

She did as she was told and stopped the car. She turned the gear to neutral and pulled the handbrake on "What's happening?" she asked.

"My repair was temporary. The valve is acting up again. Kill the engine." he said and opened up his door.

"Are we going to walk to Granny?" Teddy asked happily. As if that prospect was the best that could be presented to him at the moment.

"No way!" Hermione declared and got out of the driver's seat after killing the engine.

Severus opened up the hood and took a dirty cloth. He touched the engine lid and drew back as it was rather hot. Teddy was yelling from the car "Can I come out?!"

Severus looked at her briefly "Can he?" he whispered trying to alleviate the darkness around her eyes.

She crossed her arms and looked at him for several seconds before smiling away "Sure, I'll get him
He bit on his lips and shook his head. He tried the lid again and he managed to unscrew it. Then he went to the back of the car and found the T bar that he had used the first time. Teddy and Hermione were waiting for him at the front.

"You need help?" she asked looking truly lost.

He sighed thoughtfully "I am embarrassed to say this, but yes"

She smiled up to him contently "Tell me!"

"I need your wand" he whispered, not liking to admit that he needed to purchase another wand soon. He had thrown his collection away when he decided to stop using magic. A rather annoying and irresponsible act on his behalf.

She raised her brows taken aback for a few moments. Then she pulled it out of the inside pocket of her coat and offered it to him "Sure".

"Thank you" he leaned over the engine and placed her wand on his side pocket. Then he unscrewed the loose valve. The piece of Hagrid's shirt was smoking. It was partly melted. He drew it out and winced at the result.

"Your temporary fix..." she said amused.

He raised his brow testily "Lasted more than I thought possible. We should have taken the car to an engineer, before attempting to get out in the motorway. I bypassed my own prudent advice"

She laughed and cupped her mouth "Never mind, so what do we do now? There are no garages near by. I could call the motorway assistance" she said and pointed at the phone that was a few feet from them.

"They have already seen us from the camera and are probably on their way here, but I think I can fix this before they arrive" he said thoughtfully and unscrewed a second valve. He took the healthy bolt and her wand.

She frowned and approached "What are you doing Presser?" Teddy was trying to look up.

Severus noticed and kneeled down next to him "Transfiguration... your Granny's specialty" he whispered.

Teddy's mouth dropped in a large O, when he saw the shirt of Hagrid changing slowly to a replica of the healthy bolt. Severus raised his brow rather satisfied and twirled the bolt in his palm a couple of times to make sure it's weight and consistency was good.

Hermione's hand fell on his shoulder and she squeezed him. He gazed at her eyes and they were smiling. They have lost part of their darkness. He smiled calmly at her and silently placed both bolts back at the valves. He tightened them both and then replaced the lid of the engine "Fire it up" he gazed up at Hermione.

She entered and turned the key. The car fired up easily and he said "Don't push on the gas pedal. Let it run on idle for a while"

She did as she was told and got out of the car "Sounds pretty steady. I'd say you did a perfect job this time". 
He wiped his hands clean and closed the hood "I think so" he nodded and remained put for a while trying to hear any alterations of the engine's sound.

She smiled widely and clasped her hands happily.

He gazed at her partly amused "You seem way too happy for something so mundane" he whispered, not wanting to admit that seeing her smile after so long felt wonderful.

"I am not happy the engine worked…I am happy that you are using your magic more and more often and that you are doing a very good job with it" she said and approached him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest.

He sighed and closed his eyes feeling a ton of weight lifting off his shoulders. This small gesture of tenderness assured him that she appreciated his presence next to her. That she hadn't changed her mind about him escorting them to this trip. That this vague lingering darkness around her, might not have something to do with him. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and rubbed her back, silently.

"Have you noticed your telekinesis is almost non existent lately and that your arm is not bleeding anymore?" she asked quietly.

He squeezed her with his arms "Yes" he lied. His brows furrowing at this sudden realisation.

"Auntie, I am hungry!" Teddy reminded them of his presence.

They both turned. He was looking at them demandingly. He drew back from her and made it to the driver's sit "Get in Ted, we are going to stop at the first exit so you can get something to eat" he said.

She hesitated momentarily "You are driving?"

"You need to rest" he whispered and got in.

Teddy jumped into the back sit and then she followed. She seemed relieved as she put her seat belt on "I am tired indeed, thank you" she said and gave him a grateful smile that uplifted the corners of her eyes.

He threw in the first gear and sped off the shoulder lane quickly, seeing from his mirror the motorway assistance car approaching the place they had stopped. Happy to avoid the muggle engineers he sped off and soon they were having a smooth drive over to the quick lane.

Sometime later Hermione was partly dozing off and Severus was hearing at Teddy's acute observations about everything around them. He was trying to answer to the boy without looking over at Hermione too much. Trying to suppress his need to kiss her darkness to kingdom come. Teddy's next words managed that, as they drew him in a lovely fantasy of a small child's bubbling imagination.

"I want to fly up to the moon" Teddy mused and he watched at the pale moon that was already out, along with the sun. Lying low at the horizon.

Hermione stirred "Maybe Severus can teach you how to fly…" she muttered and looked at him tiredly. She reached out and pulled back a silver tendril from his temple.

"OCDing?" he mouthed at her with a soft smile.

She shook her head "No…I just love to touch you" she whispered.
His smile grew wider as Teddy chimed in from the back sit "Can you Presser?!

"Of course, but I cannot reach the moon…” he whispered and took Hermione's hand. He planted a soft kiss on her wrist and she bit her lower lip. Her eyes looked at him so tenderly that his heart melted.

"You fly with a broom?" Ted asked with wide eyes.

"Yes, but I prefer to do it without one" he admitted and turned his attention towards the road.

"Without?!" Teddy cried "How?"

"That's why Severus is special….because he is able to do, what most of us are unable" she said thoughtfully and he offered her a grateful smile. Not noticing her serious expression as she was eating up his countenance.

"Can you teach me to fly without a broom?" Ted hollered.

"I can try, but you have to listen carefully" he frowned and checked on his rear view mirror.

"I will be a good boy! I will listen!" Teddy jumped.

"Don't mess up your seatbelt!" she chastised, momentarily taking away her solemn attention from the imposing man on her side.

"Sorry Auntie!" Teddy muttered and then turned to Severus again "Why can't we fly to the moon Presser?"

"Even the strongest magic cannot bypass some laws of physics" he said.

"I don't understand" Teddy seemed confused.

"If you want to go to the moon, then you must study the muggle sciences that are truly unsurpassed and then become an astronaut. That will bring a step closer to the moon" Hermione smiled at him appreciatively "Never thought I'd hear you admiring muggles"

"I am half muggle…” he reminded her.

She smiled widely.

"What are astronauts?" Teddy asked.

"Astronauts are scientists that have been deemed as physically able to endure space travel. And space travel is what will bring you out of earth's atmosphere and onto space…where your beloved moon is" he said and pointed upwards.

"I will become an astronaut then!" Teddy claimed seriously "And then I can stay on the moon?"

"In order to stay there, you need to have oxygen to breathe and water to drink and sustain fauna and animals. No one is living on the moon currently" Hermione intervened. Severus allowed her to take over.

"Why not?" Teddy asked.

"Told you, no oxygen and no water" she repeated.
Severus hummed and she turned to him "What?" she asked.

"I will disagree on the water part" he whispered carefully.

"There is water on the moon?" she asked truly surprised about that, but above all about his extensive knowledge on muggle sciences.

"Actually yes, want me to explain?" he felt amused with her perplexed expression.

"Oh, do I!" she said and turned to him fully.

"I want too!" Teddy said and clapped his hands.

He smiled at the road and his forefinger begun drumming the steering wheel as he slipped into his academic mode easily. "The obvious answer seems to be, no, because during a day on the moon which lasts two earth weeks the temperature on the lunar surface gets up to a hundred and twenty three degrees Celsius. That would be enough to boil away any water, if the moon had an atmosphere likes earth's. Which it doesn't and the reason is because the moon's gravity is weak. It's just a sixth of earth's gravity. That means it can't hold on to fast moving molecules like water. Anything going faster than two point four kilometres per second, the moon's escape velocity, is gone. Plus, since the moon has a very weak magnetic field, it cannot protect its surface from the solar wind. That's the stream of charged particles coming from the sun. These particles can effectively blast molecules from the surface of the moon into space. In fact that is how Mars lost its atmosphere. So if the moon had any water it should be long gone by now, correct?" he asked her.

She seemed mesmerised "Of course"

"Wrong. In 2001(* Read below) a very different picture emerged when scientists crashed a rocket intentionally into the surface of the moon. It created a crater twenty five meters wide and four meters deep that injected ten million tons of material into space, with half of it high enough to be lit by the sun. That allowed orbiting spacecrafts to photograph and look for the emission lines of water in the dust and what did they find?" he looked at Hermione.

"Water?" she looked at him mesmerised.

"Indeed. The water emission lines were bright and scientists estimated that five point six per cent of the mass of the ejected debris, was water. How is this possible? Where did the water come from and how did it remain on the moon?" he asked her.

"How?" she asked eagerly.

"There are actually three sources of lunar water. In order to comprehend the first source you have to look at where they crashed the rocket. It's a misconception that the moon has a dark side. Yes, one side is always invisible to earth, but all sides get light from the sun. However at the poles there are some craters that due to their location and depth are always in shade. They are called the permanently shadowed regions. Since they don't see the sun, these craters are one of the coldest places in the solar system. Colder than the surface of Pluto. They can reach negative two hundred and nine degrees Celsius. Since they are consistently holding such low temperatures they are cold traps, places where volatiles agents like water, remain frozen as ice. But where did the water come from, in the first place?"

"Meteorites?" she said quickly.

He shook his head "Close enough. Water containing comets and asteroids that have crashed at the moon surface over time. Any water molecules that found their way to the permanently shadowed
regions, would be trapped there forever as ice, but this isn't the only source of water on the moon. Samples from the Apollo missions collected beads from old volcanic explosions from the moon surface. When they sliced the small beads they found high concentration of water molecules in the middle of the formations, rather than outside. That means that the water came from the interior of the moon, so it must have contained water to begin with. Which makes sense, since the moon is likely a piece of earth that broke off millions of years ago upon impact with the body of Mars. The third and final source of water is created on the moon's surface by the reaction of Oxygen and Hydrogen. Oxygen can be found easily, since it makes up forty five per cent of the lunar surface mostly bound in oxide minerals, but where do you get the free Hydrogen?

"The sun?" she said with a huge smile.

He smiled at her with a nod "The solar wind, which is constantly bombarding the lunar surface with protons. These can react with oxygen to form hydroxide and ultimately water. That can drift over the surface of the moon until it finally flies away, or gets trapped in the permanently shadowed regions as ice. So there is water on the moon and this is important, because future astronauts like Ted can make use of those cold pockets and facilitate the water to their benefit. To build crops, to sustain their machines, or even to assist the process of creating rocket fuel"

She exiled and relaxed back to her seat "Phew…" she whistled.

"What did you just say Presser?" Teddy's voice sounded confused and lost.

Hermione laughed out loud and looked back at the child "I understood half of what he said, you are not alone Teddy".

Severus smiled at seeing the darkness lifted from her countenance. He couldn't care less about the moon or the water on it. It sufficed that this conversation made her smile again.

"I thought you were supposed to simplify your lecture, so that everybody can understand it. This was anything but simplified!" she chastised him playfully.

"This was simple enough for your bright intellect Hermione, as for Ted…" he looked at the still confused boy from his rear view mirror "There is water on the moon Ted, at the poles in the form of ice. Go to a good university, study really hard, don't rely only on your magic, become a scientist and maybe one day you shall step foot on the moon and use that water for a lunar colony. I for one, vouch that you can do it" he said with a smile.

"Yeah I will do it!" Teddy clapped and smiled widely "I'll go to the moon, find the poles and get the water to make carrots and cucumbers and I will take some chickens up there to have some eggs. I will build me a house and then I can bring Granny up there with me…" he remained thoughtful for a moment "….and then I'll come bring you and Auntie over also!"

Severus huffed and shook his head "Fine by me, Ted"

"Where the hell did you learn muggle science in such detail?" Hermione asked him after a brief pause where Teddy was pointing at the moon with a greasy hand upon the window and mumbling to himself.

"I love to read and I am half muggle. You keep forgetting that" he whispered nonchalantly.

"Excuse me, this was not simple mainstream interest. You could have easily taught physics in some muggle university, the way you spoke back there" she said and raised both brows, truly impressed by the wide extent of his knowledge.
"Thank you for the compliment, but it takes more than basic understanding of physics to become a Professor….the same is true for our schools and Universities. Not anyone with basic knowledge of magic can become a Professor….correct?" he gazed at her calmly.

"Severus…you truly have no idea of your potential, have you?" she asked with a small frown.

He laughed and waved her off "Get some rest, you are talking nonsense"

"I once asked you if there is an area of magic that eludes you…" she traced off.

"Many" he said becoming serious.

"Now, I will start asking you if there is an area of muggle sciences that eludes you…” she continued unfazed.

"Apart from chemistry, that resembles Potions too much…I think most of them elude me" he said with a small nod.

"And physics of course" she added.

"Not really" he brushed her off.

"And car engineering?" she continued with half a smile.

He gazed at her and raised his brow "Shut up…” he whispered gently.

"Damn…do I love your brain…it's absolutely brilliant…” she admitted wholeheartedly.

His heart squeezed tight and he cupped her neck. His forefinger caressed her cheek and he offered her a quick grateful smile "Said the woman that has scored higher in every single test in Hogwarts all through her seven year course there…” he whispered.

"You never admitted to my brilliance when I was a child…that's when I needed it the most!” she chastised him, but rubbed her cheek on the palm of his hand, enjoying its roughness.

"Back then you were wholly bothersome. Have you any idea what it's like to try and make the more introverted students participate, only to have you constantly sticking your hand up in the air…?" he whispered.

"I felt very short tempered when no one was answering the blinding obvious" she crossed her arms and frowned, but her smile was still there.

"Did age knock any sense into you?"

"I think age made me more quiet….” she said her countenance getting a tone darker.

He sighed but remained silent.

She felt the need to elaborate and kissed the palm of his hand before he withdrew it back to the steering wheel "The war…took away our innocence…the pain made us more silent" she said thoughtfully and then offered him a burning stare that looked right into his soul "Right?" she whispered.

He nodded and felt his throat going dry.

"The war that killed my mommy and daddy?" Teddy chimed in.
Hermione felt her eyes tearing up and her throat constricting "Yes, my darling" she said and wiped the tear that rolled before offering him a sad smile.

Severus pursed his lips as the darkness drew heavy in the car. Everyone got immersed into their own thoughts. He rested his elbow at the side window and his other hand hang loosely upon the wheel. He caressed his chin thoughtfully and gave Hermione a couple of concerned looks. She was not crying anymore and she caught one of his stares. She immediately cupped his knee and pressed him in order to assure him that everything was fine. Something that he was not certain about. After that small break with the moon where the mood had turned around, the reminder of the war darkened the mood of the car. He looked at the rear view mirror where Teddy was standing still, looking outside with a pouting lip. In contrast to his previous need to fix the mood, now he wanted only to remain silent.

As the car rolled down the M1 and left the area of Scotland and entered Blackpool, Hermione was already asleep and Teddy was sucking on the remainder of his chocolate milkshake. Severus found an opportunity to exit at the first available resting area and everyone got something to eat and drink. Hermione and Teddy also used the loo. When they got back into the car and drove off, she tried to convince him to let her drive. He told her that they only needed a couple of hours to reach Stoke on Trent where Andromeda's house was and that by nightfall they were going to be there. When she debated that he was going to be exhausted from driving all day long, he said "Better me than you".

Something which she awarded with a soft kiss, no matter Teddy's disgusted noises and declarations of a possible vomit. After that the mood became lighter again as they had their most immediate needs fulfilled. Sleep soon swan over Hermione and Teddy went in and out of short naps throughout the road.

Several hours later, Severus turned the car into Andromeda's driveway with a head that was mildly pounding from Teddy's constant jabber and from eyes that were stinging. Hermione woke up at some moment and after finding it impossible to persuade him to change seats, she did the best she could to alleviate the tiredness from his countenance in various ways. She started saying funny stories from her childhood, about her parents and then she moved onto the years of Hogwarts. Then she played a car game with Teddy, where they counted certain colours they chose and the one counting the most, won. Then they blasted the music on the radio and at one point Hermione started head banging on Deep Purple, knocking at your back door. Something that surprised him pleasantly and soon enough her completely altered mood rubbed off throughout the car. Teddy begun singing and dancing and even he began drumming his finger on the wheel in rhythm with the music.

When they entered the wide area of Stoke on Trent many passers by and other cars kept looking at them with interest as they drove with loud music through the peripheral streets. Something that Severus stopped promptly when they entered the small quiet village of Stone and pointed outside at the river and at the boats. At the beautiful houses and at the heavily green nature that enveloped them. He told them that blasting rock music through such a peaceful area was a desecration. That made Hermione embrace him, plant a juicy kiss on his lips and say "Party pooper!"

He pulled the handbrake and killed the engine, finally admitting that he wished to get out of his seat and stretch and that his ears felt absolutely abused from the loud music, from the constant talking and from the sound of the car engine at full speed. No matter his fatigue though he felt very peaceful and close to what he could call happy. Just seeing Hermione smiling widely and Teddy laughing was enough to compensate for his tiredness.

"Who is going to show us, around his house?" Severus looked back at Teddy.

"I am!" Teddy cried and tried to unbuckle himself. Hermione got out and helped him. The moment
Teddy run towards the door, it opened up and the forever beautiful Andromeda made her appearance. No matter that she was close to fifty five years old, she still remained pleasing to the eye, although she bore her older sister's Bellatrix haughty beauty. So much so, that if one didn't notice the slight difference in their hair colour, and her eyes that were several shades kinder, one could have momentarily mistaken her for Voldemort's dangerous Lieutenant and possible lover. Severus got out of the car and walked over at the passenger door, but didn't try to join Hermione and Ted that run up to Andromeda.

"DROMEDA!" Teddy cried loud enough to wake up the neighbourhood and grabbed her by the waist.

His grandmother kneeled down and passed a good five minutes kissing, caressing him and asking him about his trip. Then she turned her attentions at Hermione and the two women embraced and spoke some mutual amicable words. Severus smiled discreetly and leaned back at the passenger door, crossing his arms. He didn't want to admit that he enjoyed that scene, but most of all that he was the one that brought them here. That he had somehow contributed to the happiness of three people….his brows furrowed… maybe four….his mind thought….maybe this time he could count himself into this pleasant atmosphere….when he always drew back from such occasions. Nevertheless he didn't want to impose himself in what was family business. Hermione told him that Andromeda had been informed and was expecting him, but still….

I am not family….

As if sensing his reservation, Hermione turned to him still holding Andromeda's arm "What are you doing there? Come on….come inside!" she said happily.

He smiled and gazed at his boots feeling slightly uneasy.

"Take Teddy inside, I will help Severus" Andromeda reassured her and Hermione offered him a bright loving smile that warmed his heart before disappearing behind the door.

Andromeda walked elegantly down the small path and stood in front of him. Tall for a woman she could almost look at him, eye to eye. Her hair a matching silver colour to his, only breaking through with brown tendrils, whilst his were coal black. He straightened and gave her a curt nod "Good evening Andromeda. Hermione said you have been informed, nevertheless I cannot but feel that I am intruding on your family this evening" he said quite reserved.

She inhaled and smiled at him calmly "The man that worked alongside my daughter for years, the man that saved my nephew from a fate worst than death, the man that helped my younger sister as if he was her brother….the man that took care of my grandson, as if he was his child…." she trailed off.

He swallowed and felt himself frowning deeply. Her words were sudden and stirred in him many memories and emotions.

She extended her hand to him "The man that worked alongside my daughter for years, the man that saved my nephew from a fate worst than death, the man that helped my younger sister as if he was her brother….the man that took care of my grandson, as if he was his child…." she trailed off.

He hesitated only for a second before he took her hand and shook it "Thank you" he whispered keeping her gaze steadily. Letting her understand that he appreciated her words more than he could ever say.
She pointed elegantly to her door "After you Severus, having you over is a true honour and a real pleasure"

Waves of relief run down his back as he reached the door and then waited for her to pass in front of him like a true gentleman. When he closed the door behind him and saw the bright lights, the warm earthy colours of the parlour, smelt the burning chestnut wood from the fireplace and he turned to the living room and saw the big brightly lit Christmas Tree, he felt his back deflating. The need to sit down was too heavy, because it was the first time in years that he felt welcomed, inside a family home that had the intentions of celebrating Christmas properly. That moment he felt Hermione's arms embracing him from the waist and he turned to her.

"You look absolutely exhausted" she whispered as Andromeda took Teddy up to his bedroom. They could hear their happy voices from the top floor.

He shook his head "I am not" he assured her.

She reached up and entwined her fingers through his hair. She drew him to her quietly and kissed his lips gently at first. Then his arms wrapped around her back and he opened up his mouth as she kissed him deeper for what seemed like an eternity. Making the images he saw a moment ago around him and her touch feel like a fairytale. Like something that he couldn't truly ever belong to.

When he opened his eyes he felt foggy. He pecked her lips and whispered "What was that all about?"

She looked up and offered him a sweet smile "Mistletoe" she said mischievously and giggled. He drew her inwards and cradled her head on his chest as her arms tightened around him. At that moment he felt that his decision to come along with her for Christmas has been the best he could have ever taken.

Chapter End Notes

The scientific facts about the moon are real, but I changed the dates a bit to match them to the timeline of the story. The crashing of the rocket upon the lunar surface was in 2009 (for anyone that likes to check on those facts)
Severus picked up the small glass vial and rolled it around in his hands. The small snowdrop looked disheveled as it floated inside the clear liquid. He remembered the moment he saw it up at the mountain top with the eagles flying free and the dire need to bring it back to Hermione. This woman, won over his freedom. Something that he would have never thought possible a couple of months ago. Yet….

Yet, here he was. In the guest room of Andromeda's house, sitting on the double bed after fixing the duvet and cleaning up as best as he could. Hermione had woken up way earlier and not wanting to disturb him, she took a shower and went downstairs with Andromeda and Teddy who were already up. He appreciated very much that she allowed him the time to rest as much as he could, because he was very tired from driving all day yesterday. He slept way into noon and when he woke up he felt slightly embarrassed to take a shower, even though their guest room had it's own bathroom.

The need to clean himself won over any moral barriers and soon he was freshly dressed, but still sitting at her side of the bed after noticing the small vial peaking out from under a sweater on her open suitcase. Feeling slight remorse for checking on her things, he got rather shocked when he saw his snowdrop carefully kept inside a pretty little vial. Did Hermione value his flower so much that she needed to keep it preserved? That thought made him smile at the small bottle and he didn't even try to hide himself when the door creaked open carefully.

Her soft footfalls entered the room and she came in front of him. He was still looking at the snowdrop when her hand covered his and the vial softly. He gazed up at her "You kept it?" he whispered.

Her hand caressed his softly "Of course".

"I am sorry I took such liberties with your things" he said and his brow creased when he felt an unaccustomed ache in his heart.

She smiled and her hand cupped his cheek "I would have shown it to you eventually". Her finger caressed the roughness of his jawline.

He sighed silently, not understanding what all this was making him feel. Only that it was very strong and consuming. He didn't even know what to tell her. He resulted in showing her instead. He clasped her hand and kissed her palm. As he did, he closed his eyes and tried to identify the tightening on his chest.

"I know..." she whispered and drew him in. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and she pressed him tightly, making him understand that whatever was going on through his mind, was also affecting her. Still, neither voiced their most inner thoughts. His arms rested on her waist and his fingers caressed the small of her back for a long time.

It was her that spoke again softly, as the animated voice of Teddy was heard from the ground floor "Did you rest well?"

He nodded, not releasing her from his arms, or the vial from his palm "Thank you for giving me the time" he whispered.
"You were so exhausted last night, you fell asleep the moment your head touched the pillow" she said with a gentle smile.

"You expected another epilogue to our night after that kiss under the mistletoe?" he asked and kissed her stomach.

Her muscles tightened under him and she exhaled "Yeah, hope always dies last…" she giggled again and pinched his shoulder blade playfully.

"I aim to please…but sometimes I fail…" he tightened his arms around her.

Then she laughed out loud and cradled him "We have all the time in the world for you to make it up for me, don't worry"

He frowned again and tightened his grip around the small vial "What do you intend to do with the flower?" he returned on what caused his heart to ache.

"I want to find a way to be able to carry it with me all the time…” she murmured and entwined her fingers through his hair. She began massaging his scalp.

Waves of pleasure rolled down his spine at her touch, but he remained silent.

"Severus?" she said after a few quiet moments.

"Mmm?" he murmured.

"I have brought something over for you to take, but I am not sure it's not going to ruin the mood between us" her voice sounded hesitant.

He pulled back and frowned the question, instead of voicing it.

She munched on her lower lip and then as if deciding on some inner debate she pushed back from him and went to her suitcase. She searched for a few moments and then returned with a potion bottle where a bluish liquid was flowing inside, forming bubbles at the slightest movement. She stood in front of him and opened up her palm "You give me back my snowdrop, which you went to great lengths to bring me in the first place…and I give you this"

He frowned in confusion but did the exchange. Before turning his attention to the blue potion, he saw her hand closing tight around the snowdrop and his heart pinched him hard again. Reminding him that there were unresolved emotions boiling down there, that were awoken by her tender treatment to his flower. Feelings that he didn't want to acknowledge at that moment.

"What is this?" he whispered and turned it around in his hands. He had an idea, but he wanted to allow her the space to show him.

She placed the vial carefully on a small zip locked bag and then between her clothes, probably to protect it from breaking and then smiled back at him "I know you may find the idea disturbing, but I had to bring it over…” she said as if that was enough to explain the existence of this small bottle in his hands.

He raised his brows silently.

"I had to try to convince you to take it…” she said and walked back to him. This time she sat next to him and placed her hand above his thigh.
He raised his head in understanding and she hurried to elaborate.

"I made it according to your diagram, even though I felt slightly nettled by my inability to create such perfect potions as you" she said with a low voice, which showed him that she needed a boost on her self confidence.

"…For now…" he whispered and gazed at her steadily.

She smiled and rubbed her cheek "For now" she agreed half heartedly.

"Your mind is too brilliant to be contained by anyone's advice, no matter how prudent. It needs to explore things on it's own" he raised his brow at her testily.

She huffed and her cheeks caught fire "Thank you" she muttered.

"Just try not to explode again…” he added half seriously, half playfully.

"Haven't you had any accidents during your career…? Was it always impeccable?" she sounded hurt.

He signed and pretended to think "Nope…it was impeccable" he said after a moment.

"Severus!" she tightened her hand on his thigh.

His arm wrapped around her shoulder and he pulled her in "I had many accidents, so I am advising from experience. Allow your brilliance the space to explore, but do be careful. People have died from experimenting with magic, it's not uncommon"

"Luna's mom died like that" she whispered and leaned her head on his shoulder.

He nodded "Be careful, but don't try to contain your intellect. It's one of a kind"

"I feel like you are pampering me, beyond true value" she sounded reserved.

He shook his head "I'd never do that"

"Even though we are all over each other?" she caressed his thigh demandingly.

"Especially because of that" he assured her.

She exhaled seemingly soothed by his reassurances "So?" she pointed at her potion that was still cradled in his palm.

"So?" he mimicked her.

"Are you going to take it?"

"Why should I? Give me one good reason and I promise I will swallow it this very moment" he whispered.

"Don't you want your voice back?" she gazed up at him.

He remained thoughtful for a moment and inhaled deeply "I do, but on the other hand this silence has shown me new ways to handle things…" he rebuked.

She pressed her lips and reached up to caress his jaw. Her finger moved above his lips "I want to
hear your voice again” she whispered.

He frowned and swallowed hard ”You do?"

She wrapped he hand behind his nape and pulled him down to her. She dragged her lips upon his and licked him softly ”I want to hear that monumental voice, speaking gently to me. I want to hear it tell me that I am beautiful and worth a trip up to the mountains, just to bring me back a flower in the middle of the winter. I want to hear your deep voice vibrating through my spine when you whisper dirty things to me during the night….” she murmured and opened up her mouth to kiss him deeply.

”Sweet Merlin…” he whispered breathless when after a few moments she pulled back from her sensual kiss.

”Was that a good reason enough for you?” she asked and pecked his lips softly.

”Better than any other” he nodded and felt his heart pounding like crazy. The voices of Teddy and Andromeda stopping him from throwing her back to bed in order to continue what she started.

She smiled knowingly and bit her lip ”They are waiting for us downstairs so don’t get any dirty little thoughts into your mind”

”Me? Never…” he whispered and kissed her softly.

She pulled back ”Will you try it out?” she pointed towards the potion.

His brows furrowed ”How many doses will I need to take?”

”Considering the extent of the internal damage I’d say at least four….and even then the results might be ambiguous” she said with a regretful tone.

He nodded ”I understand…this is an experiment of some sort”

”I am not using you as a guinea pig….I honestly want to heal you” she said with a small frown and caressed his temple.

His lips turned to a lopsided smile ”I know”.

He looked at the potion thoughtfully. He wanted to tell her that he was not ready to succumb the obvious pain that was going to come from the rearrangement of the scar tissue inside his throat. He wanted to enjoy his short vacation with her. Not withstand more painful nights and days…but her eyes when she confessed how much she wanted to hear his voice again, stopped him.

”You don’t have to do it now….there is going to be some level of discomfort…” she began explaining, but he already knew what he was in for. Better than she did.

He nodded and uncorked the bottle.

”You will take it now?” she sounded hopeful.

He gave her a curt nod and downed her potion with one gulp. The moment it passed from his torn throat, he felt the pain sharp and sudden. He had been expecting it, but he was unable to stop the reaction. He winced and swallowed repetitively in order to clear his throat of that liquid. The need to drink some water was dire ”Can I have any water?” he whispered and tried to stop the need to cough.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulder and chest and leaned her head on him ”No…it has to start
mending the scar tissue around your vocal chords. Can you withstand it? Is the pain too much?"

He shook his head "No, it's ok". He was not lying. The pain was mildly disturbing, but the need to cough was making him very edgy.

"Don't try to use your voice now. You have to take at least a couple of more doses, before your voice begins to return back to normal" she pressed her arms around him.

"I won't" he whispered with a smile. He couldn't even if he wanted to. His throat now felt so painful and sensitive that even whispering was difficult.

"The effects will become less with each dose, ok?" she asked.

He nodded.

She crashed her lips to his ear and murmured "Thank you for doing this for me"

The left side of his body numbed down from goosebumps and he tightened his grip around her waist reassuringly, yet he couldn't but voice his most inner insecurities "How long would you have abided by my silence?"

She frowned "What do you mean?"

"Before you decided that you have had enough?" he whispered feeling his throat burning and pulling him painfully. His eyes watered, but he didn't know if that was because of the pain or because of the fear for her answer.

"Are you seriously asking me such a thing?" she gazed at him angrily.

He frowned silently.

"What's going on through your mind Severus? Do you honestly think that I will let you go, because you cannot talk? I didn't give you the potion in order to upgrade you to higher standards…but because I want to heal you…because I …." she stopped and huffed. Her teeth munched on her lower lip "You sounded pretty stupid right now" she chastised him.

"It was a justified question" he whispered quietly and caressed her side. His fingers curled around her and he drew her in. He planted a soft kiss on the top of her head.

After a moment she exhaled and nodded "I suppose it was, because of the stupid reasons I gave you back there. I don't care even if you never speak to me again…as long as you keep holding me like this" she said and felt her eyes burning. She never meant to make him feel inadequate. She only wanted to help out.

He nodded and planted another soft kiss near her temple.

"I got involved with you, knowing that you can only whisper….that never stopped me…I am only trying to do the best I can for you…do you believe me?" she said and tightened her arms around him.

"I do" he whispered and coughed slightly.

She looked up to him "Is it bothering you a lot?"

He shook his head "It's partly painful, partly itchy. I have an dire urge to cough like crazy"

"Don't! You'll only make it worst" she said imperatively.
"How long until I can drink some water?"

"Give it a quarter of an hour, ok? I'll keep you company as the nuisance settles down" she caressed his stomach and then her hand rested on his belt.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head on hers for a few silent moments. Swallowing often in order to clear up his throat and trying to control the need to cough. The pain was intense, but not something he couldn't easily handle. If he could remain silent through Crucio, then this was a mere inconvenience for him and if it would make her happy he was more than willing to go through it. Did he care so much about having back his voice, if the potion ever managed to bring it back? He used to think that this was so important to him, yet now with Hermione in his arms he rarely thought about his voice anymore. Or about his arm, that was never bleeding since he started using magic. Everything was slowly mending up and it was happening so slowly and discreetly, that he barely ever noticed it.

Before Hermione came into his life, he was always thinking about the loss of his voice, the loss of his freedom, the loss of his magic….and now, a couple of months later, he was partially using his magic again, he had gained some form of freedom and she was trying to offer him back his voice. All that could be attributed to her and that was disconcerting him, because along with his unresolved emotions, all this created something that was barely under his control. It was something that was attaining a life of it's own and he didn't know if Hermione was sharing those feelings with him. He was not ready to ask her, nor pressure her to face something that was so complicated. Hell, he was not ready to do that either.

For now it was enough to just hold her in his arms and feel blessed that she appeared in his life. She was pulling him towards the light slowly and he was willingly following her there. He just didn't know how long that would last, because his life never had a bright halo. His aura was dark, so darkness would draw him back down eventually….

Right?….  

He sighed and that alerted her. She opened up her eyes and rubbed her face on his shoulder. A sudden thought came to him as they were sitting there so comfortably and he couldn't but voice it.

"Hermione?"

"Mmm" she murmured and snuggled against him contently.

"Why was your mood so bad yesterday?" he whispered feeling the need to cough lesser and the pain almost gone.

She paused for a brief moment before answering "Yesterday morning, you mean?"

He nodded "Yes"

She sighed and didn't speak for a couple of seconds "Had a disturbing talk with Harry about us" she said finally, probably deciding that she wanted to be completely honest with him.

"I suppose Mr. Potter is not so happy about our situation" he whispered.

She huffed "Harry…uhm…how can I say it without compromising the whole situation…" she paused thoughtfully.

"You are free not to say anything" he reassured her.
She looked at him appreciatively "No, I want to explain. As much as I can…Look, Harry feels like you and him share an invisible bond…so in his opinion, I got in the way"

He inhaled and frowned "I didn't know I was in a relationship with Mr. Potter. Very interesting"

She paused and then laughed "Severus, this is serious"

"Apparently it's not and Mr. Potter is simply delusional. I never shared any special bond with him" he whispered.

"You protected him for seven years"

"Indeed" he gave her a curt nod.

"You sacrificed yourself for him to live…." she clarified.

"In order for Voldemort to die…I must correct you" he pointed out.

"You didn't care if Harry would survive this?" she frowned.

He exhaled "I didn't want the boy to come to any harm of course" he whispered with obvious hesitation. It was clear that he was not talking about all this easily.

"Therefore you do share a bond" she said.

He shook his head "No we don't. For reasons of my own I protected your friend and I was torn between my hate for his father and my love for his mother. After years of protecting him, I ended up caring about his well being. He was not to be held accountable about what his parents passed down onto him, nor for the fact that Voldemort chose him as one of his Horcruxes. He was just a boy, much like Ted is"

"You sound sentimental beyond recognition" she noticed.

"I assure you I am not and this conversation is not easy on me. You asked if I share a bond with Mr. Potter and I answered quite clearly that no I am not. I never did" he said solemnly.

Her shoulders slouched and her lip pouted "Nevertheless Harry thinks you do"

"And he made your life hard for getting in the way…you said so" he squeezed her briefly.

She smiled sadly "Yeah, that's why I seemed distracted at the beginning of the trip" she lied, not wanting to tell him what Harry said about the unsurpassed love that Severus had shown towards his mother all these years. She didn't want to share with him the thorn on her side. She would resolve it slowly, alone, as she observed how he treated her with the passage of time. Although to be fair, he never gave her an indication that Lily was between them. Whenever they were together, he was very tender and loving towards her. He didn't seem distracted and lost in other worlds. So in reality she didn't have a reason to doubt him and listen to Harry's prickly words. Suddenly she felt angry at her best friend again.

"Is there something I can do to alleviate the tension you feel about the situation?" he asked carefully.

She smiled mischievously and her hand caressed his thigh upwards and reached just below his hips. There she squeezed him and bit her lower lip "I can think of a couple of things…"

He appreciated her touch "Behave…So what's the conclusion of the situation with Mr. Potter"
"That he became a judgmental bastard and I had to put him back in place, that's about it. But all that left me rather raw and I took it out on your and Teddy in the car. Forgive me"

"It's ok, Miss Granger" he smirked and tagged her playfully.

She huffed "Are you ready to come downstairs with me? Andromeda has brought a friend over and I feel rather uncomfortable down there all alone"

He stood up and lifted her with him "The very independent and rebellious Hermione Granger, needs a chaperone…" he drawled.

"I need you…next to me…is that so strange?" she asked and looked up to him with a sweet smile.

"I am teasing you" he raised his brow.

"I am not" she rejoined and reached up to kiss him again.

He deepened the kiss and they both got lost touch for a few blissful moments. This time it was he who pulled back and pressed his lips "Are we leaving tonight or tomorrow?"

"I thought about going tomorrow morning. Return the car to my parent's house and then apparate back at Hogwarts for Christmas" she said with a smile and pulled him to the corridor.

He followed her down, but before entering the dining room their hands separated and Hermione check her long hair, making sure that she was presentable. He followed behind and Teddy run up to him.

"Presser Snape, here I saved you a seat!" the boy said and pulled him by the hand.

"Hi Ted, good morning Andromeda" he said politely.

"Good morning Severus, let me introduce to Mr. John Tucker"

Severus shook the man's hand steadily "John, this is Severus Snape a close friend of my family” Andromeda introduced him politely.

"Glad to meet you" the middle aged, tall man said with a smile. His accent sounded a bit off and immediately Severus identified it, as Ted made him sit down next to his chair.

"You too. You are American?" he whispered.

"Indeed I am! From the vast forests and mountains of Montana. Is my accent so obvious?" the chubby, red cheeked happy countenance of the man bespoke of a healthy and pleasant disposition. His hair was yellowish blonde and his forehead wide and proud. He was a bit taller than Severus and that made him close to six foot five.

"It is, as it is also rather colourful" Severus smiled kindly

"What brought you to England?" Hermione asked and sat down on his other side.

"Pleasure at first, business later on and finally I remained. I have been living here for twenty years now. Cannot get rid of the accent though" John said pleasantly.

"You don't need to, it's beautiful" Andromeda said with careful concern and Severus knew immediately what the arrangement between those two was. Well, Andromeda had been a widow for four years. No one should expect her to remain alone forever.
"And your accent is not one hundred percent Oxonian either, Severus!" John pointed out cleverly.

He raised his brow and accepted his tea from Hermione with a curt nod "Very perceptive of you. My father was British, but my mother was Irish. I think her part gave my accent some mild confusion"

"Ireland! Now that's another place I want to go and live in!" John declared and drank some of his coffee.

Teddy placed before him a plate with some toast and butter. Severus was not in the mood to eat, as his throat felt sensitive, but the need to drink was immediately satisfied as he swallowed some tea. It felt as if it was washing away the remainder of the potion and he felt thankful for that.

"You should visit, it's very picturesque and at certain parts so isolated you think you have turned back in time" he whispered.

Hermione squeezed his thigh under the table and he gazed at her calmly.

"We've waited for you to wake up impatiently" Andromeda said with a smile.

He winced "I am sorry I delayed your plans for the day. Apparently I was very tired"

She waved him off "You are part of our plans, we couldn't go without you"

"What are the plans?" Hermione leaned over with obvious interest.

"Mr. Tucker insists on taking us on a walk through Stone's parks, then maybe we can go into the centre of Stoke On Trent to buy some Christmas gifts…." Andromeda begun.

"YEAH! I want a doll house and a Train Station and a new football and I want new ropes so I can climb trees and ….." Teddy begun counting his fingers.

"You will get one gift from each of us and one from Santa Claus…that's it young man!" Andromeda chastised and then turned to her guests "…then for lunch at The Wayfarer. A lovely walk by the park and maybe a boat ride and then home for dinner. What do you guys think?"

Severus raised his brow and checked on Hermione.

She hesitated "We intended to return early since we are leaving tomorrow morning and we have a long drive to my parent's home"

"Leaving? You cannot leave!" Andromeda frowned.

"What?" Hermione smiled.

"You must remain for Christmas, of course" she sounded dead set. As if she had arranged their plans for them.

"We intended to have Christmas back at Hogwarts" Hermione clarified.

"Bullocks! You pass Christmas there all the time, this time you shall remain with us. Right Teddy?"

"Yes Dromeda!" Teddy clapped.

"I'll drink to that! Would be lovely to get to know you better Severus" John raised his coffee to him in salutation.
"Uhm...I don't know how Severus feels about this arrangement" Hermione said carefully and looked at him.

Her eyes told him that she wanted to remain, but she was afraid what he would say. He was careful how to express himself "I am not used to celebrating Christmas..." he saw her face darkening and he hurried through "...but this time I think I can make an exception, correct?" he gazed down at her quietly.

She smiled and bit her lower lip "Yes, you can...." then she frowned "I mean...are you sure?" she whispered, not wanting to pressure him into anything he was not ready to do.

He nodded "Of course"

Andromeda clapped her hands "That's settled then, you shall remain with us till Christmas. After that, you are free to go wherever your hearts desire"

"We can go for a walk at Caldon Canal Dromeda! I can bring my skateboard and show Presser Snape how to do it!" Teddy chimed in happily.

"I don't think that particular sport was made for me" Severus joined in quietly.

Teddy pouted at him "It is! If you can fly, then you can skateboard!"

Hermione giggled.

Her raised his brow at her.

"What? He's right. You can fly...so what's a mere skateboard to you?" she teased.

"Certain death" he pointed out.

Hermione laughed out loud, but Andromeda's voice made him look to her direction.

"We can go for a picnic in Parkhall Country Park or Central Forest Park, or Queen's Park"

Andromeda begun counting her fingers.

"Let's just take it one day at a time, because Severus is going to get a dangerous social overload and I am afraid his systems are going to come crashing down" Hermione teased and checked to see how he was taking it.

He pursed his lips and tasted some tea. When he felt her eyes on him he looked at her with a raised brow, but remained calm and silent.

Hermione's fingers curled around his knee and she squeezed him, then she approached his ear and whispered "Remember how you almost had a total breakdown at that coffee shop in Hogsmeade?"

He frowned upon that memory.

"Look where you are, look how far you've gone...I am proud of you" she said and planted a soft discreet kiss on his cheek. Then she turned to John that was asking them something that Severus couldn't hear because his ears were buzzing heavily. He had gone a long way since that first try to socialise, hadn't he?

"...fly" John said as Severus's hearing returned slowly. That was the only word he heard from the conversation.
Hermione looked at him fleetingly "I don't know how acquainted you are with the magical world"

"I am a squib" John said proudly.

Hermione raised both brows as declaring that one is born to magical parents, but lacks the skill was not something one presented with pride in their world. Then again she was against any discrimination, so her inner sense of justice kicked in and she shaped up rather quickly.

Severus looked up at him with interest but didn't speak.

"Parents were famous wizards back in Montana. They were the founders of Squib Hope, an independent organisation that gathered fundings in order to help Squib children find jobs in the magical world. My mom was a Magical Doctor, my father a MediWizard. Their organisation grew very large and extended outside the borders of Montana. They helped a lot of children find jobs and accumulate themselves inside a magical environment" John sounded justifiably proud.

"Did you work in the magical world?" Hermione asked.

John huffed "Nope, I decided to follow their footsteps only in the muggle world. I am a cardiologist"

"Impressive" Severus admitted.

"Thank you. Took a lot of guts to get out of my comfort zone and out of their protective bubble that Squib Hope had created for me. At the end of the day they were very proud of me and I am pretty much ok. I created my own path in life which was never magical" John said with a simple modesty that Severus appreciated deeply.

"You are an exceptional individual John" Andromeda smiled appreciatively and the blonde giant blushed.

Severus raised his brow and looked at his tea discreetly. Hermione's hand caressed his knee and again he felt so out of place and yet exactly where he belonged. He shook his head trying to understand what was truly making no sense to him.

"Come on, finish your tea everybody, we have a lovely day ahead" Andromeda waved at them happily.
It can grow in darkness and make it's own light

Soon they finished with late breakfast, put on their coats and followed Andromeda, John and Teddy for a walk in the city centre, were Hermione went completely crazy with all the brightly lit storefronts and the colourful lights adorning the trees and the street lights. At the central plaza they had created an ice skating arena, which was full of children crashing upon each other or falling flat on their behinds. Laughter, playful screams and yells of horror filled the area as they approached.

Teddy convinced Hermione to enter, even though she told him she couldn't skate. Just before going in, she tried to convince Severus to join them, something that he denied with disheartening austerity, so she left him alone with a pouting lip. He leaned his elbows at the iron fence that was around the ice and watched with growing amusement as Ted drew her at the middle of the circle and left her there. She couldn't stand straight at all. She was moving her skates back and forth, going nowhere and she was jerking her body in every direction trying to keep her balance. Her face was contorted in a mask of terror as Ted drew her at the middle of the circle and left her there. She started crying out for help, lost her footing and fell on her behind. The staff that was there in case of an emergency intervened and soon she was taken out of the arena.

When she and Teddy joined them he turned her around and looked at her wet behind before clasping her shoulder and drawing her in a silent embrace, which she accepted willingly. After that they walked along the main road that was full of shops with festive storefronts and Hermione window shopped for every single gift she wanted to buy. She asked him coyly if he knew what he wanted to buy for her, to which he answered "There is one thing that I've been dying to buy for you since the beginning…"

"And you won't tell me?" she asked with a questioning frown.

"No"

"Damn…" she muttered.

Andromeda and John were holding hands in front of them and were leading the way discreetly, trying to allow them the space to talk and mess with each other. Mess as much as a man like him could in front of so many people. Which was merely to walk with his arm around her shoulder and with her around his waist. He hadn't been around so many people in years. At Hogwarts he was always isolated inside his chambers or in the classrooms. Working in espionage demanded isolation. All this felt too strange and foreign to him, yet he was doing the best he could, because of Hermione. In the end, they didn't shop for Christmas to Teddy's dismay and to Severus's disappointment, as that meant that they were going to have to return to this beehive again soon.

When Andromeda told them to walk slowly toward the Wayfarer restaurant, he felt quiet relief at getting out of that crowd. Hermione seemed to blossom in this environment and he admitted that she fitted perfectly inside a city's buzzing life. He couldn't help but wonder why she hadn't chosen to work at the Ministry of Magic, where she could be in the midst of such a vibrating crowd. Why did she chose a place as calm and low key as Hogwarts. Of course living under the same roof as hundreds of teenagers was not really peaceful, but he had gotten used to that over time. This kind of commotion he was not used at, and he was very surprised that he didn't end up with a nervous breakdown today, like he had at Hogsmeade during their first date.

He tightened his arm around her shoulder as they entered the restaurant and Andromeda led them to the back yard that was overlooking a vast green field and the calm river with the boats.
"Did you know that we had our first date at Hogsmeade, at that coffee shop, where I almost lost it?" he whispered and gazed at her with a tenderness that she felt straight into her heart.

She squeezed his waist "Yep…Did you just realise it?" she sounded amused.

He huffed and gave her a curt nod at which she giggled and shook her head.

Lunch came and went quickly, and the menu was very satisfying. The sun was bright and the clouds white and sparse. It was relatively cold so after lunch Hermione, John and Ted borrowed a football from the manager of the place and arranged themselves a nice game at the field in order to warm up.

