

Summary: As a reckless archaeology-student unveils a secret hidden for centuries an old evil escapes. A wizard has to travel back in time to prevent the world from becoming eradicated by the demon mage Voltimore. Little does he know he's walking straight into a trap...

Categories: [Crossover/Multi-Fandom](#), [Harry Potter](#) Characters: Ensemble, Severus Snape

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FANDOM: Harry Potter/Robin Hood

NOTES: Dear Azrael: Thank you SO much for letting me have a go at your fabulous idea! :) Without you this story would never have been written, and without your help and support I would have given up long ago. I only hope the story ends up half as good as your original idea, and that you feel I have managed to write some of what you foresaw when you came up with it! I thank you yet again on bended knee for helping me keep my sanity! :)

Dear Keely Kylan: Thank you for also being a tremendous support during the writing of this story (which I never seem to finish, the thing has a life of its own), your neverending positive feedback leaves a spoilt but happy Restina, giggling madly as she sits down and continues writing. And I can't wait for your scanner to start working again so that I can have a look at the Sheriff you're drawing for me! :)

Dear Chienne: Thank you so much for actually volunteering to go through my grammar and spelling. I know tweeking my preeschool English isn't a job for the faint hearted! ;)

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Chapter 1 by Restina Lovebug

Curiosity killed the cat.

~present~

Kent Hardington was a bright and skilled archaeology-student, who dreamt of one day finding the architectural finding of the decade. And it was this dream and his eagerness that brought him to Nottingham Castle, famous from the Robin Hood legends. Forget it, his professor's said, there's nothing more to be found in that old castle that haven't been discovered years ago! But Kent didn't nudge. He wanted to search through the castle by himself, examine every millimeter and every dust-bunny to be sure he didn't miss one thing.

He was a thorough young man, and he went through every room, searched every single crack in stone or wood working his way slowly upwards towards the towers. After six weeks he hadn't found a single thing, and despair slowly started to creep its way inside his brain. He had finished most of the floors now, from the dungeons and up the halls and the many rooms, and there were only one room and four towers left. He went ahead with the work on the small room, half expecting nothing would turn up here either. There was a fireplace placed in the far corner of the room, which by the way, had no windows what so ever. This struck Kent as weird, given the fact that the left stonewall should be facing the Sherwood Forrest. A spark of excitement lit his mind and he started to examine the fireplace with renewed energy. He searched every crack, looking for a secret entrance or something showing there was a hidden room behind the fireplace. Suddenly he stopped for a moment, as his heartbeat increased and his hands started sweating. Beneath his fingers he could clearly feel an outline and curve that parted from the rest of the stone. If he wasn't very much mistaking he'd just found signs of a sealed room!!

Hardington got so excited he had trouble thinking straight. Finally all his hard work would pay off, finally he'd found what he'd been looking for! After scurrying around the room for a couple of minutes, gathering his wits and fantasizing wildly about the headlines in the newspapers he would make- he got his sledgehammer. Sure.. Sledgehammers are seldom used in the art of archaeology, but Kent had no time for a toothbrush to do the same job. With one harsh blow to stonewalls the sledgehammer made way into an agent room, sealed for reasons unknown. As soon as the dust settled, Kent climbed through the big hole his vandalism just had been responsible for. Pulse thundering in his ears, excitement beyond anyone's imagination, he could see a room no one had seen for over eight hundred years. It was small and square and to Kent's disappointment seemed to contain only one object, a family portrait. But this was a big discovery as well, and he curiously approached the painting with goosebumps creeping up his neck as his excitement grew once more.

Time, dust and cobwebs had worn on the painting through time, but Kent had no problem getting a glimpse of the people portrayed with his flashlight. There was a man sitting on a chair, the center of attention, a noble most definitely. He had dark hair and beard, dark eyes and dark, middle-aged-fashioned clothes. His face showed signs of pride, power and the spoiled look some children have. On his right side an old woman stood, probably his mother. She had a foul expression on her face, with what looked like an evil twitch in her eyes and a wart on her left cheek. On the man's left a fair woman stood, with what once had been long, reddish hair and bright green eyes. There was the typical smile of a woman who'd just fallen madly in love on her face. But the most odd detail with the painting was something the man was holding in his arms. It looked like a baby's body, probably the man's and the young woman's son or daughter, but the

baby's face was missing. It was like it had been scraped off, or weirder- never been painted on..

"Fascinating!" Kent mumbled as he went from studying the painting and over to the frame withholding it. It struck him that the frame seemed somehow misplaced, like it didn't fit the painting it was surrounding. It was a wooden frame, painted black, worn down by the tooth of time, but there was no mistake, he could clearly see the outline of inscribed letters, once decorated with gold. Kent frowned as he tried to make out the letters.