Severus was relaxing with his legs crossed and his elbows resting at the arms of his chair. His hands were clasped in front of his chin and his eyes were stuck at Hermione and Teddy playing. He barely looked at John. All his concentration was on her and the child. He appreciated her happiness like a man that has never experienced these feelings ever before. He took everything in hungrily without participating. His eyes feasted on the beauty of nature, at the calm river waters that were glistening with the sun and at the colourful boats. The colour of the grass was vibrant under Ted's feet as he kicked the ball towards John. A flock of birds flew away from a tree line towards the horizon and momentarily Severus disengaged his eyes from them. His thumbs rubbed against each other and he sighed deeply as the birds got lost into the edge of the sky.

Then his eyes returned to her once more and his heart mellowed down. He didn't hear Andromeda returning from the bar and placing a glass of frozen beer next to him. Only her voice disturbed his quiet reverie.

"If I was her, I would feel very flattered" she said.

He frowned and looked at her slightly disoriented "What?" he whispered.

Andromeda tasted her beer and pointed at Hermione with her head "You've been looking at her non stop for a long time" she said easily.

He sighed and lowered his hands down to his legs. He didn't answer, but he noticed the beer and he reached out for it "Thank you"

She waved him off and remained silent for a few moments, enjoying her drink. Severus tasted his own not even bothered by Andromeda's remark about his attentions on Hermione.

"Did you know I met Tonks when I was in my third year at Hogwarts?" she asked out of the blue.

He raised his brows and took a few sips, relishing on the frozen taste of this drink "No" he shook his head and forced himself to get out of his introverted mood and engage in a conversation with her.

She nodded and wiped her mouth with a tissue "Indeed. Ted was Hufflepuff like me, but he never got my attentions until one day in the fourth grade, something unexpected happened"

"What was that?" he asked.

"It might sound too stupid at our age, but he picked up a pen I dropped on the floor and gave it back to me…” Andromeda flicked her shoulders "I looked at him and that was about it. After that we became inseparable"

Severus sighed and remembered how he picked up Lily's books at school once and had felt they
would be forever inseparable too. That hadn't been the case for them "It doesn't always happen that way" he said quietly.

Andromeda raised her brow thoughtfully "Doesn't it?

"No" he shook his head very decisively.

Andromeda took another sip from her beer and relaxed back "With Ted it wasn't obvious from the beginning that we were going to fall in love and get married. It started out as a friendship, but then again we were so young and naive. Thought we had our life figured out just by being students in such an illustrious school. What did we know about life's hardships back then? What could we have known about what love truly is? That came out slowly for us…so quietly we didn't even realise it until a couple of years later" she said.

He drank some beer and turned his eyes to Hermione again.

Andromeda took his silence as consent to continue her narration and so she did "You see love is a peculiar thing, sometimes too obscure to be realised from the beginning. It can grow from nothing and then blossom in a second. It just needs a seed to planted inside you, somehow in some manner. Small it might be…but the seed needs to be there. In my case the seed had been him returning me my pencil. He kind of…looked after for me, you understand?"

He nodded silently and his eyes moved thoughtfully around the field.

"You see when that seed is planted and it blossoms it can devour every beat of your heart and every breath you take. It can grow wild and out of your control so easily. It can become consuming. It can leave you speechless with its intensity, but it can also have a darker side. It can grow alone and then turn to dust. It can break your world apart and destroy you forever…" she continued.

He pursed his lips "Indeed it can" he whispered heavily. Love has only ever done that for him all these years. It has never shown him everything else that Andromeda was describing. Only it's dark side.

"Inside that darkness though another seed can be planted and that seed will make it's own light. Brighten up your whole world and turn your curse into a kiss. It will change the meaning of your world and of your soul…" her calm voice entered his mind and made him seriously reflective of her words.

"Love makes no sense" he abolished.

"No it doesn't. It makes no sense, it has no name, it sees no colour, it cares not about age. It just makes you whole and sets your heart on fire, not caring about the norms of society or about propriety. You know what's most important about love though?" she asked.

He shook his head "No"

"It has no fear. It can make one fearless. It makes you able to take the hand of the person your love, look into their eyes and tell them to follow you to the end of the world and erase their past forever. Finally, love needs no reason, Severus, it doesn't need to make sense. It is the one thing that can change you slowly, that can make you better. It will make you give everything your loved one wants and ask for nothing in return. It is hidden masterfully in the blink of an eye, in the hint of a smile and in the way you say goodbye"

"You are lucky to have experienced that with your husband" he whispered and swallowed several sips of his beer. He couldn't but admit that her words had touched him deeply.
She smiled "We both were lucky. Remember what I said that love makes you fearless?"

He nodded.

"When I decided to run away with Ted and get married against my family's wishes, that was a terrifying decision. I was giving up a life of plenty and security to run away with someone that couldn't offer me half of what I was used at. I loved him though and as love makes no sense, neither did my decision make any sense to my family. In the end they disowned me and never spoke to me again. Even after all these years, Narcissa is still very reserved towards me. I took my chances though, against all the odds and I followed my heart. Ted and I lived a nice life and I never regretted my decision. The war took away both him and my daughter. After that my life was cut in half. Only my grandson made me want to try again, for his sake. That is how much I have loved Ted. That is how much I have dedicated my life to him" she said with a voice that resonating heavily on him.

He gazed at her silently and lowered his eyes to his beer glass not really knowing what to tell her.

She let a few moment pass where she settled down onto those memories and then she spoke again "You know why I am telling you all this?"

He gazed at her solemnly "No"

She smiled sadly "You are looking at her the same way I was looking at him" she said quietly.

Pain tightened around his heart and his throat convulsed with unspoken words.

Her smile widened and she offered him a curt nod before picking up her beer and walking towards the field and her friend John. Severus opened up his mouth and exhaled. He straightened up in his chair and looked towards the table top. The words of Andromeda had rocked him so hard that he momentarily lost all ability to control himself. He looked towards Hermione briefly and then decided that he wanted to walk away from them for a moment. The need to find a quiet spot to reflect was too strong as he stood up and walked slowly away from the restaurant.

Thankful that everyone was too preoccupied with the game to notice him, he walked close to the docks and leaned his elbows on the wooden fence of the pier. His eyes fell onto the glistening waters and he rethought of Andromeda's words about her love for Ted. About what love truly was. The moment she described how the seed of love was buried inside her, he thought only of the incident with Lily and the books. Where his seed of love never blossomed and turned into a darkness that finally consumed him.

How about Hermione though? Had there been a seed that was planted without his knowledge? Was he indeed looking at her with the same devotion Andromeda had been looking at the love of her life, at her husband? He swallowed heavily and his cold hands clasped in front of the railings as he remembered the way Hermione touched his hand in that coffee shop and tried to make him zone out. When she tried to help him overcome his fear of big social gatherings. His heart complained at that memory and he frowned, now uncertain of how deep his feelings for this young witch were.

If there was even the remotest chance that he had fell victim to the nonsense of love, then did he want to drag down Hermione with him? He was not a man that fell in love easily and if that turned out to be true, which he was not sure of just yet, then he could end up suffocating Hermione with that love, like he had done with Lily. He could end up too angrily possessive of her and destroy everything. He didn't want to do that to her. He was afraid of himself, he was terrified of his reactions and this girl was too fresh to be buried under the heaviness of his emotions.

Teddy had asked her if she loved him and she never answered. At that moment he didn't mind her
lack of response, but now, after Andromeda's words….he felt his heart tightening painfully at her silence. Yet he couldn't demand answers from her that he couldn't give himself. How the hell did he end up caught in such an emotional turmoil again? These feelings were on the other end of the spectrum from what he was used at, but the desperation was similar. On one hand he wanted to take her into his arms and never let her go, on the other he didn't want to hinder her freedom, since he valued his more than words could say. He wanted to ask her how she felt about him, but he was afraid to answer back in case she asked him. He remembered the depth and tension of his gaze upon her and he instantly knew how demanding and personal that look had been. What it was that Andromeda saw in his eyes.

That look was declaring openly at Hermione "You - are - mine" and he frowned angrily at himself for that. He had no right to think so possessively about this woman. She didn't belong to him, no matter the probable depth of his feelings, which he was not ready to delve into deeper. She was his partner, not his possession. Had her friend Harry Potter been right? Was she in danger from him? Could he overpower her by his need for exclusivity in the end? Could he become so possessive as to turn her away in the end, like he had done with Lily? He didn't want that. He wanted to do all the right things, but life didn't work that way. His actions were overburdened with the weight of all the failures in his life and that made him a good candidate for unfair treatment to what mattered the most to him at the moment. He didn't want to be unfair to her. He had to find a way to put a bridle at his emotions and control himself, until he could place a clear tag at what he felt. Even then though he couldn't force his feelings on her. He had to patiently wait for her to tell him how she felt. That was what she deserved….and in the end of the day that is what he deserved also.

He remained like that for a long time, settling down the wild feelings that Andromeda stirred in him. Slowly as time passed by his heart cooled down and his head cleared up. He could hear the birds singing again and the water of the river flowing in front of him. He could listen to the voices of the people that were boarding the boat for the ride along the waters and the plates and glasses that were moved around at the restaurant behind him. He stayed put for a while longer, albeit his need to go check on her and Ted. He wanted to allow the space at both her and him.

After a while it was her voice that drew him out of his contemplations. Her hand landed on his shoulder blade "What are you doing back here?" she sounded slightly out of breath.

He gazed down at her and smiled "Wanted to quiet my mind for a moment" he whispered.

"How is your throat?"

He swallowed and felt no pain or irritation from it anymore "Perfect"

She smiled and pressed him "Tomorrow you will take another dose?"

He offered her a nod.

Her arm encircled him from the back and she came in front of him "You seem too preoccupied for this beautiful weather and our playful company. What are you thinking about?"

"Your beautiful company" he whispered and caressed her cheek.

She scrounged her nose "You came out here all alone to think about me?"

He flicked his shoulders and nodded.

She inhaled cautiously "That does not give me ease of mind"

"You are overthinking Miss Granger, as always’ he elbowed her off.
She bit her lower lip with a mischievous smile and undid some buttons on the lower half of his coat. Then her arms passed under it and encircled his back. Her fingers caressed his spine and traced the deep scar tissue that always made him feel uncomfortable. A crease appeared on his brow "You do realise we are in public..." he whispered and sounded strict, but his hand cupped the back of her neck and he pulled her inwards. He didn't want to admit that he was enjoying her fingers tracing around his scar and over the muscles of his back and shoulders. He tensed from her touch.

"Mmm, I love feeling your muscles twitch under my fingers…it makes me feel warm inside" she drawled and pressed her body on his.

He exhaled close to her mouth and looked at her with an intensity that loosened up her knees "Everybody is looking at us"

She shook her head and rubbed her nose on his chin playfully "No, everybody is minding their own business…believe me. No one cares that I will do this to you" she whispered and pinched his side.

He gasped and frowned at her.

"Or this..." she whispered and moved her body in front of him.

He inhaled feeling all her curves rubbing rudely on him and she smiled widely at his reaction "Or this..." she continued and tightened her arms around his back and pressed her breasts on his chest. Her hot breath scorched his neck as she pulled down his turtleneck and planted a kiss there.

"Do you like that?" she murmured provocatively and brought her lips close to his. The moment she touched his lips both their eyes closed. She pecked him softly, testing the waters. He cupped her cheek and leaned her at the side. He opened up his mouth and his tongue demanded entrance. She responded hotly not caring about who was scrutinising them. They kissed fervently for a few moments and when he pulled back she didn't want to release him.

He felt his breath catching and shook his head "I like this so much that I think the restaurant is going to censor us if you continue what you are doing". He felt his face catching fire and she noticed.

She cupped his cheek and smiled sweetly to him "Ok, I am stopping, because you look like you got caught with your hand in a cookie jar"

He pursed his lips and raised his brow "With both hands in the jar…". His fingers run down her spine and her body jittered with goosebumps.

"So will you tell me what is preoccupying you?" she asked gently and cleared some hair from his cheek.

"Apart from you?"

"I am serious!"

"So am I"

She raised a brow and looked at him critically "Did I freak you out with my window shopping?"

He signed "Almost"

She bit both lips "My ice skating?"

"That amused me" he gave her a lopsided smile.
She slapped his shoulder and he laughed lightly, but drew her inwards instead of releasing her. She giggled in response and when they settled down she continued "Is it the fact that I wanted to remain and you had to abide this festive environment because of me?"

He shook his head "That is my pleasure"

She frowned thoughtfully "Is it that I pushed you to take the potion? I only did it to help you out" she was quick to justify her reasons, which he didn't need. He knew she meant well.

He shook his head vigorously and more hair came onto his eyes and cheeks "No"

She exhaled truly bothered "My talk with Harry and the mood I was in yesterday?"

"I was concerned about that, but you laid my worries at rest today" he cleared.

"Then what the hell got you into this dark mood? I don't want to see you like that. What is it that bothers you?" she said and she gazed at him truly concerned.

The way I have been checking you out is what ails me….he thought and he swallowed feeling his eyes wandering towards the boat that flowed away from the dock. He was not ready to reveal his talk with Andromeda and the fears it had stirred inside him. He simply tightened his arms around her and planted a tender kiss on the side of her temple "I just needed a few moments to calm down the introvert inside me" he whispered.

She sighed and he hoped it was in relief "Was he sitting at some hidden corner of your mind, with his legs up to his chest rocking back and forth?" She tried to lighten up his mood that suddenly seemed to take a nosedive again.

"Yes" he said and as his breath caressed her ear, the hair on her arm stood up.

"I am sorry I forced you to get in touch with all the things that make you nervous. I should have taken you straight to my parents house and then at Hogwarts. We could have passed quiet holidays there alone" she said and kissed the top of his chest.

"Stop talking nonsense. I wanted to remain with the child for Christmas" he said steadily.

She tightened her arms around him and took several deep breaths. He caressed her and tried to alleviate the tension she felt. His large palms begun massaging her shoulder blades and she closed her eyes and rested her cheek on his chest. "Thank you for doing this for me" she murmured.

He nodded and felt his throat going dry … I would do anything for you…his mind said, but he didn't voice the thought. It was too demanding for their current relationship "Are you ready to go back to them?" he whispered.

"Mmmm…I am happy to stay here with you and have my back massaged…and then I'd like to rent a room in a hotel and fuck the brains out you please" she said and bit him lightly.

He gasped and laughed "Well, that was unexpected"

Her face reached up to him and she touched his lips. His was quick to respond and their kiss deepened in a slow sensual dance of tongue and teeth and lips. She cupped his nape and enjoyed his mouth exploring hers for a while longer. When he pulled back she felt her head floating and her body on fire.

"Should we get a hotel room now?!" she asked and her fingers tugged on his hair playfully.
He growled low and bit her lower lip "Now, we go back to the family that has politely allowed us to stay for Christmas my fiery little lioness"

She smiled and drew his head on her neck. He opened up his mouth and gave her a wet kiss that loosened up her legs "Ok, ok…I get it. Come on" she said and pulled back from him regretful to feel the cold air intruding the space between them.

He didn't follow "Go to them and I will be with you in a moment"

"Why?"

He pointed towards the restaurant with his head "Got something to take care off"

Her features relaxed when she understood what he was going to do "Ok, don't be long" she said and with a playful wink she walked away. Letting him muse after her. When she was lost from his sight he exhaled hard and rubbed the side of his temples. He tried to settle down his heart that was thumbing heavily and his body that had woken up abruptly by their sensual kisses. If she managed to arouse him up so easily he didn't think that he would be able behave during their stay at Andromeda. Shaking his head at these inappropriate thoughts he walked into the cashiers and took care of the bill for the whole family.

When he finished he reached the door that led out to the patio and stopped briefly to look at them all gathered together under the bright sun. He crossed his arms and saw Hermione pointing something at Teddy who was smiling widely. Andromeda and John were leaning close to each other, holding hands. His eyes looked over at the field that had been occupied by them a short while ago and at the sky that was still clear of any cloud now.

Reflectively, he uncrossed his arms and walked down to join them.
A home or a house?

Andromeda got read to take the tray with the eggnog into the living room, when Hermione's hand stopped her.

"What is it?" the older witch asked momentarily confused.

"I want to serve him" Hermione said and her cheeks blushed.

Andromeda raised her brows knowingly and smiled "You want to serve him or them?"

Hermione scrounged her nose "Him…" she whispered and she cast her glance down in embarrassment.

Andromeda signed and place the tray back at the kitchen counter "You want to serve him and he cannot stop looking at you…well"

Hermione looked up quickly at that "He cannot?"

The older witch shook her head "He looks at you with a devotion that I find both captivating and very flattering"

"He does?" she continued feeling the skin around her neck beginning to steam.

"Surely you must have noticed" Andromeda raised her brow.

Hermione cupped her cheek that went crimson and her teeth worried her bottom lip. She huffed truly embarrassed but also very happy at Andromeda's observations "Well…" she traced off not knowing what to say.

"His eyes are burning holes into you" the witch pointed at the tray and Hermione picked it up.

She laughed the hotness she felt around her collar "Is he that obvious?"

This time Andromeda joined her "haha…you think you are not?"

Hermione sobered up and deflated "Am I?"

"Sweet Merlin you are both so obvious, that even a newborn can figure you out. Now take out the eggnog and serve him" Andromeda said with a smile and offered her the tray.

Hermione straightened and gave a small playful shoulder dance to the older witch. Then she took the tray happily and walked into the living room. Teddy was sitting by the Christmas Tree messing around with the gifts. John was sitting at the couch and Severus at the easy chair next to the fireplace. The sky outside was dark this afternoon and the heavy downpour that started after they returned from their Christmas shopping at noon, kept on beating the bay windows steadily and creating a very homey atmosphere inside the brightly lit parlour.

Severus looked at her briefly as she placed the tray on the dining table and took a glass to serve him with a deep spoon.

"My parents had great expectations from me since birth. They never expected to give birth to a squib, but it's my mentality in life not to let anything get me down. I never felt insufficient, but I knew I wouldn't excel in anything in the magical world, so I excelled in the muggle" John said proudly.
"Parental shortcomings…I know something of that" Severus whispered and took the glass she offered him. He smiled discreetly at her, but she didn't stop there. She caressed the back of his hand with her forefinger before going back to serve John.

"Your parents were disappointed that you were born a wizard?" John asked.

Hermione flicked her eyes back to check on him.

Severus shook his head "Not exactly..."

John smiled at Hermione as she offered him his glass "Thank you darling"

"Do you need any help?" Severus frowned feeling slightly uneasy with her serving them. Something was nettling him to get up and help her out.

She felt her heart warming and offered him a thankful smile "No". She wanted to do this so much for him and John was just a sidetrack beneficiary of it all. Then she turned towards Teddy that was pulling a bow from a wrapped up gift "Teddy! What did we say? We don't open presents until tomorrow!" she chastised with a deep scowl.

"Sorry Auntie, just wanted to see what Presser Snape got me" the boy said with a pouting lip.

Severus felt his lips upturning into a smile but didn't intervene between them.

"If I see you touching the gifts I am going to tell Santa Claus not to come" she warned him with her finger.

Teddy pulled back quickly and sat cross legged and wide eyed in front of the Christmas Tree "Ok, Auntie!"

Hermione shook her head at Severus and with a playful wink she made it to the kitchen, were she helped Andromeda serve their meal. Soon enough they were all sitting at the table enjoying a perfectly cooked Christmas dinner.

Five days had passed since they arrived and even though at the beginning she was a bit sceptical about remaining for so long at Andromeda's house, now on Christmas Eve she didn't regret her decision. It was Severus that caused her most of her worries, but they were proved to be unfounded. She knew he was not used to belong to a Christmas family atmosphere and she was afraid that he would pull back. Something that she noticed at the Wayfarer restaurant. One moment he was sitting there enjoying the sun and looking at them playing and the next he went missing. It took her awhile to find him standing at the piers looking thoughtful and brooding. A mood she hadn't seen on him since they left Hogwarts. That worried her, but her tries to dig out what caused his mood to shift ended up in them almost making out in front of the departing river boat. At least that proved that his sudden moodiness didn't have to do with her and their visit at Andromeda.

Thankfully the next few days that darkness got uplifted from his countenance and he followed willingly and several times even enjoyed their outings and activities together. Andromeda and John arranged for all their days to be full, not allowing them to brood idly.

They visited several beautiful parks around Statfforshire and enjoyed the weather beautiful, albeit cold weather. It was a good intermission from the constant snowfall of Hogwarts. They didn't see a lot of rain during those days. Only a soft drizzle during some nights, but that didn't dampen their spirits. They even went for a picnic at Queen's gardens, which ended up in all of them enjoying themselves thoroughly. Seeing Severus leaning back at a tree bark, with his eyes closed and a soft smile on his lips, seemed like a miracle. She secretly enjoyed how the sun shown on his silver
tendrils and how it got lost on the black streaks of his hair. Forever thankful that she met this man anew and that she had the opportunity to live all this with him as a partner. Bypassing easily their former relationship and their shared past. This seemed like a new life, bereft of ties with the old.

Their days continued pleasantly with various trips around the countryside and in the end they managed the dreadful, for Severus, return at the city centre, in order to buy the Christmas gifts. Contrary to every expectation he abided calmly the overflowing streets and even managed to buy gifts for everyone, alone. He pressed her hand at some point, when Andromeda suggested that they split up for the shopping, and told her that everything would be fine. She let him go with a lot of regrets and she worried constantly throughout her shopping spree, which she finished first of all, in order to return with Ted at the appointed place and wait for him.

Not much later he appeared walking up between the crowd. His dark imposing countenance made her heart skip beats and when she saw that he looked calm and composed she couldn't help but wrap her arms around him and kiss him openly. Declaring to everyone that this handsome man was hers. Even Teddy this time acted like he didn't notice. Either that, or he was getting used to their acts of tenderness. Soon enough Andromeda and John joined them and they ended up having warm soups at the roof garden of "16th century Soup Kitchen". Something that they all enjoyed to the last spoonful. All that brought them to Christmas Eve, with the tree's base overflowing with presents and everyone eating Andromeda's classical take on a British Christmas dinner.

"And yes, I have read the shocking news from the Magical part of London the last few days. What do you think? That I am totally isolated down here?" Andromeda said and took a spoonful of chestnut stuffing, which she admittedly had cooked to perfection.

"You mean from the Ministry of Magic?" Hermione asked not wanting to delve into that now, but having no real choice. It was John that stirred the waters by telling them he read about the deconstruction of the Aurors, that the "Wizard Weekly" was swearing by, because of the incident with one of their top Aurors.

John raised his finger and got up. He went to Andromeda's desk and searched around until he dug up the article. Then he returned and sat down with a groan "Here, I found it. Guy's name is Borovic, Alexander" he said and looked above the newspaper "You guys ever heard of him? I read that he used dark magic inside the Ministry. Impossible! This world is going to shambles" John shook his head and gave his wine a taste.

Andromeda ate some bacon and nodded "Who hasn't heard of Alexander…"

Hermione inhaled deeply and looked at Severus, needing to see where he was going to stand through all this.

He raised his eyes warningly at her and shook his head in negation discreetly. Immediately she knew not to say anything about what took place between him and that Auror. She gave him a curt nod and licked her lips.

"He was always an unstable personality. After his wife got killed, he simply lost it" Andromeda seemed dismissive.

"I always wondered why they kept him at the force. He should have been committed to a mental institution much earlier" Hermione said.

"They needed him darling" Andromeda pressed her lips.

"What the hell for? The Aurors have many highly skilled wizards and witches. Why did they need
that crazy bastard" Hermione frowned deeply. This man's name was making her mad. She gazed at Severus who was twirling his wineglass calmly. Apparently Borovic didn't have the same effect on him, as on her.

"He is a class XV duelist, isn't that right Severus?" Andromeda looked at him.

He raised his eyes at her and after a moment tilted his head "Yes"

"Class XV duelist? I didn't know that" Hermione's scowl deepened.

"The Ministry doesn't have anyone that has such a great skill in magical duels. Class XV means Master Duelist and that is not simply an impressive title. It carries monumental skill behind it. That guy is wielding a formidable force behind his wand. It's quite impossible to reach that level. I should know something about that" Andromeda smirked.

"What do you mean?" Hermione's frown melted into a confused smile.

"I tried the competition to reach that level. Made it up to Class XII. Failed on the trials and fell back to Class XI, something I still currently own to" Andromeda said proudly.

"You are a Master Duelist? Amazing?" Hermione's eyes stretched wide.

Andromeda shook her head "No, I never reached that level, but I know how hard it was for me to reach several classes below the Mastery"

"I wonder what Albus was" Hermione said.

"Master Duelist, but not Minerva. She is Class XIII. Two steps ahead of me" Andromeda smiled widely.

"Harry?" she frowned. She didn't even know if her friend had ever taken place in these trials.

"All I know is that the only one Master Duelist in the Aurors was Borovic….therefore your friend falls behind" Andromeda said "Now you understand why Kingsley was playing blind eyes to his obvious mental issues? He needed the amazing power behind that man's wand"

Hermione raised her brow loftily "Well, he couldn't play blind eyes when that man cast an unforgivable inside the Ministry of Magic"

Andromeda shook her head "Indeed. I can bet you Kingsley is very pissed off to have lost such a powerful tool from his employment. It's very hard to find Class XV wizards in the magical world today, much harder to employ them…Severus should also know something about that, right?"

Hermione raised both brows and looked at him "You do?"

He pressed his lips and sighed silently.

Andromeda waved him off "Of course he does. He is a Master Duelist. Much like Albus and Borovic"

Hermione's mouth dropped open and uplifted in a smile "What?"

Andromeda felt happy to reveal something that only she knew about him, not even noticing the deadly stare he was giving her "Class XV indeed!..." she said and pointed at him elegantly.

Hermione broke into a giggle and covered up her mouth. He turned to her frowning and questioned
her silently. She shook her head and hesitated momentarily before saying "Bet you, Gilderoy Lockhart had NO idea"

His features lost their hard scrutiny and he looked towards his glass unable to stop his lips from curling up slightly "You are insufferable" he whispered, internally thanking her for deflating the tension he felt when Andromeda spoke for him.

"What's insafeble?" Teddy asked with a stuffed mouth.

"What she is" he whispered and pointed at Hermione.

"Did he know you are a Master Duelist?" Hermione asked feeling both proud of him and amused by that old memory that she saw now under a new light.

He raised his brow "Of course not"

Her giggle evolved into a heartfelt laughter "There you have it…you did it on purpose!"

He flicked his shoulders "Somedays were way too dull at Hogwarts. Even one as mundane and boring as me needs some fun every now and again"

"Damn it Severus, I wish I had know back then" she rejoined still calming down the giggles that reignited when she remembered Lockhart flying into the air and summersaulting several times before landing on his behind in front of all the students.

"Why?" he tilted his chin to her admitting that her happiness was rubbing off on him.

"I would have bet on the most able man, not on the most pretentious" she said with a sneaky smile.

"Pretentious, yet pleasing to the eye. You were too young then and he was a master of impressions" he whispered with a calm smile.

"Did Albus know?" she asked waving him off Lockhart.

"What do you think?" he whispered.

"He did and he condoned?!" her brows reached her hairline in surprise.

"Albus was much more sadistic than you will ever know" he said half amused, half bothered by the reality of that sentence.

She shook her head and rubbed her cheeks "It's amazing how many secrets and mysteries this castle holds"

Andromeda raised her hand at that and munched her food quickly in order to intervene "Something I look forward to checking out for myself, because I have forgotten to mention something to all of you. Apart from John of course"

The man smiled widely and nodded.

"What?" Hermione didn't think she could handle anymore surprises.

"Minerva offered me the position of Transfiguration Professor for next year!" Andromeda said and raised her glass in a salutation.

Hermione covered up her mouth and squeaked happily "Really?!!"
"Yes indeed. The old Headmistress is getting very tired and she wishes to take a break from teaching. She wants a younger Professor to take over her place" Andromeda said.

"That's why you went to those seminars?" Hermione's cheeks were red and she felt very happy with the possibility of having them close to her.

The older witch nodded "Of course and I must thank you both for taking care of Teddy and allowing me the time to brush off my knowledge before I come at Hogwarts"

Hermione clapped "So it's quite decided?"

"Indeed, me and Teddy are going to come live close to you next year" Andromeda said and caressed Teddy's turquoise hair.

"Yeah! I am going to live at Hogwarts, I am going to live at Hogwarts!" Teddy started dancing on his seat.

"We will see, but eat your dinner first" Andromeda pointed at his plate.

"Can we go to mommy and daddy after we finish dinner? I want to tell them about Hogwarts!" Teddy said innocently and everyone's eyes felt suddenly all too heavy on her. She paused briefly and then nodded.

"Of course darling" she said quietly.

Hermione quietened down and spooned at her food feeling uneasy.

It was Severus that broke the discomfort that Teddy's request brought to the gathering "I believe congratulations are in order Andromeda" he said solemnly.

She looked at him momentarily lost and her smile was underlined with a tone of sadness "Thank you Severus. It will be an honour to work by your side….and by yours Hermione dear" she said looking over at the younger witch that seemed to have lost her happiness.

"It will be amazing to have you and Teddy close by. What about you John?" Hermione looked at the red cheeked, pleasant blonde man.

"I have made my papers to be transferred to a muggle hospital in Scotland. We intend to get a house close to the school and split the way between our work" he said.

Hermione's features turned down "Oh, so Teddy won't be sleeping in the castle…a pity, but also a fair arrangement for you guys"

"No! I want to sleep with Auntie and Presser Snape" Teddy snapped angrily with a mouthful of baked turkey.

Andromeda sighed "If they don't have any objections, you can go there every now and then and stay for a couple of days"

"Days?! Not months and years?" Teddy said and his hands became little fists.

Andromeda smiled quietly "Will see, ok?"

"Any such arrangement is fine by me…" Hermione looked at the older witch and flicked her shoulders "…just so you'd know". Then in an afterthought she turned at Severus "What do you think?" she asked.
"I'd love a permanent library assistant" he whispered and offered Hermione a smile that reassured her that he was ok with it all. She retaliated the smile with a nod.

"Will see how everything goes, ok? Let's just take it step by step. For now it's only me agreeing to take over the position and trying to remember how to teach again. Everything else comes a distant second, right Teddy?" she warned.

"Fine!" Teddy said and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Are we finished with dinner?" Andromeda looked around at the empty plates and the half full glasses of wine.

"Yes, I'll help you" Hermione attempted to get up, but Severus placed his large hand on her knee and stilled her.

"It's our turn to help out. You can both sit down, correct John?" he said and picked up his plate and Hermione's.

She bit her lower lip and smiled at him appreciatively as he and John begun gathering the used plates, with the help of Teddy. Andromeda looked at Hermione as they all went into the kitchen

"You don't have to come at the cemetery. Stay here with Severus and we will return shortly. Besides you have to sleep early, since you have a long trip to your parent's home tomorrow"

Hermione drank a sip of wine and cleared some hair from her forehead "No, I want to come, really. I want to pay them some homage"

Andromeda lowered her eyes and picked on her fingernail "Thank you darling" she said quietly and Hermione knew that sentence carried more emotion in it, than Andromeda's countenance was betraying.

When they were at the door, putting on their coats and getting ready for a walk to the town cemetery, Severus approached her and pulled her aside.

She looked up to him "What?"

"Are you ok?" he asked and his finger caressed her cheek softly.

She swallowed hard "I am ok"

"There is something that seems to preoccupy you. Is it this visit at the cemetery? We can remain here if you wish" he whispered with solicitude.

She shook her head "No, I want to go to them…"

"Something ails you, since that conversation about the Ministry and Borovic" he said quietly.

She shuddered at how close he had fallen at his assumptions and inhaled deeply.

"Tell me" his finger run down her cheek and touched the side of her mouth.

"Why didn't you ever say that you were a Master Duelist?" she asked him straight off. She had been thoroughly impressed by this information, but in the end she was also bothered and above all scared. Instead of feeling safe by learning his true potential, now she felt he could be too exposed on many people that would want to harm him.

"I was teaching you Potions. My skills in wand duelling had nothing to do with that" he frowned.
"Very well, why didn't you tell me now? Now that we are getting to know each other on a different, more intimate basis?" she asked not wanting to sound like she was accusing him of something.

He winced in confusion "So in between our kisses, I should have thrown in a casual Oh! By the by, I am a Class XV duelist, so you'd know. Would that have achieved something extraordinary for you?" he sounded dry and she could understand why. She didn't explain properly what fear all this had aroused in her.

"You don't understand…" she traced off.

"Make me" he tilted his chin towards her, but his thumb caressed the side of her mouth gently. Making her understand that he had not misread her words. Merely that he was confused.

She closed her eyes "I cannot stop thinking, what could have happened if back then you had retaliated Borovic's attack" she said and shuddered at how real that was and how terrified that thought made her feel.

"I see" he nodded in understanding.

She bit her lower lip "You could have engaged in a duel with him and then what? What would have been the result?…"

"Considering we are both equally skilled, the dice could have rolled either way" he whispered steadily.

"That doesn't make me feel better" she gazed at him intensely.

"It matters not. He is locked up and we are worlds apart now" he smiled softly at her.

She felt her shoulders slouching "I don't know if I wish for you to buy a wand, or to remain invisible to the world forever"

"Why?" he frowned.

"If you buy a wand and start using it, the world will remember your formidable skills" she said and rested her head on his chest. Her arms wrapped around his waist and she closed her eyes.

"And that is bad because?…" he winced.

"There might be many Borovics out there waiting to get you…"

"Do you think that just because I am not using my magic I am invisible and thus safe?" he asked carefully.

She nodded half heartedly. She didn't know what she wanted exactly, or what she was afraid the most.

"The Minister of Magic himself bound me to Borovic, because he is afraid of me. I can never become invisible, so rest your weary little head. As I told you before, what happened was not something extraordinary. I am not afraid so neither should you" he caressed the back of her neck softly.

She sighed and nodded "Sometimes I can become a little paranoid, I know"

"You can" he agreed quietly.
"I'll try to shape up. I don't know why, but the closer we get to leaving Andromeda and going to my parent's home, the more tense I become and everything bothers me" she shook her head and tightened her arms around him.

He nodded and kissed her temple silently.

"Thank you for being patient with me" she whispered and kissed him near the collarbone above the usual turndleneck.

He cradled her for a few more quiet moments. Then he kissed the top of her head "They are waiting for us" he whispered and looked out where they stood with their backs turned to them discreetly.

"Let's go" she said and gazed up at him with a tired smile.

***…***

The visit to the cemetery only added to the heaviness around her heart. The sun was close to setting when they arrived, but there was still ample light and the gates were unlocked. The graves of Andromeda's daughter and son in law were far off to the Northern corner of the cemetery behind an iron picketed fence that kept our the intruders. There was a rather large park behind the fence and Hermione immediately recognised the tall tree that Teddy was climbing at the animated picture he had drawn back at Hogwarts. A solitary bench was in front of the graves and the rest of the area was open.

Teddy run up to his parents and begun hopscotching around the graves. Hermione stopped when she felt that Severus was not by her side anymore. She turned and saw him standing a few feet behind with his arms crossed. She frowned and went back to him "What are you doing?" she asked.

He tilted his chin towards the child and Andromeda with John "I don't belong close to these graves. Approaching is equal to desecration"

She frowned "Severus, you have helped this family more than anyone"

He shook his head "The Tonks yes, but Remus no. I don't want to get close to him, I am sorry Hermione"

She sighed and sifted her legs uneasily "I know you share a burdened past, but in later years you helped him. You even made his wolfsbane potion"

"Under Albus's orders. I really didn't mean any harm to the werewolf, but I didn't want to be close to him either. Even in death I don't...." he said coldly.

The strictness of his voice gave her pause and she swallowed heavily "I understand, I won't force you of course"

He pointed towards the graves with his chin "Go, take your time. I will stay here"

She observed him quietly for a few moments and then rose on her toes to plant a soft kiss on his lips, which he accepted with relief. She pressed his bicep and offered him a small smile before walking back towards Andromeda.

"Here Auntie, my mommy and my daddy" Ted pointed at the simple tombstones that were placed next to each other, much like they have been during their life.

Hermione approached with a growing feeling of weariness and looked at Andromeda who was
holding a bouquet of white roses "I haven't brought any flowers" she said truly bothered at her own inability to act formally. They have just passed a flower shop at the entrance of the cemetery. Andromeda bought some flowers, so why hadn't she done the same. She felt pissed at being so inadequate, so disoriented and so unexpectedly anxious. Not even knowing if that anxiety was because she was approaching the graves of old friends, or because tomorrow she had to visit the home of her parents. Which was not really a home anymore to her…it was just an empty house filled with solitude. It's walls as lifeless and cold as the tombstones in this cemetery.

Andromeda smiled sadly at her "Here…". She pulled two roses and offered them to Hermione.

She bit her lower lip and gave the older witch a thankful nod "Thank you"

Andromeda pointed towards the graves "Go on love, pay you homage. I will take much longer"

Teddy took Hermione by the hand "Yes come on Auntie, I'll show you how it's done"

She followed the child with growing heaviness in her heart and they stood in front of the tombstones.

"You stand here and say hello to both of them" Teddy said in the most formal manner he could master.

Hermione looked at him briefly and then at the graves. She attempted to put the flowers down. He stopped her.

"No Auntie, first you say hello" Teddy pointed at the marbles insistently.

Hermione inhaled "Hello Remus, Hello Nymphadora" she said quietly.

Teddy smiled "Now put your flowers down"

Hermione kneeled over and placed a single rose in front of each grave. Then she remained kneeling and felt her chest welling and her eyes stinging.

"Now you tell them that you want to go climb your tree and that's it" Teddy said happily and moved his bottom from side to side a couple of times. His finger begun digging on his nose instinctively.

"I won't climb no trees darling" she said and looked at him sideways. A soft smile appeared on her lips.

"Oh! I also tell them that I love them and that I miss them!" Teddy remembered.

Hermione felt the tears releasing from her eyes and she reached out to pull Teddy into her arms. The child didn't resist, but continued digging his nose as she embraced him warmly. His free hand caressed her back quietly. After a short moment he said "Can I go climb my tree now?"

She nodded and pushed him back. She lowered her head and tried to dry her eyes without him seeing "Of course you can"

Teddy begun hopscotching away, barely aware of Hermione's emotional turmoil. After a few hops he stopped and looked back at her as if remembering something "Won't Presser Snape say hi to my mommy and daddy?"

Hermione turned to him with red eyes and a stuffy nose "He will my love. Later, now go have fun" she said.

Teddy nodded and run towards Severus and John. Andromeda approached and stood silently behind
her. Hermione remained kneeling with her hands crossed in front of her lap. Not wanting to move either her body, or her eyes away from the names that were engraved upon the tombstones. Andromeda's voice was low, yet Hermione heard it way too loud in the silence of the forest.

"They had their whole lives in front of them"

Hermione nodded feeling frozen inside.

"And he stole my children's lives…." Andromeda's voice turned sour.

"He took many lives, before his was over" Hermione whispered.

A long pause full of suppressed anger took place behind her "He took my daughter away from me… my only child"

Hermione closed her eyes and bit her lower lip hard enough to draw blood "I am sorry…" was the only thing she was able to mutter.

"He took my husband away from me….the snatchers were his tools" Andromeda continued her intense lament.

Hermione felt caught in the middle and unable to move away.

"If only I could, I would have returned to kill him myself" her voice turned to cold and calculative and Hermione had no doubt that the older witch meant every word. Even if that meant that she could have died in the process.

"What would have happened to Teddy then?" she asked quietly.

Andromeda's breath caught and Hermione heard it. She approached and placed half the bouquet on Nymphadora's tomb and half on Remus. She kneeled next to Hermione and remained quiet for a few moments. Then she took a flower from Remus and moved it on her daughter's tombstone. She sighed "My daughter deserves a flower more than my son in law, don't you think?"

Hermione felt her heart crying and her shoulders slouched heavily. She nodded "Nothing can come between a mother and her daughter" she said and her words made her heart clench painfully. As if a cold hand just squeezed all the blood out of it.

"Only death" Andromeda muttered.

Hermione felt her brow creasing deeply "And oblivion" she murmured, slowly getting immersed in her own nightmares.

Andromeda sighed silently.

She inhaled and her fingers tightened in hard fists upon the apron of her skirt. She remembered her parents and the oblivion she had cast upon them. What was worst she wondered. A mother loosing a daughter to death, or a daughter loosing a mother to oblivion? Was maybe the pain equally strong and shattering for both cases? Andromeda lost her daughter to Voldemort. Hermione lost both parents because of Voldemort. Now she felt equally angry at him, for destroying so many families. For taking out so many lives. For unraveling the threads of the strongest men, she briefly looked at Severus who was following Teddy at the tree, and of the bravest women. She looked back at the graves and tightened her teeth. Somehow now she wanted to return back and try to kill him herself too. Knowing for certain that she would have died in the process, much like Andromeda.
After a long deeply immersive silence Hermione spoke and she felt like she was submerging from water "I cast an oblivion to my parents in order to protect them from Voldemort" she said, not really needing to explain something that Andromeda already knew.

"I know" the older witch replied calmly.

"I never returned them their memories, because I am afraid to bother the tranquility of their current life, and reveal to them the hell that I have lived through during the war" she whispered, feeling her eyes overflowing with tears. She blinked and they run down her cheeks, but she remained frozen.

Andromeda looked at her "You are wavering with indecision"

Hermione nodded and felt the tears reaching her mouth. She opened it slightly and licked their saltiness "I am…" she agreed.

"What can I do to help you through this?" Andromeda asked candidly. Hermione's nightmare drew her away from her own desolation.

Hermione gazed at her musingly "Answer me one thing" she traced off.

Andromeda nodded "Tell me"

"If you were in my mother's shoes, how would you have felt knowing that you had a daughter that cast an oblivion on you. That you had a daughter you couldn't remember…." Hermione whispered and felt her tight fists slightly trembling.

Andromeda frowned "If you had robbed my ability to remember the first moment I looked into the eyes of my daughter when she was born? Her first smile, the first giggle and the first cry. Her first time to walk alone a few steps before falling down, her first words and then sentences. The first time she ate a whole toast and not just the four corners and her first teeth that broke out painfully. Her first major sickness and my nightmarish vigilance that lasted for endless nights until she was healthy again. The first time I saw her go to school and the first time I saw her write down her name. The first time I heard her sing and play with her friends. How I admired her as she grew up and became a young lady. The first time I saw her fall down in the gym and the moment she achieved her goals of becoming a soloist in gymnastics. How she first touched a piano key and how she developed in a very able musician. How she first picked up her wand and blew the kitchen cupboards to pieces, to the point where she graduated from Hogwarts to become one of the best Aurors the Ministry has ever seen. The moment she fell so deeply in love she didn't want to live without him. When they married and when she fell pregnant…the moment that Teddy was born and the glint in her eyes when she saw her child, that was so similar to mine when I had first seen her. The glint in every mother's eye….that eternal bond and that eternal love that a mother and a daughter share. Had you taken all that away from me?…" Andromeda asked.

Hermione was crying hard and her lips were trembling. She nodded "Yes…"

"I would have rather died…." Andromeda said with a trembling nod. Her eyes were overflowing with tears also.

Hermione moaned and covered her mouth. She begun crying in all earnest, not caring who was looking at her. Andromeda's words had cut a large piece out of her heart. She squeezed her eyes tight as her shoulders moved hard along with her sobs.

"Your mother now doesn't know you ever existed, but she has lived through the memories of seeing you blossom to the beautiful lady you are now. She admired your every step, from applauding your
smallest achievement to your biggest accomplishment. You have robbed her of those memories Hermione. If I was her, I would have rather died" Andromeda said and squeezed her hand on Hermione's shoulder.

She nodded trying to control her sobbing as her heart felt torn apart. Suddenly Andromeda's tight hold left her, but she didn't have the time to feel alone as a larger much stronger hand landed on the same place and the threads of a deep voice echoed close to her ear. They were mere traces, but she heard them rising slightly above his whisper. She had never forgotten those deep influential undertones, but now they caught her at her most vulnerable and made her cry even harder. Cry for her dead friends, for her oblivious parents and for his lost voice that was slowly coming back "Are you ok?" he spoke close to her ear.

She was unable to stop herself. She buried her head on his chest and her fists uncurled and clutched his lapels forcefully. He pulled her up and embraced her passionately. Locking her within his arms. She welcomed him like a dry land welcomes the rain "Just hold me" she moaned and pressed her forehead on his chest. She wanted so much to tell him about his voice, but she didn't trust her own voice to deliver. She needed to calm down first. She wanted to yell at him, that she wasn't ready to go back to her parent's home, especially now with him by her side. She wanted everything to be different. She wanted them to be there waiting for her in order to meet her partner. Not her boyfriend, not her bit on the side….her partner, but they were not there. Her home was just a house now. Empty…..no, she didn't want to go there anymore and yet she knew that she had to. She shook her head angrily at her thoughts and pressed herself on him more. Wanting to be engulfed by him in some manner. He felt that and pressed her tightly "It's ok" he whispered, this time his deep undertones were inaudible. Was it his worry about her that made him force his voice more than usual? Did that reveal the first signs of his healing?

"Speak to me again" she whispered from the safety of his chest.

"What do you want me to say?" he whispered.

She shook her head vigorously "No…speak to me. Don't whisper to me"

He hesitated.

She lifted her teary eyes and gazed up at him intensely "I heard your voice…" she pulled him by the lapels.

He swallowed hard.

She nodded "I heard the traces of your voice along with that whisper…speak to me" she commanded. She needed to hear his voice desperately again. She wanted it to ground her to this world. To bring her back to their reality and draw her away from the nightmares of the past.

He shook his head partly confused "I didn't realise that I spoke" he whispered.

"Don't whisper!" she said.

"I don't know how not to" he said and pulled her back to his chest "Just please, don't demand this out of me".

She rubbed her face on his chest and tightened her teeth when she realised that it was probably as hard for him to use his voice after four years of whispering as it was for her to go back to her house. They were both fighting on different fronts, but their fights were equally hard. She tightened her grip around his back "I am sorry…I am so sorry" she whispered and regret overpowered her.
"I will try to speak again, just give me the time…" he whispered and she felt the pain in his voice.

She felt the tears renewing in her eyes and she gritted her teeth "I shouldn't have asked this from you…please please forgive me. I was so unfair…"

He nodded "It's ok"

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes tight. She wanted to disappear and at the same time she never wanted to leave his arms. She was torn between the pain that Andromeda's words caused and the guilt her words created. She needed to pull back and smack her head upside down in order to get a grip, but she dared not push him away. Now he was grounding with his presence if not with his voice. She remained silently buried in his arms until she begun calming down.

He felt it "Are you better?"

She nodded and signed deeply, feeling a tone of weight removed from her shoulders, but a whole lot more still lingered. At least with his attitude he made her know that there were no hard feelings from their brief altercation a few moments ago "Yes sweetheart, thank you" she whispered and this was the first time she was using a loving appellation for him, something that was unforced, but very welcomed from him as it seemed.

His large palms spread on her back and pulled her in. A deep exhalation came from his chest "Will you tell me what happened? Is this about Nymphandora and Remus?" he asked carefully.

"No" she shook her head vigorously. She was not ready to tell him what was ailing her. She needed time to settle down. If she begun talking about what Andromeda told her and about her own anxiety for her home, she was going to break down again. He had seen enough, she had burdened him enough and she had attacked him about his voice unreasonably. He didn't deserve such an attitude from her. She could be better than this, for the benefit of both of them.

"Do you wish to tell me what happened?" he whispered in an afterthought and tipped her chin up.