"It seems to be some sort of Latin.." he muttered to him self as he carefully brushed the dust away with a small brush he kept in his vest pocket. He had skipped a lot of Latin-lessons in his days, and he regretted every single one of them now. But slowly he worked his way through the text, mumbling his narration as he went along: "A beast kept prisoned between these four walls, your doom you're uttering with saying these very words. I'm afraid to tell, my unlucky soul, you're heart will beat no more." A whoosh went through the stone-room as the last word escaped his mouth.

"What the..." Kent started, but he never finished. A cold chill went down his spine, as every part of flesh was devoured from his body in an instant. Kent made the newspapers, although not in the way he had intended...

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Black night, dangerously dark. The perfect hiding place for evil on the run. Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwart's school of wizardry awoke with a start. He felt a shift, a great trembling through the earth- something evil had escaped, something foul and terrible with a burning hate. He didn't know this evilness, but he recognized its stench. A dark demon that had been locked away for centuries- and that for a good reason. Albus had a bad feeling about this, he definitely had.

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The muggle newspapers were running over with the story about the secret room found in Nottingham Castle. A corpse, or more precisely the skeleton of a reckless archaeology-student who'd been a bit too eager with his sledge had been found in front of an old family portrait, never seen before. The find amazed archaeology's all over the world, as this was the first preserved and only family portrait found of the people once living in this old castle. Maybe the legend of Robin Hood finally would be explained one way or another, once and for all. Some of the papers flooded over with the rumors about there being something evil kept hidden inside that room. The very same night the young man died a most mysterious death, apparently self- combusting like a torch, a terrible storm raged through the countryside, leaving many broken homes, and the Loxley mausoleum, vandalized beyond recognition. People in the village where whispering about an old evil escaping, something that had been trapped for centuries.

No reasonable archaeologist with a minimum of brain function would of course believe such nonsense. A simple case of many incidents, a lightning striking the young lad maybe, and some punks fazed out on some drug vandalizing the mausoleum. The storm was just a fact of weather. No one stopped to bother about Kent Hardington being struck down by lightning in a room without entrances besides a hole in the wall...

A group of experts were chosen, solely to investigate further the old Nottingham castle. Maybe there were other treasures hidden within these Stonewalls. And once again the castle was searched, from dungeon to rooftop, leaving nothing behind unsorted. Five weeks with thorough investigation took place, nothing was found. But then, on the first day of the sixth week- another archaeologist found signs of a sealed room. The group was ecstatic. Who knew what was hiding behind these walls. The villagers were afraid. There probably was more evil waiting to escape its stone prison. Many fled their ruined homes to be sure they wouldn't be haunted once more. Unspeakable things were happening in the Sherwood Forrest, and no good could come of

luring more of this evilness into the daylight.

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Even the replacements of the young unfortunate Mr. Hardington felt the urge to break through the wall to get to the secret treasures as fast as possible. But many years in the trade had taught them patience, and they bid their time carefully so they wouldn't disturb or destroy anything but cobwebs. Archaeology is a delicate art and these men knew that, by breaking through with force they could end up destroying the very thing they were looking for.

Finally, two weeks later the first glimpse of the second secret room was revealed. They succeeded in removing one of the many stones gluing the many castle walls together and now they with some difficulty could look into a room no one had seen for over eight hundred years. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to claim that these grown men were just as euphoric as the young Mr. Hardington had been when he got his first glimpse of the hidden room he found. The temptation to break through the walls and give a big gaze about everything that was called etiquette and moral codes of archaeology made every single one of the ten expert members of the specially elected team sweat on their palms in mere impatience. Still, they managed to keep their patience..

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Far away in the precise time the archaeology's got their first glimpse of the hidden room an old wizard having an after dinner nap suddenly drifted into a dream. In a heartbeat he stood besides the sweating men who were peeping through the tiny crack in the wall. Albus watched them with great curiosity. Muggles were a fascinating kind of folk and he never got tired of looking on their many weird habits. But something called him on, something through this very hole these men were trying hard to look through. Albus, knowing this was a dream went straight through the wall. It was a room covered in dust and untold secrets. The old man looked around noting a bed, a desk, cupboards and in a corner by a fireplace- a crib. Could this be the living-quarters of a nanny? No. Why would anyone try to hide a nanny's room for all eternity? He went closer, surprised to find chemicals... and even Astronomy equipment. This were things that didn't belong here, not to the decade this was supposed to be from.

Some artifacts, parchments and clothes lay scattered around the floor like someone had been plummeting through the room in a rage. Albus picked up the remains of a black cloak. A tingling sensation of recognition whispered somewhere in the back of his head as he lay it carefully back down again. He wandered over to the crib. It looked untouched, like it had never been used, but was just about to when faith had decided different and left it unused for all the future. A strange sensation dragged him towards the desk again and he found himself pulling out one of the desk drawers. There, practically unsoiled by time a small charcoal portrait caught his attention. No... it couldn't be! The face, so familiar! Together with the cloak, the chemicals, the Astronomy equipment.. and not to mention the crib! Albus Dumbledore stood aghast, not believing his very eyes. For once he prayed his sight had betrayed him, but he looked at the drawing once more, knowing he would have to change a man's life forever.

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A sensation! The archaeologist's had no words to describe the findings they had done. The room and its contents were practically unharmed, and what secrets it contained! They were over themselves with praise over what they believed had to be the finding of the decade! They had found objects that wasn't even supposed to be there, star-maps that shouldn't have been drawn before tree hundred years later, chemistry equipment and chemicals that was invented many years later and even Astronomy- equipment no one could explain how got there. But a carbon testing showed that everything the room contained was over eight hundred years old, that this was an authentic find which no one had been trampling with. And in the desk drawer a charcoal

portrait of an unknown but striking Saxon, caught everyone's attention. He had a very distinct being shining through even this old paper. The drawing was drawn in the same style as a certain famous portrait, of the Mona Lisa. This man also had that posture. His eyes seemed distant, maybe it was hundreds of years old chalk that did it, but the most striking detail with this picture was not the man's face.. but his stomach. The easiest way to describe it would be to resemble it with a woman's stomach, heavy with child. And the way the man had his arm wrapped around his belly, as if he was protecting it from something made all archaeologists think of their wives when they were pregnant. This was what they looked like. Many questions arose around this man. Who was the secret guest, how come he was in position of objects not even invented in the time he would have lived in, why was his room to be sealed up for all eternity? And what about the old legends of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham? Was there more to them than just a story?

Especially one of the ensemble of great brains and dust busters, a Mr. Norman Wellington, got especially fascinated by the possible connection between the findings and the legend. Could it possibly be the Sheriff of Nottingham portrayed on the family portrait, and the fair maiden- could that be Maid Marion? But that didn't make sense with the legend- Marion wed Robin of Loxley, not the Sheriff, or at least according to the stories. Could it be possible Robin never got to break off the wedding and the Sheriff actually got to wed Marion? The baby on the painting would therefore be the so desperately needed child the Sheriff wanted, so he could claim the throne. Maybe a soft heart many centuries ago decided this end of the saga was too sad an ending and changed it? And where did the mystery guest fit in the picture? It was easy to see that the man had a striking resemblance with the man on the portrait, but this man had no beard and his hair was shorter and arranged differently. And his expression didn't look close to the nobleman's. The aura of power and childish spoil had no traces in this man's face. This man had a look of no fear on his face, a chillingly cold appearance looking like it was pasted on to hide different feelings. And his eyes... somehow Norman Wellington got sad just looking at them. Somehow the charcoal drawing seemed to have captured an enormous loneliness.

Sure anybody could point out the obvious similarities between the two and claim they were the one and same person, but Norman didn't think so. It was two different persons captured in time by one or two skilled artists. Maybe the stranger was the noble man's brother, but Norman doubted it. The noble man had clothes typical for a wealthy man in the Middle-aged, while the other of what Norman could make out of it, had clothes that didn't fit in that time-period at all. Just like the clothes they had found in the secret chamber. It was like.. this man had dropped in on a visit...from the future..

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Albus Dumbledore was in a grave mood. He'd just heard the reports from the Sherwood Forrest and they were not good. Indeed there was a Demon Mage on the loose, and that wasn't even the worst of it. For this demon had a name. A foul, death-bringing name that had been whispered on the lips of terrified mortals some eight-nine hundred years ago. Voltimore. The essence of pure evil, the demon form of a wizard that terrorized the world in the beginning of time, Voldemort's forefather. Albus slammed a stunned hand down into his work desk, too grieved by this news to think of any more constructive manner to react. He remembered his dream a couple of days ago only too well. He had hoped for the longest that he wouldn't have to do what he'd guessed back then, but now it seemed damn well impossible. He would have to send an unknowing man back in time to do his bidding..