She opened her puffy eyes and forced a smile that was too desperate "Not now…just give me a moment to settle down and promise that you will forgive me…” she said and her hand slithered behind his nape securing him to her.

"Nothing happened" he said with a smile that seemed genuine and honest.

It warmed her heart and she pecked his lips softly "Thank you…” she pulled back and looked towards the tallest tree in the clearing "…I think we should join them. I don't want the child to suspect that something is wrong" she said thoughtfully.

"As you wish" he said and as they walked he pulled her close to him and she embraced him from the waist. She leaned her head on his shoulder and felt blessed that he was there with her. When they reached Teddy she tried to force back Andromeda's words. She didn't want to ruin the reminder of their holidays here, nor this beautiful Christmas Eve, with her own problems. She would solve this finally, like she always did.

***…***

It was way into the night when Severus opened up his eyes and saw that Hermione was not sleeping next to him anymore. He frowned and looked towards the small clock that was on his nightstand.

where is she at two thirty in the morning?
He rubbed his face and forced himself out of bed. He checked the bathroom and he wasn't surprised that she was not there either. Their door was closed. He winced and debated if he should go back to sleep, but the debate was outlived by his need to find out if she was alright. She had worried him with her break down at the cemetery.

When they returned home her mood seemed better, but half of her was missing. It felt as if her mind was elsewhere. She never told him what ailed her back there and he tried not to feel bad about that. At the moment though he needed to check on her. He opened up his door quietly and tried to be as silent as possible tiptoeing at the carpeted corridor and down the narrow staircase. He landed at the downstairs hallway and carefully approached the living room since the kitchen was unlit. He paused at the door and leaned his hand on the casing. A deep relieved exhalation left his chest and that notified her of his presence. She turned to him momentarily drawn back from her musings and then she smiled sweetly.

She waved at him and mouthed a silent "Hi". Then she pointed at Teddy that was sleeping on the couch under a colourful red and green duvet.

His lips curled up in a smile and he walked quietly into the room. He bypassed the sleeping Ted that was softly snoring and came over at the large bay windows, in front of which she had cuddled with a blanket and a cup of hot tea.

His hand reached out and caressed her hair "I didn't see you next to me and I got worried" he whispered even lower than normal, in order not to wake up the boy.

She smiled at him and drew his hand to her mouth, planting a soft kiss in the middle of his palm "Teddy came to our bedroom and woke me up, because he wanted company downstairs. He wanted to sleep near the tree in order to catch Santa Claus…" she pulled him to sit down in front of her and he did. Then she cleared some long locks from the top of his chest and pushed them above his shoulder "….Instead of trying to convince him to go back to bed, I decided to accompany him. He fell asleep within the first half an hour" she said and tilted her head at the sleeping child.

He snorted "Something that didn't happen to you"

"Obviously" she raised her brow and tried to use playfully the word he always used to piss students off.

He bit his lower lip and shook his head, taking her joke in easy stride "Want to come to bed now?" he whispered.

She signed and tasted some of her tea "No, I cannot sleep now…want to stay here with me?" she asked with her large bright eyes overpowering him.

"Of course" he nodded and cupped the side of her face. His thumb caressed her upper cheek.

"We can wait for Santa Claus together" she said with a small smile and rubbed her face on his palm.

"I never believed in him" he said and pressed his lips regretfully.

"That's a great loss" she frowned.

"Indeed, but my parents didn't believe much of anything. Not even fairytales…" he whispered.

"I wish I could bring back your childhood and make it happier" she said honestly and her eyes looked at him sadly.
His lips curled up "I am sure you do, my fair lioness. You cannot handle injustice in any form"

She huffed and closed her eyes briefly "Especially for people I …" she hesitated and his eyes gazed briefly at her pink soft lips "…people I truly care about" she finally decided how to express her emotions.

He smiled and drew back a few brown tendrils that were near her eye.

She took hold of his hand and looked at him intensely "Sometimes I become overbearing to the people I care about Severus…" she said suddenly.

He frowned "You don't need to explain, I understand…" he begun, but she didn't let him finish.

"I do need to explain…because this afternoon I became too possessive on something that belongs to you. I shouldn't have" she said and placed her tea at the window sill.

He inhaled "This afternoon you were already overburdened by other worries"

"No excuses. I spoke roughly to you, demanding that you use your voice. That was so unfair from me. This battle is yours alone and I have no place ordering you around. I offered you the potion and my hand to hold as you slowly heal, but that's it. You alone control the moment that you will try out your voice again after four years" she whispered fervently, with sparkling eyes.

He nodded feeling his heart tightening painfully as it always did when she showed him affection and understanding "I know you may have heard some traces Hermione. I can feel my throat able to speak louder, I am just not ready to try it yet. All these years whenever I tried to speak louder than a whisper the resulting pain was crippling me. Reason tells me that this time I won't be in any pain, but reason doesn't always win out in this game of paranoia. I've conditioned myself to whisper and protect myself from pain, for four years now. This feels much like learning how to walk" he tried to explain the best way he could.

She nodded and drew both lips between her teeth "I know, that's why I feel so regretful of the way I treated you back there"

He frowned "You were too overburdened, by worries you never explained" he repeated, letting that hint linger. Trying to see if she might be willing to share her troubles with him now.

She deflated and leaned her body against the window casing. Her eyes observed him quietly for a few intense moments were he kept her gaze calmly and then she spoke "I don't want to go at my parent's house tomorrow"

He raised his brow momentarily "Why?"

She exhaled and looked outside where heavy rainclouds had covered the night sky and munched on her bottom lip for a while. He allowed her to do this at her own pace. Finally she shook her head "Going there during this time of year is really hard for me. I remember Christmas with my parents. How the house was always brightly lit, warm and welcoming, full of laughter and love, much like Andromeda's. I cannot handle to see it dark, cold and desolate. Just the thought of going back there makes me very anxious and deeply sad"

"Yet you went there in order to pick up your car in September" he said carefully.

She nodded "It was not this festive, family time of the year. I was dragging a tired Teddy behind me and I had great anxiety for my first job, in one of the most illustrious schools in the magical world. I just went in, blindingly, took the keys, unlocked the garage door and took the car out. That was it."
"Now though…"

"Now?" he leaned his head on the casing and looked at her with devotion.

She inhaled deeply "Now, I won't stay outside the garage. I will want to go in…"

"Why?"

Her hand reached out and cupped his knee. Her fingers created musing circles above his sweatpants and he relaxed back "Because you will be with me and I want to show you the house I grew up in and the memories I had described on my magical drawing. I wish I could have introduced you to my parents….but ….." she felt her eyes burning anew.

He nodded thoughtfully "Will me returning at Hogwarts and you going there alone help things at all?"

She frowned "No, that will make everything worst" her voice was more forceful than she intended.

"Will me returning the car to your house and you going back at Hogwarts maybe help?" he tried.

Her shoulders fell and she pressed her lips "No sweetheart. I have to go there and I need you with me"

His hand cupped hers that was still caressing his knee "Then, we shall go and face whatever hell is troubling you, together".

His solid whisper made her eyes water and she felt her breath hitching "I don't think I will be able to face the darkness and coldness of my house Severus….without them it feels empty and distant to me"

His hand traced up her arm and squeezed her shoulder "I cannot pretend that I understand the difference, because my house was always dark and cold, but you have to face what troubles you. Running away from your problems, won't get them fixed"

"I know" she closed her eyes and nodded "I created this hell for myself and now I don't have the courage to undo things. To bring them back to their previous state"

"I will push your limits and suggest you forget your house and go to Australia tomorrow. Apparate outside their current adobe, bring back their memories and join your family" he said solemnly.

His words, honest and blunt made her heart cry out in pain. That is exactly what she should do, but could she? She voiced her thoughts "Can I?"

His hand cupped her cheek "Can you continue down this selected path?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"It doesn't look like you can" he resulted quietly and his thumb caressed the side of her mouth. His eyes fell on the hairpin that appeared there as she tried to force a smile.

"If I do that, then I shall act egotistically" she whispered.

"How is that so?" he frowned.

She swallowed hard and looked towards his lap "I will ruin their happiness. I will remind them what was happening with the Death Eaters just before I cast the Oblivion on them. I will have to explain to
them what happened afterwards. They will lose their happiness if they hear what I went through"

His scowl deepened "What did you go through? You found yourself in the middle of war that you
didn't create and fought bravely till the end. You have all the reasons to be proud of yourself. You
are going to offer them the chance to be proud of you…that's all"

She felt her breath catching and she wiped a tear away quickly. She remained silent looking towards
his legs.

He tilted her chin up and his eyes penetrated the sadness she felt and the fear. They ground her there
with him "You will offer them a chance to get their daughter back and then maybe you can change
the colour of your aura"

Her lower lip trembled at his words and she tried to turn this to a lighter tone "You can see auras
also?"  

His lips curled up and he flicked his shoulders "Yours has a dark shade around the bright orange that
resonates from within you. That darkness comes from not having your parents close to you. Some
families make their children wither and dry out and some make them blossom. Your case is the later
and it's a pity to devote yourself of this privilege"

"Privilege?" she muttered and her eyes fell to his lips.

He nodded calmly "Not everybody can have a family like yours…."

She sighed and closed her eyes feeling more tears rolling down. Her hand wiped them off nervously.
She felt pissed off at her inability to control herself "I want to see them" she said and fresh tears
replaced the ones she wiped off.

His lips turned down and he frowned "Then you should go to them"

"I want to see them as their daughter, not as a spectator from far away, but I am afraid to act on it"
she said and her fingers entwined tightly, making her knuckles white.

He noticed and disentangled them gently. He pulled her hand up and opened up her palm. His lips
touched her skin in a soft kiss that made her feel warm inside "What you need to do is take it step by
step. First we go to your home…"

She felt cooling down by his soft kisses on her palm that were slowly moving towards her wrist "It's
just a house now…not my home. Hogwarts is my home…"

It was his turn to stop her "Your home…you cannot disown the place you grew up in, just because
your parents are not there. You will go in and turn on every light. You will show me around your
room and I hope to catch several embarrassing glimpses of your teenage life. Then you will escort
me to your kitchen and show me where you mother was baking those lovely cakes you mentioned.
Finally you will take me out the back and show me the tree that your kite got caught in and you
brought it down along with the branch on your father's head" he said and after each sentence his kiss
moved from her wrist to her forearm and then to the inside of her elbow.

She shivered in pleasure and felt her tears backing away slowly. Her lips upturned into a gentle smile
"And at the living room where me and my dad used to tickle each other. I'll show you the coffee
table's worn out corner, that scratched my back so hard one day that I ended up in the hospital"

He huffed and his lips opened up to suck on the sensitive skin on the inside of her elbow. She gasped
and looked at him dreamily "I would like to see the reminders of that scar also" he whispered and she
felt the insinuation of his whisper resonating through her spine.

She bit her lower lip and slowly all her fears and anxieties begun withdrawing "I'll show you our fireplace and the carpet that's in front of it, which has a small singed corner, when one day a large bark slipped away from the hearth and burned it off. My mother barely had the time to stop it from coming ablaze".

She saw his adam's apple move as he pulled her closer "You do that…" he murmured and gave her a penetrating kiss that felt like he was tasting her.

Another gasp escaped her and she looked briefly at the snoring Teddy "I'll show you the side of the fireplace where it has a small diagonal vent. Crookshanks got in when he was a kitten and I thought he was going to die in there. I was crying my eyes out in front of the small vent in near panic, when he jumped at the opening again" she whispered and her forearm locked behind his neck drawing him to her.

He huffed upon her lips and tasted her sensually again. She closed her eyes and her core tightened up. When he pulled back she leaned her head on his shoulder and looked at his lips adoringly "More…" he whispered at her and her stomach twisted around, not knowing if he meant their kisses or her memories.

"I'll show you the black jewellery box that I had taken from my mother's possession, without her permission. The one I filled up with sea shells, sea glass and little funky looking stones, thinking that this was my treasure. I had written on the red velvet lining with a pen, Captain Good, my favourite character from Solomon's adventures. When my mother saw the jewellery box she smiled instead of punishing me. She never asked to take it back" she spoke softly, feeling her breath quickening and her heart thumbing on her ears.

His hand caressed her side softly and then touched the side of her breast "More…" he whispered again and pecked her lips.

She had to push down a moan "More memories, or more kisses?"

He smiled knowingly and turned her head away from his with his fingers. He leaned on her neck and kissed her gently "More of everything" he said.

She swallowed hard and her body moved instinctively closer to his. She wanted their bodies to touch "What happened to propriety Severus?" she wanted to sound strict, but she ended up sounding needy.

"It flew out the window" he whispered and smiled playfully at her.

She bit her lower lip and caressed his jawline "Want to go up?"

"If you promise to be silent" his whisper was full of promises on it's own right.

She exhaled and pulled him up "I promise" she said.

With one last look at the snoring child, he led her upstairs and locked the door behind them.

She was as quiet as she promised no matter her need to cry out her pleasure and nothing was ever heard from the room except from his name when she melted under him, obeying his breathy request to call his name as she was coming apart for him. They slept in each others arms, thoroughly sated until late next morning.
"This is it" Hermione stood frozen with her hand on the door handle. The corridor was dark and full of shadows barely forgotten. She sighed and heard her breath way too loud for the silence of the house. She felt his solid presence behind her, giving her silent courage to go inside and face her fears.

"I can only see the door frame, which is interesting enough" his unforgettable voice spoke in a low reserved tone and she felt her back running down with shivers.

She looked at him above her shoulder and smiled "Making jokes won't help me through" she said carefully.

"Will pushing you inside do the trick?" he continued down that playful mood. She was certain that he was trying to find a way to alleviate her tension.

She shook her head "Nope"

He crossed his arms and looked at the neighbourhood "We must look truly strange" he noticed that an elderly couple was staring at them from across the street. The man was mowing his lawn, but for the last five minutes the engine was running idle above the same spot and his wife, was watering the same place for way longer than was appropriate and the water was overflowing above the shallow pit around the base of the tree.

"Oh, that's just the Stanleys. Old neighbours. They must have not recognised me" she mused.

"What are you doing?" he asked with a frown when he saw her lifting her hand and waving at them.

"I have to say hello to them, else I would be terribly rude to people that knew me since childhood. No matter how bothersome they can be" she said at him and continued waving.

"Maybe then I should kick you into the house instead and we can pass on any weird social interactions" he said dryly, but it was too late.

"Hello Mr. Stanley, Mrs. Stanley!" she said greeting her neighbours. They hadn't recognised her indeed and she wondered if she had changed so much the last five years.

Suddenly Mrs. Stanley jerked and turned off the water. She dropped the hose and crossed the street. She approached them and wiped her hands on her apron. Severus pulled back so Hermione could come out and that is when the confused look on her face turned into a large smile "God all mighty! Hermione Granger?" she asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded "Nice to see you Mrs. Stanley"

"Here Jonathan, it's the Granger girl! Come here!" the elder woman cried at her husband with a wave.

Hermione winced slightly, knowing what was coming and she barely had the time to warn Severus "I am sorry about this"

"What?" he looked at her in confusion.

"About what you are about to hear" she said with a slight tilt of her brows.
"Darling! Look at you! You've grown so...so...mature!" Anna Stanley said with a high pitched voice.

She tried a smile that looked only too forced "Thank you Mrs. Stanley"

Anna picked up her hands and turned her around a couple of times "We haven't seen a Granger come into this house in over five years! Lord, we thought you all died in some freaky accident of some sort"

Hermione exhaled "No we are all fine. How are you and Mr. Stanley doing?"

Speaking of the devil, her husband just arrived and moved his ear muffs out of the way in order to be able to hear them better "Thought they would eventually demolish the old house since it's been unoccupied for so many years, damn" he muttered and offered a suspicious look towards the brooding figure of Severus, who looked absolutely out of place.

"What? No, of course not..." she tried, but they interrupted her again, as usual.

"Where have you been darling, where is your mom and dad? Have you moved out of Hampstead?" Anna said.

Jonathan was scratching his chin and offering quick glances towards Severus every now and again. It was obvious that he wanted to know who he was, but Anna hadn't finished with the Granger girl just yet.

Hermione smiled tightly "They have moved to Australia" she said trying not to elaborate.

"Australia! Lord!, why so far away? Are they getting better pay checks in the dentistry business down under, or was it the sunny weather that got to them?" Anna said with a fake laugh.

"I think both, they wanted to take a long break from the dull weather of England, but ended up purchasing a house and moving down there" Hermione said feeling very weary when speaking about her parents.

"And they left you behind? Lord..." Anna covered her mouth with her palm and frowned. She was obviously not condoning this behaviour.

"I decided to remain, as I found a good job at a school in Scotland" she explained offhandedly.

"Chemistry was it?"

Hermione nodded and forced a smile. She took an involuntary steps towards a silent Severus.

"Did you finish you doctorate darling?" Anna said with a wide smile.

"Not yet, I am still working on it"

"Are you a lecturer at the University?" Jonathan asked.

"Professor and it's a school" she repeated truly bothered.

"Damn..." he muttered.

"So you and your parents have parted ways, Lord..." Anna raised her brow.

"Yes" she exhaled tiredly.
"What about the house then? Everybody in the neighbourhood had gotten so worried" Anna pointed around as if she could show everyone scrutinising her for having the audacity to abandon her home.

"It's still standing…I see no problem with it" Hermione looked back and flicked her shoulders.

Anna approached as if to tell her some big secret "Younger generation that's popped up thinks it's haunted. I have stopped a lot of children from breaking down your windows". She sounded as if she was expecting gratefulness.

Hermione gave it, just in order to get rid of her "Thank you so much. I should bake a cake to show you my appreciation, before we leave tomorrow"

Jonathan frowned "You just came and you are leaving again?"

She nodded quickly "I have a limited vacation time from the school. I need to return soon"

Anna nodded "Ah, but of course you are right. Shall we expect to see you and your friend during the summer vacations then?" she turned and checked on Severus as if this was the first time she was seeing him. Hermione knew that Anna's keen eyes had already checked everything on him and had categorised him as a personality and tagged him under some kind of name inside her mind. John turned his interest openly towards the taller man, without hidden looks, now that his wife had taken an interest in him too.

Hermione sighed deeply "This is Severus Snape" she said and pointed at him.

Jonathan extended his hand and Severus shook it. Then he shook Anna's and said calmly "Nice to meet you"

"Lord, is he your uncle darling?" Anna said with a smile and looked at Hermione. Dismissing Severus completely.

Hermione tensed and pressed her lips obviously bothered "He is my friend" she said trying to point out their relationship as clearly as possible without becoming vulgar.

"Damn, he is too young to be the girl's uncle Anna, what are you talking about?" Jonathan chastised his wife with a frown.

"And too old to be her cousin!" Anna retorted as if they were not standing right there, something that Severus mentioned.

"I am right here, you know" he said calmly and his unused voice didn't lack the depth and strictness to draw their attention.

"Of course, I am so sorry. Just having a small debate with my husband about your age" Anna smiled forcibly.

"Which is forty two, just to save you the trouble" he drawled.

Hermione had to hide her chuckle by looking away, towards the windows of her house.

Anna's eyes grew wide "Lord….are you Hermione's overlooking PhD Professor then? Age matches the role" she continued down her intruding path.

"Severus is a colleague and a very dear friend" Hermione intervened and took hold of his forearm.

Anna's eyes fell quickly to that gesture, but it was Jonathan that spoke "Severus, strange strange
name that one….and your appearance is rather intimidating, I must admit" Jonathan said and crossed his arms "Forgive my straightforwardness of course. We are just not used to people like you in the neighbourhood. We are a quiet place here"

Hermione raised her brows critically "I assure you…" she begun, but Severus squeezed her hand.
"….Then my original intentions are fully met" he said and tilted his chin upwards.

Anna paused for a moment before harking out loud "Lovely sense of humour, your friend has. Right, Jonathan?" she checked on her husband.

He nodded coldly, not truly agreeing with his wife apparently.

"So are you a Professor of Chemistry also?" Anna tried to sound conversational after all the prickly points she threw at him.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione stopped him "He is a PhD in two major subjects and is a Master of a minor"

Anna inhaled in surprise and Jonathan raised his brows "Lord, we are in the company of scholars now Jonathan. So shape up, shape up! Although expecting something less from the Granger girl would have been simply impossible!"

Hermione smiled coldly and Severus pursed his lips. Silence drew long between them as neither of them was willing to instigate anymore conversation from the neighbourhood busybodies. Finally Anna decided she couldn't remain silent for much longer.

"So would you and your friend…" Anna hesitated just in order to point out that their age difference was noticeable and then smiled "…like to come to dinner tonight? Just so you won't have to cook after such a long journey on the road?"

Hermione shook her head and her hand traced up his shoulder. She embraced him calmly and touched her body to his. She wanted all this to be over. Let them feed on what they wanted to know most since the beginning. She wanted to yell to their faces "He is my bloody boyfriend!", but she didn't want to mess up the relationships on the neighbourhood. Maybe one day she would return to live here permanently "Thank you, but all we need is some quiet time and a lot of rest"

Anna covered her mouth and elbowed Jonathan "Hear that darling?…." then she waved them off "…Of course you need some quiet time, the little darlings that you both are! Maybe we will see some Granger grandchildren at some point, right?"

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. Severus's arm came around her waist and she rested her weight on him, thankful he was there "Maybe Mrs. Stanley, but don't expect that to happen anytime soon. Now without meaning to sound rude, we would like to…." she pointed at the entrance of her house.

Anna yelped "Of course my little darlings, you go get some rest now and we will see you tomorrow before you go. I'll bake you some cookies for the road, what do you think?"

"No, no, no, really no thank you!" Hermione said with a frown shaking her hands vigorously. She didn't want to have any obligations towards the Stanleys.

"Listen to her. Of course I'll bake some! We haven't see you in five years. Now you go get some rest and we will talk tomorrow. Good evening my lovelies!" she said in a singsong manner and grabbed her husband from the elbow almost dragging him across the street.
"Good evening and thank you" Hermione said and waved half heartedly.

Severus didn't say anything.

She rested her head on his shoulder "I am truly sorry you had to go through this…”

"Don't worry, every neighbourhood has it's busybodies" he brushed her off.

She looked at the entrance and swallowed hard "We better go in, or else we will have to explain our relationship and the disappearance of my parents to all the neighbours. I am certain Mrs. Stanley is already on the phone with at least four houses simultaneously and is giving them the news of our situation"

He smirked and followed her inside. When she closed the door behind she remained standing in the dark corridor, afraid to move.

"It's so silent" she whispered after a moment.

"You want me to turn on the lights?" he offered.

She shook her head and forced herself to do that job. She tiptoed under the staircase and found the fuse box. She put all the fuses in place and flicked the switch. Several blinks sounded all around the house from the electrical devices that powered up. She inhaled and flicked the corridor switch. As the brown carpet and the similarly brown wallpaper illuminated, she turned and looked at him.

He was gazing at her with a soft worried frown. She gave him a brief scared smile and moved to the living room. He followed her in as she lit it up and then moved towards the kitchen. She checked the fridge and was happy that it was empty and clean. She had undertaken the job of cleaning her house after casting the oblivion on her parents and her cleaning spells were still standing strong.

She then walked upstairs to the second floor were the corridor was blue in both carpet and wallpaper and opened the door to her bedroom. The main colour theme there was orange and yellow and Severus snickered behind her. She paused by her dresser and bit her lip "I heard that you sneaky bastard" she muttered.

"I am so glad I bought you a new scarf for Christmas, because Gryffindor's colour theme had taken over your life as I see" he noticed and she heard the playful undertones of his voice.

She turned to him and pulled the scarf he had bought her above the lapels of her coat. She then pursed her lips and tilted her head, daring him to say something.

He came over and took hold of it's ends, pulling her on him. Then he gave her a soft kiss "Even more glad am I, for seeing you wearing it" he said and then kissed her again.

She exhaled in relief upon his lips and wrapped her arms around his neck "Severus, you don't know how glad I am that you are here with me" she said with candid spontaneity.

"I am glad to be here too" he said and pecked her lips tenderly.

She closed her eyes and pressed him on her for a few moments before drawing back. Then she looked around her room "I don't know what you could expect to find here that would be more embarrassing than me colouring everything Gryffindor".

He flicked his shoulders and looked around "I bet I can find something"
She raised her brow "I am sure you can".

Then she let go of his hand and moved to her bed. She sat down at the deep orange coverlet and took a snow-globe from her bedside table. Ron had given it to her when they were in their fifth grade. It was a magical miniature of a snowy Hogwarts. She shook it and several small Quidditch players begun flying around. She smiled at it and cradled it in her hands "I thought I had lost this" she murmured more at herself than to him.

He looked at her but didn't speak. He turned his attention to the wallpaper that was full of posters, from rock bands, big Quidditch players and even great scientific minds "Expect you to have Einstein and Tesla next to ACDC and Rory Gallagher" he said.

She smiled at her snow globe "Trust me to appreciate people with brains and talent on every area of life" she rejoined.

He paused briefly and then spoke "And looks apparently" he mused.

She looked up frowning and saw with growing embarrassment him having revealed a half hidden poster of Gilderoy Lockhart, that was hiding behind William Shakespeare. She raised her finger threateningly "I was too young, too easily impressed and I covered him up with dear old William, so don't you dare come after me for that one!" she warned.

"I cannot imagine you drooling over the poster of that bloody idiot" he shook his head "It's beyond me"

She chuckled "It was too short lived, ok? Don't go on pestering me about this!"

"I think I should…it's getting you red on the cheeks and it suits you" he said and she gazed up at him. His eyes were gentle and loving.

"You want to know something?" she placed the snow-globe back on the side table.

He nodded and crossed his arms.

She came over and grabbed him by the lapels. She drew him on her and whispered on his lips "The moment I saw you blasting him into the air, he was out of the picture…I was too attracted to skilled people to swoon over him after such a ridicule. When Harry revealed to me that he never did any of those things he boasted, I was not really surprised" she said and kissed him softly.

He retaliated the kiss "Glad Mr. Potter helped you out of that teenage awkwardness"

"You did too, without knowing of course"

"Glad I helped also..." he smiled.

She pulled back and tittered "Come on, I don't want you to linger here until you discover my most embarrassing moments. Lockhart's case was idiotic enough, but one can blame teenage hormones for that".

She took hold of his hand and led him down the hallway. She pushed her parent's door open and flicked on the lights. Immediately her eyes filled with tears and she jerked back with the inability to control them. She covered her mouth and felt the tears running down her cheeks on seeing the bedroom that she loved the most. All dressed in purple with a huge queen sized bed and a large fireplace. The old TV was still standing across the bed and she remembered how she sat next to her mom in bed and enjoyed her favourite children programs, as her mom slept away a very tiring day.
She felt his hand clasping her shoulder and squeezing her reassuringly. She shook her head "I don't want to sleep here, nor in my bedroom tonight" she whispered and wiped away her tears quickly. Her heart felt torn apart.

"We can sleep in the living room. We can transfigure the couch" he offered.

She nodded quickly and turned around. She flicked off the lights not wanting to see that room anymore. It was simply too painful for her "Let's go downstairs" she said and walked down the stairs not waiting to see if he was following her. His heavy footfall notified her that he was close behind. She crossed the long corridor and went into the kitchen "There is really nothing in the fridge for us to eat tonight. Maybe we should take up the Stanley offer, what do you think?"

He shook his head vigorously and she smiled at seeing him this animated "No way, I'd rather starve" She chuckled and nodded "I couldn't agree with you more. Maybe we can order some pizza later on"

"That would do nicely" he agreed.

"Come on, I want to show you something" she said and opened up the kitchen door.

They went out into a rather spacious back yard that was too neglected. The undergrowth has grown so high that it was difficult to walk in the pathways. There was a small patio on the right, but all the furniture had been secured into the garage. The tent which she had been unable to bring down five years ago, was torn apart. It was hanging in long tatters above the circular dining area were once she has spent hundreds of summer afternoons playing chess with her dad, while her mom was chastising her for not eating her fruit salad before the ice cream. She shook her head at the image of desolation and walked towards a birch tree that had a wooden swing hanging from rather worn out ropes.

It was creaking as the breeze was moving it back and forth slightly. She took hold of the rope and stopped its movement. The wood looked worn out, it had a piece missing and looked dangerous to use "I wish I could use this one more time"

"Take your wand out and mend it" his deep voice spoke behind her and she shuddered.

She didn't want to tell him one more time how grateful she felt to hear his low key tones vibrating through her spine and calming down her mind. She told him enough times already during their drive to her house and he was making a solid effort of not whispering anymore. That meant that he was appreciating the effect of his voice on her.

She shook her head "Then I'd have to fix everything else also and I am not in the mood"

"Why?"

"Because they are not here with me Severus" she said solemnly and crossed her arms. Her hands caressed her shoulders.

"You are torturing yourself" he said and his hands landed above hers. He leaned his head and planted a soft kiss on the side of her neck.

She shuddered and closed her eyes "Come, I want to show you…" she said after a thoughtful moment and pulled him by the hand.

She crossed the overgrown bushes and grass and reached the end of the back yard. She pointed up at another tall birch tree outside the yard "That's the tree where my kite got caught, but this looks full of rust and I don't remember were I have put the keys", she turned her attention at the iron gate and
rattled it upon it's hinges. It didn't move at all.

He came next to her and flicked his fingers elegantly towards the lock of the gate. It broke open and all the rust cleared up. She gazed back at him silently and he flicked his shoulders "Just easing this up for you"

She pressed her lips thankfully "And you are doing that without even realising that a few months ago you didn't want to use magic at all"

"That's the effect you have on me" he said softly.

She smiled and opened up the gate. They walked quietly outside at a wide area in front of a birch tree forest. The weather was cold and the sky was grey, but there was no rain yet. She reached the tree she had shown him from the gate and pointed upwards "There, see?"

He nodded. There was a stump of a cut off branch close to the top of the tree "That must have been huge" he frowned.

She nodded "It wasn't small. My dad got a concussion"

He huffed "A little bundle of trouble you were"

She shook her head and sat crossed legged in the middle of the field "I was a good kid Severus"

He sighed and looked about him with a deep frown. Then as if deciding he sat crossed legged next to her "I am sure you were and you had a lovely family life that left you with beautiful memories. You are very lucky to have grown into such a house and I don't mean to sound jealous"

Her hand reached out and grasped his, but her eyes looked solemnly around her at the serene nature "I am not lucky anymore. I don't have my family now" she said and felt her eyes burning anew.

He tightened her hand "It's a decision you can revoke any minute"

She flicked her shoulders "I could go to Australia and bring back their memories, right….? You think it's that easy?"

"Maybe not easy, but certainly necessary. Apparate outside their door and talk to them. Right now you are simply belting yourself and I cannot understand the reasons"

"Don't Severus…" she closed her eyes.

"Don't? Have you seen yourself? Since we arrived, you have been going from room to room like the walking dead. There is no reason to keep your parents in oblivion anymore Hermione. We live in peaceful times, there is no danger for them. As for having to explain to them what happened…"

"Yes?!" she looked at him demandingly.

"Just do it" he said calmly.

"Apparate just like that in another continent…” she mused and wiped a tear that run down her cheek.

"Yes"

"And destroy their peaceful life…”

"Remind them that they have an ingenious, brave and beautiful, yet slightly insecure daughter that
needs them next to her in order to blossom" he said quietly and the depth and tenderness of his voice touched her heart deeply.

She squeezed his hand and inhaled the fresh air that smelt of oncoming rain "Will you come with me if I decide to do it?" she whispered.

"Come with you?" he seemed taken aback.

She nodded and gazed at him steadily "Yes, if I decide to do it, will you come with me?"

He pressed his lips and turned his gaze towards the forest for a moment becoming silent. Then he nodded softly "Yes"

She closed her eyes and felt her heart melting …I love you…her mind said, but she didn't dare voice it. She simply caressed his palm gently with her thumb, but every cell in her body was tuned over to his presence that was creating a safe haven for her.

They let time pass by, holding hands and sitting cross legged in the middle of the field at the back of her house, until rain finally started pouring down on them. They run inside and took turns into the bathroom to clean up and change clothes. During the evening Hermione fired up the living room fireplace and transfigured the couch into a cozy double bed. She ordered pizza and they ate and spoke until late at night.

They finally fell asleep at two in the morning, but he was the only one that remained asleep comfortably wrapped up in a thick deep maroon blanket she had brought over from her parent's closet. An hour later she woke up to a nightmare were her dad died from the branch that fell on his head and her mother died from grief soon after.

Finding herself unable to sleep she took another tour all over the house, going from room to room and trying to bring back every single thread of happy memories. She haunted the corridors and the bedrooms. She tore down Lockheart's poster still feeling embarrassed that Severus saw it upon her walls and she went to her parent's room. She laid on their bed and tried to bring back the feeling of having her mother sleeping behind her. That sense of security and love. She remade the bed after a while and walked downstairs.

She managed to dig up an old pack of Earl Grey and she made a cup of tea that tasted too stale, but felt wonderful. She sat at the cold and dark kitchen for a long time musing out of the window at the steady rain that tapped upon the windows and looking at the small Hogwarts snow-globe with the Quidditch players flying around. Finally several hours later she felt like she had reached some form of closure to her torture. Feeling her heart twitching with both timid excitement and blinding fear, she made her way back to the living room and came around to his side of the bed. She kneeled in front of him and pulled back the blanket a bit in order to reveal his sleeping face.

Her hand cupped his cheek and she rubbed her palm on the stubble that was there "Severus?" she whispered.

His eyelids flickered.

Her thumb passed above his well formed lips and she touched her forehead to his. Then she kissed the top of his nose "Severus?" she repeated close to his mouth.

His eyes slowly opened up and he cleared his throat "What is it?" his voice sounded rusty and old, but it's throaty rumble echoed down her spine.

"I want to go…” she whispered.
He frowned and tried to push away the confusion from his barely awoken brain "Go where?"

"To Australia" she said and a soft smile appeared on her lips.

The crease on his forehead deepened "You will go to your parents?" he asked.

She nodded "Yes"

"When?"

"I want to go on the first sunlight" she spoke quietly and caressed his temple.

He nodded "Ok"

"You said you would come with me…” she trailed off, waiting for him to pick up.

He paused in obvious hesitation for a moment making her heart tremor. She didn't want to go without him, no matter how weak that felt. His hand came from under the blanket and cupped her cheek "I will" he said calmly and pulled her down to a soft kiss that he slowly deepened into a sensual exploration.

She felt her heart elating and beating quickly with the anxiety of what she was going to do tomorrow in Australia and how she was going to talk to her parents before she attempted to return their memories. He drew her in bed and his sensual kiss soon developed into a passionate battle of tongues as their hands stripped each other almost in desperate need. Soon she was astride him, grinding her pelvis on him in front of the fireplace, taking out all her emotional frustrations in a quick pace of love making that made her come apart way too early with her mouth upon his and her hair sprawled all over his chest. Something that she appreciated so much, that she pulled away and went down to him, wanting to hear him moan in satisfaction, which she accomplished with her warm and wet mouth rather easily, appreciating with new arousal his breadth and length as the world broke apart for him. He rode out the tremors of his body with his fingers pulling on her hair painfully and she groaned along with him, relishing on his pleasure.

After all that she felt herself much calmer and soon enough she fell into a deep sleep till the next morning, were her daring decision was going to take them both into another continent. And maybe that same decision was going to bring back to England her parents and with them her childhood happiness.
Hermione turned back and looked at him. He was standing rather solemn at the same spot they had apparated without making an attempt to follow her in the Australian Ministry of Magic in order to register their presence in this country and their magical trace "Severus, what are you doing?"

He pressed his lips and lowered his head. His eyes felt very imperative, but she couldn't understand what was his problem. He had been the one that pushed her to take this trip and it was his presence that made it possible for her to overcome her fear, but since they woke up that morning his mood seemed much darker. As if something unseen was lingering behind his dark eyes, keeping him from smiling or acting as playfully as all the previous days. It felt as if some part of the old depressed Severus had returned for some reason that she was unable to fathom.

He didn't try to change her mind about the trip and when she asked him several times over if he was certain that he wanted to accompany her, he didn't hesitate. Unable as she had been to draw some input from him, she locked up her house and led him to the back yard where they both apparated, in order not to be seen again by the Stanleys. She rather doubted that he was going to appreciate their intrusion, or that he would have been as patient with their rude comments today.

She just took his hand and within seconds they were outside the Australian Ministry. The only place a foreign magical person, whose trace was not registered, could apparate freely. They left England at eleven in the morning and they were outside the Ministry in the other continent twelve at midnight. Yes, she felt thankful that there were no long waiting lines to the registry, but on the other hand it was simply impossible to go and knock at her parent's door at this hour. They had to register and then find a motel in order to spend the night, which was also going to be hard, since they had just woken up. Damn, this was going to be difficult and his attitude now was not helping her much.

She gritted her teeth and went back to him "What are you doing?" she repeated.

"I am not coming in" he said solemnly.

Her eyes opened up widely "What are you talking about? We have to register in Australia, else we cannot travel the country"

He shook his head coldly "I said I am not coming. You go in, I will wait for you here"

"But that will make you illegal…" she trailed off trying to understand where all this broodiness was coming from.

He pressed his lips "Excuse me for not wanting to enter any Ministry, in any part of the world. Now do me the favour and go in to register, because standing out here arguing is drawing attention upon both of us" he gritted his teeth angrily.

She inhaled in order to keep her patience and looked back at the entrance "You prefer to travel illegally and possibly get arrested?"

"I won't" he shook his head dismissively, but sounded certain enough.

Her mind nettled her that this made no sense, that something was up, but she was too anxious about her parents to let that thought bother her. She exhaled and nodded in defeat "Very well, wait for me here" she said.

He nodded coldly and gazed about him. He seemed to be looking for something or someone.
Hermione looked around also, unable to find the source of his intense scrutiny. She left him half heartedly at the corner of the building, hidden in the shadows and went in. The registry was working twenty four seven, so she registered quickly and easily. When they returned her wand back and wished her a pleasant stay, she thanked them and run out to find him.

He had not moved from his spot and when he saw her he pressed his lips and sighed in relief. As if a great weight had been lifted from his chest. She wondered what he was up to, but she didn't dare ask him. Especially not after the small altercation they had a while ago. They walked on foot for several blocks and Hermione found a nice isolated spot in order for them to apparate. Asking him one more time if he was sure that he didn't want to get registered and getting a cold "Get on with it", that made her heart clench, she apparated them at Queensland were the house of her parent's was.

It was a warm night and both she and Severus shed their heavy coats and scarfs as they had reached a small clean looking hotel at Port Douglas. She explained to him that her parents lived within walking distance from the hotel and that she'd like to be close by, but this looked a bit too expensive for her. He didn't hesitate when he took her hand and brought her inside. He paid in muggle cash for a double room without giving her the chance to offer her share of the money. He took the key and wordlessly he led them to the elevator and up. His eyes checked on the hotel entrance long and hard before the elevator door slid close.

When inside their room, which was beautiful and elegant, she had only the need to sit at the bed and rest her head for a moment. He on the other hand seemed more and more on edge. As if he was expecting something to happen soon. She tried to ask him what was the matter once more, to get a vague reply that everything was fine and that she should force herself to get some sleep.

"I am a bit sleepy" she admitted. She might have woken up only two hours ago, but she hadn't slept well last night. She wouldn't have said no to a couple of hours of sleep.

"Then go to bed, you have a very hard day tomorrow" he said without turning to look at her. He was gazing out the third floor window and down at the street. His arms were crossed and his hands were holding his biceps.

"What about you? Aren't you sleepy?" she asked wanting him to cuddle with her. His cold attitude and evasive answers made her more needy of an affirmation from him, especially now that she was so close to seeing her parents again.

He shook his head "No"

She sighed "What are you going to do?"

He gazed at her sideways with a deep thoughtful frown for a few intense moments were she felt her heart speeding up. Then his shoulders seemed to relax a little bit and he uncrossed his arms. He walked up to her and his hand touched her head softly. She exhaled and wrapped her arms around his waist. She rested her head on his stomach and closed her eyes "I will watch over you, as you sleep" he said. His voice and his words now sounded exactly as they should have been. Close to her and tender.

She nodded "I am sorry I forced you to come with me Severus" she attempted a shot in the dark, that could explain his dark mood.

He hesitated "No…you got it wrong"

"You don't explain to me what's got into you all of a sudden. You were not like that in Andromeda, nor at Hogwarts" she tried.
He exhaled "I am worried about you and I am also too hot"

She giggled "Yes, you are"

His fingers tightened upon her head and she heard the mirth on his voice "and very sweaty. What kind of weather is this in the middle of the winter for crying out loud?"

She smiled feeling a ton of weight lifting from her shoulders "I know, but that's the land down under. You haven't been here before?"

"No and it is bloody killing me, this heat" he said and sounded exasperated.

She pushed him back and stood up. She raised her brow and scrutinised him for a few moments "Will you allow me to do something for you?"

He frowned and raised his brow, but didn't speak.

She nodded and drew her wand. Before he had the time to intervene she cast a spell and transformed his warm turtleneck to a black short sleeved t-shirt with an open neckline. His cardigan turned into a very thin cotton scarf and his coat disappeared. He looked around him worried and she laughed "Don't worry, the spell will be reversed and you will be fully dressed the moment we return to England"

He twisted his lips "It'd better. I loved that cardigan"

"No more than I loved it" she winked at him, since it was the cardigan he had offered her after their first kiss at the infirmary. She kept wearing it on and off whenever he wasn't.

He frowned and drew the cotton scarf away from his neck and she gazed at him confused as he placed it in his back pocket "Thought I'd cover up your neck wound" she explained offhandedly.

He shook his head "I am feeling so warm that I cannot tolerate anything on my neck"

She smiled and her eyes brightened up. Then she pointed at her own body and her warm clothes changed. She checked herself on the mirror appreciatively. A knee high grey short sleeved dress had replaced all her clothes and she moved her body. It flowed airily around her and she took a couple of turns before stopping under his intense stare. He was eating her up with his eyes and she felt that look burning her up. Her legs loosened "What?" she blushed, but couldn't help asking him the useless question. She knew exactly what he was doing.

His brow rose slowly as his eyes glided from her feet up to her eyes again. He tilted his head and a lopsided smile appeared on his lips.

"Severus I feel like you are undressing me with your eyes"

"That's exactly what I am doing" he said calmly and her cheeks burned up even more.

She approached and placed her palm on the top of his chest "If I tell you that tonight all I want is a hug will it bother you?" she asked quietly.

He placed both hands on her waist "No matter my indisputable need to push this dress off your shoulders and to pulled it up from your legs...no matter how much I want to gather it on your midsection and grab hold of it as I thrust in you till the end of all time..."

She opened her mouth and a soft gasp escaped her at his sexy suggestions.
"I will respect your need to rest and the even more impertinent need to gather your thoughts before tomorrow's important meeting. We didn't come here to fuck, but to see your parents. Go to bed and I shall join you later on" he said and gave a brief soft kiss.

She exhaled grateful that he could understand her. Seeing his darkness retreating, by all this vocal foreplay between them, made her heart smile. She fell to bed shortly after they ordered some dinner and kept her eyes upon his silent vigilance over the street. Her eyes slowly closed and she saw with a sinking heart that the dark cloud began gathering over his serious eyes as they moved intensely behind some silver locks that had escaped from his temple.

"You should draw your hair back from your temples…you'd look rather handsome like that" she whispered as consciousness slipped away from her. She didn't see him turn to her heavily, nor did she see his cloudy gaze remaining on her for what seemed like an eternity. His brow creased as he brought his attention back to the street once more. His eyes always searching…and searching…

***…***

Next day found them walking towards the house of her parents at eleven in the morning. She managed to convince him to go out with that revealing v necked t-shirt and with all his scars under the public eye. She made her own wish come true by pulling some hair from his temples and holding it to the back of his head with a small black hair band. He asked her playfully if he should cast a shaving spell on his face, but she shook her head in negation and told him that this dishevelled look suited him more than he thought possible. They walked quietly after a light breakfast they took at the hotel.

She couldn't stop casting her eyes down anxiously and even though his steady pace was deliberately slow, she broke away from him several times. He reached her easily and took hold of her hand, bringing her back down to his pace. Telling her calmly that she was making herself anxious and in her current condition that was the worst thing that she could do. They walked in front of the main peers of Port Douglas and enjoyed the warm sun and the merriness of the people. Even though it was still rather early the walkways were full of sauntering families and running children. Bicycles were coming up and down the lane reserved for them and the cafes were filled to the brim.

When after a twenty minute walk they finally reached the two story house of the Wilkins, she stopped abruptly and felt the blood draining from her face. She hadn't been expecting her mom to be outside watering her sidewalk trees. She was wearing a flowery short sleeved dress and a pair of white flip flops. A weaved hat was on her head with a red band tied in a large bow around it's base. She looked as young and beautiful as Hermione always remembered and a strong shudder run down her back.

He felt it on his palm that was resting reassuringly on the small of her waist.

"My mom" she whispered feeling in awe. Her instinctive reaction was to run across the street and fall in her arms, but she rather doubted that Mrs. Wilkins would appreciate a desperate hug from a strange girl in a grey breezy dress.

"I remember her" he whispered.

She turned to him and gave him a sad smile "Did she come pestering you about my academic achievements that were always poorer in Potions?"

He raised his brow "She did try to figure out why I never gave you honours, but only straight A's"

Hermione exhaled and turned to her mom again. It felt as if she hadn't ever left her side. As if they
never lived away from each other these five years "Wish she knew that now I have taken over your place in Hogwarts" she muttered.

He pushed her softly "Go tell her"

She pushed back hesitantly "I can't, Severus" she said and felt sudden anxiety rising so quickly in her, that her stomach tightened and her tummy began hurting.

"Yes you can and yes you will" he said with a serious tone that was meant to straighten her act up.

She felt close to an anxiety attack. The more she stood there, across the street, looking at her mom half hidden behind a tree bark, like some sick stalker, the more she got afraid "No, no I can't" she muttered and felt her fingers numbing down.

"Don't tell me that we came all the way here for nothing" his voice held a tone of dark warning that made her look at him.

"Severus!" she tried to chastise him. She had enough problems right now to mind about his anger.

"Don't Severus me. You have no idea how many things are at stake this very moment, so you can talk to them…so you will!" he retorted heavily and she saw the darkness coming back into his eyes.

She frowned feeling her stomach a complete mess. She wondered what he would think, or what Mrs. Wilkins would imagine if she turned around and emptied all her breakfast on this poor fellow's front lawn "Care to tell me what you are talking about? Don't I have enough worries already?!" she said and couldn't hide her own anger at his mysterious attitude.

He tilted his head in obvious frustration and grabbed her hand forcibly. She tried to pull it back, but she couldn't release it from his firm grip "Severus, you are hurting me!" she said partly shocked, partly freaked out.

"I'll show you what I am talking about" he spat and pulled her by the hand. She jerked forth and followed him, wanting to or not, across the street and to her mom's front lawn. As they approached she gazed with growing apprehension at Monica raising her head and observing them with a soft smile on her lips.

Severus pulled her again as she tried to back away and she bumped onto his shoulder and laughed nervously at the curious look her mom gave her. She felt ready to puke.

"Can I help you with something?" Monica asked politely. She turned off her hose and placed it down.

Severus bowed his head curtly "My name is Robert Jones. This is my wife Maria. We just moved to a small house close to Port Douglas and we decided to take a stroll to the posh part of the neighbourhood. We are sorry for the impolite intrusion" he said with a social grace that surprised even Hermione, that was looking at him with a gaping mouth. He offered his hand.

Her mom shook it "Nice to meet you Mr. Jones. My name is Monica Wilkins. Hello Mrs. Jones" she said and offered her hand at Hermione.