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~past~

Muggle history and romantic legends are all founded on some truths...no matter how hidden that truth may be. And everyone knew the legend of The Robin of The Hood. The fight between good and bad, how light and justice prevailed. But the real stories' are never that simple. Things get forgotten through history, details that don't fit in or don't seem suitable to tell small children, or

grown ups as well, is left out. The legend ends but a shadow of the true story, and that is in many cases just as well. For the truth can be scaring and not to say the least, sad...

Up in the tower of a castle beside the Sherwood Forrest centuries ago a dark, an ageing witch was visited by a dark guest. This witch was the Sheriff's mother. She'd been scrying for months, trying to find out various paths for her son to gain the crown. Having already bewitched a noble lord, married him and produced an heir some 35 years earlier. Oh, she was proud of her son! Tall, dark and cultured to a great extent he was, sane he wasn't. The blood of the witch was cursed and like all her family he inherited a dual personality, childlike arrogant spoilt and violent even for a feudal lord. The flip-side, a dutiful son of an aged and often infirm mother, he was the last of an old and noble bloodline, a learned man of books and arcane law, trusted servant of the crown. She would do anything to secure her son's future, anything.

The easiest way to secure his path to the throne was for him to marry someone with royal blood and produce an heir. Here the old witch had picked the perfect specimen years ago, namely the sweet maiden Marion. But there was one problem. Since her son was kicked in a strategic place in his youth he could no longer produce any offspring. And sadly he needed to be the father of a child with royal blood to claim the throne. Sure he could marry her, but there was a law specifying that an heir would have to be produced the first two years of their marriage, this to secure the line of Kings. And with no more action in some of his lower regions he would have a serious problem when the two years had passed.

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At this late night there was something out on the search. It had a name feared by mortals and it left only destruction in its path. It had a great desire and a great need. It wanted to take human form again. To do this it needed an agent artifact, which had been passed from generation to the next for centuries. The only problem was that one couldn't TAKE this artifact from whom which it belonged, it had to be given to you. But as he arrived his destination place Voltimore couldn't believe his luck. He felt the need and greed the old witch harvested and knew it would be the easiest thing in the world to have her giving the artifact to him. It amused him she wasn't scared as he entered her chamber. She looked like she was disturbed in an important task and wanted to throw the dark shadow out the room.

"What do you want!" there was no trace of fear on her face, and the Demon started to feel a bit agitated. She could at least show him some respect, the old hack!

"Show me the respect I deserve and demand, and I may provide you with the offer of your lifetime!" he roared and made all the objects in the room, including the old witch fly scrambling into the wall. Yes, there was the right look! If the Demon could have smiled he would. Instead he settled for a subtle neigh. "I think I've got your attention, good! Now I can offer my services to you, in exchange of the proper payment of course.."

"And what services is it that you may offer, my Dark Lord?" The old woman made some sort of bow and approached him cautiously.

"I can help you provide the heir that will secure your son's right place as king." The expression on the witch' face went from fright to pure joy:

"My Lord, are you telling the truth? If you can grant this old dying witch her last wish I would give you anything in return!"

"Oh, the price is but mere pocket-change, my fair Lady!" the dark shadow exclaimed while he sniggered silently: "All I want in exchange is a small worthless stone inherited down generations of your family. The old witch' hand absentmindedly rested on her chest where she carried an ornament she'd inherited from her mother. It was a cherished belonging to her as this was the

only thing her mother left her before being burnt on the stake for witchcraft. It was a simple silver chain with some sort of rock attached to it, not pretty in any terms of beauty, but dear just the same. But this would secure her dear son the future she wished for with all her heart.

"And how is it precisely you're going to produce this heir?" she asked suspiciously. "My son don't have the ability to produce any offspring by him self."

"You're right," the shifting shadow answered: "and that's why I've found you a direct descendant matching your son's flesh almost to the full." The witch thought about this for a minute.

"But that still don't help with the Maiden Marion and my son wedding her," she argued.

"Well, that's the genius of this plan! You see, I can make sure your offspring is born, and that the fair Marion is the mother without even having her touching the man fathering your son's heir. Sure it's a bit intricate, but I assure you it will work!"

"And how are you supposed to put this man's semen into her womb?" the witch continued.

"Who said anything about impregnating HER?!" the demon answered curtly. The old witch looked like a question mark.

"I said I would provide a man who is a direct descendant of your bloodline, didn't I? And this man will also carry forth the very offspring that your son is in need of. When the child is born a simple blood scan will assure Marion is the mother, and she will have no choice but to marry your son even spite the fact that she has not carried this child to term. The facts don't lie and even when she denies all knowledge of this child she will have to obey the laws stating she will have to marry the father unless she wants the child, and her self most importantly, to become outcasts. The child's father in this matter will be the stranger. But he will be such a close match to your son a blood scan will state him to be the father." Tears actually appeared in the old witch' eyes. Finally the solution she'd been waiting for, offered to her by this... dark demon in exchange for a simple stone. There were only two more questions to be answered before she gave her answer:

"Who is this man, and how are you to get him here, through time?"