She looked at it like a moron. Severus jerked her other hand and that kicked her into action. She took hold of her mother's hand and shook it gingerly "Nice to meet you" she tittered and felt sweat breaking near her forehead.

"It's always nice to see new neighbours introducing themselves. Do you like Port Douglas?" her
mom asked conversationally.

He looked around him easily and Hermione found herself mimicking his actions without meaning to "It is beautiful. We are not used to this weather, since we moved here from England" he said.

Mrs. Wilkins smiled "Oh, the forever grey England. So this must look totally different for you"

"Yes, and we are very pleased to be here" he said with a kind smile.

Monica looked satisfied. She crossed her hands in front of her dress and looked at them both "So, what can I do to assist you?"

She shook her head with wide eyes full of terror. His hand tightened painfully around hers, grounding her at this moment "My wife loves flowers and when she saw your beautiful front garden she wanted to ask you about the arrangements and how you are taking care of your plants, but she is very timid. So I decided to bring her over to you"

Monica's smile brightened "Ah, yes, I saw you from across the street, but I couldn't have imagined. Why so timid my dear? You are a pretty flower yourself. I can show you around my front garden and if you have the time you can take a look at the back also" she offered.

Hermione didn't know what to say, so Severus interposed one more time "She would like that a lot, wouldn't you my love?"

His loving appellation, albeit that it felt too staged and forced in that tense moment, was what made her speak, even though she felt her voice unsure "Yes, darling" she whispered and then forced a smile at her mom.

"Lovely, come then my dear, let me show you. You can also meet Mr. Wilkins, my husband" she said and pointed elegantly so that Hermione could pass in front of her.

She looked at Severus with hesitation and passed in front of her mom. His daring approach gave her the push she needed in order to see this done. No matter how much she wanted to puke or turn around and slap him across the face for forcing her like that, she also felt distinctly grateful for his timely intervention. After a few steps she stopped and turned around. He was observing them solemnly from his place at the sidewalk. It was Monica that spoke "Aren't you joining us Mr. Jones?"

He shook his head "I have a few errands to run in town. I will meet my wife back at the house"

She felt her heart clenching and she walked quickly back to him. She grabbed his forearm and pressed it angrily "What the hell are you doing? Aren't you coming in with me?" she hissed. Monica was slightly frowning.

"You are making her suspicious. This is your moment. The moment where you connect your family. I've done my part. I've brought you here. Now it's your turn to finish the job" he said quietly.

She opened her mouth, but couldn't find anything to tell him.

"Don't look at me like that, just go inside" he said pressing his lips almost angrily.

"What are you going to do?" she asked worried.

He smiled and cupped the back of her neck. She had no time to react as he leaned in and gave her a small kiss, before opening his mouth and deepening it for a few seconds. She released her breath in
him and wrapped her arms around his back. Her nails clutched him and dug into his shoulder blades. When he pulled back a bit she felt her eyes filling with tears "I will find a quiet dark spot and apparate back at Hogwarts the moment you enter your house. I will meet you back there, when you finish with your parents. Will that do?"

She inhaled and closed her eyes "Yes" she nodded.

"Now go, it's rude to keep her waiting"

Hermione looked at him lovingly "I cannot thank you enough and also I cannot tell you how much I want to slap you at this moment"

He gave her a smug smile and pushed her away "See you at the school shortly". Then he turned to her mom "Nice to have met you Mrs. Wilkins" he said and waved at her.

"Me too Mr. Jones" Monica waved at him.

Hermione turned around in deep apprehension. She saw her mom pleasantly observing them and after a momentary hesitation she followed her on the flower tour that Monica intended to give her, fingering the wand that was hiding under her dress on her side.

***…***

The moment Severus apparated in front of the Hogwarts main gates, his face set heavily and his eyes gazed steadily towards the viaduct. He folded his arms and dug his chin into his scarf, thankful that Hermione's spell was cast this masterfully. Australia's summer clothes didn't stand a chance in the white frozen Scottish highlands.

The cold air whistled around his ears and with each step closer to the castle, his brow became more clouded. He met no one at the viaduct, nor at the central plaza. He stopped a few feet sort of the main entrance, his eyes scrutinising the heavy iron bolts with austerity. He hoped that by now Hermione had already returned her parent's memories and they were all in tight embrace, safe and happy.

Anything to justify what he had done, with full knowledge once more, against the law. The probation had one condition only. Not to leave England. He exhaled and his lips thinned. When Hermione asked him to go, he didn't hesitate. He followed her willingly to Australia, knowing full well what awaited for him on his return back to England. Hermione didn't know and he made sure she didn't find out.

Her acute mind noticed immediately his mood had taken a nosedive after she suggested he escorted her at this long trip. Her insistent need to understand what ailed him, made him react rather instinctively and at certain cases angrily towards her. He couldn't linger though and telling her the truth would have resulted in them returning to England without managing their primary goal. He preferred to keep it all to himself and use advanced displacement spells in order to conceal his magical trace in Australia. He kept his eyes open and his mind alert to see if he was being traced or followed and thankfully after a nightmarish night were he didn't sleep at all, they finally reached the Grangers.

When Hermione cowered away from talking to her mom, he truly flipped. He didn't want to accept that he took such a great risk, without the benefits of this meeting. He simply overlooked her mind numbing fear and forced her into action, knowing that she might hate him afterwards. Standing there in front of the main entrance of the castle, he still didn't know how she was going to treat him upon return, but at least she was with her parents now. He hoped that she had already returned their memories and that this adventure was going to end pleasantly.
at least for them….he thought and his frown deepened as he saw the doors opening up. The light from the interior threw three shadows on the steps and he slowly lifted his eyes to an expected scene.

"Severus…” Minerva acknowledged and quickly walked over to him.

His eyes looked at the two men that stopped at the top of the stairs. He didn't recognise their faces, but he knew what they wanted.

"Good evening" he said in a low tone at the general direction of the newcomers.

His voice made Minerva pause "Your voice" she said looking confused.

"Hermione's potion" he said succinctly.

Minerva opened up her mouth to say something and then as if remembering that they were not alone she closed it and turned towards the two men that stood there patiently. She hesitated for a moment and then sighed deeply, knowing that there was no way out of this "Severus, this is Barnaby Potts and Nicholas Webb. They have arrived from the Ministry this morning. They've been waiting for you, by orders of the Minister of Magic” she said and shook her head sadly.

Severus inclined his head politely, but remained silent and unmovable.

Barnaby smiled and walked down the steps towards him. He extended his hand in a rather friendly manner and waited "An honour to meet you Sir" he said with respect.

Severus brows flickered in confusion "You too" he replied and shook the man's hand. He was a tall brown haired man, with a long beard and large strong hands.

"I'll help the indecision that has overtaken your Headmistress and get to the gist of it, shall I?"

Barnaby said.

Severus nodded with a strictness in his countenance he couldn't easily erase, albeit this man's polite approach.

"You have broken the rules of your probation, by apparating away from England…”

"Where the hell did you go Severus?!" Minerva chastised, suddenly kicked into action by Barnaby's words.

"Australia" he said coldly.

"What?" she frowned deeply.

Barnaby raised his hand at her and she inhaled and straightened "It matters not where he went. I must bring him back at the Ministry with me, so we can sort this out". He turned to Severus and offered him a kind smile "I hope you do understand that I have no choice. I have admired you for years, but they have placed me as your temporary warden. I have to bring you back" he tried to explain.

Severus pressed his lips "You do your job"

"I will get ready" Minerva said and made to go them.

Barnaby raised his palm at her "You cannot come Headmistress, I am sorry"

She frowned "Why not? I was allowed to come each time. Even crazy Borovic allowed me to attend"
Barnaby shook his head "I have no idea. I was ordered to bring back only the Professor through the portal. You can floo yourself to the Ministry after we leave. You are going to find us at the third floor, at the Auror offices…"

She waved him off "I bloody know where you are taking him. I've defended him many times there already"

Barnaby smiled contently "So we are ok then"

She exhaled "Fine, I'll meet you there Severus, ok?"

He offered a weary nod and turned his eyes to the tall Auror who turned to his assistant "Are you ready Nick?"

"Yes Sir" the second Auror said and came next to Severus.

He lifted his hands in front of him so they could place the magical binds on him. Barnaby laughed heartily and shook his head "No such thing necessary Professor. You are being escorted by friends this time, not foes"

Minerva smiled widely "I am so glad Borovic is out of the picture" she said.

Barnaby pressed his lips "Don't think we are going to see more of Alexander soon. He's been tied up in the most strict environment"

Minerva nodded and then turned towards Severus "Where is Hermione?" she asked him.

He tensed and looked sideways at the Auror, making her understand that he didn't want to give too much info about her "She will return later on" he said quietly.

She inhaled and lowered her head "Very well, I will see you back at the Ministry soon"

He offered her a curt nod and then looked at Barnaby. The large man smiled and pointed elegantly in front of him. Severus walked and the Aurors winged him. They walked a couple of steps and the usual blue portal opened up before him.

He closed his eyes as they passed through. When he reopened them he felt a soft drizzle caress his face and a small voice spoke at the back of his head.

There is something in the wind…a voice that whispers hidden nightmares…shush…do you hear it? He looked at the deserted docks of a grey city that was way asleep into a wet and lonely night. They seemed to be the only ones there, apart from a few figures that kept going back and forth in front of a dark ferry. The only one bearing any lights at this time of night. Barnaby walked next to him and on his other side came Nicolas. They remained equally silent to him observing the ferry boat.

"Where are we?" he asked coldly.

"I'll give you a hint Toto. You've been here before and it's not Kansas, although during that time you were so messed up, this port must have looked like any other" Barnaby said with the most serious voice he could master. He crossed his arms in front of him.

Severus inhaled deeply and felt his throat going dry "St. Andrews bay" he whispered feeling traces of sweat breaking on his forehead and back with apprehension.

After a few silent moments Barnaby spoke again "Dundee Port. Have you missed it?"
Severus swallowed heavily.

Barnaby raised his arm and out of the shadows emerged two men. Dressed in black cloaks and hoods that didn't reveal their faces. They came and covered his front and back. Barnaby took out his wand "Hands behind your back" he said with a voice that had lost all it's pleasantness suddenly.

He remained immovable and his mind instantly tried to find the quickest and safest way out of here, but Barnaby's next words made his heart freeze over "Don't try to get any ideas, because Port Douglas is just an apparition away and there's four of us"

Severus mouth dropped open and he turned to the tall Auror terrified. Did that man just say that he knew were Hermione was? He couldn't have spoken even if he wanted to. He was petrified.

Barnaby smiled at that effect "Now hands behind your back Professor" he assumed his professional tone once again.

Severus did as he was told, trying to control the tremor of his hands as the binding spell was cast. Handcuffs of magical matter encircled his wrists and a long magical chain extended from his hands down to his legs, were two more cuffs appeared around his shins. He wanted to say a lot, he wanted to break the magical binds and run, but this man's words had stopped any tries for freedom. Barnaby and his acolytes must have went through a lot of trouble to learn were he and Hermione have been and to manage a silent exit for him. They apparently intended a quick getaway before people declared him missing and they had a strong hold on his actions through Hermione. This has been planned carefully and something told him that he was not meant to return from this boat ride.

When he was properly secured, Barnaby and the remaining Aurors escorted him to the black ferry boat. When they were boarding up all the seamen averted their eyes, as if they had been given orders in advance. Several simply drew back and got out of their way. They led him through the ship and exited on the bow were another group of prisoners was contained at the side. They were all bound together and were watched over by two Aurors. When Severus came out, bound hand and feet with an escort of four Aurors all to himself, the prisoners averted their eyes quickly.

He approached the railings and stood there getting slowly wet by the steady drizzle. His captors remained equally silent to him. Covering him from every side but the front. Where would he go then? Just fall into the sea, or fly into the sky in order to get away? He couldn't do anything...because Hermione and her parents were out there all alone with no one to warn them or protect them. A strong feeling of regret washed over him as he remembered Hermione's words "I don't want to bring them back to this world and endanger them again. They are safe in their oblivion". She had been right all along and he had been wrong. Right now he was the one putting them in danger without ever intending to do so.

He heard the engines powering up and soon enough the boat sailed away into a black sea that looked menacing. Severus swallowed hard and twisted his arms behind his back.

Barnaby's voice spoke close to his ear making him shudder in repulse "Contain the magical grenades that hide in your hands and don't mess with the binds, alright? I know Granger road in Heathsgate and even her nosy neighbours the Stanleys, who speak way too much to way too many people. Hogwarts is an easy access to the Aurors and Bellatrix's younger sister cannot be harder to penetrate than Minerva. I am going to find your lover easily and drag her through the corridors of Azkaban until she loses the brilliant mind she has under that pretty head. Then we'll see if that will break you, since you pride yourself on having such an unbreakable shell" he said with a hair raising whisper close to his ear.

Severus felt his heart clenching and his stomach twisting painfully. He relaxed his hands behind his
back "If you dare touch her I am going to make you swallow your lungs and your tongue"

Barnaby smirked "I am sure you'd like to try, but you won't...will you? She is out there all alone...and you will soon be locked away where no one will be able to find you"

Severus felt his jawline tightening and the blood draining from his face.

Barnaby smiled "I know you are reasonable enough to understand real danger"

Severus's teeth ground and he twisted his neck around, feeling his spine cracking at the nape.

Barnaby smiled viciously "Voldemort never managed to break you no matter what unforgivable he cast upon you or whatever psychological game he played with your mind. But I will make you beg for mercy before the next day even begins, because I know were you hurt. As long as she is out there, an easy target, you will not scream no matter how many times I cut you or how deep. You shall not raise your hand towards me nor cast any spells, because death will be a blessing to her, believe me, and you will be too messed up to help her, even though I'll make sure you are able to hear her blood curling screams up to your cell"

Severus felt his eyes stinging and nodded with a tight jawline. Suddenly he knew exactly what all this was about and his eyes got lost in the swelling waves of the dark sea ahead of them. Far away at the horizon several thunders fell and one travelled across the clouds and ended up above the boat.

"She will die away from you, alone and torn from the inside out. Her eyes will be bulging out of her skull and her mouth will be open with the last plead for you to help her and you will have to live the rest of your sort life knowing that she died with your name on her lips" Barnaby said musingly.

Severus shuddered and his stomach twisted around so hard that he had to push down vomit "You sick motherfucker" he whispered and shook his head trying to stop the tears from running down his face. Any sign of weakness would be lethal.

"You told me to try harder. What do you think? Am I doing a better job now?" Barnaby said almost playfully and waited for a moment.

Severus raised his brow and twisted his lips in disgust "Did you brew the polyjuice yourself?" he asked dryly.

Barnaby nodded with a smug smile "Wouldn't have trusted any other"

Severus nodded with a sinking heart and suddenly the easiness with which he could have broken his binds melted into the sea. The freedom that was ahead of him up in the stormy sky, was only a dream. His eyes fell back at the horizon, were the lightings were brightening up the sky. Somewhere there was the island of Azkaban and he was certain that he was not going to be escorted through the main gate, nor that he was going to be given an official number. His capture was not ordered by the Ministry and unofficial prisoners in Azkaban had gruesome fates, making the regular prisoners and their horrid living conditions, seem like a dream.

Have I kissed her goodbye…? ….was the only clear thought that came into his mind.

He swallowed hard and felt his eyes watering when he remembered the kiss he gave her before she went in with her mother. She was safe, as long as he did what he was told and shoved down all the screams that this man was going to try to elicit from him...He calmed down his breath and closed his eyes in abandonment, as the boat battled its way through the rough seas and onto a petrifying horizon that was riddled by shadows of death.
Apparently his torture had not ended with the death of Voldemort. It had simply been postponed.
Hermione apparated just outside the gates of Hogwarts exactly three days after Severus had done the exact same thing. It was midday and even though everything around her was buried in deep snow, the sky was clear and the sun was shining bright. The cold was relentlessly piercing though and she felt thankful that her spell was so well cast that her summer clothes transformed back to her old winter wardrobe.

She instantly smiled at Charity that was walking thoughtfully up to the viaduct with her back turned to the gates. Hermione yelled out "Charity!"

The older witch turned around with a frown.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest protectively and walked quickly to her "Hello darling, did you just apparate?" Charity said.

Hermione nodded "I missed you guys!"

Charity smiled "How was your vacation?"

Hermione felt her heart elated at being back home. She closed her eyes and yelped "Amazing! Breathtaking, unexpected, wonderful!" she said quickly.

Her happiness rubbed off on Charity who laughed and caressed her shoulder in a friendly manner "I am happy for you"

Hermione bit her lower lip "I want to tell you everything about our Christmas, if Severus hadn't done that already"

Charity's smile melted into a sad frown and she cleared her throat "About that…" she began.

Hermione waved her off "Give me time to go find him and take a bath first. Pick up Hagrid and come to my apartments this afternoon for dinner. We can all talk about our vacation with some red wine to brighten up the mood and warm our stiff muscles. I've forgotten how cold it is here. It's so different from Stone and worlds apart from Australia…and Oh! Don't ask how I ended up in Australia…I'll tell you all about it in the afternoon!" she spoke quickly, all the while impatient to go find him at the library. She had missed him terribly and she wanted to tell him everything about what happened with her parents after he left them.

Charity winced "Hermione, wait…"

She tightened her grip on Charity's shoulder "I will wait all you want, after I go to the library first. Call me a romantic fool, but I haven't seen him in three days and I am dying to see how he is…"

Charity's teeth ground together and she grabbed strong hold of Hermione's arm. The younger witch frowned in confusion "What are you doing?"
"We need to have a talk first"

"Talk about what?"

"Severus…" Charity said darkly.

Hermione felt as if a cold hand wrapped around her heart "What do you mean…" she muttered.

"He's not in the library" Charity tried to find the best way to approach this.

"What? Where is he?" Hermione licked her lips.

"I think you'd better come with me" Charity said deciding that this needed Minerva's intervention.

"Where are we going? Where is Severus?" Hermione asked imperatively.

"Minerva shall tell you, better than me" Charity said and pulled her by the arm.

Hermione stopped and pulled free. Charity looked back at her. She raised her brow "Where is Severus?". This time her question sounded demanding.

Charity pressed her lips uneasily "He is not here Hermione"

Her brow darkened "What do you mean? Didn't he apparate here three days ago?"

"He did…even though I never got to see him"

Hermione frowned and shook her head "You are making no sense…"

Charity sighed deeply "Severus was escorted at the Ministry of Magic through a portal the same evening he apparated here…"

Hermione couldn't stop her instinctive reaction. She grabbed Charity's arm "What? Who took him away?"

Charity nodded "Aurors…" she tried to shake Hermione's hand away, but it didn't budge.

The colour drained from her face "He was arrested again?" she muttered.

"Yes"

"So he is at the Ministry?" Hermione tried to calm herself down, but it felt impossible.

"No"

"What!?!" her voice turned dark and imperative "So where is he?!" she demanded.

"No one knows, that's the problem" Charity tried to explain and Hermione saw through a misty terror that had covered her logic like a wet blanket, the older witch's eyes watering.

"How can this be…what bullshit is this? What happened? What are you HIDING from me?!" she growled and twisted her hand around Charity's forearm, bruising her.

"Argh, Hermione you are hurting me. That's all I know. Only Minerva can give you more details. We must go to her" Charity pleaded, trying to disentangle her arm from Hermione's deadly grip.

Hermione looked towards the castle and released Charity's arm. Then she was running in front of the
old witch, not following her. She run with half her mind operating properly, the other half numb with terror. The thought of him gone missing kept banging on the doors of her reality every second, and with each bang her stomach dropped and her heart writhed in agony.

She remembered him waving at her at the front of her mother's lawn. His eyes smiling contently that they had managed their original intentions of seeing her parents. He had kissed her goodbye with another one of his knee loosening sensual kisses that always ignited a fire inside her and then she had followed her mother into the house in order to see the back yard. He told her that he was returning at Hogwarts and she was safe in that knowledge. She knew she was going to find him safe there when she returned. Had she known he would have gone missing, she would have never followed her mother home. She would have never allowed him to leave without her.

She pressed her lips and the crease on her brow deepened as her face became almost livid. Her steps quickened as she climbed the four steps of the main entrance and came face to face with Sinistra.

"Hermione when did you arrive?" the astronomy Professor said, but Hermione didn't slow down.

"Charity!, she needs to talk with Minerva" Sinistra said.

"That's where we are going to" Charity replied.

I would have never let him leave without me…

Guilt overflowed her, making her chest well and her eyes sting painfully. If she hadn't dragged him in Australia, this would have never happened. If they had gone back home together from Andromeda, he would have been fine now. She shook her head and wiped away her eyes as she run faster than before. Needing to have answers about all this, needing to find him with a desperation that resembled madness. Didn't Charity say the Aurors took him away from Hogwarts and into the Ministry? How then, was he not there? An insane thought invaded her mind. Maybe they hadn't seen him? They had misplaced him somewhere?

He's not a pen in order to be misplaced in the wrong drawer. He is a human being….a six foot three, a hundred and several pounds human being whose bearing is so impressive, he sticks out of the crowd like a sore thump. How could they have misplaced him, you bloody idiot? ….she chastised herself.

She felt mad at herself for allowing him to go missing, mad at Hogwarts for allowing him to leave so easily, mad at the Ministry for not having him there, mad at Minerva for not being careful enough and at Harry for not telling her anything. The blissful content of her family's reunion was now buried under a blanket of mind numbing fear.

She came back elated to find him and tell him that their plan worked! She managed to follow her mom through the dreadful flower tour and saw her father at the living room reading a newspaper. The moment she got introduced, she pulled out her wand and cast the spell on them. Fast and clean and without lingering at all. If she hesitated even for a second then she'd run out the door and vanish again. She would return with her head bowed low at Hogwarts only to be scolded by him for her cowardliness; But not now that she could share with him the explosive emotions that overpowered her, when her father whispered a confused "Hermione".

When her arms wrapped around them both and her head got buried between their shoulders she began crying in all earnest, hard and long. They cradled her with the same loving affection she remembered from old. It felt as if not one day had passed. After settling down she sat them both and began explaining what happened the last five years. Her words seemed alien and shocking, but they listened to her closely, getting immersed into her narration.
They couldn't argue the obvious in the end of her speech. Their daughter was more mature and aged beyond her years by troubles of the heart and of the mind. They all hugged again for what seemed like a much needed eternity. Slowly they managed to settle down the shock from her words and by late evening they agreed to sleep away all this turmoil and wake up with a clean mind.

When her mother asked her about what happened during the second magical war, Hermione was hesitant to relate her hellish adventures. She said that Voldemort death was a collective effort of many brilliant wizards and witches, many of whom had died during this endeavour. When the conversation turned to Ron, Hermione said that their relationship was a mistake that thankfully ended up without any kids tagging along. When she was questioned about her studies and her career, she proudly announced her position at Hogwarts proudly. Both her parents puffed up with equal pride. Finally, when they asked about any new romantic interests, she was quick to tell them that she wanted them to meet her new companion when they returned to England with her. There something in the air changed and the dark hesitation in their eyes was only too obvious.

Hermione expected them to follow her back to England the moment she returned their memories, but apparently things were not as straightforward. Her mother said that it felt as if a veil had been lifted from her mind and now she remembered what was truly important in her life, yet she couldn't forsaken what she and her husband had created from ground zero in this country.

The fact that their most precious memories returned, didn't mean they could forget their lives now. Hermione frowned in confusion. Their previous life was waiting for them untouched back in Heathsgate. She even joked about the Stanleys and their nosy gossips. She mentioned with some regret the mess of the garden, which she didn't take care to spell properly. About the broken swing and the tattered shades, but everything would be easily mended if they returned and worked on it as a family.

Her parents exchanged worried glances that made her stomach drop and in equal sadness told her that it was of course a possibility to return, but she had to give them time to settle down after the torrent of changes she brought upon them. Leaving their current house, lives and jobs behind was something easy. They told her how much they loved her and that they didn't intend to lose her now that they've found her, but this needed sometime to be resolved properly and with a clear mind.

She agreed half heartedly and then followed them to the spare room. She stayed with them for two more days. It felt as if nothing had really changed the five years they have lived apart. They fell into their old patterns easily and Hermione had the best two days of her life after many years. When she sated her hunger for emotional stability from her loving family, the need to see Severus reemerged and in the end of the third day it became insufferable. She needed to return to Hogwarts and she announced her departure to her disappointed parents.

They bid their emotional goodbyes outside the Australian Ministry of Magic with the promise to visit her soon back in England. The word that made her heart drop was 'visit'. She had been expecting a 'move back'. Her mom gave her several food containers with cookies and also those famous cakes Hermione had described to Severus. Soon after she apparaleted at the Ministry of Magic in England only to reappear within an hour at the gates of Hogwarts. Ready to share with him her happiness at finding them again, her apprehension when they didn't return with her permanently, the cakes and a lot of love making. Only to find him….

missing…

She stopped in front of Minerva that opened the door under her insistent banging. She was panting and visibly sweating, albeit the cold air "Where the hell is he?" she whispered with menace. As if all this was Minerva's fault.
The older witch pressed her lips and offered her entrance to her office "You'd better come in dear" she said solemnly.

Hermione went in with an air of haughtiness. She stopped in of Minerva'a desk and offered Albus a lofty look before crossing her arms and gazing at Minerva coldly. She couldn't act in any other manner, or she would simply crumble to dust "Where is he?" she repeated demandingly.

Minerva came around her desk and sat down "Would you please sit?"

Hermione shook her head "No, tell me what happened"

Minerva nodded "Very well…” and she got into a detailed description of what happened from the moment Severus apparated outside the gates to the moment he got escorted out through the Ministerial Portal, or at least what seemed to be so at the time.

When the narrative was over, Hermione felt a desperate need to sit down. Her shoulders slouched and her body loosened up, as she felt all her anger taken away from her. That was the only thing that was sustaining her up till then. She caught herself at the arms of the easy chair and eased her body on it, giving some rest to her melting knees "And the Ministry…”

Minerva shook her head "Knows nothing. He never appeared there"

"Harry?" her face was a mask of death.

"Mr. Potter never ordered Severus to be arrested. Yes, he had broken his parole by leaving England, but your friend stopped the arrest process immediately. This time the Ministry was not after him… someone else was" Minerva's eyes fell on her hands.

Hermione felt the remains of her terrified heart twitching painfully "He was not allowed to leave England?" she whispered, feeling lost and stupid at not figuring this out sooner on her own.

"No" Minerva shook her head.

She felt a small moan of objection rising on her throat and she pushed it down viciously. She had no right breaking down in front of these women. She should have known that something like this was afoot when she saw his attitude slowly becoming grey after they reached Australia. He was always looking around him, checking every corner. Bloody hell, he didn't asleep during their only night there, probably waiting for them to trace him. He must have cast a displacement spell on himself and she didn't realised it at all. So self centred had she been, only caring about her own issues with her family. All his desperate anger that morning across her mother's home, seemed now so justified in the light of this new information. He risked his freedom in order to bring her closer to her parents. He would have never allowed her to back out from their joined cause that morning.

Her eyes welled and she wiped them off roughly, angrily even.

"You need a tissue?" Minerva offered.

Hermione shook her head and gazed at her steadily behind blurry eyes "You say the Ministry knows nothing about the man that came to escort him away..."

"Barnaby Potts? No, nothing"

"His name isn't even in the Auror records?" Hermione insisted.

"No"
"Older records?" she frowned.

Minerva raised her brows "I don't know, but I am sure Mr. Potter has a way of finding out. Although I think the Aurors must have checked out that parameter"

"Have they created a search party for him? What does the Minister say?" Hermione gazed at Minerva with nerve wrecking intensity.

"He has been filed under a missing person report and Mr. Potter is on the case as we speak. As for the Minister, well…" Minerva winced.

"Yes?" Hermione tilted her chin upwards. She blamed Kingsley for all of Severus's troubles at that moment. Even for their inability to find him. Three days have passed since his disappearance. Most missing persons ended up dead within the first twenty four hours. She felt her stomach twisting painfully and she closed her eyes for a moment.

"Are you ok?" Minerva frowned.

"Yes" she struggled to spit the word out and felt cold chills running down her back "What about the Minister?" she insisted.

"I think Kingsley is rather afraid of the publicity this is going to take. You see Severus's name is a ticking bomb. The public knows him very well and if news of his disappearance get out then Kingsley is going to get very closely cornered by the Press. Currently he is trying to keep everything silent. He gave orders for Mr. Potter to take over, since he is Severus official warden. They have been working overtime since then"

Hermione pressed her lips "And no news?"

Minerva shook her head "They are at a complete loss. It's as if he vanished into thin air. They have no real leads, but surely Mr. Potter is more appropriate to explain to us the moves of the Ministry as he is the lead investigator"

"I need to talk to Harry" she muttered feeling her head swimming.

"Working in espionage for so many years earned him mortal enemies on both sides, so I don't think it's going to be easy to pinpoint exactly who was the one that decided to do him in" Charity said solemnly.

"Don't speak like that" Hermione whispered. Her stomach twisted painfully and vomit came up quickly.

Minerva noticed that she was pale and wavering "Are you ok?" she asked frowning.

Hermione nodded and made to get up "I need to talk to Harry" she said and felt her knees weak. The thought that maybe Severus was already dead was threatening to loosen them up completely and send her pivoting to the floor like a rag doll.

Minerva walked around and grasped her from the waist "Here, I'll help you"

"Help me to the fireplace and give me some floo. I won't be able to walk back to the gates" she whispered without any breath.

Minerva frowned "you are in no condition to floo there on your own"
"I won't remain idle here, whilst Severus could be lying dead somewhere. Help me to the fireplace" she said trying to make her voice sound determined.

"I'll escort her" Charity nodded at Minerva and wrapped her arm around her waist.

Hermione looked at her gratefully. Minerva understood that she really had no choice. This young witch was determined to go to the Ministry and she couldn't really blame her. She reached the fireplace and took the floo.

"This is the only fireplace when one can travel through the floo network from this school. Please promise me you will be careful" she said and looked at Hermione's livid features.

"I will" she nodded and Minerva threw in a handful. The flames went green. Hermione went in and called out Ministry of Magic.

They exited at the plaza along with dozens wizards and witches that were coming and going. Hermione felt her stomach complaining and she tried to push back the need to vomit once again. She wavered on her feet and Charity caught her.

"Let's go register and ask for Mr. Potter, I don't think you will be able to stand for much longer" she said and led Hermione to the reception.

They registered their wands and the receptionist told them at which floor they could find Mr. Potter. Charity led her to the elevator and soon enough they opened the doors of the executive Auror offices. She gazed lost at a vast space of several beautifully organised offices. Harry peaked out from a half opened door. She tried to open her mouth to speak, but gagged. He immediately run up and took her in his arms "Hermione, you look like death" he said terrified.

She felt the world closing down around her "Find him, please...".

Then there was nothing, but complete darkness as she fainted.

It was his cold hand touching her brow that woke her up, but her heart wrenching sobs surprised her more than the fact that she had fainted "I've lost his snowdrop. I don't know where it is" she muttered, thinking about the only thing that was most important after him. His gift from the mountains.

"The what? Hermione open up your eyes" Harry's voice said and slapped her gently.

She did and she saw that she was lying down on a couch with several people looking worriedly at her "I've lost his snowdrop. I had it in my suitcase at Andromeda's house, but in my house it was gone" she muttered and more sobs rattled her.

Harry caressed her head "Can I assume you are talking of some kind of present from him?" he asked, careful not to cause her more grief than she was currently experiencing.

She nodded fervently "I need to find the snowdrop"

"We will find it, after we find him, ok?" Harry tried a smile.

She reached out and grabbed his lapels. She shook her head vigorously "No, you don't understand. If he is dead, this is the only thing that I have to remember him by" her lips trembled and her wet eyes were beseeching on Harry's face.

He pressed his lips and looked around "Go back to your work, everyone!" he dismissed the Aurors
that stood around her.

Everyone started filing out of his office with low murmurs.

"Gods forbid girl, hold your tongue!" Charity chastised her.

Hermione tightened her fists around Harry's lapels and she moaned as more tears run down her face "Harry?"

He shook his head "We have no leads Hermione. It's as if he vanished into thin air. His magical trace is nowhere to be found. Not in England or any other part of the civilised world. Whoever took him, knew very well what he was doing. We gave out a missing persons report at the news an hour ago, at Kingsley's fury. He didn't want this to go public, but we needed the public to know. Maybe someone has seen him, maybe someone has a clue as to what happened. We have offered a reward to anyone that has any information, now all we can do is wait. Even the portal that he went though was untraceable. They used very advanced magic on his abduction"

Hermione shuddered at the word "Barnaby Potts?"

"Never existed as an Auror"

"Has he existed as anyone else?" She frowned.

Harry pressed his lips "There are hundreds of people with that name and we have already send out Aurors to houses all over England. Still we have nothing worth mentioning"

She swallowed "Maybe there was a former criminal by that name?"

"No such record exists"

"How many years back did you look?" she insisted.

Harry raised his brow "Several. What are you doing Hermione? Are you going to do our job for us?"

"If necessary. Tell me how many years back!"

"We searched back to the 1900's. There is no use searching further back. No one that old can hold a grudge against Snape, they'd have no reason"

"Search further back, search more!" she yelled and pushed him away.

"I cannot afford my men to do useless research Hermione. Many are all over England searching for the existing Potts and the crime rate hasn't suddenly dropped just because Snape was abducted. I need men to overlook the usual everyday crimes also. I cannot use the whole Auror force just for this case. There are crimes being committed as we speak” He said solemnly.

Hermione closed her eyes "I'll search for you" she whispered.

"Of course, go bury yourself in some library"

She opened her eyes and glared at him angrily "What do you suggest I do then?"

"Let us do our job! We are not kids anymore Hermione, we can cope without your help!" Harry chastised her.

"I am not doubting you Harry, you just don't seem to understand that I cannot stand idle. I will drive
myself crazy….” she felt her bottom lip trembling.

He gazed at her momentarily and then exhaled "Rest for a while Mione, and if you feel better I will escort you down at the central library. Do all the research you want there, but I will return at headquarters. I need to orchestrate the joined efforts of many people, do you understand?"

She nodded and sat up. She leaned her elbows at her knees and cradled her head between them "Thank you" she muttered feeling unable to speak louder.

"Will you remain with her? I need to go" Harry asked Charity.

The older witch nodded "I will"

"I will send some orange juice and some sandwiches in a short while, ok?" he asked from the door.

Hermione didn't answer.

"You do your job, we are fine here" Charity took over.

Hermione shook her head as the door closed behind them.

Charity touched her shoulder "How are you darling?"

She felt more tears coming to her eyes and her heart screamed out in pain "If I cannot know that he is safe, I need to know that his snowdrop is…"

****….****

"..safe…at least her snowdrop is somewhere safe" he thought foggily and felt his breath warm and stale behind the black sack they had placed over his head. He tried to move his hands that were hanging above his head. They were painful and numb as blood circulation couldn't reach up to them anymore. His back rubbed against the rough stones of the cell he was imprisoned and he gasped, trying to stop any possible moans from being heard outside. The red slashes of his torn skin were stuck on the tattered material of his prison shirt and any movement was pulling on them painfully. No one had tended on his wounds and they had become infected due to the poor living conditions and the complete lack of hygiene. The moment his infected skin touched the stones the pain tore him apart, but he lowered his head and squeezed his eyes tight. He bit down on his lip and drowned the groan that was threatening to come up.

Alexander had warned him not to speak, not to vocalise any pain, but as the days of torture kept on and the torture itself was becoming worst, he found it harder to stop himself from expressing his pain. They had tied him up on the wall in such a position where he couldn't keep his back away from the stones for long. He had to rest back, because his legs were killing him. He had nowhere to sit in order to ease out his various pains and all this was planned on purpose to break his stamina. When he pulled away from the wall he had to stand on his shins with his hands drawn back in an abnormal position. When his shins screamed in pain and his arms numbed from loss of circulation he had to rest back and then his torn back dragged upon the rough stones.

The black sack over his head was there to make him feel like he was constantly suffocating. He couldn't breathe properly and he couldn't see around him at all. He could only hear the scattering of the mice during what seemed like the night and the screams from the other cells during the day. The cracking of the cell door as someone entered to take him on another session of torture and the rough breath of his cellmate, whom he had never seen. He was unable to relieve himself and he was forced to tend to his physical needs in the bathtubs under frozen water filled with ice cubes that was emptied on him by wardens that seemed to enjoy themselves a bit too much.
He had been beaten up almost unrecognisable, whipped to near loss of consciousness, drenched with freezing water and denied food and water, but the worst torture of them all, was the Dementors. Borovic didn't think that he was going through enough hard times, so he decided to end each beating session with Severus left tied up on the Azkaban roof, for the Dementors to feed on his darkest memories. Being the man he was, they had a lot to feed on and he felt like they were sucking out his soul for hours on end until he was left hanging from the last thread of his life. Then Borovic took him down and left his empty shell tied up against the wall, until he regained his consciousness, only to have everything repeated again the next day.

One day in and he was still standing strong for Hermione's sake. Two days in and he began forgetting his name, three days in and he had almost lost his mind to the Dementors. The only thing that kept coming back to his foggy mind was the snowdrop and it was the only thing that was sustaining him. It hadn't been in the pockets of his coat when they stripped him of all his possessions and threw him in this cell. That day at Stone when they all went for Christmas shopping, he took her snowdrop at a small magical jewellery shop. Andromeda introduced its owner as an amazing artist, who undertook sensitive alterations of small objects. He showed her snowdrop and asked for it to be placed inside a miniature bottle and turned into an elegant and unique necklace.

He knew how much she wanted to preserve his flower and with unforeseen emotion, he tried to create the best gift for her. The owner said it was going to take him at least three weeks and Severus left a down payment with the promise to return soon in order to pick it up. Then he went and bought a nice purple scarf for her, just in order to quieten her up for Christmas. His proper present was going to take a little while longer, but it was worth the wait.

Now as his back rubbing painfully on the sharp stones, he muted another groan and closed his eyes, thinking that even though the snowdrop was safe, it was not in her hands. He had to find a way to let her know where to go and find it before he was dead.

Who was he going to tell? Even if Borovic allowed him to give out a final message to his loved ones, he was certain that message would be laughed at and ultimately destroyed before reaching its final destination.

"Don't move laddie, your back is bleeding again" the rough voice of his cell mate spoke suddenly.

Severus jerked in fear unable to control his instinctive reaction. He turned his sacked head towards the voice panting.

"You need to cry out your pain. Don't smother it, because you are going to explode in the end" the man said with unbidden care inside an environment that fend rough criminals.

"I can't…" he whispered.

"Can't what?"

"I can't let them hear me" he muttered.

"I know they hold you by the balls because of your lass, but no one is here now, so let it all out …"

Severus shook his head vigorously and his back touched the wall. He inhaled sharply.

"They are driving you crazy, you are one step from loosing it completely" the man spoke thoughtfully and touched his forearm.

Severus felt the cold hand on his skin and almost jumped out of it. He groaned and tried to pull away from that man. He had never seen his face, he had only heard his voice, but he didn't want to be
touched at all. Every touch in this place was painful. Every human and inhuman contact was made to undo him. The sane part of his mind told him that his cellmate was not out to get him. He had been talking him back to sanity each time they dragged him half conscious from the roof. He had never hurt Severus and yet his body was yelling to be left alone "Don't touch me" he hissed.

The hand got removed immediately "They are not here now"

"There are guards outside!" Severus hissed.

His hands were pulling the chains away from the bolts on the wall subconsciously. If Borovic saw him doing that, he would make sure he got a harder beating and more time out with the Dementors. He declared that he wanted to see Severus scream as the last drop of his sanity slowly left him, but he hadn't managed that up till now.

"The doors are heavy, we are not heard outside"

"They can hear mumbling" he rebuked.

The shuffling notified him that his cellmate had sat down with his back against the wall close by. As if remembering his own painful back, he sat up on his shins and pulled away from the wall. His hands hang behind back and he lowered his head close to his knees in temporary relief, that would become agony soon again.

"I'll tell them I am talking to myself. They are used to that, up here on the forgotten section of this hellhole. Most prisoners speak to themselves for years on end…” his cellmate brushed him off.

Severus wanted to chuckle on that, but realised that he was going to laugh out manically instead, so he bit down on both his lips until blood drew out "I wonder why…” he muttered.

"You are not far from it yourself. The only difference is that they fucked you up hard enough within the first three days. They must really have a grudge on you" the man said.

Severus frowned thinking that he didn't know the man's name, not that it mattered in here "He wants me dead…” he whispered.

"I don't know who wants you dead, but he is doing it... you can barely stand" the man spoke matter of factly. Coldly even.

"What are you in for?" Severus asked abruptly. Wanting to understand how this man could act so evenly in such deviant circumstances.

"Rape" the even answer.

He pressed his lips, but found himself unable to answer anything to that.

His cellmate continued, to Severus's undoing "Repeated"

He remained silent for a few moments "Enough" he whispered feeling sick to the bone.

Heavy silence lingered after that confession.

Severus felt his lips curling down tiredly and his eyes began closing. He needed to rest for a moment, but he couldn't do it tied up like this. That is when his cellmate spoke again, and those words froze the blood in his veins "I hear footsteps coming this way. Settle down laddie, they are coming for you again I think"
Severus felt his breath catching and he turned to where he thought the man was sitting "Can you get a message outside?"

The hesitation was obvious "What kind of message?"

"They will never allow me to give my final farewell and I will soon be dead. Please please, it's to Professor Hermione Granger…” he began.

"Don't use trigger names, cause the message will never leave Azkaban. If I am not mistaken that's the name of your lass isn't it? Send it to someone close to her…someone who can pass down the message" his cellmate warned.

Severus nodded hurriedly "Fine, hurry up!"

The shuffling was heard again coming closer "Wait a minute. I need to find a coal….shit!…that's not big enough"

The footsteps were approaching fast "Come on…come on" Severus hissed.

"Found one, ok give it to me!"

"To Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Scotland, Professor Charity Burbage. Tell her I am sorry I couldn't give it to her in person. Her snowdrop is at Janik’s Antique shop at Stafford Road ST15, in Stone. Tell her, I am sorry I endangered her and her family and that she was right about everything…Tell her word for word…” he hesitated and felt his throat convulsing.

"Hurry up!" his cellmate said as the footsteps stopped exactly outside their door.

"I am sorry for not confessing to you sooner how much I love you" he finished and closed his eyes. He almost choked on his own words.

"Ok, done" his cellmate said.

The locks of the door rattled "Where the hell did you write it on?"

"Behind my cot with a coal on the wall…I will send it off with my own messages to my sister. I promise"

"Thank you…” was the only thing he managed before the door broke open.

Severus sacked head looked up to the oncoming footsteps that stopped in front of him. After a brief pause Borovic spoke "…Haven't ever been in your hellhole before, Death Eater. I thought it was time for me to see it up close and personal. You have a lovely arrangement here"

Severus exhaled through his nose and remained silent. Borovic was always sending impersonal guards up to get him, probably not wanting to show his face to any of the other inmates. So what happened now to make him come up and reveal himself?

Borovic laughed "You are not drowning on your own vomit today, so I presume you are up for another round?"

He wanted to shake his head vigorously and cry out "Not anymore please!", but he bit sown both his lips and shut himself up.

Borovic paused for a moment "….I must admit that you are constantly surprising me with your stamina. I have a lot to work on with you. Now, before we begin today I wanted to tell you that your
little princess has returned at Hogwarts"

Severus felt his breath hitching and his eyes moved anxiously under the sack. He didn't reply.

A hand drew the sack away abruptly and he felt the light paining his eyes. He turned his head towards his shoulder and squeezed them shut. His lungs relished on the fresh air and he took several deep breaths instinctively "I've done what you said. I have remained silent…so stay away from her" he managed to whisper with a broken voice.

Borovic approached and grabbed his hair roughly. He pulled his head around and brought his face close to his "You are in no position to tell me what to do!" he growled and Severus clenched his teeth.

"Leave the laddie alone, what has he ever done to you? You are slowly killing him" his cellmate said.

Severus tried to look at him, but Borovic's tight grip on his hair didn't allow him to move "Shut up old man, unless you wanna join him up on the roof tonight!"

Silence came from the corner of the room as a reply to that threat.

"As for what he has done to me…" a menacing chuckle rumbled and Borovic released his hair. Severus's head jerked and his wounded back fell with force on the stones. He released a low key groan and winced. Borovic walked slowly around the cell and kicked the sack out of his way "He killed my wife…" he said with a quiet resolution that made Severus glare at him angrily.

"I never touched your wife" he hissed.

Borovic turned around and looked at him coldly for several seconds. Then as if deciding he approached in two steps and the third connected powerfully to his side, breaking a couple of bones in the process and making his eyes water. He groaned and doubled down as far as his tied up hands allowed him "You killed my wife and you also destroyed my career. Up till the Ministry incident I was the most powerful Auror in the force. Well on my way to getting rid of that useless Potter boy. So weak and stupid he is. He only won Voldemort because he had the support of the most powerful wizards of the world. Ha! One of them being you! Funny isn't it? He became Chief Auror just because of his reputation, but I had plans for him. One way or the other I was going to get him kicked down. Then you had to come along, with your stupid excursions in the woods with your lover. You had to make me arrest you and then you had to make me use an unforgivable on you. You HAD to make me get detained in a mental institution under heavy wards. You destroyed my career and my life and now I am going to destroy you. I never wanted to be your warden, but Kingsley insisted and I didn't want to rock the boat of my greatest supporter. Without him I wouldn't have remained in the force for so long. Unfortunately now I have no more future at the Ministry… after I kill you I have to run away and hide to avoid being thrown in here as a prisoner myself. You destroyed my future and I will destroy yours."

"You are butthead crazy…" Severus shook his head.

"Shut up, or I will make sure your Princess joins a cell close to you!"

He wanted to answer, but he coughed hard instead.

"It won't be difficult for me to drag her quietly out of the Ministry and her friend Potter with some excuse and with the proper Polyjuice potion. I managed to trick Minerva and even you who is a master of the trade. Granger will be nothing in comparison. Especially at her current emotional state"
Severus looked up panting and his eyes spat fire.

Borovic smiled viciously "Oh...yes. Her emotions are all over the place with you gone. Although I must admit that she is as determined and strong willed as you. Between her meltdowns she passes her time in Potter's office and in the library. I suppose it won't be long for her until she find's out who Barnaby Pott was in real life. After that it won't be hard for her to find out where you are. That's why my time is limited with you unfortunately. No matter my need to torture you till the end of time, I have to finish you off soon. You understand..."

"By all means" Severus spat sarcastically and got ready to be kicked again.

Instead Borovic watched him for a couple of silent moments and then sighed "I suppose you must think that you are the victim in all this. Wrongfully detained and slowly killed...but that's not how things are..."

Severus glared at him steadily feeling his side screaming in pain every time he inhaled.

"How can I expect a murderer to understand what it's like to lose the woman you love to the worst criminals of their time?" Borovic mused.

Severus exhaled and tightened his teeth "I lost the woman I loved to Voldemort!" he spat, needing in some manner to redeem himself, not that this would change his fate.

Borovic gazed at him coldly for a few moments "It's not the same. You deserved to lose her. You are a killer in your own right. But not me...I am not"

"These walls have heard differently you sick motherfucker...and I for one believe them" Severus managed to sound sarcastic enough to bring Borovic up to his face again.

"Prove it!" Borovic spat and kneeled in front of him abruptly.

Severus pulled back in fear.

"You can't prove shit, but even if you could, what's the cost of those deaths perchance? Did I kill innocents? I killed murderers, rapists and abusers. I killed the scum of this earth!" he winced in hatred towards Severus.

"You killed nevertheless and you are going to be judged like all of us in the end. I wonder what would happen to you, if you got exposed to the Dementors...would they feed well?" Severus lowered his voice and pierced him with angry eyes.

Borovic smiled sickly "I am sure you'd like to find out..."

Severus squinted his eyes with hatred "Oh, yes I would..."

Borovic's eyes grew wide with a crazy gleam "My wife was taken away by your friends and I stood there in front of them begging for her life. I begged them to let her go, but they didn't. Then I raised my wand, but I was not fast enough. They killed the love of my life" his face set angrily again "Until I kill every single Death Eater that's still alive by mistake, I won't rest"

"I'm sure you'd like to try" Severus hissed revealing his teeth.

Borovic observed him quietly for a few moments and then laughed "Now I can see why you were third in command. Voldemort was brilliant in his darkness and Lieutenant Bellatrix was not so far behind in skills. Yet, you, I think you were the best of them all...You convinced everyone of your
innocence. You played double agent so masterfully that you managed to fool, not one great wizard, but two. Both Voldemort and Albus thought you were working for them, but we both know the truth. You were working for yourself and in the end you got out of this mess relatively unharmed. How can I ever ask such a calculative bastard to know the excruciating pain I feel?"

Severus gazed at him steadily.

"You can never understand, true unconditional love! You can never understand what it's like to loose the only thing that kept you grounded to this fucking world!" Borovic hollered onto his face in a sudden angry explosion.

"Yes I can!" Severus yelled back, surprised at the force with which his voice rebounded off the walls of his cell. He pulled his arms from the chains forcibly and they rattled.

Borovic checked on his face for a few seconds "Careful there…you don't want to loose Granger…do you?"

Severus stopped and breathed heavily. He revealed his teeth and his eyes burned through Borovic with unbelievable anger. He wanted to release himself and fall on him hands and feet. His blood was boiling with the need to kill again, no matter that he didn't want to admit it. Making Borovic's accusation of being a murderer even more painful.

"You, who declare so passionately to know, how the death of your only love can bend your reason out of shape. Did you lose your mind when you lost Lily Potter?" Borovic spat at him.

Severus inhaled sharply and his sides screamed in pain. His eyes tried to penetrate the coldness of his opponent, but found no response.

"All I know is that after her death you worked silently and meticulously for both sides. You knew exactly what you were doing. You were not a man lost in grief or beyond reason…You were a man that knew exactly what he was doing”

Severus shook his head slightly, but didn't speak. He felt Borovic's sickening breath on his face.

"Don't try to convince me that you felt like I did when you lost the Potter woman. Now, as for Granger…" he traced off.

Severus's hands grabbed the chains and they rattled again.

Borovic's eyes fell on them and he smiled knowingly "We shall have to see if her death drives you insane or if the Dementors are going to manage that task first"

"You promised not to hurt her as long as I don't resist you" he hissed and his foot lost its grasp on the floor. He fell back to the wall with force and groaned out loud this time.

Borovic bitch slapped him hard enough to make his head to turn sharply to his shoulder. He felt blood running down his nose and spat to the floor. He panted painfully and turned his head towards his assailant once again "I won't hurt her…as long as you put a bridle on your explosive magic and don't resist me or the Dementors."

"After I am dead?" Severus whispered feeling his back shuddering.

Borovic smiled "I will feel avenged enough, not to bother her"

"How can I be certain?" he asked feeling his voice wavering.
"You can't…" Borovic trailed off…he smiled wickedly "…you'll just have to trust me"

Severus shook his head "Somebody is going to find you out in the end. How the hell did you manage to escape from St. Mungo, you psychotic monster?"

Borovic stood up and stretched "Easily. With a few good connections at the Ministry, Polyjuice and a willing warden who took my place in the cell. I wonder if they have discovered me missing already although I rather doubt it. St. Mungo tends to forget the people locked into it's psychiatry ward. They check on me twice a week. The warden is bound mute and blind and even when the Polyjuice wears out they will need a couple of more days till they open the door to see me gone. But in the end you are right. They will figure me out. Either St. Mungo and that idiotic Potter boy, or that brilliant witch you've been fucking. I will have managed my revenge till then though….you can be sure of that"

"What are you gaining from all this? I was not the one who killed your wife…" Severus asked.

"Orgasmic satisfaction at seeing you die slowly….I don't care if you've never met her. Your friends killed her, now you die for what they did. I am avenging my wife and any other woman you have raped and tortured before the Ministry decided to employ you against Voldemort….your death is well earned by the Gods themselves. I am just their instrument of justice" Borovic said musingly.

"You are crazy" Severus shook his head in complete abandonment.

Borovic smiled and stood up. He walked quietly towards the door and said something to the guard outside. Then he turned towards Severus "Get ready princess….." After a few moments were he gazed at Severus coldly, he moved out of sight.

His cellmate scattered quickly next to him. Severus turned and saw an old skeleton like man, with long white hair and beard. Could have resembled Albus if he wasn't so bony and his eyes weren't so hauntingly wild. He spoke at Severus's face and he tried not to gag from the nauseating smell of urine that was arising from his body "That's Borovic!" he spat.

Severus frowned "How do you know him? He never said his name"

His cellmate nodded hurriedly and his crazy eyes searched the door for any sign that Borovic was coming back "I know his voice! I will never be able to forget it, because I have never met such a psychotic person ever before. I was next to the cell of the two men he killed four years ago. I heard everything he said to them before he managed to undo them. His wife was never killed by Death Eaters. He was the one that killed her….."

"What?" Severus frowned deeply.

"He raised his wand to kill the Death Eater that was holding her and he misfired on her the killing curse. After that he lost his mind. He was unable to cope with what happened. No one knows apart from some inmates in Azkaban who happened to overhear his crazy monologues just before he began torturing those men. He has a lot of connections to the Ministry and to the corrupted administration of this prison. He is going to kill you, like he killed them!" his cellmate said.

Severus nodded and felt his stomach dropping "I know…please try to send the message out"

"They don't allow us frequent communication, but I will send it along with mine when they allow me, I promise" his cellmate assured him.

Severus nodded "That's all I need" he whispered and then pushed the man away with his shoulder, a second before Borovic reappeared with two men. They unchained him, put the sack back on his head and led him outside. The door of the cell closed heavily behind them and left the old man
cowering at the corner and biting on his finger nails "I'll send the message for you laddie" he was whispering under his breath again and again. Straining his ears to listen to the retreating footsteps. When silence fell on his wing again, he deflated in relief, thanking all the Gods of the heavens, that he was not in the place of this tall dark eyed wizard that was targeted by one of the most dangerous people of the magical world. Wondering until very late at night, if they were going to bring him back, or if this night would be his final one up there in the roof with the Dementors.
"Auntie Mione, why are you crying? Do you miss your parents too?" Teddy's face said from within the crystal ball on Harry's office.

She shook her head and cleaned her eyes quickly, looking up at Harry.

He shook his head in disappointment and walked away.

"No, darling. I am just tired that's why my eyes are so red"

"Why cannot I talk to Presser Snape?"

Her heart stopped "Because I am at your Godfather's office at the moment and Severus is not here". She felt more tears welling dangerously.

"Can I talk to him when you get back at school? I want to tell him that I love my train station so much!" Teddy smiled widely and clapped his hands.

Hermione felt her lips curling up sadly "I will sure tell him darling, the moment I see him". She wiped out quickly a tear that fell and felt her throat choking.

"He sure managed to buy him a much bigger assembly than me or John would have ever tried to purchase" Andromeda chimed in and her face appeared in the crystal ball.

Hermione forced herself to smile "I know"

"It's the best Christmas present EVER!" Teddy cried and pushed his granny out of the way.

"I know darling. So what are you going to do on New Year's Eve?" she tried to keep her voice steady.

"Quiet, family time…nothing special" Andromeda said, but didn't try to reappear at the ball.

"I am going to count from ten backwards and then BOOM! New Year is here! I will become a year older!" Teddy yelled and clapped happily. She saw that one of his front teeth was missing.

"Did you lose a tooth baby?" she asked and sniffled.

"Yeah! This morning! I almost swallowed it!" he said and grinned widely in order for her to see his teeth.

"You become a year older on your birthday. In New Year's Eve we welcome the new Year Teddy!" Andromeda chastised.

"Yeah, the Year will become older" Teddy nodded eagerly. Then he turned towards Hermione "Whenever I blow out, air sounds funny" he declared.

"Did you put the tooth under your pillow so the tooth fairy can take it and give it to a new baby?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah! I hope she gives it to a baby boy not a girl!" Teddy frowned.

"Oh, the gender battle began so soon?" Hermione smiled tiredly.
"And then some... now come on Teddy we have to let Auntie Mione rest. You can talk to her again tomorrow" Andromeda said and pulled him away from the crystal ball.

"I love you Auntie Mione" he said and reappeared "And tell Presser Snape that I love him too and I also love my Godfather Harry!" he added and send her a toothless grin.

Hermione felt her breath catching and tears overflowed her eyes. She looked away "I will honey" she muttered and cleaned her face quickly.

"Now go take a bath and I'll come serve you breakfast" Andromeda said and then turned to her "Now that he is gone tell me .... We've seen the news dearest" she suddenly sobered up.

"What do you want me to tell you Andromeda. I know nothing more than what the news are saying, in short...nothing" she said rubbing her forehead.

"Your eyes are red and you look like you haven't slept for days" the older witch sounded worried.

"I haven't slept well, no. I think I am loosing my mind..."

"So you want me to come down there to help? John wants to come also."

She forced herself to look at the crystal ball steadily "Thank you Andromeda, but you can't do anything. Do you think we are going to make any real difference when the Aurors who are supposed to be the experts, are unable to find a single clue?"

Andromeda seemed hesitant for a few moments before saying "Not help find Severus. I meant come down to help you darling"

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose "No thank you, really. There is nothing you can do. I have Charity on my back almost twenty four seven and I practically live inside Harry's office"

Andromeda smiled "I know you may find it hard to believe right now my dear, but he is going to be fine. Severus is a very tough man. It won't be easy to undo him. They chose the wrong target"

Hermione felt her heart catching painfully "You are not making me feel any better" she shook her head.

Andromeda nodded quietly "I have lost all my family apart from Teddy in violent circumstances, never forget that. I know the pain and anguish you are going through. Are you sure you don't want me to come over to help you?"

Hermione paled "I am sorry for sounding so bitchy"

Andromeda smiled sadly and shook her head "You've lost someone you care deeply from forces that are beyond your control. That can make you feel so helpless"

She felt her eyes watering and nodded "I know" a whisper came out.

"I know too, that's why I am offering our help" Andromeda said calmly.

"No, remain in Stone with Teddy. I don't anyone else endangered or exposed until we find out what hunt down Severus. I appreciate your effort Andromeda, I mean it, but please remain in Stone" she said as steadily as she could manage.

Andromeda hesitated for a moment and then nodded solemnly "Where is Harry, I want to speak to him"
Hermione looked up silently. He was listening to them, because he immediately put his papers down and came around her. He leaned above her shoulder and looked into the crystal ball "Hi Andromeda" he said quietly. His voice was heavy with unseen worries of the mind.

"Dare I ask about Severus?" she tried.

He shook his head dejected "When we have any news you'll be amongst the first to know, ok?"

She pressed her lips and nodded sadly "I won't wish you a happy New Year"

"Don't" he shook his head.

Hermione closed her eyes and leaned her forehead on her palm.

Andromeda sighed heavily "Goodnight and please be careful"

"We will" Harry answered for her "Tell Teddy I love him"

She pointed a finger at him "When this is all over I will expect you and Ginny here to tell him yourself. As for you Hermione dear…”

She opened her eyes unwillingly and looked at Andromeda who said "When he returns…”

"Please…no" Hermione said and felt her eyes filling with tears.

Andromeda frowned "When he returns I say, you come down for a couple of days. Teddy is going to be thrilled"

"You might want to prepare the boy, that he may never come back" she muttered and felt her lips trembling. Tears stained her cheeks and she didn't make any effort to wipe them clean.

"I will not do such a thing. Teddy has lost a lot of people he loves….." she shook her head angrily.

Hermione averted her eyes from the crystal ball "Tell him what you wish" she said in abandonment. She couldn't handle anyone else's burden. Hers were enough already.

Andromeda nodded "Talk to you later, Goodnight and keep your head up"

"Goodnight" she muttered and covered her face.

"That must have taken up all your strength" Harry said thoughtfully.

She nodded not knowing what else to say that would be meaningful. Charity was looking at her thoughtfully from across the table "You have to eat something you know. It's been four days and you've only eaten a few sandwiches. You will end up fainting in the end. You are as pale as death"

"I don't need a mother! I have one back in Australia!" she barked angrily behind her hand.

"Then maybe we should bring her here. She might be able to help you were I am failing!" Charity retorted heavily.

Hermione withdrew her hand and with the same motion wiped her face clean "I don't need anyone to patronise me!"

"You do need someone to help you though. You just pushed Andromeda away. She is one of the few people that knows what you are going through" Charity rejoined.
"She is right Mione. You are going to end up in a hospital soon enough if you don't eat something" Harry crossed his arms. He looked at her worriedly.

"I don't need any food. What I want is to go to the library, thank you very much!" she snapped and stood up.

"You need to rest and you also need to let me do my job!" Harry said heavily.

"What? My presence here stops you from performing top notch in your duties?" she wanted to sound snappish.

"As long as you don't try to stick your long nose in my investigation your presence here is solemnly appreciated" Harry looked at her sadly.

She felt her shoulders slouching and she exhaled "Am I sticking my long nose in your investigation Harry?"

He smiled timidly "Sometimes"

She huffed and rubbed her face "I am sorry, I can't help it. I need to see any new leads you have, first hand"

He nodded "And as you already know, we have no new leads. So please take a break before you drive yourself crazy, ok?"

She hesitated "How?"

"Don't go at the library today. Take Charity and go walk around the city. Try to settle down your thoughts" Harry suggested calmly.

Charity nodded "Some fresh air would do you good"

Hermione shook her head "No, no can do. I cannot go around for strolls when he is gone…when he could be dead…." she felt her breath hitching and she caught the back of her chair steadying her wavering legs.

"I think you need to sit down. Your lack of sleep and proper nutrition have seriously weakened you" Charity stood up and came around to her. She had been taking care of Hermione since they came at the Ministry and hadn't left her side once. She was acting like a mother to her and even though Hermione hated that, she also appreciated the effort.

"Harry, you said there are some new witnesses that came forth today?" she looked up at him. Her haunted eyes worried him deeply.

He nodded in dejection and went back to his office. He picked up his papers "Yes, three witnesses. I have an interview with them later this evening"

"Where are they from?" she asked.

"One is from central London, the other one is from Lincolnshire and the last one is from St. Andrews Bay in Scotland" he flicked his shoulders.

"Do you have any hope?" she asked.

"More than I had with all the others that appeared these past four days?" He looked up solemnly.
She swallowed hard already knowing the answer.

He pursed his lips "Not really Mione, but we cannot lose hope. We won't stop until we find him" he assured her gently.

She closed her eyes "That's all I needed to know. I have to go"

Charity helped her up "Were to again darling?"

"To the library of course. I have stopped my research at the eighteenth century articles" she said feeling tired and dejected.

She knew her research was useless. No article this old would offer any clues as to who Barnaby Potts was or is. A mildly paranoid thread of her mind insisted that she should not stop searching until they found him, or she would fall apart. Her mind would scatter to the four winds and her body would disappear into thin air. She felt spread thin and weak and she wanted to focus into something that seemed productive towards their main cause. When she was not researching in the library the hundreds of articles for a possible reference of the name Potts linked to some crime, she was trying to catch some nightmarish sleep. Most of these ended up with her waking up an hour later drenched in sweat and screaming his name to the top of her lungs. When she was not sleeping either she was sitting staring lost at the wall, her mind replaying all the beautiful moments they had together and becoming silently psychotic about his lost snowdrop. If nothing else had managed to make her realise her true feelings about this man, then his abduction had done the trick. She felt like they had denied her the ability to live and she wondered if that is what true love felt like. And if that was it, then why did the Gods deem her worthy of experiencing it, only to have it taken away from her so brutally. What had she done to be worth such a punishment?

"What have I done to deserve this?" she whispered and rubbed her forehead feeling her reality tearing at the edges.

"What did you say?" Charity asked.

"I need to go to the library" she repeated clearly this time.

"Fine, can we grab two sandwiches from the bistro across the street before we go?" the older witch asked.

Hermione winced. She knew that Charity wanted to feed her and she appreciated the effort, even though her stomach didn't want any food "Fine" she said dryly.

"Try to bring her back before sunset. She needs to sleep, she looks like a ghost" Harry said and approached them.

"I will" Charity nodded.

"I am still here you know…why speak like I am away?" she bit angrily.

"You are away Mione. Your mind is elsewhere" Harry frowned.

"I cannot help it, you bloody idiot! How would you feel if someone abducted Ginny. How would you feel if she was lying dead somewhere?" she said and began crying again.

Harry paled and remained silent.

Hermione nodded "Shut up already" she spat and turned around. She made to grab her coat, but the
sharp opening of the door stopped her.

In came Kingsley bringing with him an air of urgency. He stopped when he saw the two women "Good evening ladies" he said curtly. Then he turned to the Chief Auror "A word with you Harry in private"

"Of course Sir" Harry hurried to obey.

Hermione stiffened "If those private words have to do with Severus, then I am not going anywhere" she said coldly and threw her coat on the chair again.

Harry's eyes tried to detain her, but she turned her cold stare to the Minister and dared him to speak.

"I don't see how any of the Ministry's business can also be yours" Kingsley hurled back at her.

She straightened and pushed Charity gently away "If the Ministry's business has to do with my husband to be, then it is primarily my business. If you don't want me to report your activities at the Wizengamot, something that will end up with an internal investigation, then you shall speak with Harry in my presence. Do you understand?"

"What activities are you referring on?" Kingsley raised his brow.

"Alexander Borovic's psychotic evaluation from St. Mungo and the fact that you've kept him in the magical police force against the suggestions of several psychiatrists for personal reasons. The fact that he unleashed an unforgivable in the Ministry and that he almost killed an innocent man….hmmm….I might even recall the old accusations of him killing two ore prisoners in Azkaban four years ago… this man has a long list I can use upon you" her voice was cold and calculative, meant to threaten and it did it's job perfectly.

Kingsley pressed his lips and tilted his head "You should try running for Minister. It suits you"

She pursed her lips and raised her brow "I might do that one day, you never know"

Kingsley gazed at her silently for a long time.

Harry decided to intervene "She is too hot headed Minister. If this has to do with Severus you can talk in front of her. She is a safe witness. I can answer for her"

"What about the other lady?" the Minister asked coldly.

Charity got suddenly animated "I will go grab some sandwiches from the bistro. I'll wait for you outside Hermione. Nice to have met you Minister. Harry" she acknowledged.

When the door closed behind them Kingsley turned towards Harry "What you did with the Press has backfired on us"

"I know…" Harry said dejected and sat down at his chair. He looked exhausted

Kingsley crossed his arms "This case has gone out of bounds in every single direction. All kinds of people come knocking at our doors and declare to know something about this abduction. TV shows are searching live, using dozens of telephone operators each, in order to trace the Professor somewhere in England. The newspapers are running wild and the Radio is fuelling this circus even further by holding twenty four hour marathons about the case. I told you I didn't want this to go public because we were going to lose every single thread of seriousness and you went and did it anyway. Now tell me how are you going to find out where to turn, when there are a thousand fingers
all pointing to different directions? It is a fucking playground out there!" the Minister finished and pointed out the window.

"We didn't have any leads before Minister" Harry tried to sound composed.

"How are you going to use the hundred leads you got now? They are all fake!" Kingsley snapped.

"Maybe one of them will not be" Harry reasoned.

"And you possess such an extraordinary ability to discern the truth in this mess that you are going to figure it out immediately, I presume?"

"I was placed in this position because I possess certain skills. I think I can discern the truth between a hundred lies. Or at least I can sense when something is worth checking out in more detail" Harry defended himself.

Kingsley shook his head "I should have stripped you off your badge this very moment Potter. What you did was against my orders and look where it got us. Trying to play cops in a madhouse that's gone wild"

"What was the alternative Minister? We had NO leads!" Harry said and stood up. He was fuming.

Kingsley sighed deeply, but she didn't allow him to talk again.

"Why does it sound like you don't want him to be found?" Hermione's low voice sounded haunting from the corner of the room.

"I thought you were only supposed to hear our conversation, not interpose" Kingsley dismissed her.

"I will interpose and blow your conversation to kingdom come if I feel that you have done something wrong. And it sure feels like it…it has felt like it since I met that psychopath Borovic" she said coldly and approached. Her footsteps were calculative and self assured. An air of dark haughtiness was around her.

Kingsley frowned at her "You sound ridiculous" he dismissed her.

"Maybe it will be convenient if Severus ends up dead in a ditch somewhere, right?" she continued with that eerie tone of voice.

Harry felt his hair standing on end.

"What are you talking about young lady?" Kingsley faced her fully.

"He's caused you a lot of trouble since the beginning, hasn't he? It must have felt very inconvenient for the Order of the Phoenix to employ Voldemort's third in command and also believe on his loyalties readily. His presence amongst our side must have caused you a lot of grief. Was he difficult to control I wonder…." she let the thought linger in the air.

Kingsley raised his brow "I was never able to control him"

She nodded "Was anybody else?"

"Only Albus seemed to have a leverage on him" the Minister admitted coldly.

"When he came back from the dead you must have felt rather annoyed, right?" She asked.
Kingsley didn't answer.

"A powerful wizard with a very heavy and dark past, that was always out of your control…. it would have been much more convenient for him to have remained dead, correct?"

Silence.

"I wonder if you were the one that fed that rumour about him being an Obscurial so you could find a leverage on him and make the Ministry able to control him through Borovic…” she frowned slightly.

Kingsley raised his brow.

"You did…” she deducted and felt her back shuddering "you son of a bitch. You almost destroyed an innocent man because he didn't suit your perfect universe…”

Harry's mouth was hanging slightly ajar. He was looking from Hermione to Kingsley and back, unable to speak.

"You knew he wasn't an Obscurial since the beginning didn't you?"

He didn't speak.

"You knew he wasn't dangerous to the world and yet you fed the rumour and made it grow. You imprisoned him in the only place he didn't want to be, in order to break his moral and you placed the most dangerous Auror as his warden. Were you so fearful of him that you had to subdue him with the worst way possible?" she winced and took a step towards him.

"Professor Snape had a very deviant past, he was a Death Eater…and a rather dangerous one at that” Kingsley said.

She shook her head forcefully "He tried to commit suicide so many times that it's difficult to count. All he wanted was his freedom and he was willing to pursue it by taking his own life and you mean to tell me that you feared a broken man?"

Silence again and a cold stare that rattled her nerves.

"You needed to subdue a man that was even unable to speak, with the most psychotic magical officer your police department had to offer?" she continued.

Harry took a step forth and frowned.

"Or maybe that was exactly what you were trying to achieve …"

"What?" Harry asked lost.

"You wanted him to succeed in his suicide attempts, or maybe flee and give Borovic a reason to kill him. That's what you wanted all along wasn't it? Him out of the way. Him safely dead along with all the other Death Eaters. Your society clean of all the rubbish from the old world, right?" she said in a haunting voice.

"Your accusations are ridiculous, but it's understandable since you are grieving" Kingsley said solemnly.

She frowned "I am not grieving, he is not dead…yet, but I know you are hoping he is. Then there will be one problem less in your hands. One Death Eater less to worry about, no matter that he was instrumental in helping you win the war. Maybe that's the reason you didn't want the case to go
public. You didn't want it solved"

Kingsley shook his head "You are becoming totally paranoid"

"Maybe I am. Maybe all the pain I feel tearing my heart apart is driving me crazy, but be warned Minister. If we manage to find him, lay your claws off of him, because I am going to go straight to the Wizengamot with valid proof of your wrong handling on his case and whilst I am at it, I am going to offer my suppositions about your ulterior motives. I am sure you have supporters in this higher judicial system, but maybe someone will hear me out” she said heavily, becoming more and more convinced that her theories were true as she was speaking them out loud.

"Hermione…” Harry looked totally bewildered.

She raised her finger warningly at Kingsley and ignored Harry completely "You will let your superior Police Force do their job and you shall not trip them up, because I am going to go forth and reveal what Minerva has kept hidden about you and Borovic, do you understand?” she felt her hands trembling slightly.

"Threatening a higher officer of the Ministry is a crime punishable by…” Kingsley tried, but she stopped him again.

"…the Press is going to have you for dinner. You always look so well controlled and logical that no one will be expecting that plot twist from you and I am not as prudent as Minerva to keep what I know under the rag. I am going to expose you and I am going to gain a lot of pleasure doing it. When I find Severus, you leave him and me alone. You will release him since he was never a real threat to anyone and you will let us live our lives peacefully, you understand?” she warned with a heaviness that was beyond her usual composure.

"If he is found alive I am sure the Wizengamot will allow you a hearing for his permanent release, taking into consideration all the new evidence that have come to our attention" Kingsley said coldly.

"Which you are going to support officially, correct?” her eyes were burning him.

"If he is found alive, I will assist you" he said coldly "…One cannot remain unemotional in front of such love"

She huffed "I don't need you to patronise my feelings Minster. I want you to keep away from us or I am going to bring you down so hard, you will find it impossible to get back up again. You have no idea what I am capable of doing to protect the people I love!” she growled at his face.

He raised his brow and gave a sort inclination of the head.

She looked at Harry wearily "I need to leave"

"I will see you out" he said and then looked at Kingsley "A moment if you please Minster".

"Of course Mr. Potter. Miss Granger" was his only recognition to her as he turned around and offered her his back.

She didn't mind at all. When Harry closed the door behind him he looked at her deeply in the eyes "Your husband to be?” he asked.

She exhaled "I needed to say something more official than just my boyfriend"

"To protect the people you love?” he asked solemnly.
She felt her eyes filling with tears and she didn't try to hide it. She nodded gently "I love him".

"That's quite obvious" he said with a sad smile.

"Are you shocked?" she looked at him steadily.

He shook his head "No, but I am partly shocked that you threatened the Minister of Magic"

"I couldn't stay silent in front of such hypocrisy" she said coldly.

"With valid accusations?" he tried.

"I don't know Harry, maybe I am just shooting in the dark, but I didn't see him declaring his innocence fervently" she crossed her arms.

He hesitated briefly before nodding "You are right at that. I really don't know Mione, but if what you accused him off is true, then any such revelation is going to take away his job"

She raised her brow and tilted her head "If these accusations turn out to be true, then maybe he should lose his job"

"Then maybe you should run for his place. He was right on that one, you have what it takes" Harry said only half seriously.

She closed her eyes "I don't care about anything more than finding Severus, Harry. And I will do everything I can to protect him from the corrupt wheels of justice that have been crushing him ruthlessly all these years" she said steadily.

"I know how determined you can become when you put your mind to it, Mione. On that count alone I consider Severus, a very lucky man" Harry said gently.

She smiled and embraced him "Thank you Harry" she whispered.

He pressed her "I am telling you the truth"

"I know and I appreciate it deeply" she said feeling very moved.

After a few quiet moments he pushed her back calmly "Go find Charity, we will talk in more detail later. Know that you have my full support in everything that you decide to do"

She nodded and pushed him back "See you later" she said and Harry entered with a last worried look towards her.

Soon enough she was walking outside. A soft drizzle fell on her face, invigorating her. She saw Charity waving from the corner of the building across her. She crossed the street zigzagging dangerously between the passing cars. When the last car honked and the driver called "Do you have a death wish, crazy lady?!"

She yelled back a mad "Fuck you!" that made half the street look at her dismissively.

Charity raised her brow when Hermione approached "Guy was right, he missed you by a hair's inch"

Hermione cleaned the sticky hair from her cheeks and panted "I don't care if he was right or not, he's still an asshole"

Charity smiled "Got you a sandwich" she offered one of the brown rolls "Turkey with tomatoes and
lettuce in whole wheat bread. All healthy and proper"

Hermione looked at it for a moment before shaking her head. She crossed her arms and moved nervously as her leg bounced under her. Her hands fidgeted on the material of her coat "I am not hungry. Listen Charity I need to walk alone for a while. Do you mind?"

Charity frowned.

"I am not going to kill myself, nor am I going to faint in some dark corner. I just need some time alone, that's all. I will walk down to the library and you can find me there anytime later, ok?" she tried to sound reassuring. She really needed to be left alone for a while. The people around were pushing her to insanity with their solicitude.

"I don't know, Harry said I should be with you" Charity said.

"Don't tell him" she suggested.

Charity frowned "No way am I lying about this. We have one person missing, we don't need a second one"

Hermione forced herself to smile "I won't go missing. It's just a straight line from this place to the library. Just give me some time, please"

Charity scrutinised her for a few moments and then exhaled in defeat "Fine, I will come by in two hours to see how you are doing, but you will take your sandwich!" she said and offered the brown rolled paper.

Hermione sighed and took it "Fine"

Charity hugged her tightly "Please take care, ok?"

She nodded "I will". She turned around and tucked the roll in her side pocket not caring that half was sticking out of it.

The walk to the library was slow and as lonely as she wished it at the beginning, even though the street was full of people that walked purposefully. All getting ready for the New Year's Eve that was coming in a few hours. Not looking around at anyone else, most walking with their heads bowed low, unsmiling, uncaring, almost invisible to one another.

Hermione mingled amongst them, another invisible individual in the midst of the social indifference of the big city. Who could care that her loved one had been abducted? Who would mind that her heart was barely beating and that she was barely living these last few days? Who even knew what hid behind the dark countenance of the attractive brunette that was walking down the street with her chin buried deep in her purple scarf. Her lips half open almost kissing it. Her hands buried in her pockets, with a large sandwich half buried in one of them.

Her eyes blinked disinterestedly as she saw her boots appearing under her long black coat. First the left then the right and then all over again. Walking steadily over the cracked pavement, concentrating on the fissures that looked abnormally long and big. Noticing the cigarette butts that have escaped the meticulous broom of some road sweeper. Someone who bypassed that coffee cup over there just in order to get quicker to his house and open the door to call to his wife a tired and bored "What's for dinner?!"

Her brows creased heavily and she heard her breath too loud in her ears. It overpowered the sound of cars and motorbikes from the road. She barely noticed the large road cleaning machine that came up
next to her, with it's excruciatingly loud sucking and it's large circular sweeps running next to the curve of the pavement. A man that was discussing with the news seller at the corner, turned around and bumped on her shoulder.

"Sorry love, ta" he said with a vague smile and then run down the street. Another purposeful human being on the road to success and happiness that the new year was going to bring for him.

Hermione looked up mildly confused and muttered "It's ok" to the void as the man was already being sucked in by the greedy city crowd.

She stopped in front of the news seller who smiled at her "Want to buy a paper? Wizard Weekly printed a special edition last night" he said and lifted the paper.

Hermione's heart stopped beating for several seconds. She saw his dark eyes piercing her very soul, under a pair of well formed but always scrutinising brows. His hair black as the night and down to his shoulders and his face deeply clouded albeit his youth. That picture was an old one, taken before the second war. She read the title without wanting to. Her eyes just took the initiative and rolled over the letters dutifully "Professor Severus Snape, hero of the second magical war, still missing! Aurors fear foul play. Chances of him found alive are less with each passing day"

She inhaled and felt her heart thumping on her eardrums. The road cleaning machine with it's overpowering sucking passed her by slowly, but she couldn't follow it down the road as she had been doing before. She was frozen in place, unable to get her eyes away from his. The image of a small white winter flower blinked in her mind and she felt her eyes tearing up.

"Are you ok darling?" the news seller asked and lowered the newspaper.

She swallowed heavily and broke into a run. Wanting in some manner to get away from his haunting picture. Knowing that if she raised her eyes she would see more newspaper stands and more articles screaming for her to come over and read them. They will be hiding behind the impersonal city crowd that didn't care about her pain. If she fainted they would all stand frozen around her not knowing what to do. Forced into stillness by the bystander effect. Some of them would be pulling back, covering the eyes of their children or maybe theirs too in front of such blunt human pain and desolation.

She raised a hand that felt foreign and wiped her mouth. She was perspiring not matter the piercing coldness of the air. The meteorological institution had given out a special warning for heavy snowfall in the city of London the next few days. Hermione wondered if Severus was cold now. Did he have any warm clothes? Was he inside or somewhere outside suffering the cruel elements of nature? Did he care about the weather, when he was probably suffering the cruel nature of mankind? Was he even alive to feel all that? On that thought she felt the sob breaking out of her chest, but no one heard her. The city sounds were loud enough to drown any personal suffering.

She stopped her wild run that caused several people to turn around and check her almost angrily, as she broke their normality with her inappropriate flee, only when she felt her knees buckling under her. She leaned her hands on them and tried to catch her breath as her eyes checked the fissures on the sidewalk again. For several moments she remained like that, her body unable to decide if it wanted to faint or remain standing. When her head lifted up she saw that she was in front of a muggle church. One of the rarer buildings in the magical district of London, placed there by the Minister of Magic in order to satisfy the religious needs of the thousand muggle born wizards of this city.

Her mind called her to go in with a need that felt imperative. She directed her steps mechanically to the entrance, not even knowing why she wanted to go there instead of her beloved library. The
moment she opened the door, she knew why. The stillness and silence of this place fell on her like a soothing blanket. She entered and took care to close the door gently behind her. There was only an elderly woman sitting at a pew next to the aisle.

Hermione walked up and stood at a respectful distance from the old woman. Her eyes uplifted towards the sanctuary and she felt her heart emotionally wasted. She had always been a practical woman. Always relying on her intellect, her profession, her talents, but above all her logic to solve all her problems. Yet, now, here, she wanted to pray to something stronger than her. She wanted someone to keep Severus safe, where she had failed to do so. She closed her eyes and bit both lips as she struggled to stay standing.

I never truly felt the need to pray even though I've seen hell…..she brought her hands together in front of her and felt tears running down her cheeks….there is someone out there who has sacrificed himself to save others, much like your son has done. He has the most loving heart I have ever seen and I feel the luckiest girl on earth to have experienced it. He has helped so many people in his life and he deserves your help if you are willing to give it. Even though I don't think he believes in any kind of religion readily I think you can bypass his folly in view of all the good he has done for this world. The world is better place with him living in it. It will be so much lesser without him. Please, I beg you….Help him live…..I beg you, please help me find him alive. I haven't told him how much I love him. Teddy asked me and I was ready to answer, but fear overtook me. I was stupid and egotistical and weak, were I should have been brave….forgive me…give me the chance to tell him how I feel about him…..please….

Her lips tightened painfully as she muttered a vocal "Please…"

A hand landed on her shoulder and she had to physically stop herself from crying out loud. She turned around sharply and saw the old lady behind her tear stained eyes "The Lord can hear your prayers even when you are sitting down dearest. You look ready to faint" she said carefully.

Hermione shook her head "I cannot afford to lose him" she murmured.

The old lady nodded "I understand"

"I love him so much….and he doesn't know" she whispered with a deep frown.

The old lady pointed back at the pews "Come pray with me. Pray silently and the Lord shall hear your prayers"

"Will he help me?" Hermione asked desperately.

The old lady looked at her patiently "Only he knows"

Hermione felt her shoulders slouching as let the old lady lead her to the pews. She sat down heavily, thankful that this bench was under her at that moment. She remained silent next to this stranger, praying repeatedly. Offering anything in exchange for his life, but knowing that in the end, everything lay in the hands of men, not some vague God that ruled the universe. Yet, even in that knowledge she kept on praying. Needing to hold onto something. Onto anything that could ground her to reason.

"Severus, bring the potion"

"Yes, my Lord"

Severus tried to open his eyes, but they didn't obey. He felt the hard cold stones cutting into his back, but his mind was beyond normal pain now. He was long gone into another level of pain and
suffering. He was not really there in Azkaban anymore. His mind had flown away into a different
time long ago. He was living inside his nightmarish memories, only his body remaining barely alive
inside his cell, still chained to the wall. His hands hang limp above his head that was leaning on his
shoulder.

"Laddie, can you hear me?" Adam his cellmate said imperatively.

He remained unresponsive.

"Tie her legs spread wide on the altar and her hands above her head. Severus feed her the potion"
"Yes, my Lord"

And inaudible moan came from his chest and with it an indiscernible word that sound like "No".

"Why are you doing this? What have I ever done to you! Let me go!"

"You were unlucky enough to be born so beautiful and so muggle. I maybe beyond physical needs,
but my Death Eaters are not"

"What is this potion? What are you going to do to me?!" 

"They are going to use your body for their pleasure and when they finish I am going to feed on your
heart. Such a rare gift and offered by such a rare beauty…” a bony finger run down her neck and
between her naked breasts as an abysmal cry of terror left her chest.

Severus frowned slightly and his fingers moved "No" he muttered again, lost in the nightmares that
the last session with the Dementors had caused. The last two days Borovic was not even trying to
beat him up too much anymore. He was simply letting him stay longer and longer with the
Dementors, knowing that his mind couldn't last long before finally snapping.

"Laddie open your eyes…they fucked you up way too much today. I don't even know how you
have lasted this long" Adam said and slapped his cheek.

"Severus, feed her"

"Yes, my Lord" another pair of long fingers, not bony this time, but smooth and clean. Opening up a
mouth that was trying to keep shut. Pushing on the sides of her jaw, forcing her to open. Feeling her
struggle under his tight grip as he poured his potion into her mouth with a frozen heart and icy hands.
Hearing her choke, yet keeping her head still so she can swallow and wanting to turn around and
vomit at Voldemort's feet.

"Help me! Someone help me!" her voice gargling with the liquid, but sounding desperate, close to
panicky.

His eyelashes flickered and both his hands tightened, his knuckles turning white above his head. He
groaned heavily.

"I have to call someone, I don't think you will make it through the night" Adam muttered and shook
him by the shoulder. His back rubbed against the rocks, but he hardly felt it.

His potion was working, making her eyes foggy and lost, stopping every resistance in it's birth. Her
face turning this way and that. Looking stupidly at the men gathering around her with feverish
testosterone.
"Will you have her first Severus? Your potion worked well, you deserve a virgin present" the offer came as usual.

"No, my Lord, thank you"

"Your celibacy oaths still holding strong?"

"Yes, my Lord"

"It's a pity you always decline a beautiful virgin. One of these days you must partake in these adventures or I might start suspecting you do not belong to us heart and soul"

His countenance cold and composed, but his mind running a hundred miles per hour "Of course, my Lord"

"Very well begin and remember to mess her up as much as you want, but keep her heart intact and beating. I want it alive or else the blood I am going to drink won't hold any magic in it"

Severus gagged and nothing came out as he hadn't eaten in days.

"No, don't choke on your own vomit. Wake up, come on, wake up" Adam shook him again. Then he turned and looked at the rusty faucet "I'll be right back" he said and stood up quickly. Severus couldn't hear him or feel him anyway.

"Walk with me a bit Severus. Let's stand over here and admire their work on her. Celibacy or not, you cannot but admire this sensual scene, correct?"

"Of course my Lord"

"I must admit that I do appreciate the steadiness of your character and that you do not allow yourself to be drawn into meaningless physical excursions. You remind me of myself sometimes"

"I couldn't ever dare dream placing myself close to your magnificence"

"Clever man"

His eyes never daring leave the torturous scene in front of them. Her body moving like a rag doll on the altar as dark cloaked figures wearing silver masks thrust into her one after the other. Some becoming violent, some almost desperate, some too quick and some taking their time to stroke her, which he found even more disconcerting. Feeling his insides tying up in knots and the bile lingering just under his tongue. Fearing to show any sign of weakness and terrified to look away as Voldemort's eyes were solely on his when he was not enjoying the rape himself. Using up all his magical skills to keep his Occlumency shields up. Not daring use them for anything else apart from that.

His tight fists pulled on the chains and they rattled behind him ominously. Adam came back holding some dirty water in the palm of his equally stained palm "No laddie don't struggle, the guards are going to hear you and notify that psycho. I need to revive you and you need to take a breather from the roof. You won't last another visit up there. Next one, will certainly be your last". Adam splashed the dirty water on his cheeks and forehead and Severus shook his head trying to keep away from any physical contact. His hands pulled on the chains again and they strained against the bolts of the wall "You've lasted way longer than any other normal person would have….who the hell are you?" Adam muttered at himself, still splashing water on face.

Voldemort's deadly whisper closer to his ear "Don't tell me that you are not getting aroused by what
you are seeing Severus. I won't believe you"

"Of course I am, my Lord" he agreed coldly, not daring look at the monster next to him.

Voldemort's bony hand flew to his flyer stopping inches from checking an erection that was never there. He was able to remain impassive outside whilst inside he died a thousand deaths. Voldemort smiled and then broke into a crazy laugh for a few seconds. Then he withdrew his hand from a surprisingly unmoving Severus and straightened up "That's what I love about you Lieutenant. Your coldness. Nothing rattles your self control. Brilliant" Voldemort said becoming solemn once again.

"Thank you for the compliment, my Lord" he replied feeling his heart beating out of control behind his steadfast protective shields.

"I wonder if you would have had similar control if you watched that Potter woman fucking her husband, before I killed them both"

His heart screamed, but outside he remained as impassive as ever "I would have been aroused, my Lord" he answered coldly.

"Yet you wouldn't have broken your celibacy oaths"

"Of course not my Lord"

"Noteworthy control indeed"

"Thank you, my Lord" Severus observed the continued rape silently.

"I want you to prove to me that you belong in my elite and especially as a Lieutenant. I will resurrect the Potter woman just for a night and you are going to fuck her in front of me until you come inside her. After that you will take the place of Bellatrix as second in command"

Severus felt his soul tearing away from his body. It was trying to flee to a safe place where he couldn't see the violent nature of men or hear the torturous suggestion of a monster. Instead he turned and looked at those snaky cold hearted eyes with unbelievable self control. He tilted his head quietly "I will do the best I can to prove my loyalties to you, my Lord"

Voldemort shook his head "Very well, Lieutenant. Very well"

"No…no…no….NO!" he growled and pushed Adam away with a sudden jerk of his shoulder. His eyes flew open and they were bright yellow. The iris were elongated like a feline's and Adam pulled back in terror "What the hell laddie?" he cried and scattered close to the wall "What the hell got into you, what kind of demon?"

"NO GET AWAY FROM ME! NO!" he yelled and both hands grabbed hold of the chains behind him. One leg found leverage at the wall and he jerked both chains sharply from the bolts. The left one shifted and some lime powder trickled away between the stones and onto his bare foot.

"I am not anywhere close to you!" Adam declared and made a protective sign against the wild gleam of Severus's magical eyes.

"I'D RATHER DIE YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" Severus cried and gave another mighty pull on his chains. The stone that was holding the left bolt in it moved visibly. "YOU'VE DESTROYED MY LIFE!" he continued and gave another sharp pull. The stone moved further away spewing lime powder and larger pieces on his foot that was pushing the wall behind.
"Merlin almighty protect me from this evil…" Adam whispered and made the protective sign again.

"I don't want to live anymore…I don't want to remember anymore" Severus muttered under his breath and pulled on his chains again even harder. A loud growl released from his chest and the left chain pulled away from the wall together with the huge stone that was holding it. His hand flew out and the stone crashed against the opposite wall spewing smaller pieces everywhere.

Adam covered his head "Protect me Merlin, please protect me from this evil" he kept muttering. He closed his eyes and tried not to look at what was happening.

Severus kneeled down, panting heavily. He looked towards the destroyed wall. The right chain was still holding strong. He frowned towards the debris filled floor and laid down without any clear thoughts in his broken mind. Just the ability to stretch his body wherever after five days of being chained up in awkward positions made to cause him pain and suffering was enough. His head leaned down at the broken limestone and his bright yellow magical eyes looked towards his stretched right hand that was dangling from the thick chain. They watered and his eyesight became blurry "I am sorry I fed you the potion" he whispered to that girl that was still getting raped inside his mind and his eyes closed down slowly. A tear run down his dirty cheek, cleaning up a muddy path to his mouth. He quickly fell into an infernal sleep that felt more like passing out.

Adam keept his head between his crossed arms and his eyes closed. His mouth was still praying for Merlin to help him keep this demon away.

Hermione rubbed her tired eyes. She had been searching all day long. After leaving the church, she made it to the library and since then she hadn't stopped. Her eyes were burning from the monitor and she felt her head woozy, still she didn't want to stop her research, because she knew that the moment she closed down the PC, she was going to get engulfed in such a desperation and fear that it would keep her stomach twisted in knots until she fell asleep somewhere from exhaustion.

She didn't want to sleep, she didn't want to miss him terribly, she didn't want to fear for his life every single second her eyes were open. She didn't want to walk on nightmares anymore. She pressed the X of the article she was reading about some seventeenth century murders that had nothing to do with the current case and neither did they have the name Pott in them. How did she end up engulfed by them was a complete mystery. Maybe her sleep deprived mind was playing tricks on her.

She looked at her cold cup of stale coffee that was half full next to the keyboard and felt nauseated "Fuck wizards and fuck their history" she muttered and rubbed her eyes feeling tired to the bone. She had been researching magical criminal history for three days now and nothing had come up. Nothing that could give her a lead. Maybe Harry was right. Maybe she should have never began researching a vague suspicion that this Barnaby had been a criminal once upon a time. That maybe the real man behind the mask had taken over the identity of a dead criminal.

"You think we should go back to Harry?" Charity said. She was sitting next to her, checking articles on a PC herself. Mostly in order to keep her company.

"I'll return to him alone and you can go back at Hogwarts for the festivities if you wish" she said coldly. All she wanted to do was lay down her head right there and sleep.

"I am not leaving you. Severus would have wanted me to take care of you" the older witch said with impressive determination.

Hermione huffed "I need to take a break"

"Haven't found anything yet, have you?"
She shook her head and the disappointment made her feel like crying again. That was the only thing she had been doing the last few days. "No. Magical history hasn't got anything to show us. You know Charity, I think Harry was right. All my need to research was useless for Severus. It only served to help me from driving myself crazy. I think I should stop now and let the Aurors do their job..." she whispered and leaned her forehead on her forearm. She closed her eyes and felt her temples thumping hard.

Charity never answered her, but Hermione heard the clicks of the mouse pad and the keyboard as the old witch kept on her reading for a long time. She had almost dozed off when Charity's voice made her reopen her eyes.

"I think you should see this" her voice had a haunting tone that made Hermione's heart catch.

She opened her eyes and stood up straight, feeling slightly disoriented "What?" she asked.

Charity pulled her closer and pointed at an article that was open in her PC. Her finger landed on a name "Barry Potts" Hermione's eyes flew open, sleep flying away from her suddenly alert mind. She scooted her chair close to Charity and leaned over to read.

"It Was a Dirty Little Murder' but It Lands Him on Death Row


August 21, 1985JOHN HURST l Times Staff Writer

SAN QUENTIN — It was, an appeals attorney said, "a dirty little murder."

Barry (Barnaby) Lee Potts is not a notorious killer.

Like most of the 167 condemned men living on San Quentin's two Death Rows, Potts is virtually anonymous.

The murder for which he was convicted did not make the pages of The Times. It was not even a big story in Bakersfield, where it occurred.

The judge who sentenced Potts to the gas chamber couldn't remember the details of the case 3 1/2 years later.

Potts was sentenced to die for his role in the 1981 bludgeon killing of his freshly wed wife.

"I just cannot believe that Pott's case would have been tried as a death penalty case in Los Angeles or in San Francisco or virtually any major metropolitan area," said appeals attorney Dennis Riordan.

'Doesn't Compare'

"But beyond that," he said, "it's a dirty little case. It doesn't compare to cases which, for one reason or another, are so horrid and yet (the convicted murderers) don't receive the same penalty."