"The time travel will be simple," the demon answered: "And his name is.. Severus Snape."

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The Demon Mage instructed the old witch of what she would do. Voltimore knew that this Snape was a powerful wizard and alchemist in the future and that he would be more than happy to get his hands on the artifact that could threaten the course of the world if Voltimore got his hands on it first. It was a pleasant thing, being able to look into the future, but the skill was cursed with the fact that he could not determine his own future or faith. Therefore Voltimore had no idea that some eight hundred years later he would escape imprisonment, and that the wizard society would search for the very stone he was so much in need of. The other curse that cramped his style was the fact that he wasn't capable of time travels himself. Therefore he had to use this old woman's lust for her son achieving the throne to secure the stone he so desperately needed. She had to contact the wizard through a dream, offering him the artifact in exchange for knowledge of the Dark Arts of Magic. If he did her bidding for one month, teaching her potions and curses, to show her the future and train her son in the arts of statesmanship restraint and deception, the artifact the demon desired would be given to him and him alone. Or at least, that was what he would think..

From the moment the man stepped through the time-barrier he would be cursed with Voltimore's curse that would leave him weakened and ...pregnant with the unknowing Marion's child. By the time he realized he had been lured into a trap it would be too late. Now the witch was old, but she

was not stupid. When she accepted this deal she also made it perfectly clear that she would not give the artifact away before the child, a boy, was born and her son's future was ensured. Voltimore accepted the terms, after all he had learned the skill of patience the last hundred years and so he would go into hiding again after he'd marked the unfortunate man with the curse. This was a skilled man in the Dark Arts and Voltimore knew he had to make some adjustments to him as he passed the time portal. He didn't want any slip-ups this time!

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Chapter 2 by Restina Lovebug

Mirror images.

~present-past~

Severus Snape seldom got bothered with dreams. After years as a death eater for Voldemort and secret spy for Dumbledore he'd experienced enough to make any normal man go insane. Two years had passed since the Great War in which Voldemort finally died a painful death. Severus hid his betrayal well, but when his master gave him the order to kill Harry Potter he'd flinched, for just a second, but that was enough. With a rage beyond anything Severus had ever witnessed, the betrayed launched himself at him with one thing in mind, killing him. And Severus would have died. Beyond any doubt a most excruciating death, worse than any cruciatius curse. From nowhere his savior appeared, a tiny second before Severus' heart would stop beating and he would stop drawing breath. The Avada Kedavra claimed the war's last victim, the life of the dark lord Voldemort himself. Blinded by pain Severus couldn't see who it was that had saved him at first, but he could recognize the voice any day.

"Are you alright, professor Snape?" So it was that he once again would be saved by one in the Potter-line of heroes, damn them and their courage!

Yes, Severus seldom dreamt at night. But that didn't mean his rest was peaceful and blessed. His old days as a death eater came back to haunt him in his sleep, denying him to forget all the lives he'd ruined, all the pain he'd caused and all the pain caused to him.. There was a dark scar on his soul and it burned every night denying him to let go of the past. He was a cursed man, cursed by his past and his memories. No wonder he behaved the way he did, he knew no other way. But on this peculiar night his mind escaped the old nightmares. He'd never had any clairvoyant experiences in his life, the only skills he had when it came to guessing the future was reading the stars on the night sky. But this had nothing to do with the future, this was a call from the past. His resting mind was approached by a witch from the past, and how odd this felt he instantly knew it to be true. It was a pitiful creature, lurking in the shadows, and she had an offer to make.

The next day he went to the headmaster's office, feeling pretty excited for a change. Finally he would have the chance to do something good and decent! He'd seen the strain Albus was under for the time being and knew of the Demon Mage, Voltimore, terrorizing the Sherwood Forrest. He knew the headmaster had been searching for the owner of a certain artifact the last couple of days with no effect. It seemed the object had got lost somewhere along time.. And now this perfect opportunity had presented itself for him to go back in time to fetch the thing. Sure, he was a suspicious man, and the opportunity of which he'd received the offer was almost too well timed, but the witch had claimed she had a feeling he was in great need of this very object and mentioned nothing about Voltimore. Besides, it was an offer he couldn't allow himself to be too suspicious to. He wanted to remove the anxiety causing the headmaster's worries and this was the way to do it. Voltimore would be hard enough to fight without the stone, but with it he would be damn near invulnerable and immortal. Little did Severus know Voltimore wasn't the cause of Albus' worries, there was something else...