In the terrible and numbing litany of crimes committed by many of those on Death Row-the torture murders, the rape killings, the child slayings, the mutilations, the multiple murders, the cold-blooded executions and the murders for hire-Potts' case does seem less horrible than most.

And, at first glance, the articulate, seemingly well-educated Pott appears somewhat different from his fellow Death Row inmates.

According to a 1984 report by the state Bureau of Criminal Statistics, two-thirds of the condemned
men at San Quentin have an arrest record involving violence. About 41% had previously done time in state prison. Nearly 40% of them had been sentenced to the California Youth Authority as juveniles.

Undoubtedly, many of them, like inmates throughout the state prison system, grew up poor in unstable homes and without family guidance, education or training.

But Potts doesn't seem to match that profile.

Insists He's Innocent

Insisting that he is innocent and that his conviction will be reversed on appeal, Potts stared with wide, pale brown eyes at a visitor and told of how he copes with life on Death Row:

"To me, life is all about evaluating the images that you have within yourself and projecting those images of who you really are and living comfortably with yourself. I never killed my wife. I simply tried to protect her and now she is dead. I will live comfortably in the knowledge that I did everything I could to protect the love of my life from a gruesome fate, that found her anyway. It was the will of the God"

The image Potts was trying to project is one of a well-mannered product of a stable, middle-American family. He told of growing up in a pleasant tract home with a two-car garage, of being an athlete at Bakersfield High School, getting good grades, graduating, marrying his high school sweetheart, attending college in Canada. . . .

Sure, he admitted, he got into trouble as a youngster. He was sent to the Youth Authority for minor offenses. And he even did some prison time for robbery, but all he was doing was helping a friend collect a debt. And he had long since returned to middle-class life before he was accused of murder.

It is an interesting image. Maybe it is the way Potts wishes it could have been. But it is a fantasy. He is being attended to at the psychiatric ward of the prison regularly as

the guards declare he is not very stable in mind. Several psychiatric evaluations had labelled him as rather unstable and dangerous. The think that he lost his mind after the death of his wife, which comes in contrast to the way this crime was revealed years ago.

He was the one that appeared in the city's Police station. He approached calmly and declared that he tried to protect his wife from a drug addict that entered their house in search of money. He pulled out the gun he had for the protection of his abode and knew he was able to shoot the intruder in the head. He aimed coldly, but the bullet passed from his wife's head instead. He was very cold and collected when he confessed his crime and he remained as impassive and calculative much later. The drug addict by the name of Robbie T-Rex by local authorities was brought in for questioning, only to be released soon after on lack of evidence. He kept on repeating that he was nowhere Potts's wife when the murder took place. Authorities knew right there and then that this case run much deeper than Potts original intended. Evidence showed that he had planned the death of his wife because he couldn't handle her infidelity and used the drug addict to break an entry into their house in order to give him the right to shoot his wife with a valid reason.

Barry (Barnaby) Lee Potts, now 33, lives on Death Row at San Quentin. On Oct. 7, the state Supreme Court is scheduled to hear his appeal that the trial court erred in rulings on witness identification and on admitting grisly autopsy photos into evidence. His attorneys will also argue that intent to kill was not proven in the trial and that the death sentence in this case is a disproportionate punishment under the state Constitution.
Barry (Barnaby) Lee Potts, now 33, was executed on May 17 1990. All his appeals had been declined.

Hermione pulled back and all the blood drained from her face. She looked at Charity intensely.

"Barry Potts, that's the name you've been looking for, but this murderer is not a wizard, he's a muggle. Do you think he fits the profile you've been looking for?" Charity asked with a heavy frown.

Hermione covered her mouth with the palm of her hand and her eyes searched the table's chapped wooden surface for answers as her mind run a hundred miles per hour "He killed his wife and he lost his mind because of it. He wanted to appear logical and collected, well mannered and stable. A figure of authority and trust, whilst he was the exact opposite" she murmured.

Charity was looking at her thoughtfully.

Hermione's finger found the edge of a chopped wood and began digging under it "Killed his wife, lost his mind because of it" she started repeating in a thoughtful mantra. Her fingernail pulled the piece of wood free and she trapped it between her fingers. Her thumbnail pushed it and it broke upon the soft side of her pointer finger "Killed his wife, lost his mind because of it" she repeated again deeply immersed in her rapid thought processes.

"Hermione?" Charity asked after a brief moment were Hermione remained immovable looking at the broken piece of wood on her finger.

She lifted her eyes to the old witch and felt her heart sinking to the abyss. She felt as if she was coming up from underwater, taking the first deep breath after a century. She inhaled and breathed out one word "Borovic"
As the bells around the city began chiming festively, the door of Harry's office broke open and made him look up from his paper work. He took his glasses off and frowned "Hermione, Charity, I was expecting you much sooner. Happy New Year". He felt very tired after going through many interrogations today so celebrating the New Year was the last thing on his mind.

By the looks of it, Hermione was in the same mood. She stormed into the office and picked up his telephone. Her eyes were imperative "Call St. Mungo, now". Her whisper raised the hair on his arms.

He approached carefully and took the telephone from her hand "Whatever for?" he asked.

"Call the psychiatric ward and ask for Alexander Borovic" she said not taking her piercing stare from him.

"Borovic? What the hell for?" Harry frowned.

"I think he is the one that took Severus" she said with a dark brow that didn't seem willing to take much debate from anyone.

"Borovic is being detained under heavy wards. How could he have taken Severus?" Harry raised his brow.

"I think he's found a way to escape" she retorted.

"You think?" he looked at her intently.

She crossed her arms and frowned.

He continued "You are off into a wild goose chase again and I am really not up for it. I had a heavy day and I also need to talk to you about one of the witnesses" he dismissed her.

She bore her teeth angrily "Call them, or I will apparate there and ransack the place until I find Borovic's cell!"

"Calm down, this attitude is not going to help anyone" Harry rebuked.

"It might help Severus, now call them!" she pointed at the receiver threateningly.

"What's gotten into you? Upon which excuse do I call a hospital at midnight in New Year's Eve? They are going to hang up on me" Harry reasoned.

"Upon suspicions that Borovic is not in his cell anymore. You are an Auror aren't you? You have access to security codes that can order a psychiatric institution to check on their patients. Especially if they are placed there by the magical Police force, for using Dark Magic" Hermione crossed her arms.
"What the hell did you find in the library?" he winced.

Hermione offered Charity a brief look and then explained at Harry the article the older witch found on Barry Potts, the muggle wife killer that resembled Borovic so much. When she finished Harry was still holding the receiver frozen. His eyes were penetrating upon hers.

"I think Borovic has escaped from under their noses and he has taken on the identity of this killer. Harry, call St. Mungo! What have we got to lose?" She ground her teeth, needing in some manner to kick him into action.

"Face?" he frowned.

"Fuck your face, I need to find Severus!" she cried and hit her hand sharply on the table.

He inhaled "Fine Hermione, just for old times sake. Just to humour the underlying detective in you that is trying to take over all of us. When we finish with this ridiculous call you will sit down and listen to me, because one of the witnesses today said something really serious that's got me thinking"

She frowned and sat down "What happened?"

He shook his head "Not now, I got to check on St. Mungo, remember?"

"Fine" she growled and pushed some hair away from her face. Her heart was pounding heavily and she couldn't really stand still. As Harry began calling the hospital number she frowned in sudden confusion "Harry, this is a muggle telephone" she said abruptly, only then realising the presence of muggle technology inside a magical office.

He raised his brow "It's not as easily traceable, exactly because there aren't many wizards that take up on muggle technology. One of Kingsley's best ministerial decisions to be quite honest" he said and then raised his finger at her "Yes, St. Mungo? Happy New Year love, I am Chief Auror Harry Potter, can you please connect me to the psychiatric ward?"

Hermione sighed impatiently and began munching on her pointer finger.

Harry offered her a quick glance and raised his brow "Yeah, I'll wait, thank you"

She shook her head in question.

"They are connecting me now, be patient for bloody sakes Hermione!" he chastised.

She fumed and leaned her chin on her hand. Her fingers drummed the wooden surface "Do you want me to bring you some coffee darling?" Charity whispered and sat down next to her.

"No, thank you" she said and then in an afterthought she turned around and offered the older witch a smile. Their hands interlocked and squeezed tightly "Thank you for being here for me"

Charity waved her off "Wouldn't have dared do anything else. Severus will slaughter me if he ever finds out that I didn't take care of his favourite girl".

Her words stirred unexpected emotions to Hermione who felt her eyes tearing up. She quickly wiped them off "I'll make sure to tell him you did a perfect job the moment I see him" she whispered, trying in this manner to convince herself that she was indeed going to see him again soon.

Charity caught onto this sad game "You be sure to do that, dearest" she squeezed Hermione's hand
"Yes, psychiatric ward? Hello and Happy New Year…." Harry said.

Hermione bit her lower lip and concentrated on his face.

"what?… Yes, Chief Auror Potter and you are? Hello Maddie, yes I need your help. Forgive the inappropriate time of this call, but I need someone to check on Alexander Borovic. What? B-o-r-o-v-i-c. Yes…No…come again? Oh, yes we send him to you. My security code? yeah are you writing down? Ok…TTG-447-J27-O87E" Harry turned around and looked outside the window. The heavy snowfall that the meteorological department had predicted was already covering the city of London slowly.

Hermione exchanged a worried silent glance with Charity.

"Tango Tango Golf - four four seven - Juliet two seven - Oscar eight seven Echo. Yeah I'll wait for your to repeat" he said and everything was silent for a moment. Then he got animated again and turned to gaze at Hermione "Very well, now I need you to send someone to check on Alexander Borovic. Former Auror officer, did you find his detention cell? Good, yeah take as long as you need. I am not going anywhere" he sighed and lowered the receiver to his shoulder "They are going to check on him now"

"Thank you Harry" she said and began munching on her bottom lip nervously. On one hand she wanted to be right about her assumptions, because that would give them a lead, on the other hand she didn't want Borovic and his psychotic nature anywhere close to Severus. She inwardly prayed that this shot in the dark was a mistake. That the nurse was going to come back soon and inform Harry that Borovic was still securely locked in his cell. Probably under heavy sedation also.

Yeah under the heaviest sedation available out there….her mind chimed in and she munched on her thumb so hard that she drew blood. She hissed and looked at it. Several drops fell on the table.

"Are you trying to undo yourself bit by bit?" Charity asked and passed her over a tissue.

Hermione wrapped it around her finger and winced "I cannot stop fidgeting….tell me I am crazy…tell me this psychotic asshole hasn't escaped a high security psychiatric ward to go after Severus. Tell me I've been wasting your time all along" she muttered and looked at Charity pleadingly.

"You don't want to be right…" Charity frowned.

Hermione felt tears rolling down her cheeks and she shook her head intensely. The blood seeped through the tissue "No" she mouthed.

Charity sighed deeply "I understand darling"

Hermione's brows creased deeply "Not with him, not with that man…no…" she shook her head vigorously.

Harry was observing them silently from his place close to the window. Holding the receiver on his ear. Hermione's eyes pierced through his as the minutes ticked by, trying to discern even the slightest change on his expression. She felt that time was slowing down around them as the heavy snowfall covered the window panes behind her friend. Her peripheral vision began counting the fat snowflakes, so when Harry inhaled gently and looked sideways at his receiver, her mind was momentarily away.

"Yes, I am still here…." a long haunting pause.
Hermione's eyes returned to him demandingly and the shock she saw in them made her heart freeze. Her fingers loosened up and her bloody tissue rolled out of her hand and onto the wooden surface quietly. She inhaled and held her breath.

"Are you sure? When was the last time you checked? What?" he frowned in confusion.

Hermione licked her lips and her mouth opened up slightly. Her breath was unable to get released. It was still trapped into her chest.

Harry's shocked eyes became heavily concentrated on her and he nodded at something that was being said from the other side of the receiver "You will do nothing. Lower the wards and I will send men over immediately. Yes, now…no…I will send them now, calm down Maddie!" he said and his voice was authoritative.

Hermione pushed her chair and sprang up. Sweat stained her brow and her finger was tearing up with blood again, but she didn't care. She took a step closer to him, but his solemn gaze, gave her pause "Yes, ok Maggie. Thank you" he said and then hang up on the receiver. He swallowed hard and gazed at Hermione.

"He is gone, isn't he?" she whispered feeling like someone else was talking from the room and not her.

Harry nodded and swallowed again "There was a warden in his room, magicked silent. Borovic has escaped"

"How many days ago?" Hermione run up to him after a long time of shocked immobility.

Harry pursed his lips "That's the problem. No one knows. It could have been five days, could have been yesterday"

Hermione winced confused "How can they not know?"

Harry crossed his arms "I don't think they check on their inmates very often Mione"

She opened her mouth to speak, to curse, to send people to damnation, but nothing came out. She closed it again, feeling her tongue rough and dry. Her hand cupped her mouth and she rubbed her lips nervously. After the longest pause she managed to speak again "He took Severus…Harry that crazy motherfucker has taken Severus. He probably used polyjuice to take on Barry Potts identity…he must have. It's the only thing that makes sense…"

He raised his hand and stopped her verbal torrent "Hermione, I have more to tell you"

"I don't care what you have to say, we have to try to figure out where Borovic took him…" she said and her eyes looked nervously around the office. She had no clue as to their destination. Nothing to lead her to him. Now that she knew who took Severus, the need to find him became more imperative. It was a matter of life and death. That man was going to kill Severus…he was going to kill him…"he is going to kill him" she almost choked on those words.

Harry pursed his lips "Oh, I think you want to hear what happened, cause it may well be linked to Borovic's escape, but first I need to notify a crew to go down at St. Mungo. I need to collect evidence" he said and walked to his door.

She managed to grab hold of his sleeve and turned him around "If you know something that can lead us to him, say it!" she commanded.
He frowned "I will damn it! Just give me a moment to organise my men! Shit Hermione, get a hold of yourself!" he said and uncapped her hand from his sleeve angrily. He pushed her away and got out of his office. The door crashed upon its hinges.

Hermione backed up and dumped herself on her seat. Her eyes fell to her bloody tissue and she swallowed "If I find out this man has hurt Severus, I am going to make sure he dies a very painful death" she whispered the threat at the air. Mostly speaking to herself.

"You are not killer material dearest, don't speak like that" Charity chastised her.

Hermione glared at her hauntingly "Charity….what if he's dead already?"

Charity swallowed and frowned "He is not! Do you hear me?"

Hermione closed her eyes and averted her head, she didn't want to meet Charity's eyes and her fake promises.

"Do you hear me?" the older witch insisted. She took hold of Hermione's cheek and tried to draw her head around.

Hermione resisted, but Charity managed to meet her eyes in the end. She looked angry "Severus has sustained HELL under Voldemort. No mere mortal can break him! Do you understand me?" her voice was strong and drew Hermione slowly out of her sorrow.

She licked her lips quietly and felt her salty tears reaching her mouth.

"You haven't seen him with the Dark Lord, like I have. You don't know what he is capable off, and how enduring he can be. No mortal asshole can break him. He is ….unbreakable…” she continued with the same tone.

"No one is unbreakable" she whispered. She tried to grab reason from Charity's brave words, but she found her head shaking in negation. They remained silent after that, not really having anything more to say to each other. Charity was caressing her back softly and Hermione was moving the bloody tissue around, catching it on the wood splinters and tearing it apart, as she waited impatiently for Harry to return.

When the door opened up, she sprang out of her chair and turned around to meet his eyes "Harry?" she asked.

He waved her down "I send men off to St. Mungo. I need to gather evidence and take on witness reports. Evidently Alexander Borovic escaped within the last five days, which matches the abduction of Severus. He used polyjuice at the warden on his cell, who took on his appearance and he magicked him silent with very advanced, lasting spells. Unfortunately St. Mungo does not check on patients that are detained in the high security wards more than twice a week. They pass trays of food every day, but the doctors unlock the door for a closer inspection rather infrequently. The warden could have been banging on the door and trying to scream out his true identity for many days on end, but Borovic's magic help strong, which is something that doesn't surprise me. He is highly skilled and very volatile. Nothing is too hard for him and that makes him rather dangerous"

"He took Severus" she insisted wide eyed.

He nodded "It's a possibility worth checking out, especially since it was Severus's misadventure at the Ministry that send Borovic off to the psychiatric ward for evaluation" he said meaningfully.

"Borovic had a grudge on him way before that. He has a grudge on every Death Eater" Charity
added.

Hermione offered her a terrified glance "We don't know where he has taken Severus, though…"

Harry raised his hand for her to wait and began checking on his files "Today I had several interviews with possible witnesses of this abduction. Most of them were complete fable makers, except possibly for one…" he trailed off and found the wanted file. He opened it up and checked on the pages for a few moments that Hermione felt her mouth going completely dry.

She came over to him and looked to his file. Her eyes passed from the lines quickly making no real sense "Who?"

"McKenzie Duff, aged sixty five, sailor and fisherman. Lives in St. Andrews Bay, works in Dundee Port…"

"St. Andrews in Scotland?" she looked up.

He nodded "Yes, he gave a very good description of four men escorting a tall man with long hair that matches Severus's countenance"

"Four men?" she frowned.

He raised his brow "He was escorted by two Aurors out of Hogwarts, apparently there were more waiting for him down the road"

She paled.

He pursed his lips "He said they waited patiently to board the dark ferry and then they sailed off. What makes me think that this witness is valid, was the name he dropped"

Hermione frowned.

"He gave out your name….He heard one of the men speaking and he mentioned a Hermione Granger, not only once but a couple of times. The old sailor said that this group of men didn't give off the idea that they were too friendly with each other"

"Borovic used me to threaten him…" she muttered and her hands closed in tight fists.

Harry nodded "If we follow that thread, then quite possibly, yes. Your name is not connected with the Professor in any public way, so I tend to think that Mr. McKenzie was not lying. He saw the questionable group in Dundee Port five days ago. The same evening that Severus was escorted out of Hogwarts"

"So Borovic escaped at least five days ago"

Harry pressed his lips "If we assume that he was the one that took up Barry Potts's identity"

"He must have been Harry, don't you see? It all makes sense" she said hurriedly.

"I think it does"

"You said they boarded the black ferry? What is that? Does that sailor know where that ferry goes to?" she asked with a frown.

Now it was Harry's turn to pale "Everyone knows the black ferry's destination, Hermione"
"Not me…" the crease on her brow grew darker.

"Azkaban. It's Scotland's transfer to Azkaban…." Harry shook his head sadly.

She felt all the blood draining from her face and she remained dumbly mute for a couple of moments
"That psycho took Severus to Azkaban?!"

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes "If we assume that our theory is correct, then yes"

"But how? He is not a prisoner. Borovic doesn't have the proper paperwork to get him into the prison" Hermione tried to reason.

Harry looked at her "That's not the way Azkaban works. There are back doors and if one has the appropriate connections they can go in and out of it easily enough. Severus being transported there illegally makes this even more dangerous, because not many people in Azkaban know of his illegal transfer there, so it won't be easy to find him"

Hermione felt like cold hands grabbed her shins and were trying to pull her through the floor. She took hold of Harry's table and raised a deadly stare to him "We are going to Dundee Port now!"

Harry winced, taken aback "One does not simply walk into Azkaban!" (*who got the reference? Tell me that someone got the reference please!…..^_^)

She bore her teeth "I will! If that psycho took Severus there, then I am going in too!"

"You are crazy. No one is going to allow you to enter. This is not the proper way to work on this" Harry frowned.

"Then give me a way…what's it going to be? Are you going to gather an Auror team so we can check the whole place from top to bottom?" she glared at him. Her need to storm that accursed island and find Severus felt desperate. Just because she was humouring Harry with a conversation didn't mean that she intended to be patient much longer. She was going in, no matter if he was following or not. He just didn't seem to have realised that yet.

He shook his head "I don't have enough evidence to get a warrant to ransack the place"

She raised her brow "Then what do you suggest?"

"That we need to organise ourselves better…we need time"

"To see Severus dead? He is going to die in there, if he isn't dead already and you want us to wait more? I am going Harry…alone if need be. Do what you want!" she said and grabbed her coat.

His hand fell on her shoulder "You are going to apparate in Dundee Port and tell them what? Take me to see my boyfriend, who I am not one hundred percent sure is held there anyway… Is THAT your plan?"

She drew her arm away forcibly "I will blast my way through the ferry and all it's men if need be! I will use the Imperius on ALL of them and make them take me to Azkaban. Let go Harry!" she cried.

"You will use an unforgivable in order to get into a high security prison, with hundreds of floors, thousands of corridors and cells, hundreds of wardens which is surrounded by frothing sea and a sky full of Dementors. And then what? Do you intend to Imperius everyone in there to take you see Severus? Who tells you that they even know? There are hidden entrances all over the place. Borovic knows it by heart. He used to be a warden there. He may have used a side entrance to sneak him in.
Hermione, your explosive attitude will not assist Severus" he tried to reason.

"Then tell me what will, but make sure it's in the direction of St. Andrews bay. Don't expect me to remain here, whilst I know where they have taken him!" she spat.

Harry inhaled and looked at her thoughtfully "I cannot storm the place…"

"What CAN you do?" she snapped angrily.

"I can try to make us look like visitors, if you can eliminate your need to smash everything in your path to find him. You need to act normal and play nice and I will try to get us in the ferry. Now when we reach Azkaban we will have to play by ear, because I have no idea how we are going to find him inside that fucking maze" he said calmly and crossed his arms.

She drew back and straightened "That's the first wise suggestion you have made in days Harry Potter"

He broke a timid smile "So you agree?"

She raised her brow and nodded "Yes"

"Damn it, officially I am supposed to be going at St. Mungo right now" he said hesitantly.

Hermione didn't back an inch "Officially you can…I am just going a different way"

Harry exhaled trying to retain his patience "I am not leaving you alone in this Hermione…Gods know how many times we broke the rules together. Some things never change, no matter how old we get" he broke a small smile in the end.

She huffed and loosened up a little "Indeed, now are we leaving?"

"Charity, I need you to return to Minerva and let her know where we are going. I cannot reveal anything to my office or the Ministry. If we don't return within twenty four hours, tell her to find Kingsley and inform him exactly what happened and where we are. Can you do that?" Harry turned to the older witch.

Charity crossed her arms "I was kind of hoping to escort this young lady to her destination. I am not leaving her"

Hermione paled and took hold of her arm "I know you want to help me out. Please, go to Minerva. I have the Chief of all the magical Police force with me. What can possibly go wrong?" she said with a ghostly smile.

Charity uncrossed her arms "I have an obligation towards you"

"And you can fulfil that, by listening to me. We cannot visit Azkaban officially and going there without anyone knowing can be dangerous. You are keeping us safe. You and Minerva can raise hell if we don't return. Please, please Charity for the love of any God you might believe in. Cooperate please!" Hermione said imperatively and shook her by both shoulders.

Charity looked at her thoughtfully for a couple of seconds and then nodded imperceptibly "Very hesitantly I will agree, but know that my heart is not in it" she said and touched Hermione's hand.

The younger witch smiled sadly "I know"

Charity leaned closer to her "It's not that I don't trust Mr. Potter. He is an exceptional wizard of many
skills, but Azkaban is hell. I am afraid you won't return from that place alive"

Hermione frowned and her face was livid "If I find him dead up there, then I prefer not to come back" she whispered.

Charity shuddered and felt her eyes tearing up. She clenched her teeth and squeezed Hermione's hand tight "Go and find him. I will bring up the whole Ministry at its feet if you guys don't come back soon"

Hermione's lips curled up in a dejected smile and she pulled back "Thank you"

Harry put on his coat "Get ready little bookworm, we are going on an adventure" he said with a smile that seemed too forced.

She inhaled deeply and wrapped her purple scarf around her neck. Then she approached Harry who took a handful of floo powder "Let's do this" she said and took firm hold of his hand. He threw the floo in and the flames turned green. She was the one that called out "Dundee Port" clearly as they both stepped into the flames.

***…..***

They flooded out of the fireplace to the Port Police office. The moment they stepped out she heard a man cursing "What the effing hell?".

He was a stout looking ginger man, with very intense facial characteristics. He was holding an empty whiskey tumbler and was looking at them angrily under his thick ginger eyebrows. His port uniform jacket was at the back of the chair and he was down to his white shirt that was now stained from the whiskey he just emptied on himself as he was startled by their sudden appearance there.

Harry took a step forth "I am sorry for flooing out of your fireplace in such sort notice. Happy New Year. We just came from the Ministry of Magic" he explained.

The ginger officer raised his brow critically "Figures! This fireplace is not connected anywhere else. Bloody hell, you gave me quite a scare!" he admonished and put his tumbler down. He took a tissue and began wiping his shirt.

Harry sighed "We scared you, forgive us"

"You made me empty the whiskey on my shirt. My shirt doesn't need a drink, but I bloody well do. Stranded here all alone in New Year's Eve, instead of being home with my gal. Having bloody Aurors flooing out of nowhere…" he muttered under his breath "Who the hell are you anyway? Were's your badge?" He spat towards them angrily.

Harry fished in his pocket and took out his Magical Police identity. He showed it at the Port Officer who was still cleaning his shirt. He nodded and waved Harry off "So what can I do for you Chief Auror? Does the lady have an identity?"

Harry looked at her briefly and then took her hand. He pulled her next to him "Miss Hermione Granger is not an Auror. She is escorting me"

The officer threw the tissue in the bin and looked at her disinterested "Fine! And what can I do for you people?"

Harry forced a smile "We have a peculiar request for you Officer…your name please?"
The ginger man pursed his lips and sat down heavily behind his office. He cleared his throat that was apparently full of mucus and looked up at them "Daniel Baird, forgive that sound young lady, the constant exposure to humidity, is always causing problems to my airways. Happy New Year, by the way" he said in an afterthought.

"Don't worry, Happy New Year" she said and tried a smile that failed.

"So what can I help you with Chief Auror?" Daniel looked back at Harry.

"We need a ride with the black ferry" he said nonchalantly.

Daniel pulled back "A ride to Azkaban? Whatever for?"

Harry smiled and pulled her hand playfully "My friend is writing a book about Bellatrix LeStrange. We fought in the war against her, as you might already know…"

Daniel raised his brow and winced truly not impressed, but didn't stop Harry.

"…She always had this peculiar request. To take a tour in the Azkaban prison during New Year's Eve. I haven't gotten around with my job to help her out with this. I thought I'd try it today. I know all this is sort notice and it might sound weird and all…"

Daniel waved him off "You have any idea how many people come over offering money to me, for the exact same reason? Azkaban holds such a haunting reputation that people want to experience it from the safety of the visitor's perspective all the bleeding time"

Harry frowned "Do you take such requests?"

Daniel felt suddenly cornered "Never of course, that would be illegal, which is something that comes down to your request also"

Harry sighed "I am Chief of the magical Police force. I am not the same as any layman that has nothing better to do. I've visited this hellhole various times and I've escorted prisoners myself in there. Don't treat me so patronisingly"

Daniel caressed his cheeks and shook his head "Even if you are right, the black ferry is not working tonight. It's New Year's Eve…” she flicked his shoulders as if that was enough of an explanation. Apparently at this particular evening nothing was working at Dundee Port.

"Isn't there any ferry or boatman available to take us across?" Hermione interposed, unable to keep away from the conversation. It was going nowhere.

Daniel flicked his shoulders again "You can go out and ask, if you are able to find anyone, but I rather doubt it"

Harry frowned "You don't seem very willing to assist us"

"I have no problem ferrying you over. I just don't have any boat ready to sail" he said and picked up his firewhiskey. He filled his tumbler with the remaining liquid which was very little. He looked at it disappointed.

Harry inhaled and released Hermione's hand. He frowned and licked his lower lip "You know, New Year's Eve or not, it's illegal to be drinking, while it's your shift. As Chief Auror, I think I should make an official report of this incident" he said coldly and made to walk towards the fireplace.
Hermione looked from one man to the other confused, but didn't dare interpose at Harry's play. He was in charge now and she didn't want to ruin anything.

Daniel stood up "Wait a minute! You floo in here out of the blue, asking me to cross you over to Azkaban illegally, just for a woman's whim and now I am the one who is going to get reported?" he sounded confused.

Harry turned around and smirked "We can both file a report on each other. It will be your word against mine"

Daniel straightened "Considering your position and your reputation, I think that's hardly fair!"

Harry nodded "It's not. Life is not fair my friend. Come on Hermione, we are going home" he said and offered her his hand.

She raised both brows at him and took his hand with a lot of hesitation. Just before throwing the floo in the fireplace Daniel's voice stopped them "I have a cargo ferry passing across in an hour….

Harry paused and turned slowly around. Hermione's heart looped with anxiety "Can we go with it?" he asked without any more pussyfooting. The masks were off anyway. This Port Officer knew they weren't going there for a research about a vague book, but he cared more about not being reported for drinking on the job.

Daniel nodded "I will notify the Captain, but you must promise not to report what you saw here" he warned Harry.

Harry smiled knowingly "What did I see? I don't remember anything. You Hermione?"

She shook her head eagerly "Nope, nothing"

Daniel sighed and nodded "Very well, follow me"

***...***

"Holly hell!" Hermione spat as they stepped out of the upper deck. The snow up there in Dundee Port had already been heavy for several days and the deck was frozen all over. Harry saved her from a very painful and embarrassing tumble as her boot slipped onto the frozen snow.

"Steady" he whispered at her and looked at the angry horizon.

Daniel did as he promised and boarded them on a cargo ferry that was operated by Captain Harry McNish and three sailors. The Captain was a rather young man, forty years old, with a clear face and a pleasant smile. He didn't question the order from a higher officer and took them in willingly, albeit a little curiously. He offered them a place at the ship's bridge, but Hermione pressed Harry to go outside. She just couldn't stand being in closed up spaces at all. To Harry's irritation she dragged him out of the bridge, through the ship's ladders and various decks, until the walked out to the front deck.

"I don't understand why we cannot go inside. It's bloody freezing out here" Harry bit angrily.

"I cannot be inside, I am sorry" she whispered and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. She half buried her head in her purple scarf and drew deep warm breaths, filled with her stale scent that was trapped there from not taking a bath for several days. Harry didn't reply to her, but he didn't try to bring her inside either. He remained a silent sentinel next to her, fixing his glasses every now and again. She could see from her peripheral vision his hand fidgeting with his sleeve, were his wand was hiding. She reached to her own sleeve and checked it also. She sighed in relief when she felt it's...
solid presence and closed her eyes "What are we going to do when we get there Harry? We have absolutely no plan"

He winced "We will play by ear and you are going to follow my lead Hermione. You don't know Azkaban. Don't try to take over, or you might blow this attempt up. Please” he looked at her with a deep crease on his brow. As if he was expecting her to act unwisely at some point.

"I will do whatever you say, but I just don't know how this is going to work” she said thoughtfully. Several thunders fell at the horizon and she shuddered heavily. She wrapped her arms tighter around her shoulders.

Harry remained silent for a few minutes and the only things breaking the quietness around them was the howling wind and the swelling sea that broke upon the ship's hull. When he finally spoke, she looked at him tensely "In Azkaban all the alarms go off simultaneously…” he muttered mostly at himself.

She frowned.

"Any attempt to use illegal magic in there will result in the alarms going off all over the building…” he turned and looked at her "If one of us raises the alarms for some vague reason, then the other could possibly use magic and go undetected, since all the alarms would already be off” he raised his brow carefully.

"Sounds good enough to me” she said breathlessly.

"We need to find out where the side entrances are. One of us must remain in the front reception and possibly cause chaos, the other must use magic to trace the side entrances that lead to the hidden part of the prison. If they brought him here illegally they wouldn't have used the front entrance” he explained.

"You cause havoc, I'll check on the side entrances” she offered willingly.

He pressed his lips "I might be able to speak reason to them and rally them to search the prison. You have no authority there. You are not an Auror, but I don't want you taking over this task” he mused.

She nodded "Do you see any other volunteers out here? I will find where they took him. Don't worry” she sounded very determined.

Harry sighed "I don't want to endanger you…”

She flicked her shoulders "I was always the one digging you boys out of trouble, remember? I'll do the same now. Don't worry about me. Just make sure you create enough havoc for me to use magic untraced”

Harry nodded thoughtfully and rubbed his chin "We will both play it by ear at first….just follow my lead”

She nodded and buried her chin in her purple scarf once again "I will” she nodded.

They remained upon the front deck for a long time feeling the freezing air on their faces and their hands numbing down. Her eyes were concentrated on the dark horizon and she counted inwards every time a lightning tore the sky, until she heard the rumbling sound echoing through the night. Trying to understand how far away those thunders fell and if they were approaching the nightmarish island. Not feeling the biting elements of nature that were making her lips turn blue and her eyelashes catch a thin layer of ice.
It was Harry that dragged her almost by force inside the bridge, when he saw her visibly trembling all over. She tried to resist him, as she didn't want to lose sight of the horizon, but when she got into the warmth of the bridge she collapsed exhausted at a chair that the Captain offered her. A small glass of firewhiskey was placed in front of her and even though she refused at first, in the end Harry convinced her to drink it in order to warm up her circulation.

"You won't help him, if your freeze your ass off, before we reach that damned island" he whispered in her ear and that pushed her into action. She drank it slowly as the taste disgusted her, but admittedly she felt way warmer half an hour later. The Captain and Harry were discussing about the difficulties of being a seaman in the hostile Northern Seas. She was not participating in the conversation, she was half listening to them, half to a small cd-player that the Captain had behind the ship's wheel. It was not loud enough to fill the bridge with the haunting Scottish ballads that the Captain had chosen, but it was enough to have her drifting away from them slowly. Her mind flew out to him faster than the hull of this ship was able to sail. Was he in there somewhere? Was she ever going to find him alive? Would she be able to tell him how much she loved him? She remembered her prayer at the church and the need to pray again arose again, but she didn't dare move and betray anything to the men in front of her. She was not feeling terrified anymore, not sad or desperate. She was feeling a haunting void, a dark serenity that was always present before a great storm. She didn't know if she was ready to face whatever Azkaban had to offer her. She didn't even know if he was there, or if she was going to step on this torturous land for no reason at all.

She swallowed and rubbed her warm fingers on the rough material of her coat. She stood up and walked slowly towards the large windows. When she reached them she leaned her shoulder on them and her forehead rested on the coldness of the thick glass. She tried to keep her body from sliding back and forth as the intense swaying of the ship was attempting to overbalance her. Her eyes looked at the tumbling sea in front of the ship and her heart sunk. The beautiful haunting voice of the next song made her eyes water and she didn't try to wipe them off.

"Who is singing?" she whispered, not expecting the men to hear her.

A short pause told her they noticed her and it was the Captain that spoke "Loreena McKennitt ***. Do you know her?"

Hermione nodded "I've heard of her"

"Old girl was half Scottish, half Irish. Did you know that she is an honorary colonel of the Canadian army now?" the Captain humphed.

"Is she?" Harry asked conversationally and then looked at Hermione's slouched back.

"Little too popular for my tastes, but her vocal chords could always capture some of the Celtic magic that's always kindled into the heart of every Scotsman and Irishman, yes indeed" the Captain agreed with himself.

Hermione closed her eyes and felt more tears running down her face….there is one half Irish heart that might not be beating anymore with it's Celtic fire….Her fingers wiped away the tears with renewed anger. As Harry and the Captain began discussing again in low tones she felt herself getting lost in the welling of the rolling waves that crashed with anger upon the ship. Some of them were high enough to drench the windows with water and cover the decks below. She remained like that for a long time, listening to the beautiful music that filled the bridge and musing over the waves that covered the lower decks time and time again. Her eyes returning frequently at the dark horizon that was flashing with heavy lightning. As time passed by she closed her eyes, needing to detach herself from what was expecting her out there.
It was the voice of the Captain again that made her open her eyes slowly "There, would you feast your eyes at that…what do you think?" he asked and pointed at the horizon.

Hermione straightened and cleared some stray hair from her eyes. A lightning crossed the sky above them and she saw the outline of the dark and menacing A shaped building. Out there standing alone in the consuming darkness, like a silent sentinel of death. She shuddered visibly "Azkaban" she whispered.

The Captain nodded and pursed his lips "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to your final destination….Hell" he said and the heaviness of his voice echoed through the bridge.

Hermione swallowed heavily and a deep crease appeared on her brow "Hold on...I am coming". She closed her eyes and enveloped that thought with her magic. Then she send it off to him, hoping that in some manner it would reach him, if he was even in there somewhere. If it was even possible for her to show him how much her heart was weeping with those words. Wanting to offer him comfort in some way, to make him hear her, impossible as it was. To make him understand that she was getting closer.

Her warm breath filled the glass with vapour that blurred the immense dismal building. She touched the glass with her fingers and bit her lower lip. Her pointer finger pulled back and her eyes fell on the circular clear shape that it left on the vapour. Azkaban looked perfectly framed behind it and she felt a strong shudder of apprehension running down her back.

Hold on...she thought and her heart almost broke into a thousand pieces.

"You made it through to 2001 laddie, or at least you are close to making through. Wake up" Adam spoke carefully. He was partly afraid to wake up this tall stranger that seemed to ignore the Dementors darkness and returned from the roof time and time again, bending all the expectations out of shape and altering reality with his persistence. Even breaking the stony wall with a physical strength that seemed totally impossible after so many days of hard torture and seeming to carry in him an unmatched determination to survive.

The Azkaban bells never chimed in New Year's Eve, no one could have a way of knowing that the year just changed, out there in the middle of the huge rolling waves, behind a curtain of constantly howling wind. Adam though always engraved the days in a manmade calendar on the wall, with sharp pieces of coal or limestone. He always looked at the calendar at the communications room, whenever they took him there in order to send off a message to his sister. It was very hard though to keep track of time. That was truly challenging, especially during the winter, when the sun was rarely seen through his small window. Therefore he knew that today was New Year's Eve, but he had no way of knowing if it was past twelve at night. He just tried to say something nice at the stranger that was laying face down on the hard rocks for a long time immovable. His hand still dangling from the only chain that was still connected to the wall.

He winced and his hand lingered above the long haired wizard for a while in indecision. Did he really want to wake him up? A few hours ago that man was lost in other worlds that send him into a mad fury that destroyed half the cell. Was he sure he wanted to come face to face with that again? It took him a long time to open up his eyes and decide that his cellmate was not a threat to him anymore. A longer time even to approach him and talk. Nevertheless he couldn't remain silent to all this suffering he was witnessing. This man didn't just go into an unjustified frenzy, out of the blue. They had tortured him for five days, they had allowed the Dementors to suck on his soul for an equal amount of time and they had broken his body and his mind thoroughly. It was only a matter of time before he either gave up and died, or become a frothing lunatic that would kill anyone on his path to freedom. More or less what happened to any inmate of Azkaban.
Frothing lunatic or not, Adam couldn't remain hidden at his side of the cell, whilst this man was half
dead and half out of his mind. He had to do something to help him. He walked back to the faucet and
turned it on. The brown smelly water filled his palm and he brought it back carefully to Severus. He
emptied it on his cheek and forehead and tried to clean him "Useless" he muttered dejected and this
time his hand cupped Severus's shoulder. He shook him lightly "Come on, open up your eyes. I
know you are alive. I can see you are breathing, now open them. Can you hear me?" he said with a
deep frown.

The only thing Severus felt was sharp pain on his cheek. He winced and tried to open his eyes that
felt heavy like led.

"I've never felt so alone in my life"

"Don't you know that the closer you come to death, the lonelier you feel?"

"For fuck's sake open up your eyes laddie, I hear footsteps again. I don't know if they are coming for
you, or just to check this wing, but please wake up" Adam sounded terrified. He slapped Severus
several times over on the face and shook him hard in order to arouse him. The steps and the distant
murmurs were a few corridors away, but Adam was sure they were going to pass from their cell also.
He couldn't risk them finding him like this. He had almost completely destroyed his restraints.

"A fell voice in the air is calling… do you hear it?"

"Hold on...I am coming"

He shook his head and squeezed his already closed eyes tight. Adam looked up towards the door
urgently and stopped breathing. He heard a cell door cracking open from the corridor and then a
scream from one of the inmates. Yes, the guards apparently wanted to have some fun with the
prisoners on New Year's Eve. He didn't know if Borovic was amongst them, but his cellmate was so
fucked up that even the slightest torture would probably send him careering through death's door
"They will be here soon. They cannot see you like this with one of the chains broken. They will tell
Borovic! You have to wake up and pretend you are still tied up to the wall! You are too bloody
heavy for me, I cannot push you over" he cried near his ear and tried to pull him by the arm. Adam
was too old, too weak and Severus was too big for him. His dead weight didn't move an inch. Adam
remained like that for a while, slapping him, pushing him, urging him to wake up. Trying to pull him
uselessly towards the wall, without any particular results. He only managed to move him a few
inches at a time, making his head rub on the rough edgy stones on the floor. Feeling like he was
doing absolutely nothing to help the situation, but not knowing that this was slowly waking up
Severus.

Severus's eyes slowly opened up as several smaller stones cut through his eyelid when Adam tried to
pull him closer to the wall. The image of Voldemort flickered sharply in his mind and he winced
painfully. His free hand pushed Adam away with far more force than his broken body could have
potentially produced. His cellmate scattered quickly to him again and grabbed hold of his shoulder
"Do you see me? Can you hear me?"

Severus frowned and looked at the face of Adam confused. He took a breath in order to answer, but
started coughing instead. The smiling face of Voldemort returned and he covered his eyes with his
free hand. The groan was loud and sounded painful and he didn't even realise it was coming from his
chest.

Adam pressed his lips "No, no time for that now, they are walking up the corridors. They are
checking on everyone. You have to move closer to the wall. I'll put the boulder back in place and
you can just lay there and act unconscious. They cannot see the chain broken!" he said imperatively.
"Will I be remembered when I am gone?"

Voldemort smiled wickedly at him "No one will remember you...."

"Life is a dream...death is an illusion"

He hissed behind his hand and tried to turn away from Adam, but his chained hand stopped him.

Adam turned him over and pulled his hand away from his eyes "Look at me! They are coming and if they see your chain broken they will kill you on the spot!"

Severus frowned and shook his head in order to clear it. His thoughts were scattered and confused and his eyesight blurry, but he knew were he was. In the same nightmarish place he had been for the last five days, although he couldn't remember anything after a point and on. His eyes fell to the broken chain and he looked back at Adam as if his cellmate could answer all his questions and disperse all his confusion.

Did I do that?

"They-are-coming-for-you!" Adam mouthed as another cell door opened up much closer to them.

Severus hissed and pushed himself upright, his dizziness almost overpowering him. He looked at the broken stones on the wall and then at the large boulder that was attached to his chain, next to his foot. He staggered and almost fell down "Did I do that?" he whispered feeling in and out of reality.

Adam nodded nervously and began fidgeting with his fingers "You broke the chain from the wall, and now they are going to see you like that. Laddie, they will kill you. Go back to the wall please!"

Voldemort thundered through his brain with a manic laughter that bled his ears. He grabbed his head painfully. He doubled down and groaned audibly.

"For fuck's sake, they are going to kill me too, because of you..." Adam muttered and scattered at the back of the cell as another door opened up closer to them.

"I am sorry I did all this to you...I am sorry I endangered you...find the snowdrop...please find it..."

He forced himself to open his eyes and saw that his cellmate was hiding at the corner of the room now. Apparently that was all the help he was going to get. He couldn't allow them to touch him again. He couldn't stand another trip at the roof. He'd rather have a guard stab him to death right there and then. He'd rather break all his chains and reach the roof in some manner. Then he could fall of the edge to the sharp rocks below and end all this torture. Everything would be over then. He looked at the wall and gave a testing pull at the chain that was still attached to it.

"Don't rattle the chains! They will hear you! Stop it!" Adam hissed from his dark corner.

Severus shot him an angry glare and then took firm hold of the chain and approached the wall. He placed his foot at the bottom of the wall and began pulling in all earnest.

I have to get out of here...I have to break free....I have to fall off the edge of the roof...the thoughts repeated in his mind as his hands pulled harder and harder.

"Don't struggle, soon you'll be free of pain"

"I don't want to leave her...the voice told me to hold on...I have to hold on for her..."

"Why remain? Time will only pay you with ash, dust and a dark silent grave, remember? There is
nothing out there for you anymore"

"There is...someone is coming...her voice told me to hold on..."

"It was just a dream...just a dream...nothing more"

"No…” he shook his head in order to send all those conflicting voices away. His teeth ground angrily and his jawline tensed with the unbearable tension he felt inside.

The cell door next to them opened up and they heard the mirthful mumbling of the guards. Adam made a protective sign and brought his knees up close to his chest "They are coming to kill you laddie, I am so sorry I couldn't help you"

Severus felt adrenaline shooting through his body and his temples moved as his jaw clenched painfully hard. The face of Voldemort flickered in his mind and he winced. His roared, not minding if anyone could hear him and the boulder that was holding the second chain to the wall moved sharply.

"Check on that cell and I will wake up the worms on this one!” the voice said right outside their door.

Severus threw his head back and with one last painful cry that he couldn't hold inside anymore, he pulled the second chain free. His body crashed to the opposite wall with a muted thud, but the large rock that crashed right next to him caused a ruckus that notified the guard outside immediately.

"Did you hear that? There's trouble in this one. Cover me!” the voice said urgently.

"Heaven help us!” Adam muttered.

Severus picked up one of the heavy stones with a lot of effort. He pressed his body on to the wall next to the door and leaned his head back. He closed his eyes and began counting inside. There was no way back now. He needed to fall onto one of these long boot knives the guards always carried with them, or fall off the roof. He had to stop the pain, or try to find that fell voice that spoke into his mind. He had to either die on the spot or break free. He couldn't stand this torture anymore...

The keys on the cell door rattled angrily and Severus clenched his teeth in determination. When Voldemort's wicked smile appeared behind his eyes again, he hissed in pain and the stone almost fell from his hands. The keys stopped and the handle of the door moved slowly. His hands tightened around the heavy stone and his fingertips run over the sharpest edge, taking courage from it. He looked straight at Adam that was cowering at the far corner.

"Close your eyes" he muttered under his breath, and he didn't know if he was commanding himself to do that, or his cellmate.
"Hamish?" Harry frowned.

"Yeah, you got the name right, but everything else wrong" the angry Administration officer was gazing him critically.

"Is it so difficult to give us a tour of the prison? Really?" Harry tried to break a smile, but the scrutinising countenance of the officer stopped him.

"As I told you about a dozen times since you came in through the front door, yes. Now go back to the cargo ship. It is going to sail in twenty minutes and I cannot afford the Director to learn that we have unwanted guests, that pretend to research some long lost story about a dead criminal. What a bunch of bullocks... What kind of moron do you take me for? I would have held you in detention, for arriving illegally on the island, but I will respect your office... Chief" he drawled and then pressed his lips "Now-Happy-bloody-New-Year-away-from-my-prison" he counted each word, his voice becoming angrier with each .

Harry looked at the two guards standing next to the tall iron gates. Then he gazed at the officer behind the iron bound reception that pretended not to have noticed them. He could feel Hermione sheathing and knew they couldn't afford to be kicked out now.

He crossed his arms calmly and took a deep breath "Fine...alright. We are not here to research a book". This man was too seasoned to be easily manipulated and Harry needed to act quickly and with partial honesty if he was to gain any points with this thick skinned officer of the law. He should have expected this kind of dismissal from the moment they stepped out to the island and the guards led them in. He looked sideways at Hermione who was fuming, barely holding a straight face in front of this stony officer.

"You don't say...wow" the officer looked bored.

Harry's brow raised and he pursed his lips "We can both be ironic with each other, or you can assist in a case that could possibly blow Azkaban's foundations sky high"

The officer smirked "Oh, now you want your visit here to sound really dangerous....I cannot wait. Give it to us, come on" he urged him.

Hermione inhaled deeply impatiently. This man was pissing her off. If Harry wasn't going to do anything soon, then she was going to take out her wand and wipe that sarcastic smile off his face.

Harry's jaw clenched and he took a step closer to the officer who straightened up quickly and blocked the way with his huge frame "Watch it, Chief. Whatever you have to say, you say it from a respectful distance" he warned.

"Very well, we have suspicions that Azkaban had an illegal transfer during the last five days and we are here to check on that" Harry said honestly.
The officer humphed "Azkaban never gets illegal transfers"

Harry raised his brow "You are talking to an Auror, not a layman…we both know the hidden side entrances that are used to get people in and out without official paperwork. We also know that Azkaban has been illegally used as a huge torture chamber during the first and the second magical war"

"Prove everything you said"

Harry frowned "To whom?"

"Me" the officer titled his head coldly.

"I don't have to prove what you already know. You are an Administration officer here. You know everything that goes on inside this prison" Harry retorted.

"First time I heard what you are telling me. Therefore you have to prove your words or else you don't get a chance to move beyond this point" Hamish pointed an invisible line in front of his boots.

"Harry, I think this is enough…" she tried feeling her nerves fraying at the edges.

He raised his finger and stopped her "I can see that you don't want to cooperate with us, officer. Therefore I am going to address your sense of honour and hope for the best. I suppose you know about Professor Snape's abduction? It's the only thing occupying the newspapers during the last few days" he waited with his head titled in expectation.

Hamish flicked his shoulders "Yeah, what about it?"

She stepped in front of Harry "We have valid suspicions that an old warden of this prison brought him here illegally in order to torture him"

"Valid suspicions?" the officer snickered.

Hermione's jaw clenched "We don't have the proper work paper if that is what you are saying, but our research…"

"Your research means nothing here. Give me a warrant and only then will these doors open up for you" the officer barked and pointed behind him.

"Professor Snape is possibly kept somewhere in your prison against his will and against the law, getting tortured at this very moment. How difficult is it to let us search around? We are no criminals, I am a Police officer for the sake of Merlin. You might help save a life" Harry tried.

"People die all the time in here. I don't care about saving anyone's life" the officer replied coldly.

"You don't care that criminals are using your prison as a torture chamber without your knowledge?" Hermione frowned, unable to believe the disinterest of this man.

He shook his head "Prove to me that something like this is happening"

"How can we prove it, if we cannot search around?" Harry said angrily.

The officer raised his finger at him "Don't raise your voice at me Chief. Your titles mean nothing around this place. You have no authority here"

"I have the authority to check on possible illegal activities and make a report for the Wizengamot. I
can close this place down!" Harry raised his finger back.

Hamish pressed his lips and crossed his arms calmly "Do you have a warrant?"

Harry revealed his teeth "What possible reason would I have to board a cargo ferry to this hellhole in New Year's Eve, except to save an innocent man? I believe Professor Snape is here and we don't have the time to gather the appropriate paperwork. He-might-die, in the meantime" he said and intoned every word, barely constraining his anger.

The officer's brow rose critically and a sarcastic smile spread on his lips "Next thing, you'll be telling us that we have trolls in the dungeon caves underneath the building"

"I am Chief Auror of the magical Police force! I wouldn't have been here trying to reason with an idiotic buffoon if I was not SURE that a man's life was in grave danger!" Harry roared and took a step towards Hamish.

"Idiotic buffoon?!" Hamish took out his wand and pointed it threateningly at Harry "Take that back or you won't make it out of this island alive"

Hermione stepped up "Thought there were no illegal activities in Azkaban"

"What?" Hamish frowned confused.

"Threatening an Auror, is illegal" she raised her brow testily.

Hamish lips curled up in disgust and he looked from one to the other for a few tense moments. Then he pulled back, but he didn't put his wand back in his sleeve "What's the name of the supposed old warden that abducted this man?" he asked dismissively.

Harry gave a quick grateful look at Hermione "Alexander Borovic"

They both saw his face paling and Hermione instantly knew that this man was very aware of more things than he was letting on.

Hamish regained his composure quickly and shook his head "Guy is a psycho case if I remember correctly. He is locked up at St. Mungo"

Harry shook his head "No, he escaped five days ago, when the abduction took place. Check it out" he said and pointed at the telephone that was at the reception behind them.

Hamish waved him off "Just go away, both of you before I throw you in detention. I have better things to do tonight"

"Like join Borovic for a drink?" she spat bravely.

He raised his brow at her warningly "Now you are taking this up at a personal level young missy, be careful"

"I am no one's young missy. I am Professor Hermione Granger and I am here to see Professor Severus Snape. Now either you take me to him or…"

Hamish raised his hands provocatively "Or what missy? what are you going to do to us?"

She raised her hand to him "You know about Borovic, don't you?"

Hamish shook his head and spoke to one of his guards "Escort them back at the cargo before I kill
them illegally. My patience has ran short"

Harry pulled away from the guard that took hold of him "Don't touch me. Officer you are preventing a possibly life saving investigation!"

"File a report on me then" Hamish turned his back to them and walked towards the entrance.

"Get you filthy hands off me!" Hermione pushed the guard that tried to take hold of her arm. Then she turned angrily at Harry. They couldn't afford to be escorted at the cargo. She was not going to allow it "Harry!?" she pleaded.

He nodded and drew his wand "Stop!" he cried.

Both officers pulled their wands. Hamish turned around slowly and then frowned "What the hell? If you move, you'll be dead in seconds"

"Let us search the place" Harry growled and took a step forth.

The officers tensed.

Hermione pulled her wand and looked at Hamish angrily "Take me to Borovic. I saw how you paled when you heard his name. You know what's going on. Take me to him!" she spat decisively.

Hamish pulled his wand with a speed that took both of them by surprise and his eyes gleamed with a menace that had not been present before "You just made my New Year's Eve, much more interesting..." he hissed and got ready to fire.

Harry and Hermione prepared to rebuke, but the prison's alarms stopped them. Red lights and heavy low pitched sirens began ringing all around them. Hermione covered her ears. Harry took a step back and looked confused all around.

"Did you do that?" she mouthed at him.

Harry shook his head "No, did you?!"

"No!" she frowned deeply and looked at Hamish that was hollering orders to his officers.

"Unit one, two and three take the first two levels, unit five six and seven, levels three to five, B and C special Unit you take on the high security wings on the middle floors and inform the Social workers to lock up the hospital and the psychiatric wings. Special Units D and E search the top levels and call down at the entrance Unit X. I will take over it"

Hermione tightened her teeth "Escort me back at the cargo ferry now! I have had enough of this hellhole. I want to go home!" she cried.

Hamish turned to her "Just a small breakout incident and you civilians become hysterical. Quite expected. You had the audacity to threaten me with your wands...damn aren't you lucky that some half crazy fool decided to make a ran for it...Get the hell out of here!"

Harry pulled away from the grip of the guards once again "I am not going anywhere! I am a Police officer I can help you"

"Get out before I blow your head off!" Hamish growled.

"Lower your wand Hamish, what the hell is going on down here?" a middle aged, scowled faced man opened the doors and walked out to them.
"Director Forbes these people came here without any proper paperwork and want to search the prison for an illegal transfer..." Hamish began.

The Director waved him off "I am not asking about them, I am asking about the alarms Officer. Report to me"

Hamish straightened "I have arranged the Units to search each floor. I am taking over Unit X. It's a break out attempt as usual and the first alarms came from the top floor, but we need to check the whole prison. It might be a decoy. Don't worry Sir, I am on top of everything"

Forbes nodded heavily and then looked towards Hermione and Harry "What about them? Why were you threatening them? Who are they?"

Harry tacked his wand and came forth offering his hand "Chief Auror, Harry Potter, nice to meet you"

"You too Chief, your reputation precedes you, but you must understand that coming here without the appropriate paperwork can cause problems. As you can see, we have enough of them already" the Director said calmly.

Hamish nodded at one of his officers reporting and then turned to the Director. "Sir, I am off to take over Unit X, we are going to take over the top floor and the roof" he said.

Hermione peaked at him fleetingly as he walked out of the door.

"So Chief, what can I do to help you?" Forbes asked calmly.

"You seem unfazed by all this ruckus" Harry frowned.

"This kind of thing happens regularly. None of our guests wants to stay in this place, not that I blame them. Now what can I do for you or for the young lady?" he repeated and looked at her with a cold smile.

"I want to be escorted back at the ship!" she replied haughtily.

Harry winced "Go Hermione, I will see you in a little while"

She nodded frigidly and followed the guard that was next to her. The moment they stepped out the heavy rain and the strong wind made her grab hold of her coat and wrap it tightly around her body. The guard walked in front, showing her the way, but her eyes drifted at the side of the building towards Hamish's direction. Knowing that this was her only chance to enter the prison, she drew her wand and pointed at the guard's neck. The man fell unconscious at the wet path and she leaned down. Her eyes gazed upwards at the massive foreboding building. Its clean geometry was a total abomination in the foreground of the consuming waves and the dark clouds. The red light that was flashing all over the greyish monstrosity made her wince in fear, but the steady sirens didn't change their low pitch. She sighed grateful that her magic had gone undetected. Emboldened by that she checked around to make sure that no one was close by. Then she walked quickly towards the direction that Hamish had taken.

It didn't take her long to see his back turning around the far east corner of the building and she ran after him. Her hair sticking on her wet cheeks and her coat weighting her down as the rain drenched it. When she reached the corner of the building, she stopped abruptly and her foot slipped on the black pavement. She caught herself just in time and slammed her body against the flat wall. She felt her breath straining when she peaked from the corner carefully. He was standing a few feet away, talking to a black dressed guard with a dark hood. There were a dozen more men dressed in a similar
manner a little ways off.

This must be the X unit….she thought.

She pressed her back against the wall and prayed inwards that no one noticed her. The sky was slowly breaking dawn and the horizon had taken on a deep red colour, but she couldn't enjoy the scenery, as Hamish and the guard parted ways. The X Unity moved away from them, taking the path that led to the front entrance and Hermione frowned.

wasn't he supposed to take over this Unit?

Now she felt almost certain that this abhorring man knew more than he was letting on. She inhaled and gathered up her courage. She followed him, careful not to detach herself from the security of the towering building. The low pitched sirens gave the howling air a sense of imminent doom. She followed Hamish to the end of the second facade and wondered if they were come around the third and final one. That would lead them back at the entrance, but Hamish didn't intend to move alongside the face of the building this time. He detached himself and went towards the peripheral protective wall that was broken off by huge boulders. Hamish carefully climbed on the boulders and soon she lost him from sight. She cursed under her breath and detached herself from the facade of the building. The ran was quick towards the protective wall. She mimicked Borovic and climbed over the boulders, feeling her city boots unsuitable for such dangerous endeavours.

The rough waves tumbled on the rocks making her hands shake and frequently loose their grip. She concentrated solely on where to place her foot and which sharp edge to hold onto in order to pull herself up. Just when her dangerous trek made her think that all this was in her mind and that Hamish didn't really come this way...just when she started to believe that she was crazy climbing over the huge rocks of the island for nothing, she saw a small yellow light reflecting upon the top of the rock that was above her. Her jaw clenched and she muttered under her breath "Hold on…” not knowing if she was projecting that to Severus, or if she was trying to comfort herself.

She tried to place her foot somewhere upon the slippery rock, but the darkness around her, the rain that kept blinding her, the air that was howling loud enough to make her head hurt and the constant wailing of the sirens didn't give her the luxury to search for a good grip. Her foot stepped on a small rocky ledge and her hands grabbed the top of the rock. She was ready to push herself up when when a huge rolling wave rose high above her. She barely had the time to look up and her jaw dropped open as the waves crashed down on her with breathtaking force.

When she opened her eyes, her heart was beating out of control, but she was still hanging off the rock for dear life. Her lips curled up in a scared smile and she huffed, unable to believe that she managed to hold on through that watery wall. She shed off her wet quickly, not wanting anything to weigh her down. Then she pulled herself up with difficulty. When she reached the top she kneeled down and tried to catch her breath. Hamish a few feet away from her, unlocking a small rusty iron door that had a small dirty yellow light above it.

Hermione slithered off the rock and walked alongside the wall quietly, until she came close to him. Then she drew her wand. The door opened up and she knew that if she didn't act now, then all her chances of finding Severus would be lost. Her jaw clenched and she thought the unforgivable, bearing no regrets in her heart. No words were necessary as the spell jumped out of her wand and fell on Hamish. His body straightened and his arms fell limp on his sides. The door creaked open heavily and Hermione shuddered at the sound.

She looked up to check that nothing changed in the alarms. Then she sighed in relief and came up behind him. She lowered her wand and swallowed hard "Is Alexander Borovic in this building?” she whispered.
"Yes" the officer answered quietly as she was controlling him by the Imperius.

"Take me to him" she said and pointed the wand at the back of his head, keeping the connection steadily on him.

Hamish walked silently past the rusty door and Hermione followed him in quickly.

Severus pushed himself up and gazed confused at the pool of blood under his palm. He winced and felt his head woozy and foggy. Everything was spinning wildly around him and he was unable to concentrate his eyes on a single point for too long. He exhaled and his breath sounded too loud in his ears. He turned around dazed and looked at the guard that was lying face down inside the cell, with his head cracked open. He felt his stomach twisting viciously and looked away.

The second guard was lying a few feet away from him unconscious. He still held a wand loosely in one hand and a boot knife in the other. Severus frowned and touched the side of his temple were gooey, thick liquid was moving down his face. His fingers got buried in a very deep scar and he hissed. His eyesight flickered off and then on again and his dizziness flared up. He remembered distantly the guard stabbing him hard at the side of his face, before Severus grabbed the back of his head and smashed it violently upon the rough stones of the wall.

He hissed and closed his eyes as the sirens screamed around him. The second guard managed to fire up all the alarms before Severus took him out of commission. He heard the cell door across him rattling violently upon it's hinges. Cries for help, cursing hollers, painful laments, shrieks of terror and threatening roars filled the corridors of wing 311. The forgotten part of this prison, were prisoners were left to die or go crazy. He didn't know if he was going crazy or if he was close to dying, or maybe both. He grabbed hold of his head and moaned from the pain. He couldn't even pinpoint what hurt him the most anymore. The pain seemed to be coming from his very soul.

When he opened his eyes again he saw a figure crawling out of the open door of his cell. He backed off in terror. His foot caught in the arm of the fallen guard and he fell next to him. He felt more blood sipping down the side of his head and his stomach made a nauseated loop.

"You killed them…ran away. If they get you, you are dead. ran the fuck away!" Adam whispered with a broken voice.

Those words kicked Severus into action. He looked through his foggy eyesight the fallen guard and leaned down. He grabbed the wand and then scattered to his other hand to take his bloody boot knife. Then he stood up quickly only to stagger at his feet. Voices from the back of the corridor made him turn around sharply.

"ran up to the roof!" Adam hissed and then crawled back in the cell.

The laments and the curses from the cells all around intensified as the running boots of the guards echoed on the staircase. Maybe the deep scar at the side of his head, or the torture he underwent all these days made the noises feel so excruciatingly loud, but he simply couldn't take it anymore. He wanted out. He lifted the wand of the guard and looked at the iron gate partly confused. A large ball of energy sprang out of it's tip and blasted the iron gates in the air. He looked behind him, but only saw debris and a lot of dust as he made a ran for the roof. Any kind of freedom suited him and right now the closest to that was falling of the edge of that roof and ending this torture.

The adrenaline that burned hot through his veins forced him into a wild run. The next ball of energy came without him even realising that he lifted the foreign wand and the door to the roof blasted away and fell of the edge of the building to the black rocks below. When he was out and felt the rain cooling down his fiery brow, his eyesight closed down for a few scary moments. He leaned his
hands on his thighs and panted like a fish out of the water. The rain covered his eyes with the blood that was overflowing at the side of his head and he looked behind a red semi-transparent drape at the large A shaped void in the middle of the building. He had stopped very close to the edge and his heart thumped in alarm at how close he had come to realising his previous wish. His legs took the initiative and walked back in fear, drawing him away from the impressive drop of death. That is when he felt them sweeping down from the sky, gliding elegantly as if the angry elements couldn't touch them. The dark bony sentinels that sucked his soul dry and left him half alive and even less than half sane. He lifted his arms and covered his eyes protectively.

You will not kill me….I will do it myself…..he thought in dismay and tried to dig up some pleasant memory inside the hell that was blazing in his mind. A small white snowdrop flashed behind his closed eyes and he momentarily felt hope. The white doe that radiated from his broken body was strong enough to light up the skies with its brilliance. It swept outwards and pushed the Dementors far above the clouds. He didn't even get to witness the intensity of his Patronus, because his arms were still covering his eyes and it took all his strength to keep himself standing. The air was howling and the sirens were screaming around him and he waited and waited long for the Dementors to start tearing away his soul one more time. The heavy downpour cleaned out his face and revealed a deep angry gash that started at his temple and ended at the top of his cheek. He legs were trembling visibly and the need to sit down was crucial, but he was afraid to move. Yet, time didn't bring with it the frozen touch of the Dementors, nor the agonising pain that always accompanied that touch. Slowly he drew his heavy arms away from his eyes and peeked timidly at the red horizon.

Red dawn...someone will die…

His eyes darted towards the edge of the roof and he heard the voices that kept urging him to get closer to it, loud and clear.

You will...its your death...your relief from pain. Jump off the edge. The end is near…

He stumbled closer and gazed at the sharp rocks below that were getting covered by the steady onslaught of the frothing waves. Inside his daze, with half of his sanity already gone, he couldn't remember that he owned the gift of flight. That if he so wished he could fly from that roof and onto his freedom instead of committing suicide. His wet hair was whipping around his face as the galloping wind assaulted him relentlessly.

"Hold on!" the voice that yelled made his blood freeze in terror.

The fell voice told me to hold on, she is coming…but this voice…this isn't her voice…

"Hold on! Another suicidal attempt?" Borovic asked and lifted his wand.

Severus felt his eyes closing down and shook his head to clear it off its dizziness "Leave me alone…" he whispered feeling heartbroken.

Hold on…

These comforting words were not supposed to be spoken by his assassin, but from her. From the one that had to find the snowdrop. Upon that thought he looked up confused as to why he couldn't see the Dementors anymore, suddenly remembering them as if through a dream.

"Not until I see you dead"

"I'll do it for you, just let me go" Severus said and the desolation in his voice was hair raising. He eyed the edge of the roof once again.
Borovic laughed manically "I honestly want to wait for her to find you, so I can kill you in front of her"

Severus frowned in confusion and gazed up at him "Her to find me?"

Borovic raised his brow and rolled the wand expertly between his fingers "Your princess is here, trying to get to you before it's too late".

His tone was sarcastic, but Severus didn't hear it. He tilted his head slightly and his fingers tightened around the forgotten wand on his hand "Hermione is here?"

Borovic pressed his lips "Yes and she is as determined, as you; but I can break anyone, even the most determined. You always had the rumour of being unbreakable...Are you indeed? Lift your wand!"

Severus's jaw clenched and the pain that tore through the side of his head made him feel woozy. His other hand flexed around the knife, upon her thought.

"Let's witness your famous skills master. I've been waiting many years for this duel" Borovic smiled.

Severus lifted up the guard's wand and swallowed hard. Hermione was here? She was in this hellhole searching for him? He couldn't allow Borovic to touch her. His knuckles went white and he gazed at his opponent as steadily as his exhausted state allowed him.

"Let's play!" Borovic fired an offensive spell quicker than the eyes could see.

Severus parried with equal speed. He frowned in confusion and looked at his hand that was holding the wand. He was too messed up to handle a duel...

Right?

Borovic smiled widely "Finally, a worthy opponent" he cried and the sudden array of attacks took Severus by surprise.

The rooftop lit up from the spells that ricochet in every direction as Borovic fired them and Severus rebuked them. His mind was fuzzy and confused and he barely had the time to think of his reactions.

No single word left the mouth of Borovic, yet Severus knew the oncoming spells even before they left the tip of that formidable wand. His mind took over instinctively and his Legimency intruded the Auror's mind and allowed him to know most, if not all the oncoming spells prior to them being released. That gave him a monumental advantage against Borovic, who grew more and more impatient and angry after each spell got parried away.

Yet Severus didn't feel that he had enough strength to organise an attack. He barely had enough power to intrude his opponent's mind and parry the violent onslaught. He whole body was in pain and his broken ribs were restricting his ability to breathe. He rebuked successfully a combination of three offensive spells, but was unable to stand up anymore. He kneeled down heavily and gasped for breath.

"Get up motherfucker! Get up!" Borovic hollered and his wild eyes gleamed under the redness of the heavy skies.

Severus inhaled and his hand pressed on his side, trying to alleviate the pain.

Borovic snapped his arm angrily and another barrage of offensive dark spells fell on a Severus that
was barely able to keep himself upright and awake. His jaw clenched and he pushed himself to stand up and fight for as long as he could possibly hold on. Hermione was in this hellish building. If he died then Borovic was going to go after her. If not today, then someday. He was not a man that easily let go of a grudge and with him dead, Hermione would be next. The thought of Borovic getting his hands on her animated him as much as his weakened condition allowed, but he knew that in the end he would not be able to kill this maniac. Hermione would end up at Borovic's mercy and he would be lying in some forgotten shallow grave unable to keep her safe.

He parried two vicious attacks that exploded behind him and felt the dizziness from the stab on his temple flaring up "I did what you asked off me! I never resisted you! Leave Hermione alone!" his voice thundered so impressively upon the rooftop that even Borovic paused in slightly indecision. Only a few months ago he would have given anything to have his deep voice back again, yet now that it echoed upon Azkaban's shadowy rooftop, he didn't care. He felt his own tears mixing up with the rain and his head burning with fresh raw anger and a long forgotten lust for blood "You promised to let her be..." he whispered and his eyes overflowed by tears of anger and desperation.

"I lied! Your brilliant princess is going to die a very painful death, like my wife did at the hands of your friends!" Borovic spat and send another dark spell towards him.

Severus parried it easily and felt his heart speeding up "You promised to leave Hermione be! You promised!" his voice rumbled in blind fury, as it was this promise that made him sustain all that torture.

"Read-my-lips…I-lied" Borovic tilted his head to him and Severus felt his eyesight fogging up completely. Sudden adrenaline filled up his veins at the thought of Hermione getting tortured as violently as he. The attack he launched was so violent and unforeseen that Borovic's eyes flared in anger and fear. Severus didn't even think of the Dark spells that left his wand. They were called instinctively as if his magic had taken control over his body.

Not giving himself a chance to think that this was the first time he was attacking any wizard after joining Albus, he wove intricate patterns of dark magical matter around Borovic so quickly and so efficiently that the Auror tried hard to hold every attack in check. The onslaught that Severus undertook, went on for several more minutes and with each passing second Borovic was taking another step back, looking around him in confusion as hex after hex crashed upon his wand. The more Severus released Dark Magical Hexes, the more his lust for blood and the need to kill became more prominent. Slowly his eyes turned yellow again, brightening up with magic that didn't feel right on his soul, but felt orgasmic on his body. Magic that he held with difficulty back at Hogwarts when he had healed Hermione. The use of the Dark Arts always took out the worst in people and for Severus the worst was becoming a killer. White noise echoed through his mind that was empty of all thought. His body was devoid of any pain as adrenaline took over the wheel of this violent duel. He kept pushing Borovic, shuddering in pleasure as the Auror twisted and bend under the heaviness of the assault. Inside the emptiness of his mind an image flashed and send him rolling into madness. He saw Hermione being raped by this man and his blind fury exploded outwards with a thundering growl that sounded like a caged animal. He send out a barrage of Dark Hexes combined so masterfully that they proved too much for Borovic. The Auror parried two spells, but the third crashed straight on his chest and send him rolling upon the wet tiles.

Severus dropped his wand and ran up to him with a speed and agility that didn't correspond to his wounds or extreme exhaustion. He slid upon the tiles and his knee crashed painfully on the Auror's chest. He grabbed Borovic's hair and pulled his head back. The knife got buried on his throat. He squeezed his eyes tight and felt his chest constricting with the need to scream "I am going to kill you..." he hissed with unbearable hatred.
Borovic grinned and his fingers tried to pull his hand closer to the wand that fell only a couple of inches away "Fuck off!" he spat.

Severus tightened his grip on the Auror's hair and his knife twisted "You deserve to die a painful death..." he hissed. He saw Borovic through tunnel vision and he shook his head slightly. He was unable to get a grip on reality. It was flickering on and off.

"SEVERUS NO!"

He looked up confused and saw Hermione running with her wand uplifted.

"Hermione?" he whispered, but when he felt Borovic squirming under his hands, his jawline tightened and he twisted his knife again.

Hermione slowed down when she came closer to them "Severus, no...!" she shook her head "Don't...don't kill him or this psychotic motherfucker will land you in Azkaban permanently!"

He shook his head and swallowed heavily. The imperative need to kill was burning through his blood. The use of such extensive Dark Magic had taken part of his soul with it. Maybe the remaining part that the Dementors didn't try to suck out of him. Borovic's voice came to his undoing.

"Kill me! Prove to her that you are a killer! Prove to her that you are a monster! Show her how easily you and your friends killed my wife!" he snapped and arched his body as Severus pressed the knife deeper.

He felt his body shuddering and looked at the red face of Borovic that was gasping for breath, his saliva running down the side of his mouth "I never touched your wife..." he whispered feeling reality slipping away from him. The tunnel vision was turning narrower by each passing second.

He felt her sitting down next to them carefully, but didn't look up to her. He didn't want to see her through those yellowish demon eyes. He didn't want her to see him like that. This was not the real him as Borovic declared. This was some dark forgotten part of him that Voldemort had activated and that Severus always tried to forget. That was the silent killer in him that didn't have any hesitation on using every Dark Spell he knew, in order to destroy everything around him. His heart was thumping hard. She touched his hand that was holding the knife. He shuddered at the contact and forced himself to look at her face. Her eyes were as loving as he remembered them "I am here...everything is over. You are safe. Let him go or you will be condemned in this hellhole for all eternity"

"Do it! Fucking do it! Kill me! Show her that you are a murderer!" Borovic spat.

Severus clenched his jaw and looked down at him.

Her hand was warm and slightly clammy as it tightened around his "These hands don't belong to a killer" she said softly and he could hear her voice clear as a bell behind the howling wind and the wailing sirens that never seized. He saw her sad smile through his tunnel vision "These hands held Teddy protectively when he was walking upon the railing, remember?" she asked.

He swallowed and kept his eyes on hers, feeling their love caressing his very soul. He didn't move.

Her hand cupped his gently "They fixed my car and they shared coffee with me in the most unforeseen date in the history of the magical world. They played Gobstones against Hagrid and helped Teddy win. They brought me my coat when I was cold, remember?"
He felt his eyes welling with tears and he nodded softly. The knife loosened up on Borovic's neck.

"These hands are not a murderer's. They used magic to save my life and they caressed my face as you kissed me. And you kissed me into your world so thoroughly, that I don't want to return to my previous dimension anymore"

He swallowed hard and tried to hold on from her words in order to come back. To somehow push back the hellish fiends that were trying to crawl out of him.

"These beautiful hands tickled me …" she offered him a small sad laugh and pressed her lips. Her eyes were overflowing with tears "Remember how ticklish I am?"

He tightened his lips and tears ran down his cheeks. He nodded.

"I love it when you call me silly when I get ticklish...don't take that away from me by doing something stupid right now. Let go of the knife..." she soothed him.

"Hermione..." he exhaled and felt his eyesight slowly clearing up and his lust for blood settling down.

She pulled his hand away from Borovic's neck slowly and he didn't resist. "These are not the hands of a killer. They are hands that can draw beautiful memories of a handsome young man gazing up at the stars with hope, even though the world didn't offer him much of it. See up there? Behind these reddish clouds the same stars await for you…Do you remember?"

He nodded and looked up at the heavy rainclouds.

"These hands picked up a small snowdrop from the highest mountaintop and brought it back to me as a gift. They had the opportunity to leave, but they chose to bring me back a small white flower. These hands chose this scarf for me at Christmas, remember?"

He smiled sadly and very his heart breaking into a million pieces. She took the knife out of his hand slowly.

"Your hands Severus, led me to my parents. You, led me to my parents. My love, you are not a killer. You have the most loving heart I have ever met and I thought I lost it. I thought I lost you forever" she whispered breathlessly and he felt her hand shaking.

He didn't have enough time to answer her beautiful words, because excruciating pain tore his body when Borovic took hold of his wand and pointed it back at Severus. He didn't send out a specific spell, just raw gathered force that fell upon Severus's chest and send him groaning at the floor.

Hermione sprang at her feet and pointed her wand at Borovic "I am going to make you regret the day you were born! Leave him alone!" she hollered.

Severus rolled around moaning as his body convulsed, but he forced himself to open his eyes. Through the heavy downpour he gazed at Hermione battling Borovic like a lion. Even though the Auror was a heavily skilled duelist, she was assaulting him mercilessly. He wanted to cry out for her to be careful, he wanted to spring on his feet and help her out, he wanted to grab the knife and this time plunge it at the heart of this psychotic monster, but he was unable to move. His head was swimming and his body was unable to uncurl from it's foetal position. So he looked helplessly as she pushed Borovic back steadily until finally she managed to disarm him with such admirable determination that Severus felt his heart welling in admiration. Borovic fell on the floor heavily and his wand flew off the edge of the roof. That is when Hermione turned towards the door. She appeared to be talking to someone, but Severus couldn't move his head to see who had arrived. She
was still pointing her wand at Borovic, but had her back turned to him. A grave mistake. Borovic leaned down and drew out his boot knife. The look of hatred he gave to Hermione's back froze the blood in Severus's veins.

Hermione, NO! he thought and the remaining adrenaline in his body reactivated so violently that he sprang at his feet within fractions of a second. He ran fast to Borovic and fell on him with a deadly embrace that was hard to hold out against. The surprised cry of the Auror was the only thing that alerted Hermione as they both fell off the edge of the huge building and into the dark void.

"SEVERUS!" she screamed and lunged at the edge. Harry was the one that caught her by the waist and dropped her face down at the wet tiles.

"Don't move!" he cried above her as she struggled to get out of his grip and go the edge. Her mind was blind from terror.

As Severus and Borovic fell embraced and the wind screamed on their ears, the Auror's eyes were blazing wild with madness "We are going to die together..." he grinned almost in pleasure and wrapped his arms around Severus tightly.

Severus frowned and looked the rocks approaching fast in his peripheral vision "No..." he whispered.

Borovic's eyes outstretched as he felt the solid body of Severus melting through his grip and slipping through his white knuckled fists. They grew wild with rage when Severus turned into a greyish fog that flew away, while he continued his deadly trip to the end of the world. His body crashed violently at the sharp edges of the rock below and his back broke instantly. He died with his eyes wide open, accusing Severus for this betrayal. A deadly look of sudden revelation, towards the grey fog that flew straight up the side of the ominous building and onto the roof.

Hermione scattered at the edge and took hold of it. She was screaming, she knew it, but she was unable to stop it "HE IS DEAD! HE IS DEAD!". Her heart was trying to climb out of her mouth and her body wanted to follow him down, but Harry was pinning her down with his. Her wild eyes searched desperately at the rocks below. There was only one body down there and it was Borovic "WHERE IS HE?!" she hollered and the answer was offered by the fast whoosh of a greyish fog that passed so close to her, she felt her hair uplifting with it's speed. Her eyes followed it with hopeful desperation as it landed on the rooftop. Her anguish turned into constricted happiness when she saw it change into Severus's solid figure that rolled for a couple of feet before stopping.

She pushed Harry away from her and ran up to him breathless "Severus? Please tell me that you can hear me? Oh Gods!" she muttered feeling her fingers frozen as they caressed his cheek.

He opened his eyes slowly and against all odds their gaze was unexpectedly austere "You never turn your back at your opponent during a duel! Never! What do you think you are doing?!" he chastised her.

She laughed and cried simultaneously "Are you scolding me? For fuck's sake Severus!"

He frowned and his hands pulled her down to him "He - almost - killed - you!" he said with a seriousness she couldn't bypass.

She frowned and her eyes shadowed "And you..."

"What the hell are you doing here?!" he asked and jerked her back "You could have died!"

She cleaned some bloody hair from the side of his temple and looked at him adoringly "Came to
rescue you. Was hoping to be your knight-ess in shining armour, if such a thing ever existed"  

He exhaled and his breath turned into a low key moan "Even if it didn't, it does now. You just created the concept"  

She wrapped her arms around him protectively and pressed her forehead on his temple "I don't know if I saved you, you saved me or we saved each other, but that bastard is dead. He cannot hurt you anymore"  

He nodded and his arm pressed tightly around her shoulder "I know..."  

She laughed at first, but it soon turned into sobbing and then she began wailing like a mad woman as the shock of the last five days was settling down. She pulled him close and secured him there. She kissed his forehead and her tears ran off her chin and onto him "I thought I lost you, I thought I lost you before I had the chance to tell you. I prayed to every God, magical and muggle to give me the chance to tell you"  

"Tell me what?" he muttered unable to open his eyes.  

"Remember Teddy's question?" she whispered and touched her forehead to his bloody cheek.  

He nodded gently "Yes"  

"The one I was too much of a coward to answer back then?"  

He tried a smile that ended up being a wince of pain, and nodded again.  

She didn't hesitate "I love you Severus. Don't ever leave me, don't you dare leave me alone in this world, do you hear me? I love you" she said with an agony that broke his heart apart.  

His tired hand brought her down to him and he whispered "I am sorry I endangered you and your family, forgive me"  

She caressed his face eagerly "What are you asking forgiveness for? You never endangered us. Forgive me for allowing all this to happen to you"  

"You didn't do this to me..." he frowned and looked at her teary eyes that were red from the endless worry of many days.  

"I allowed it to happen, if we hadn't gone to Australia, none of this would have ever happened" her voice was coming out in heavy sobs.  

He frowned and cupped her nape strongly "Australia was never a question in my mind. Never! You didn't do this to me. That crazy psychotic motherfucker did" he jerked her back and forth, trying to shake some reason into her.  

She closed her eyes "I felt desperate when I lost you, when I didn't know where they had taken you. I would have turned the world upside out and inside out in order to get you...do you believe me?" she forced herself to open her eyes.  

He felt his heart twisting painfully and his fingers tightened around her nape "I believe you. I heard you..."  

She frowned.  

"You spoke into my mind. I knew you were coming" he muttered and his nose caressed hers gently.  

She felt her breath hitching sharply.

"You told me to hold on, and I did. I held on for you" he continued.

Her heart melted and each drop was his for the taking "I thought he was going to kill you, I thought I would never see you again" she breathed on his mouth. Her fingers entwined with his lovingly.

His jaw clenched and he felt his own eyes overflowing with tears "Please don't cry" he whispered at her.

"If I hadn't come into your life, none of this would have ever happened" her voice broke and she tried to cover her eyes, but he pulled her hand away.

His gaze was warm and comforting albeit his terrible physical condition "I was forever silent back then Hermione. Forever numb" he whispered and she slowly opened her eyes. She was sobbing hard and his fingers caressed the side of her face, offering her comfort "If you hadn't barged boldly into my life, I would have remained numb and silent for all eternity, until death finally released me. I don't want to be numb anymore, I don't want to be silent. I want to be in pain..." he muttered.

She frowned and caressed his face tenderly "Not in pain, never in pain, never" she whispered.

He pressed his lips and frowned "You told me to hold on..."

She nodded and whimpered "Yes, my love"

"I want to hold on hard, until I get thrown off. When that happens I want it to hurt bad, really bad, because that means that I can feel again. Not everything is dark and consuming in it's silence. My skin will not be numb anymore and my voice will not be silent. Being in pain means that I can feel...and I feel so much and so deeply right now that my heart is being torn apart. I am in so much pain...and I feel blessed" he offered her a sad ghostly smile.

She began sobbing again and pressed her lips on his gently "I will make you feel everything, but pain...Severus, I love you"

"I love you too...Gods help me..." he whispered and tightened his grip around her nape.

Their foreheads pressed together as they both cried in unison.

"Don't you dare leave me again, do you hear me? Don't you dare scare me like that ever again" she whispered passionately.

"Never..." he rejoined and they remained embraced until she felt his hand relaxing around her nape and then sliding down the side of her face. His body released in her arms and she looked down with a deep frown. He was breathing steadily, but his eyes were closed. She caressed his cheek and looked hopelessly at the large bloody gash at his temple that was still pumping blood slowly down his face.

"He needs medical attention! Harry, quick we need help!" she cried and wrapped her body protectively around his.
"Get out!"

"Severus, don't stand up too quickly" Charity sprang at her feet and steadied him.

His eyes were glaring angrily at Minster Kingsley who stood in apathy in front of his bed "I hardly think this is appropriate behaviour Professor" he said.

"Get the fuck out!" Severus rumbled and made to grab him.

Charity pulled his arms back with difficulty "Minister, I think it would be best if you left now!" she snapped.

"I only came here to see how you are doing and to offer you a job" Kingsley said with the same coldness.

"You came here to make sure I won't speak. I don't want your business proposals. Get out!" Severus hissed and pulled his arms away from Charity. He offered her a warning glance that made her pull back.

Kingsley sighed "I must admit that Mr. Potter placed me in a rather precarious position by revealing everything that took place at the press. Professor Granger made things even worst. I just hope that you are wise enough not to validate their claims to the reporters"

Severus frowned and felt his stomach twirling, making the nausea of his concussion even worst "On what price are you going to buy back your dignity?" he spat.

Kingsley raised his brow and moved towards the window with calculated steps "You must understand Professor. I am a politician above all. Not an auror or an unsung hero. My job is to maintain the peace. To allow the citizens of our country to sleep unconcerned about how this peace is maintained"

"Even if that happens through muddy and unethical decisions?" Severus asked and sat down at this bed heavily. His dizziness was making him unable to stand for too long.

Kingsley tilted his head "Politics is comprised of muddy waters and unethical decisions, Professor. What world do you think you are you living in? If my unethical conduct can maintain the peace then so be it. Unfortunately your case has been totally misread. I must admit I was mistaken on many parameters concerning you and Master Borovic and that eventually backfired"

"You have some nerve" Charity frowned unable to believe how cold he sounded. As if all this meant nothing to him.

He smirked "I have simply created a thick skin Mistress. When I was an Auror I wore my valued ethics on my sleeve, but that doesn't work in politics. You have to adapt to your environment in order to thrive in it. I did just that, and many of my decisions were instrumental in keeping a good balance in the magical world after the war. Unfortunately I am not omnipotent or devoid of poor judgment sometimes"

"You gave the most dangerous Auror the right to torture the unsung hero. I'd call that more than simply poor judgement" Charity said angrily.
Kingsley pointed at her with his finger "Maybe it is so, that is why I am here to offer the Professor my most heartfelt apologies"

"A simple apology, won't cut it" Severus whispered with a dark brow.

"I am also offering you the great opportunity and honour to train the Aurors in the art of duelling. The way you handled Master Borovic in Azkaban is praiseworthy. I cannot but admire your abilities and attest that I would like to employ them for the good of the magical community" Kingsley smiled and crossed his arms patiently.

"Only a month ago, you gave Borovic the green light to destroy both me and my abilities. Now this? …" Severus trailed off unbelieving about the Minister's audacity.

"I ordered Master Borovic to keep you in check Professor. No matter how helpful you were against Voldemort….still you were third in his command and a trusted Lieutenant in the Death Eaters. You must have done a couple of awful things to acquire this kind of trust from the Dark Lord. Moreover your knowledge of the Dark Arts is so extensive that I am forced to keep a close tab on you. Politics….you see. I need to look after my citizens. I cannot allow myself to see separate cases like yours, sentimentally"

"Your calculative manner makes my skin crawl" Charity said in disgust and pulled back away from him.

He looked at her coldly and then gazed back at Severus "Surely a man of your superior intelligence can understand where I am coming from"

"And where you are going to …" Severus whispered and felt his stomach on the verge of puking. The words of the Minister reminded him of the nightmares that the Dementors woke up in him at Azkaban. He was looking at his hand that was slightly trembling and trying to control the need to empty his stomach somewhere as fast as possible.

Kingsley smiled "I knew you were going to reason with me in the end. I talked to you with honesty and even though my words might seem too cold, you know they are reasonable. I have to look after the greater good, not just an individual"

"Even though this individual worked in espionage for you. Even though for many years he risked his life and spilled his blood for you…" Charity said, but Severus touched her hand.

"Don't" he told her and felt his fingertips very cold.

She looked at him concerned.

"I appreciate what the Professor did, more than words can say. That is why he is here now, under the Ministry's protection and not in some Siberian village, living like an outcast, like an exile, along with all the rest of the reformed Death Eaters" he raised his brow at her with austerity.

"Oh, he is lucky now…that's what you are saying. You are a true politician Kingsley. You manage to twist the facts around to your advantage, no matter what. Next thing, you are going to appear as Severus's saviour. Don't tell me that you ordered Potter and Granger to find him unofficially" she spat with hatred.

His lips curled up "I could have done so…It's your word against mine" he offered.

"Your word against the Chief Auror and a Hogwart's Professor" Charity threw back at him.
"Still not good enough, right Professor?" the Minister looked at him.

Severus felt his skin crawling. Only he could speak against Kingsley and pull him down. No one else. He lifted his eyes steadily at the Minister "Right" he said and tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement.

Kingsley seemed thoroughly satisfied "Very well, I shall leave you. My business proposal still stands. Now that the Wizengamot freed you, I assume you won't reside at Hogwarts anymore? That place is your nemesis if I remember correctly"

"Indeed" Severus gazed at him coldly.

"Therefore you are automatically out of a job. My proposal will help you earn a very good living and will add points to your positive publicity" he said and walked towards the door. He remained silent there for a couple of second and then turned the handle "The only thing I require, is for you to keep your mouth shut about me and Borovic" he finished and his eyes burned through Severus.

He pursed his lips and silently scrutinised the Minister who nodded as if knowing that he made his point and then he opened the door "Good evening Professors" he told them both and left.

"I can't believe he just threatened you. He has some nerve!" Charity spat and looked towards the door with menace.

He nodded and looked searchingly towards his hospital slippers as if they held all the answers for him.

"Unfortunate that he was not up in that roof with Borovic so you could take both of them down and make the world a better place to live in" she said solemnly.

He drew in his lips uneasily, but didn't speak.

"That move on Borovic was masterful, pity it cannot be repeated with Kingsley" she continued.

He swallowed heavily "Not masterful…just desperate" he said quietly.

"Desperate? How, since you can fly…" Charity frowned.

His eyes were sad when he gazed up at her "These moments were confusing and dark…I…I don't remember much" he whispered.

Charity approached "Severus, what do you mean you don't remember? You fell off that roof with full knowledge of your capabilities, right?"

It took him several seconds to shake his head in negation. it was difficult to think about all that, never mind admit to the chaotic vortex of those moments "No" he mouthed.

Charity's brow rose slowly "No?"

He remained silent, but his gaze remained locked with hers.

"You fell off that roof not knowing that you can fly?" she whispered. Her face had gone pale.

He swallowed heavily "I told you, I was confused"

Her countenance turned livid "Does Hermione know?"
"No and neither will she. She's been through enough as it is. I've put her through enough…" he whispered and his fingers entwined above his knees. He looked down at them. He didn't want to meet Charity's demanding stare.

"For fuck's sake Severus…" she had no other words

He shook his head silently "She has enough with her parents now and with everything else. Hasn't she told you?"

Charity sighed "She told me that they read the newspapers about her involvement in the Azkaban incident. They are quite freaked out. They wanted to come over…correct?"

He shook his head "I told her it was best to meet them in Australia"

Charity frowned "Why?"

He looked at her steadily "The press is going to have them for dinner. Things need to settle down here in England. I don't want her this exposed"

"So you are sending her away?"

He shook his head "No, she is considering the option herself. She needs to take a break from all the turmoil around her name"

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Are you going to go with her if she decides to leave?"

"I am free to move around England, but it will take me two years to be allowed a trip abroad. I don't want to risk another illegal excursion or another visit to Azkaban, Charity. I am too tired" he looked disheartened.

"Hermione, won't leave you" Charity sounded strict.

"I know" he nodded with a deep sigh "Can you please go out, I need to dress"

"Dress to go where?" she looked around to his clothes.

"I am going out" he said with simplicity and moved behind the changing curtain. Apparently Charity didn't intend to leave the room and he didn't want to wait for Hermione to return. She would try to keep him from acting on the spur of the moment, but his heart didn't want to back out now. Not after that skin crawling conversation with the Minister of Magic.

"Hermione went to the shop to get us a couple of coffees. She is going to freak out when she doesn't see you here" Charity tried to reason.

He shook his head "I am not leaving the hospital. I am just going to take a walk outside" he pulled up his pants and then his shirt. Dressing was more difficult than expected. Mainly because of his insistent dizziness. When the shirt touched the freshly healed deep wounds on his back he winced and closed his eyes briefly. The pain that flared from them, reignited his need to walk outside and accomplish the daunting task of speaking to the press.

"Whatever for?" she frowned.
"How many reporters are outside the hospital doors?" he inquired and wore his boots.

Charity froze for a couple of minutes and then a hesitant smile appeared on her lips "Two reporters with their crew. Not many, but they are enough…" she offered, when she realised what he was getting ready to do.

He walked away from the curtain and her smile widened.

He offered her a careful nod "Very well, are you coming?"

She nodded eagerly "Let's go before Hermione comes" she said and offered him his leather coat.

He shook his head. That coat was too heavy for his wounded back "A moment ago you didn't want to go without her"

"If she finds out what you are ready to do she is going to try to stop you" Charity said.

"I know" his lips curled up in a knowing smile.

"For once I agree with your dangerous spontaneity Severus. The world needs to know about Kingsley. Feed them the news they want and let the fire loose" Charity urged him on as he opened the door.

He didn't reply to her. He just frowned towards the corridor. It had a few patients walking with the support of their family and a couple of nurses that were discussing near the reception. He turned the other way and made it quickly towards the elevator. When they went in, there was only an old lady who made room for them to pass. He hit the ground floor button and crossed his arms patiently. As the elevator began moving his brows knitted together angrily. Hermione wouldn't want this kind of exposure because the press was already onto her twenty four hours a day, but above all they were pursuing her parents. He knew that reigniting the interest on their case would cause her a lot of grief, but he had to do it. After what Kingsley told him, he had to speak out.

"You are Professor Snape aren't you?" the elder asked him suddenly.

He winced and looked down at her "Yes"

"Are you feeling better?" she asked with a small honest smile.

"Better, thank you" he replied quickly, eager to stop talking to her.

"Did that disgusting Auror torture you in Azkaban?" the woman asked with a frown.

"Azkaban is a large torture chamber, not just for me. For everyone in there" he spoke honestly.

She nodded "That institution needs to be imploded and the Ministry of Magic needs to create new correctional Institutions with better living conditions"

"I agree" Charity said with a huge smile.

"Is it true that your abduction was orchestrated by the Minister?" the old lady asked suddenly without any pussyfooting.

He felt his breath catching and his eyes fell on Charity. He remained silent for a few moments before turning his heavy stare towards the old woman "It was not orchestrated by him, but it was endorsed" he said calmly.
Charity smiled widely and gave him a discreet thumbs up.

"Why don't you tell the reporters then? Why keep something so important in the dark lad? You need to clear up the political arena, for the sake of our children. Are they going to grow up to such corrupted leaders?" the old woman frowned.

He nodded and felt his throat burning. "You are right" he whispered and looked up as the doors of the elevator opened up at the ground floor. Without saying goodbye to the old woman, he walked out and looked at the glass doors sliding open and close as people walked in and out busily.