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Albus Dumbledore hadn't slept for 48 hours. He didn't dare to fall asleep for the time being, afraid the omens might haunt him again. He had played with the idea of denying Severus to do this, but he knew now he no longer had any choice but to let the Potions Master do what he in ten minutes time would be bursting through the door to tell that he was doing. And he knew that if he told

Severus what he knew- he probably wouldn't go. But that couldn't be. No matter how Albus turned and twisted the facts- he knew he had to let Severus go. If Albus stepped in and interfered with Severus' faith things that should happen wouldn't, and the world might very well face doom.

Severus arrived at time, his pale face lightened with eagerness one seldom saw on this man. He had the look of a child that have a secret he knows will bring great joy when it tells its father.

"Severus, child! I'm so glad to see you! Come, sit down." Despite his worries Albus still had the ability to smile, although not as brightly as usual. Severus whooshed over to the nearest chair and sat down.

"I have great news, Headmaster! The artifact, I know where to get it!" He actually smiled! Albus' heart bled within.

"Really?" he answered and tried to look amazed: "How, where?" Severus was a man known for his patience and his calmness, but now he seemed to have trouble sitting still.

"Last night, I had a dream from the past. A witch offered it to me in exchange for some favors. I've been thinking it through, of course, and I really think I shouldn't let this chance go by me."

"But what if it is some sort of set-up?" Albus argued, he couldn't let Severus off too easy, he would smell it if he tried to hide something from him too openly.

"I've checked the witch' story out and it seems believable enough. She did own the artifact till her death, in fact she's the last known owner of it. And if I should stumble into some devious trap I'm grown enough to take care of my self!" The headmaster looked at him with big sorrowful eyes:

"Are you really sure you want to do this?" Severus was dead calm, there were no trace of worry or anxiety in his features as he answered:

"Yes."

"Very well then. I trust you to bring the artifact and your self back in one piece, while I go to Sherwood and try to keep nasty old Voltimore occupied." Albus hesitated a moment before he continued:

"When will you leave and how long will you be away?"

"For one month," Severus answered as he got to his feet: "And I'll be leaving tonight, it's a full moon and the perfect opportunity to cast a time-portal. Albus rose to his feet and pulled the younger closer to a harsh hug.

"Good luck, child," he said, while fighting the tears threatening to betray his calm features: "And please remember, you're always in my thoughts!"

"Albus, I'll only be gone for a month. It's not like I'm going off to die or anything!" Severus answered a tad agitated. He had never grown used with the comfort an embrace can give, quite frankly he found them rather scaring, especially when it was Albus that was handing them out.

"I know, I'm sorry! I'm acting like such a wuss!" the headmaster said and smiled. He showed Severus his way out and thereby returned to his desk, graver than ever.

his mind repeated over and over again.

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Severus had a lot of things to prepare for the upcoming night. He had to pack, and on the top of his head he knew he would be needing a traveling chemistry kit and the most useful ingredients for making good, working potions with all the finesse an old witch from the dark ages could desire. He also needed some spare robes and cloaks, clothes and a good astronomy kit. Last but not least he would need a good pile of parchments and drafts, and maybe a small cauldron to be on the safe side. He was so lost in his thoughts as he strolled down the hallway he didn't notice Harry Potter before he bumped into him.

"Potter! Would you mind walking in the way of somebody else?! I do not have the time to stumble over boys which minds are too preoccupied to pay attention to where they are going! Sometimes I really wonder whom you and all Potters are descending from!" he spat out and continued down the hall with billowing robes before Harry even had the chance to reply.

The night came and Severus was ready. He had packed all the belongings he needed in a small magical purse, which could contain the same as a big muggle-trunk. A small chill went down his back as the moon appeared from black and blue clouds, it was time. He had to cast a particularly hard and mind-draining spell to open a gate through time, and he needed the person on the other side's awareness of his coming. He closed his eyes as he uttered the spell, using all his energy and power, while he made a circle movement with his wand. A bright shining light made him open his eyes again and there he saw the portal. It was shaped like a big hole covered with a mass resembling the shining surface of a soap-bubble. He had never traveled through time before and he was curious how the experience would affect his body. He'd read somewhere that all you would feel stepping through a time-portal was a tingling sensation down your back, and sometimes from under your feet. If that was all there would be nothing to it!

He held his breath and entered the portal. A small whoosh went by his ears, and a sudden weakness struck his body as he went through the barrier. He felt the presence of something, and this something seemed to strip his mind of his natural abilities. Severus felt weak and vulnerable as he stumbled into the dimly lit courtyard. He didn't need magic to know that he was being watched, it was not a pleasant feeling. And as he stood there, struggling with a strange kind of queasiness he reached out for his wand and discovered it was missing. That was a detail he hadn't expected... Pulling back the cowl he wore, he shouted out:

"Show yourself!" and the witch did.

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To find yourself staring into the beardless face of your only living son, even for a witch can be a shock. Only this wasn't her son, this was her blood but not her son. In fact the man standing in front of her was everything her son wasn't, she could feel the magic surrounding him ... like the blood running through his veins... rich and deep like a fine wine. She knew that the demon had made sure of him passing through the gate without his wand and that it had dampened his natural abilities so that he would be easier to handle the following months. And there, within him her son's future son had just been created by a single curse from her dark friend.

In those few terrible seconds of silence that seemed to last and last, she felt a terrible urge to devour and tear the flesh of the being standing in front of her. She wanted to bite into that pale neck and suck the blood, drink it bathe in it.. and suddenly just as quickly the urge passed.

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Severus felt it, the ripple as it went over him and the old witch, he'd been cursed as he stepped through the void. In front of him this old witch stared at him like she was seeing a ghost, and Severus didn't like it one bit. She was a miserable old thing, foul looking and withered.

"What are you hiding from me, old woman!" he said and wrapped his arms around his chest. The

witch twitched for a moment and then tried to lure him off with a false and teeth-lacking smile.

"What do you mean, noble Sire? I have nothing to hide from you." Severus could tell a lie when he spotted one, but he knew better than to blurt out with information that would be best kept hidden. Something was not right here, and in his current state he was in no shape of defending himself if anything should occur. He decided to bide his time and pretend he didn't suspect a thing. And spite the witch' efforts to throw it off, it was still there, Severus could feel it. He would have to be careful, before he could remove anything he would have to know what it was, and he had to be strong enough... This curse, what ever it was, was something he had to live with for the time being, and in the mean while he would try to figure out who put it there in the first place.

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He was shown to his room in one of the towers, above the vest wing. This was where he would be instructing the witch in potions and tell her about the future, and this would also serve as his living- quarters. As soon as the old woman had left he crashed to bed, feeling a weakness he'd never experienced before in his life. It felt like something had attached it self to him now draining his energy like a leach. Severus was believing this would be a very long month. But he'd had his first glimpse of the stone though, hanging round the witch' neck. At the end of this month she would give the artifact to him and he could, hopefully, return to the present, that if he had regained his strength and managed to do the spell without his wand. There were an awfully lot of ifs, and Severus decided not to worry about his return, yet. First he had to figure out what was making him so weak and vulnerable.

He awoke the next morning to one of the greatest shocks of his life. As he opened his eyes he noticed that a man was sitting next to him, but that wasn't what stirred him the least. The stranger leaned closer so that Severus could see him more plainly and a gasp of surprise bribed its way up his throat. It was unbelievable! Dark, shoulder long hair, black eyes, a crooked nose and thin lips with a curl on them, he was staring into the face of a man that could have been his identical twin! His twin had a beard, though, and his hair was differently arranged, but other from that...

The other man broke into a great smile as he presented himself:

"Good morning, lord Snape! I'm the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the owner of this humble castle. I beg your forgiveness, I just had to see... My mother has told me so much about you and your striking resemblance of , well... me- by the breakfast-table that I just had to see for my self!" So that's why that old witch had looked so amazed when she'd approached him. But how could this be? How come he had stepped centuries back in time and ended up staying with someone that looked exactly like him? He tried to sit up and felt the weakness hadn't let go. So it was staying for the time being then.

Severus soon understood that the Sheriff was a dangerous man. There was something ..strange.. about him, the way he behaved, who would have sat down by the bed of a total stranger to see how he looked- for crying out loud, and the way he looked at him. Sure, Severus understood that the man would be curious how it could be they looked so alike, he knew he was, but there was something more... When he started his lessons with him in statesmanship he had no rest from his eyes. They followed him everywhere, watched his every step, his every gesture. He often behaved like a spoiled child if there was something he didn't understand and Severus had to bite his tongue several times not to spit out harsh remarks. If this had been back at Hogwarts the dear Sheriff would get a treatment he would never forget. But Severus didn't dare show to much of his natural temper around here. He still had this weird cloud of uneasiness hanging over him and he still hadn't figured out what sort of trap he'd walked into. But he had a strong sensation he shouldn't turn his back on this man.