He stopped in front of the reception in momentary indecision and his brows knitted. Two reporters were standing outside those glass doors smoking cigarettes and laughing at some meaningless joke about the snowstorm that had covered up rural England, even causing traffic problems in London. They were wrapped in warm coats, with their scarfs up to their noses. He looked at the grey sky and at the soft snowfall and felt very undressed for the occasion.

"Severus?" Charity asked him with a gentleness that was not usual in her voice.

He turned. Her eyes were bearing the heavy circles of many sleepless nights. He reached out and wrapped his long fingers around her bicep. "Everything is going to be ok" he said and squeezed her reassuringly.

"Severus!" the next voice that called out his name, made his heart to stir and he looked back to the corridor where Hermione run up to them with two coffee cups in each hand. Her long hair waving behind her back and her long skirt puffing up around her. She was wearing grey thick shocks and a pair of flat short boots that made her lower half look very old and rusty. She had on grey fingerless gloves and his purple scarf around her neck. His heart warmed up to her rustic look and he had to smile up to her.

When she saw him smiling she lowered her pace and walked up to him confused "Are you ok? What are you doing out of bed?"

"Charity, can you give us a moment?" he turned to his friend, suddenly appreciating all the support around him. He had gone through hell for many years, but he had sustained all the misfortunes by himself. Today, he was not alone in there. He didn't feel alone in Azkaban either. She had always been out there looking for him.

Charity nodded with a deep sigh of caution "Be careful, please" she warned him.

"What happened?" Hermione turned to her, before she had the chance to walk away.

"Kingsley visited him, whilst you were away" Charity raised her brows.

Hermione's countenance darkened "What?" the tone of her voice went down.

Charity drew in her lips and bit down on them. Then without offering any more words she turned around and walked a few feet away from them.

Hermione placed the coffee cups on the reception and took strong hold of his shoulders "What did he tell you?" she looked really concerned.

"To keep my mouth shut about him and Borovic" he replied with honesty. Not wanting to relay to her the rest of that ghastly conversation.

Her brows knitted " Fucking bastard!" she admonished and let him go.
"Hermione…" he trailed off not knowing how to tell her. Not even knowing how she was going to react to his decision.

"That's why you got out of bed? You can barely stand. You need to rest. Come, I will escort you back to the room and I will go find Harry and pay a visit to this asshole" she barked and wrapped her hand around his waist to lead him back to the elevator. When she felt his resistance she stopped and looked up to him "What's wrong?" she asked.

He inhaled and stilled his heart "I am here to talk to the press, Hermione…" he whispered and tried to discern her feelings in her eyes.

She was speechless.

"I am sorry I am going to expose you and your family this way, but I have to. I have to speak out about him…" his voice sounded desperate and he hated that.

He felt like eons passed before a small fire of recognition lit up Hermione's eyes and he frowned. She offered him a small smile that vanished quickly "Is that all?" she asked quietly.

"I know how protective you are of your family and how much your parents have suffered from the newspapers the last few days. After I talk with these reporters things are going to get even worst. I am so sorry for making you go through all this…" he said and grabbed her shoulders needfully. He wanted to make her understand how much his heart was torn apart from all this.

She didn't hesitate to offer him a wide smile and pull him in "I am proud that you finally decided to do this" she said unexpectedly.

"What?" his brow moved in confusion.

"Bring that bastard down and I will be right behind you" she gritted her teeth and he saw her eyes watering.

"You will suffer from the exposure. Your parents…will suffer…" he tried to make her understand.

Apparently she understood very well "My parents are in Australia. We will figure things out as we go along, but allowing this corrupted man to rule the magical world will be a great folly. Reveal all you know and I will back you up" she said steadily and her eyes were honest and warm upon him.

He felt his heart tearing up "Thank you…"

She frowned deeply "I will always back you up…remember that" she whispered and stood up on tiptoes.

He exhaled on her open mouth relieved and kissed her softly. His tongue coiling around her bottom lip, before he sucked it gently in his mouth. She drew in his air and her fingers wrapped in his hair and pulled him down. When he pushed back she was looking at him lovingly "This scar really suits you" she whispered and her fingers traced his temple.

His lips curled up "You mean it destroys what was left intact out of my face…"

She laughed "Come on…are you ready to face them?" she asked and took strong hold of his hand.

He looked up and his brow became heavy "Yes" he said and they both moved towards the entrance. When the doors opened up he felt the frozen air assaulting his warm skin and it was the wake up call he had been needing all this time.
Love exists

Severus stood in front of the blotched marble angel statue and looked at it silently. The soft breeze blew his hair away from his face, revealing a large scar at his temple. The last reminder of the Azkaban incident. The flower scented breeze didn't manage to remove the wet leaves from the book that the angel held open on her hands.

"Are Angels real?" Teddy asked.

Severus sighed and kept his eyes on the beautiful statue "If we exist, then I don't see why they shouldn't" he said thoughtfully.

"Have you ever met an Angel?" Teddy continued.

He frowned and got ready to answer no, but the face of Hermione flashed in his mind and a soft smile appeared on his lips "Yes, I have"

"Do they have wings?"

"No" he tilted his head slightly and observed the statue.

"Can they fly like you?"

"No…” he whispered and turned around "What have you got there?" he asked.

Teddy was kneeling upon the wet soil that had a thick layer of wet fallen leaves. Under them fresh grass was starting to pop up everywhere and in between small flowers of every colour.

"A broken train track, see it has a small wooden train too!" Teddy said happily and pushed the train on the tracks playfully. It's wood had chipped from the passage of time, but some of the paint had miraculously survived the rough elements of nature. Some kid had forgotten it there, when the family that owned this mansion, abandoned it. Severus circled around Teddy, stirring the fallen leaves with his black boots.

"It's nice" he said softly.

"I like that one more!" Teddy cried and sprang up. He ran towards a moss filled balcony that overlooked a large empty pool, a water fountain and the mansion itself in the far distance. All these lands belonged to this estate, but now they were open to the public, so that everyone could enjoy this park. This April afternoon though, the only ones occupying the lands were Severus and Teddy.

After the boy took his lunch and Severus drank a strong cup of dark coffee, he reassured Andromeda that they would be back for dinner and took the boy out for an excursion. There was no point sitting in the house all day. Especially since his vacation time from Hogwarts was ending in three days and he had to return. He rented a bike with an extra seat at the back, properly adjusted for kids and they cycled all around Staffordshire, before ending up at the entrance of this hidden place. The beauty of the recently awoken nature and the darkness of the abandoned mansion was enough to draw Severus in, and they have been exploring the lands for more than an hour, before ending up in front of the Angel statue, close to the entrance of this old expensive estate.

Admittedly he didn't want his vacation to end. It was a little precious time away from all the demands of real life, that had become rather heavy the last three months. He approached the balcony and leaned his hands on it. Teddy was kneeling close to the edge of the pool and was throwing rocks into
the dark muddy rain waters that had gathered at it's bottom. Severus swallowed a dry throat and his brows became heavy as he remembered the first few days after the accursed interview outside the hospital doors.

The questions asked by the reporters were answered honestly, exposing Kingsley's personal relationship with Borovic. He talked about the Minister's endorsement of that lunatic's dangerous behaviour, in favour of Borovic monumental abilities. He exposed Kingsley's knowledge that Alexander was a murderer and his unethical decision to keep him as an Auror, just in order to scare into submission any reformed Death Eaters he had not managed to send into exile, as he admitted. He answered without any remorse that yes, the Minister wanted to clear the magical world from all the people that held ties to the Dark Lord, without caring that some of these individuals had actually assisted the Ministry in the war against Voldemort. He spoke of the non existing living conditions inside Azkaban and that this institution needed to be brought down, as it was not used for reforming criminals, but as a huge torture chamber of human souls. It was hell on earth, were his exact words. They asked him if Kingsley arranged his abduction. He said, no, but he endorsed it, by keeping a dangerous psychotic killer like Borovic, high in the Auror ranks and offering him a political umbrella of protection. Immunity to all his crimes. Especially since Alexander proved his unstable nature with the use of Dark Magic inside the Ministry, not long before the abduction took place. The Press were not aware of the incident, so he made sure to give them every detail of the Cruciatus Borovic send off to him inside the offices of the inquisitor. They asked for names, he told them to ask the Minister himself for the details.

His interview was printed that same evening in a special edition, on the most credible newspapers and he grabbed Hermione's hand and asked her to hold on tight, for that was going to turn out to be a very bumpy ride. And bloody hell was it not? The very next morning there were not just two reporters outside, but a dozen, accompanied by a rather large group of protesters that held up banners. "DOWN WITH THE CORRUPTION", "WE ASK FOR A PUBLIC INVESTIGATION", "ELECTIONS NOW!", "BRING JUSTICE TO THE HEROES OF THE WAR", were some of them. He woke up to the turmoil that had overtaken the hospital with Hermione never leaving his side and soon enough the hospital administration told him that he had to leave. He was in no immediate need for hospitalisation anymore and the protesters along with the reporters were causing a lot of problems for the people that needed emergency medical attention. It was difficult to access the doors of the hospital, even though the security was doing it's best to keep it clear for the ambulances that were arriving.

Hermione rebelled and pointed an austere finger at them, for throwing a patient out, just because of the bad rep that all this had taken and they tried to assure her that they were only acting to the benefit of their patients. When she cried out "He is your patient also!", he squeezed her arm and shook his head "It's ok". She settled down and after he calmed her, they decided to floo out of St. Mungo and onto Hogwarts within the next two hours. The administration was very accommodating and gave them all the appropriate paperwork quickly.

Apparently they wanted to get rid of them as fast as possible. Before flooing away from there, he took her hand and told her with a worried voice "I told you that everything was going to collapse after this. You need to gather your things and go to your parents in Australia for a little while. At least until this settles".

"I told you I am not leaving you!" she replied steadily and took hold of his hand as they entered the fireplace.

The next few weeks after that fateful January evening, were very hard on them both and on the school. Minerva raised heavy wards around the school and Hogsmeade and no one could come in or out without her permission. That gave Severus the time to heal under Poppy's care and for Hermione
to calm down from the constant abuse from the newspapers on her name, on her involvement with Severus, with the Azkaban incident and with Harry Potter and their decision to follow their own clues and go to Azkaban unassisted. Thankfully she was protected by Minerva's strong magic and she was left alone. Her parents though didn't have the same fate. They were sieged almost daily by a group of reporters that had camped outside their house. Harry was also having problems, but with his experience and his profession it was easier to keep the reporters on check. Hermione was becoming more and more worried about her parents as the days passed. She talked to them constantly and asked them to floo into the British Embassy in Australia and then come back home. Something that her parents refused angrily. They told her that their life was there now and that a bunch of stupid newspaper dummies, were not enough to drive them away from their beloved neighbourhood.

Severus found Hermione crying secretly a couple of times and asked her why.

"I've told my parents that they have a home here also and they told me that their life is there now. I don't know what to do" she admitted and then grabbed hold of his lapels and buried her head on his chest. She cried long and hard and he let her do it. She went through so much on his behalf the last few months and he couldn't but feel thoroughly guilty. Now she was lamenting not only for what happened at Azkaban, but for her family that was far away from her.

"Go to them, help them out" he told her tenderly, and even though his heart was torn apart he was being honest with her. It was better to separate for a while, if that meant that she would find peace.

"I am not leaving you!" she repeated with the same stubbornness, but he knew that she was forcing herself.

Deciding not to push her into any decision, he remained silent and watched her cry her eyes out after each conversation with her parents. He didn't try to intervene, nor did he try to talk to them, as they showed no interest in talking with him either. She assured him that they had no problem with him, they were just going through a rough time and were trying to sort things out, in their own way.

He always caressed and kissed her forehead protectively "Don't worry about it" he offered reassuringly. She had enough on her mind already, to think about his relationship with her parents as well. Their days passed tyrannically slow, with her moping around in misery between the Potions Classrooms and his library or his apartments. With him barking angrily at every single student entering his library. For the first time in his life he was hating the fact that his voice had returned and was used unfairly almost every single second of his days. They couldn't go outside Hogsmeade and they preferred to keep in the privacy of their rooms, in some couch, embraced. Trying to draw comfort from one another as the articles exploded like fiery volcanoes, relentlessly.

At first he was keeping close track of what was happening outside their doors and was having daily meetings with Minerva and Filius. Harry was flooing in regularly also to discuss about things. Apparently after his first and last interview Kingsley rebuked all his accusations and called him out to a public debate in front of the all the reporters. Knowing full well that he had the ability to manipulate himself very well in public, whereas Severus lacked in that area greatly, Kingsley would be a certain winner of impressions if such a debate ever took place. That is were Minerva's and Harry's interventions came in and saved the day. Minerva talked publicly about what happened with Borovic at the Ministry and gave out the name of the inquisitor. Harry spoke again of what took place in Azkaban and at the Ministry and both their words were against the Minster.

That seemed enough for the Wizengamot, who called for an internal investigation on the events around Azkaban, inside the Ministry and on the Minister himself. Kingsley rebelled against that decision and tried to upheave a wave of resistance. He used several high profile employees and a few Press bosses that belonged to him, in order to turn around the public opinion that was growing
against him as the days progressed. In the end he was unable to avoid the public investigation, as the Wizengamot was eager to prove it's impartial judgement. It needed to distance itself from the muddy waters around the Minister.

It took them a month and a half to come to the conclusion that shook the political world to it's foundations. They placed Kingsley in suspension and under internal -this time- investigation as the evidence against him was very convincing. His place was taken temporarily by Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, as the most balanced person to keep the necessary peace at the Ministry until the next Elections. During the time that Amelia Bones was acting as Minister of Magic, she launched three more investigations. Two on Azkaban. One in its administration and the second on it's medieval treatment towards the prisoners, which ended up with half the establishment emptying. Many lighter criminal cases got relocated in other institutions across Europe. It's administration was changed and as it seemed the very pleasant Director was involved in most, if not all, the illegal activities of this hellish prison. The remaining investigation was taking place on the Ministerial cabinet, to find out their possible connections to Borovic.

Severus felt the dire need to learn if they uncovered the forgotten wing on the top floor where people were sent to die and he was pleased to know it had been emptied. That meant that his cellmate was on his way to another institution, possibly with better living conditions. It was controversial to want a better fate, for a rapist, nevertheless this man had assisted him in his time of need and Severus couldn't forget that.

Slowly as the days passed by and the snow began to back away from the lowlands, more frequently sunny days broke from the sky. With them, the press began drawing their claws away from Severus's back and concentrated only on the internal investigations on the Minister and the corrupted cabinet, as well as the slow dismantling of Azkaban. Hermione and Severus found more opportunities to go out to see Hagrid, walk at the grounds and even take some careful excursions in Hogsmeade. He was at first very attentive to the people around him, but when he saw that no one treated him any differently he began to calm down. He even stopped yelling so much at his students.

He thought he saw Hermione getting happier and brighter as winter slowly allowed spring to make its first appearance. She was not as pursued by the press anymore and a couple of security measures placed by the Chief Auror, allowed her and him to walk more freely outside the borders of Hogwarts. His need to flee this accursed place got quickly eradicated when he saw that Hermione was not as happy as he had first thought. Yes, she was pleasant, loving, tender and caring, but something dark lurked beneath her bright eyes. It was not until the first days of March that he managed to understand exactly what was going on.

He sighed and looked at Teddy that was still throwing rocks into the muddy waters and raised his head towards the deep blue skies. A few white clouds floated above him and he savoured at the warmth of the sun rays on his skin. He had enough of winter. He had enough of darkness and rain. His forearms crossed above the marble railing and he rested his boot at a cross section below. He let his head drop and his hair caressed the side of his face and fell over his chest as the soft breeze moved them gently.

Yes, it was a grey and fateful March morning that made him look at things differently. It was that March morning that led Hermione to Australia, but kept him there, overlooking the charismatic child of Lupin and Nymphadora, not really knowing if he was going to ever see her again. Thinking if what he did was right, or not. His hand trailed into his side pocket and he fingered the golden necklace with the snowdrop. That March morning he was walking quickly to find her in the Potion's classroom, similarly playing with the necklace in his pocket, like he was doing now. Having retrieved it from the antique shop in Stoke, he was in a hurry to give it to her, in the hopes that it would make her happy again. On this thought alone, he was unable to stop smiling.
Most students looked at him confused and somewhat intimidated, by this sudden change in him. They didn't know that he was about to give Hermione her proper Christmas present. The one he never got around to give at the appropriate time, because of the abduction and the consequent mess he found himself in. So he climbed the steps two by two, not even minding Peeves trying to scare him and reached her classrooms with a wide smile on his face. It was only when he came close to opening the door that his smile slowly died. He stopped right outside with his hand touching the wooden panel and lowered his eyes to the floor. The voices from inside were loud enough to discern clearly.

"Why don't you tell him?" Charity said.

"Because I love him too much. I don't want to hurt him"

"You just need to see your parents. You need to go to them. How can something like that hurt him?"

Silence.

"Hermione?"

He heard her crying and his heart broke. He didn't want to make her cry. He only wanted to make her smile. It took her a long time to answer and what she said made him bite his lips in distress "They don't want to return to England, Charity. If I go there, I might not return either and he cannot come with me. Not for two years….what am I going to do?"

Charity paused briefly "You are considering Australia as a permanent abode?"

"I love them too much, but I also love him and I am torn apart. They suffered by the reporters about something they had nothing to do with. I tried to bring them home, but they told me Australia was their home now…."

He backed up and leaned his shoulders at the wall. His head leaned back and he closed his eyes feeling his heart torn apart by what he was hearing. This was the first time that Hermione was speaking honestly and it was not to him, but to Charity.

"How about visiting each other regularly. Certainly that can happen" Charity wised.

"Yes, that's what I intend to tell them, but…but…I am just afraid of myself. I am afraid that if I got there, I won't find the strength to return, but above all I am afraid I don't have the strength to leave him even for a little while" Hermione said and the desolation was clear in her voice.

"What is he saying about all this?" Charity asked.

Silence.

"Hermione? Have you told him?" Charity's voice was austere.

"No"

"For fuck's sake, why?"

"I don't want him to think that I am leaving him. I cannot do that to him!" Hermione said and began sobbing again.

He fingered the necklace in his pocket and swallowed heavily. His brows darkened and suddenly he knew what he had to do. Not wanting to admit that she was miserable here and he was unable to
help her, he moved away from the door and walked thoughtfully all the way to one of the balconies overlooking the main plaza. He leaned there, much like he was doing now at the balcony of the abandoned mansion and he observed the snow that was starting to melt. Soon Spring would arrive, but still Hermione would feel miserable, because she was torn away from her family. He couldn't relate to that feeling, because he never felt close to his family, but he knew how strongly she felt about them. He had seen the deep sadness in her eyes, when she entered her abandoned home a few months ago. That dark desolation on her countenance. He didn't want that for her.

That was why he insisted for her go to Australia and restore their memories. That's why he led her there by the hand, even though he risked his own freedom for it. And now?…now he was in danger of losing her forever to them. He frowned and shook his head almost angrily. No, that was not fair. Her parents were not his enemy. No one was. This was just…life…choices…paths that diverted and at other times joined. He had to let her go, she had to leave in order to blossom again to the beautiful Hermione he came to love. Not the depressed girl with the dark aura and the sad smile, that had gone through way too much, in way too little time. She was like a rose withering and he couldn't offer her the light she needed to bloom again. Only her parents could do that.

He stood there for a long time, sometimes fingering the necklace and entwining his fingers around it's chain. Sometimes inhaling deeply the cold mountain air that rode down the deep ravines and passed above the partly frozen lake. He moved just barely, even though he wanted to turn around and go back to the classroom in order to find her. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her hard. He wanted to tell her that he loved her more than life and that if she decided to remain in Australia he would fall into the deepest darkness. But all that would be most egotistical and he loved her more than he loved himself. He remained there weighing his choices, and the decision always leaned on her favour without a shadow of doubt. So when he felt her hand landing on his shoulder and he heard her soft voice near his ear, he smiled sadly.

"What are you doing out here darling? I was waiting for you at the classroom" she said and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek.

He drew his hand away from the pocket and the necklace fell back. His hand cupped hers above his bicep "I am thinking"

She sighed "What about?"

"That you'd look so much better without those dark circles, or those red eyes. Have you been crying again?" he asked, without wanting to go around in circles with her. She deserved honesty. She deserved the best of him and he was going to offer it wholeheartedly.

She winced and looked downwards immediately "Is it that obvious?"

"It is" he squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"I am sorry Severus, I don't know how to stop sometimes. All this has been really hard on me...on my parents...but above all on you. I cannot bear to think of those days that I thought I lost you forever. I sleep and every night I wake up with nightmares. I see in my dreams that you cannot fly away from Borovic's arms. That you break your back next to him. I wake up with your pale dead face in my eyes and I cannot sleep again. It's not the reporters giving me the trouble. It's everything you have been through" she shook her head.

He looked at her silently and felt his heart weeping blood.

"Sometimes I really don't know what to do” she shook her head and wiped away her tears.
His arms went around her waist and he drew her in. She leaned on him eagerly and he smoothed her hair away from her burning brow "I think you are long due for a trip to Australia" he said evenly.

He felt her holding her breath "I am not leaving you" she said decisively.

"I think you should"

"Are you sending me away?" she gazed at him with a deep frown.

"If necessary yes" he rejoined steadily.

"What the hell Severus?" more tears fell from her eyes.

"Go to your parents. You had a rough time here not only with what took place in Azkaban, but with the press. Your parents need you now and dare I assume, you need them too. Don't deny yourself the comfort of their embrace, little lady. Do me the favour and pack your stuff. I will take you to the portal, floo network or railroad of your choice myself. I will see you off" he said calmly.

She sobbed and rested her forehead under his chin "Severus…please"

He pulled her in and pressed tightly "I see you drying out, each passing day. I cannot bare it any longer. Go to them and blossom again my beautiful lady, and if that be your choice remain there and I shall find a way to come find you when I am allowed, and if you still want me then. Else return here and I shall be waiting for you; but give yourself the choice, for this is not a good life for you… please" he whispered. This time not because he had to, but because he didn't have enough strength to speak louder. He kissed her temple and tears run down his eyes, but he turned his head towards the grey skies and closed them, not allowing her to see him.

It took her several minutes to settle down and speak again. It took her so long that he thought she was never going to speak again, but those words made him understand that he had taken the right choices for her "I cannot leave in mid term. Minerva won't ever let me"

"Why?"

"Who's going to cover my classes?"

He smiled sadly and rubbed his cheek on the top of her head "I will, you need not worry"

She pulled back and looked at him with burning eyes. Her brows furrowed in mild confusion "Once upon a time, you wanted to flee this place on pain of death…and now you will work in it willingly?"

"Yes" he flicked his shoulders.

Her eyes overflowed with tears and she grabbed him for dear life as another crying session began. This time it ended only when he led her back to her apartments and put her to sleep.

It took her several days to decide on his offer, but when she announced to him that she wanted to go to Australia, he felt torn. Half of his heart rejoiced and half died a little. He didn't allow her to witness his deepest fear, that she was going to remain in Australia forever. He helped her to pack her things and as promised escorted her at the train station in Hogsmeade. That is where they said goodbye, maybe for a little while, but maybe forever and he kept a straight face even though she was crying her heart out in his arms. He kissed her, reassured her of his love and ushered her into the train. When the metal gears turned and the heavy machine rolled slowly onto the tracks he waved at her with a happy smile on his face and she send off kisses to him with a palm full of her tears.
It was Hagrid that waited for him a few steps away, discreetly "Eye, Professur, how yeh doin'?"

He flicked his shoulders and buried his chin in his black scarf "Been better" he said and his smile died down. He rather thought it would never reemerge again.

"I can' understand why yeh let her go" Hagrid shook his head sadly and followed him down the road.

"Because I love her" he whispered quietly. Once he wanted to holler out his pain, loud enough to make his beloved mountains hear him. Now he couldn't find the strength to speak louder than a whisper.

"I don' understand, really" Hagrid scratched his beard "Yeh love her, yet yeh send her away"

Severus inhaled deeply and his brow moved thoughtfully "The first time I saw her all the oppressive voices in my head went quiet. All the nightmarish, repetitive images of my past, all the feelings of desolation went silent. When you have lived a life of hell, like I have, you cannot get quiet and silent moment inside your mind. I may have been silent to the world, but inside, my mind was constantly screaming and the only way to shut it up, was to kill myself. The only way to be free from the emotional chains was death. When I saw her, everything silenced and the only thing I could think about was the soft curl on the side of her lips when she was feeling happy or the strong beat of a stray vein on her neck when she was excited. I knew I had to approach her in some manner. I had to get closer to her, but I was afraid of what she was going to see in me. Afraid that she would run away from my consuming depression. On our first date, that came out of nowhere, I spent more time panicking at the demanding social crowd around me, than talking to her, but she didn't seem mind. Instead she took my hand and tried to calm me down. When she got wounded I used my magic to save her, even though I haven't used it in four years. When I didn't know if I wanted to kiss her or run away she didn't cringe or get impatient with me. When I finally kissed her, I tried to do it perfectly, in order to match her perfection. The smile from her lips extended up to the goose trails of her eyes, when she was happy at those first days….but not lately. Lately the smile in her eyes died down. It remained only in her lips and it was sad. So sad that it broke my heart. I don't want her to wake up one night and tell me that she cannot stand her nightmares anymore. I don't want her to speak to me with a sad mouth. I don't want her to lose the sparkle in her eyes. I don't want her to call us, a mistake. I suppose for her it would be easy to ran away from me, when things won't feel as good anymore. The same ease won't be applicable to me. It won't be easy for me to find a new one….because she resembles no one else and that is why I love her. I can never call, being in love, a mistake and I don't want to hear it from her after a while. How can I ever call this a mistake, when I can walk through the most demanding crowds, if she is holding my hand? How can I ever give her the chance to call this a mistake?…." he said with a calm resonating voice.

"She loves yeh too…" Hagrid said quietly and Severus saw that the giant's eyes were in tears.

He signed heavily "Sometimes love isn't enough…I should have known that already. I would never make her choose between me and her parents. She deserves the freedom to make her own choices in life. She deserves not to lose the sparkle in her eyes, or the beautiful smile that echoes in them when her heart is backing it up. She deserves to find her happiness and if by remaining with me she is slowly losing it, then I must be brave enough to push her away".

Severus felt his head slightly throbbing from all those memories and tried to push them away. He detached himself from the balcony and walked down to where Teddy was. The soft breeze blew his frock coat open, to reveal a black shirt underneath that didn't cover up the deep scars on his neck. Another achievement of hers, along with everything else that had turned upside down in his life after she decided to barge into it boldly and demand the biggest part out of it.
After she left for Australia, he took over her classes and was surprised that he had not forgotten either his old trade, or his ability to teach. He proved to be slightly more lenient towards the students, which took many of them by surprise and tripped them into confused silence and obedience. He didn't care if they thought he'd gone crazy, or was waiting for the right moment to bite their heads off. If they stayed out of trouble and made his life easier it was all fine by him. Hermione called him every day, but he called only once a week. Not because he didn't care, but because he didn't want to bother her. He saw the difference in her countenance within the first few days she arrived at her parents and the more he observed the positive change in her, the more certain he was of his decision. Even though his heart was daily torn apart. Time rolled by, very slow for him. He was counting the days where she would tell him that she was coming back…but she never said it. As time passed by, his hopes that she would return began fading away. Her calls were regular, always happy, always loving and warm, always reassuring, but the distance made him more and more fearful of the future.

Finally in the first days of April he found the opportunity to ask for a week off. Minerva happily gave it to him as they were entering the Easter holidays. He communicated with Hermione the night before he was about to depart, but didn't tell her where he was going. Mainly because he didn't want to make her sad, for not being there with him. He just said that he was renting a car and was taking a small road trip around England. She send him her love and told him to be careful. Next morning he appeared through a portal in Stoke and came up uninvited to Andromeda's door to see Teddy. The need to see the boy was sudden and dire. He hoped that his unexpected visit wouldn't piss Andromeda off, but all his fears were unfounded. She welcomed him in and when Teddy saw him, he went crazy. Andromeda wanted to call Hermione and tell her the news, but Severus stopped her with a solemn frown that the old witch didn't question. Him and Teddy passed the whole day together and in the evening he talked to Andromeda about everything, over some warm tea and under the low lights of the kitchen. She told him to remain with them, the whole week, but it was Teddy that convinced him to do so. Five days into Stoke, found them in this abandoned mansion, without having communicated with Hermione at all. Since she knew not where to find him, it was now in his hands to invoke the line to her house in Australia, but he decided against it. She didn't need to know where he was. That could bring her over in England quicker than the wind, but his wanted her decision to be completely unbiased.

He leaned over Ted and frowned at the brown waters. They were dark leaves full of corrosion floating on top. Twigs full of fungus and a lot of dirt. Teddy was throwing in small pieces of marble that had fallen off the railings with the passage of time "What're you doing here Ted?" he asked and sat next to him cross legged.

"I am trying to push that wood to the far end. Wanna try Presser?" Teddy asked eagerly.

"No, thanks" he said and his hand dived into his right pocket. He found the beautiful necklace and drew it out. Then he lifted it up and observed the small snowdrop floating inside the transparent magical potion. Small snowflakes fed it the cold it needed to survive. It was forever trapped, but forever alive inside that tear drop shaped bottle. Teddy noticed immediately.

"That's pretty, is it for me?" he asked innocently.

Severus smiled sadly "Nope, but this is" he said and opened up his palm. Out of thin air a small paper boat floated upon the brown waters.

"Whoa!" Teddy's eyes grew huge.

Severus put the necklace in his pocket again "You like it?"

"It's perfect! Thank you Presser!" he clapped his little hands.
Another flick of his wrist cleared up the waters and created soft waves "Now it can travel" he mused at the little boat.

Teddy claps "Have a nice trip little boat" he yells.

"Your sail must have a name, what will you call it?"

"Sunshine!"

He flicked his hand and the word sunshine appeared at the side of the boat. Teddy scrounged his lips and mimicked him with heartfelt decisiveness. The boat rocked violently and when it calmed down the scribble of a sun was right next to the name.

Severus looked at him proudly "Very good my boy"

Teddy smiled widely and then looked at the small boat "Presser Snape?"

"Yes?" he rested his chin on his bend knee.

"Can you be my dad?" Teddy asked him out of the blue.

Severus felt his heart squeezing painfully and turned to the child. He felt his mouth going dry and he tried to find the best words "No, your father is Lupin and he is unique. I can never take his place…”

Teddy looked down disheartened.

Severus hurried "…but I can be the closest to a father, that I can be, if that is what you wish"

Teddy's face brightened up again and Severus felt his eyes burning.

"I miss having a dad" Teddy said and flicked his shoulders.

A knife got buried in his heart "I miss having a dad too" he replied quietly.

Teddy looked at him seriously and Severus felt the need to change the mood "Look at this" he said and his hand uplifted towards a large almond tree that was a few feet away from Teddy. As he moved his fingers elegantly the branches moved along with them and hundreds of small flowers fell from it. He closed his fingers and they floated towards them.

Teddy clapped happily "Drop them into the water!"

Severus released them from his magical grip and the small white buds covered them and the small pond. His eyes turn to the clear waters that were now full of flowers and he remembered a similar day when he was a child himself. A little older than Teddy, offering a single flower at Lily. He had gone a long way from those, hadn't he?

The child without warning run up to him and embraced him with an honesty that touched the deepest part of his soul. His arms come around the small body easily and he pressed the child in his arms "Thank you Presser!" Teddy said and smiled contently.

"That's the sweetest thing I have ever had the honour to witness" her voice spoke quietly behind him and he knew it was her from the moment she uttered the first letter.

He inhaled sharply as her warm whisper travelled to him quicker than the rays of the sun. He turned around and there she was. Dressed in an airy white dress, with a pair of flat white shoes. His forgotten cardigan was around her shoulders and his purple scarf loose around her neck. Teddy
sprang at his feet and ran to her with his arms wide open "AUNTIE!"

He stood up and wavered in momentary confusion as she picked up Teddy and twirled him around a couple of times "Hello darling!" she said and covered him with kisses. Was she really here? Was this a dream? Was it his imagination? He had been thinking of her a couple of moments ago...or maybe he never stopped thinking of her, but was she really there?

Then she looked up to him and offered him the sweetest smile he had ever seen. His heart ran to her faster than his legs, but it was only when he picked her up along with Teddy, and felt her warm softness pressing on him, that he knew she had to be real. She giggled and buried her head on his neck. He felt his eyes overflowing with tears and squeezed her tightly. He wanted to ask her if this was real, or a dream, but he didn't speak. Instead he searched with his eyes closed and covered her mouth with his, trying to draw in her breath. Ted slipped away from her arms with a grimace of disgust as they kissed each other with a need that bordered to desperation. No words were needed. His lips brushed hers. Not innocently like a tease, but hot, fiery, passionate and demanding. "Hermione" he whispered slowly, prolonging each letter as if to savour them. She smiled, her heart fluttering at his voice as she clasped her hands on either side of his face. Never before had her name ever felt so wonderful, as she leaned in demanding more. So he kissed her again and the world fell away. It was slow this time and soft, comforting in ways that words would never be. His hand rested below her ear, his thumb caressed her cheek and their breaths mingled. She ran her fingers down his spine, pulling him closer until there was no space left between them and she could feel the beating of his heart against her chest.

It was Ted's disgusted declaration that made them pull back embarrassed for having expressed themselves thus passionately in front of a child. "Gross!" he said and made puking noises. He couldn't stop himself from laughing out loud. "It's the first time I've seen you laugh out loud" she said and caressed his cheeks with her thumbs lovingly. "It's the first time worth laughing" he whispered and pecked her lips softly.

She smiled under his mouth, but before he had the time to close his eyes and enjoy her again a hard jerk pulled her away from his arms. It was Teddy that was trying to get her for himself and Severus willingly let go "I missed you my love" she said and caressed his soft cheeks and bright green hair. "Me too Auntie! Did you bring me back anything from Ostralia?" Teddy moved his bottom around. "Meh...a few things that are waiting for you back at the house" she winked at him.

"Thank you! did you see your mommy and daddy?" Teddy asked and offered her a tight hug. She looked up and smiled widely at Severus who was admiring them quietly. "Yes I did, and they are sending their love to you!" she said happily. "Are you going to stay here now Auntie?" Teddy asked. She frowned "In Stoke?"

"In England?" Teddy asked innocently, without knowing that this was actually the one million dollar question.
She knew it too, for she gazed up at Severus lovingly "Yes my darling, I came back to stay"

He felt his heart warming up and ready to explode, but he kept it well hidden inside. Apparently she felt his need. She patted Teddy's bottom and approached Severus quickly. She took him in her arms and pressed her cheek on his "I am back to stay" she repeated close to his ear and he felt his body shuddering.

"YEAH!" Teddy clapped and then as easily as only a child could, he forgot the need to remain with her. He ran back to the small pool and tried to grab the boat with a long stick "Auntie is going to stay! Auntie is going to stay!" he said in a singsong manner.

She smiled and send Teddy a kiss "Try catching it with your magic" she said and took Severus's hand. She led them to a small bench that was behind Teddy and he followed her there silently.

Teddy flicked his wrist and pushed the boat so far away that it crashed on the far side of the pool "Like this?"

She shook her head and showed him "Invoke it, call it to you...yes like that, but more gently. Don't be so hard on it"

Teddy invoked the boat and it moved jerkily towards him "I am doing it! Auntie I am doing it!" he cried happily.

"Of course you are my darling" she said and then turned at Severus. Their hands were still clasped tightly "How about you, darling? Are you going to embrace me, or are you going to sit there like a statue, after that soul burning welcoming kiss you gave me?" she said playfully.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and drew her in. She embraced him and leaned her head on his chest "That's better" she whispered and closed her eyes.

His hand went up her shoulder and he kissed her forehead "Was your return planned, or did something else happen?"

She sighed deeply and tucked herself into his arms comfortably "No, it was planned. At least to Hogwarts. The trip to Stoke was not though"

He smirked "How come you came here then?"

"There was a small note waiting for me back at my apartments. When I saw it, I asked Charity if she knew were you might be. She was rather eager to tell me that you came to Teddy for a couple of days. Why didn't you tell me you were coming here?" she said after a small hesitation that made him frown.

"Because I wanted you to be unbiased in your decision. I didn't want you to return just because I decided to come see Teddy, or for any other reason, but your own need to come back"

"I see" she said quietly.

"You mentioned a note...?" he asked after a brief comfortable silence were they both overlooked Teddy.

She pulled back and searched the deep pockets of her airy long dress. She fished out what looked like a very used piece of paper and gave it to him. He took it confused at first, but the moment he opened it up, everything cleared. He read it and leaned his elbows on his knees, suddenly feeling rather tired and used. The memories of that place felt only too real and too fresh to be tampered and
yet she managed to shake him twice. Not only with her sudden appearance, but by this forgotten message, that he never thought would ever reach her.

"Tell her I am sorry I couldn't give it to her in person. Her snowdrop is at Janick’s Antique shop, 535 Etrudia Rd., in Stoke, Staffordshire. Tell her, I am sorry I endangered her and her family and that she was right about everything…Tell her word for word…I am sorry for not confessing to you sooner how much I love you"

He sighed deeply and crumbled the paper in the palm of his hand. Her hand wrapped around his shoulder and drew him on her "Charity left it in my apartment" she explained.

He nodded, but didn't know what to tell her.

"I am sorry I had to remind you of those dark times" she whispered softly.

He looked at her "It's ok"

She flicked her brow at him and gave him a quick testing smile "So….you love me, right?"

He huffed and rubbed his forehead "What do you think?"

"Meh…need you to tell me again" she shook her head playfully.

He frowned and felt the pain deep in his heart "I love you more than words can say" he spoke with honesty.

A wide smile spread on her lips and it echoed in her eyes. His heart rejoiced. She raised a finger to him "So where is my bloody snowdrop, you little thief?"

He offered her a genuine smile and fished for the necklace in his pocket. He drew it out and showed it to her. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes filled with tears quickly. He had never seen her so happy and so emotional at the same time, ever before and he savoured on the effect the little snowdrop had on her. She reached out and touched the tear shaped bottle "It's beautiful" she whispered and then wiped away a few stray tear drops.

He opened it up and looked at her "You want it?"

"Is that even a question?!" she snapped and drew up her hair up to allow him to put it around her neck.

As he closed it she was sniffling and also giggling and he loved every one of her loving expressions. She let go of her long hair that rested heavily just above her waist and turned to him. Her thin fingers traced around it "Severus, it's beautiful, thank you" she muttered and more tears run down. She laughed and wiped them quickly away.

He stopped her and pulled her hand away. Then his long finger took over the job of drying her face "It was your original Christmas gift. It just took sometime to make and then I got into a bloody mess…and oh well…you know the rest" he tried to explain.

"You stole it out of my baggage!" she accused him playfully.

"Yes"

"You stole my most precious gift"

"Yes"
"To take it to the best jeweler and make me this beautiful necklace..." she whispered

"Yes"

"Severus...I don't know if I want to smack you, or kiss you till you have no breath left" she admitted with a lopsided smile.

"I'll decide for you". His hand cupped her cheek and drew her in for a kiss which obliterated every thought and every contradictory feelings. For the first time in forever Hermione's mind was locked into the present. The worries of the days that passed or the days to come were evaporated. He suspended all his actions, wanting to savour her forever. He had no wish for this kiss to end. Drunk for her love his only desire was to touch her. In moments the soft caress of his lips became more firm as he savoured her lips and the quickening of her breath. For long they remained locked upon each other and when they pulled back the world was swirling around them.

She rested her head on his chest and caressed his torso "Did you have the necklace at the train station?" she asked after a long silence were Teddy was hitting the clear waters with a long branch, drenching his trousers and his shoes along the way.

"No, but I had it when I came to find you in the classroom that fateful day that we discussed about Australia" he said quietly.

"You heard me and Charity talking, didn't you?" she asked and the regret was obvious in her voice.

"Yes"

"That's why you told me about Australia?"

"What I heard made me realise that I had to let you go" he responded with the same reminiscent tone in his voice.

"Who told you that I wanted you to let me go?" she gazed up at him.

"The smile that never reached your eyes anymore" he said and frowned down at her.

She sighed and nodded carefully "You had it in your pocket and you never gave it to me..." she sounded almost accusing.

"If I had given it to you, would you have left?" he asked.

"No, never!" her voice was almost annoyed.

"That's why I didn't give it to you" he said quietly and his hand pressed her shoulder reassuringly.

Her fingers caressed her necklace and she smiled sweetly at Teddy. Then she turned and placed a soft careful kiss upon the scars of his neck.

He shuddered.

"What made you decide to wear this old frock coat again?" she asked.

"I took over your job. I had to remind myself what it was like being a teacher" he smiled and drew her in.

"And a piece of clothing did the trick?" she asked.
He flicked his shoulders "Not, really. As it seems I never forgot how to teach"

"What made you decide to wear it unbuttoned and with such a revealing shirt?" she said and run her finger down the side of his neck, offering him another stronger shudder of pleasure. He could never get used to her touch.

"Oh, that'd be you"

"Me?" She frowned.

"Yes, that's you all the way" he nodded and looked thoughtfully at Teddy.

She smiled widely and her fingers left his neck and landed on his large temple scar that extended to the top of his cheekbone. "I love this scar also, have I told you?"

"Yes, more than enough, even though I don't believe you" he said and his lips curled down.

She laughed "I find all your scars attractive, old and new, but you know what's more attractive than them?"

He raised his brow "Do tell"

"Your insecurity"

His frown deepened.

"It makes you human, more approachable. Unlike the Demigod reputation you gained with your actions all these years" she smiled at him and braided her fingers through the hair on the back of his neck.

"Hermione, get serious" he warned.

"I am" she declared.

"No you are not. Now, tell me about Australia. Tell me about your parents" he said getting serious suddenly. No matter his need to kiss her to the end of the world, or chastise her for talking nonsense, he also wanted to make sure that he heard her correctly. That she was going to stay here permanently. He wanted to know every resolution she and her parents had come down to.

She sighed deeply and waved at Teddy that looked happily back at them "He is turning out to be a very happy young boy"

"Don't divert" he said solemnly.

She gazed back at him "There really isn't too much to tell. Things began settling down with the press as you know yourself. I've had a lovely time and I rested thoroughly. You had been right to send me away, but I would never stay away forever if that's what you are asking"

"That's what I am asking" he nodded and gazed at her intensely.

She shook her head "Come on, did you really believe I would stay away from you?"

"If that'd make you happy, yes" he frowned deeply.

"But you make me happy. You are the only one who makes me happy"
"And your parents" he added.

"And them of course"

"So what did you decide to do with them. Are they returning to England with you?"

"No, they decided to remain in Australia" she frowned, but this time he saw only a fleeting darkness pass from her eyes, that didn't linger.

"Then how?"

"Simple enough….I decided to adult" she smiled.

He looked at her confused.

"I am going to remain in England with the love of my life and I will work my ass off to become the best Potion Mistress after you….and they will remain in Australia and go on with their lives. We are going to visit each other regularly. I mean they are coming over next month to meet you" she said nonchalantly.

"What?" he croaked.

She giggled "Took you by surprise my love? They want to meet the man that stole my heart, anew. That's my moms words. Now that things settled with the press, I think you will have a lot of trouble dealing with my parents"

He felt a ton of weight lifting from his shoulders "I am sure you'll give me some tips. Unlike with what you did with the Stanleys"

"Don't even go there. That day was confusing as hell for me" she warned him.

He smiled and squeezed her waist "So you are back to stay..."

"Yes, if you want me"

"How can I not want to see the new star of Potions unpacking all her knowledge slowly to my admiring eyes?" he gave her a lopsided smile.

"Hmm, I don't know. With Kingsley in permanent suspension and elections coming soon, I might run for Minister myself. Harry said I am fit for the job" she said half seriously, half jokingly.

"Don't tell me that I will end up being married to the next Minister of Magic" he threw at her easily.

"You might…what?" she said taken aback.

He smiled smugly.

She tightened her grip on his bicep and she leaned her head on his shoulder "Come on you big goof, tell me, did you just propose to me?"

"No, I am too much of a coward to put labels into what's going on between us, or propose. I am just offering a possible conclusion to our situation in the very distant future"

"Don't make it very distant though, ok?" she raised her brow at him.

His lips curled up in a sweet smile "I'll try"
She laughed and rubbed her cheek on him "That's the most awkward marriage proposal I have ever heard off and I accept of course"

"Don't rush me…” he said half seriously.

"Or you'll run away from me?"

"Possibly"

"I'll run after you" she responded quickly.

"What if I fly away then?"

"I'll find a way. I will always find a way, no matter how difficult things might seem at times” she said honestly.

"Me too" he cupped her hand and kissed her softly on the forehead.

"Things are not perfect for us" she said thoughtfully.

"They are never perfect for anyone"

"We will try to make it work, right?" she asked him and he heard the slight fear in her voice. He was afraid too, but she was worth every single tear and every thread of fear.

"Yes, we will" he said steadily and pressed her hand.

She leaned her head on his shoulder and they both remained silent for a while. Their eyes observing Teddy pulling the boat out of the water and pretending that it could fly in the air. It was her soft whisper that drew him out of his contemplations "I meant it when I said that he is growing up to be a very happy boy, and you are partly to blame for that result"

He frowned, silently.

She felt his indecision and hurried to explain "Severus, when you appeared in his life, you gave him hope. He sees a father in you" she whispered.

He sighed and remained silent, remembering the conversation he had with a boy a while ago.

She spoke after a moment again "You know you'd make a very good dad"

"Don't even go there" he frowned.

"Am I scaring you?" she looked up to him concerned.

"A bit…” he admitted, but squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"I am scared too" she nods.

"Promise, you won't forsaken me, when things turn bad" he whispered after a long silence.

Her brows darkened "I won't" her hand pulled him in and she embraced him.

"I don't know when it felt worst Severus. When I thought you were dead, or when I didn't know if I was going to come back to you?…” she said sadly.

"Both?” he looked at her.
"When we are apart I suffer….no matter the circumstances" she said.

"We are always only one breath apart…I will follow you to the end of the world, my precious” he whispered and cupped her cheek lovingly.

"Even at Hogwarts? At the very place you wanted to avoid with the heaviest cost?” her voice turned deep and vibrated through his spine.

He nodded "Of course, you see being a tepid Librarian has been a lifelong aspiration for me"

She snorted and grabbed the lapels of his frock coat "The man that brought the strongest Auror down to his knees, is tepid?"

"Yes, tepid…I want only one thing more than to be a librarian…”

"What's that?” she lifted her eyes to him and she was crying again, but those were tears of happiness, nor sorrow and he felt his heart swelling with joy.

"To tell you that I fell in love with you, because you resemble no one else….."

She bit her lip and pulled him close. He kissed her then once more. It was soft and slow and he tasted like November, like hot chocolate on stormy evenings and crisp autumn air. As they kissed, more flower buds from the almond tree rained down on them and Teddy began circling the bench with his imaginary boat plane, making swishing noises. Not bothered by their loving embrace, possibly seeing with his childish eyes a mother and a father being there for him. Loving him without questions and not rejecting him when he was misbehaving as most people did. Severus's lips pecked hers softly and his long fingers cleared some brown locks away from her cheek as his eyes bore into hers longingly. She exhaled the words to his mouth "I love you” and he drew her into a tight embrace that lasted for a long time.

When the sky turned crimson and the sun partly hid behind the distant mountains, Severus and Hermione stood up and brought Teddy between them. Each took an arm and as they walked they lifted him up. His giggles and laughter echoed back inside the crumbling walls of the abandoned mansion. It's happiness filled the warm dusk and offered them hope for the future. A difficult and demanding future, but one that they wouldn't face alone this time, but together, and that was the most beautiful word. Together…together…because love truly existed, and they found it in each other.

THE END

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