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Chapter 3 by Restina Lovebug
Of blood and unicorns.

present~

There still were some brave, or dare one say stupid, souls left in the village by the Nottingham Castle, in the present. Like the archaeologists they had no interest for superstitions and folklore. Amongst them a family who'd just moved here from London to get away from the stressing suburban life. This tiny village with all the legends and the kind and gentle folk had soon made the family of four fall in love with the place. Magnolia Richards, the former law- secretary and her husband Martin had moved his dentist-practice to this place so that their two kids, Ellen and Rickie, five and seven years old, could grow up in safer surroundings than the roaring London. For half a year all had been peace and solitude for the little family. Martin's dentist-practice was blossoming and Magnolia had just gotten a job in a flower shop. Ellen and Rickie thrived in their new community after a rocky start. Now they had many new friends and seemed to have forgotten all about London. Then the nonsense started. Magnolia remembered with horror the night where the great storm came and almost tore their house apart. Thankfully the damages hadn't been to grave and Martin only had to exchange a broken window or two and some tiles on the ceiling. Many of their neighbors had been far worse off than them. But as if that wasn't enough, rumors started spreading through the village. On every corner of every street the whispers about an old and deadly evil was discussed. Silently, as if people were afraid someone or something would strike down from clear sky and kill them..

Magnolia tried to laugh it off and called it small city charm around the dinner table. Both her husband and kids came home with more ghost stories every day. Ellen and Rickie was scared easily enough, after all they were children, and their mother had a hard time convincing them every night there was no bogeyman out in the woods. She was starting to get agitated. Stories about children that had wandered off into the woods and never returned, an old lady who were found in her bed one morning, stone cold and with an expression of utter horror on her face.

"You're scaring your own children with these ridiculous stories, don't you see that?" She would tell her customers who stopped by to bring the latest gossip. What she failed to see was that the grown women and men stopping by the flower shop was just as scared as the village's children..

One morning a woman came screaming into the little village, just after break of dawn. Her clothes were shredded, blood were streaming down her face, and the fright in her eyes- indescribable. She ended up at the steps of the church, crying and screaming- the priest had a hard time calming her down. The story she told was enough to send cold shivers through any brave soul, and within lunchtime most of the villagers had fled. Evil was coming and you weren't safe within the walls of your own home any more. If you wanted to survive you had to run, now while you had the chance.

On the steps of their new home the Richards' silently watched as their neighbors packed a briefcase or two in unadulterated panic and headed out of the town on screaming tires.

"Stupid, superstitious folk!" Magnolia snorted as she went inside to start dinner: "Somebody makes a prank or two in the forest and they all starts screaming "Devil" and runs away like lemmings!" Martin and the children weren't as relaxed as Magnolia. They had been told some pretty convincing stories the past days and to think a whole town would leave their homes if they weren't convinced something dangerous was going on seemed.. well, more odd than the prospect of a bogeyman lurking in the forest. But Martin knew better than to try convincing his wife when she was acting like this. He'd better wait until tomorrow, then he could try convince her taking the kids to visit her mother. With the town practically deserted, minus a few drunks and a couple of fanatics who trusted God to protect them from any evil, Magnolia couldn't claim they had to stay behind to keep the dentist practice and the flower shop open for the townies' sake. He was pretty sure his plan would work.

The day and evening passed and no evil with red horns and a tail showed it self in the little village. Magnolia sat by the fire, knitting frantically while she was nagging about all the stupid,

inbreed villagers that were spooked with children's ghost stories. Martin said nothing. He had secretly loaded the rifle he kept in his tool shed, just in case. The silence of the town scared him. To know they were practically alone here made his skin crawl. None of them paid any attention to five year old Ellen who suddenly became very interested with looking out the window. A child has all the abilities a grown muggle lacks. Amongst them, fantasy, the ability to believe without claiming facts of evidence first. Now the child looked out the window from their house placed in the outskirts of the town and she saw.. a unicorn. Dazzling white and a beautiful sight for anyone both mortal and immortal. When she tilted her head a little to the left the unicorn did the same. She tilted her head to the right and the unicorn followed her movements.

She looked around to see if anyone else had heard the unicorn's whisper. But her mother knitted away just the same and her father tried to watch TV. She knew her father was just as afraid for the bogeyman as she and her brother, but she saw no evil in the magnificent white creature outside her window.

Tiny hands pressed against the window glass, she smiled against the gentle creature.

she thought as she realized the reason her parents couldn't hear the unicorn was because it was speaking with its mind. Outside the unicorn nodded and moved out of sight. Ellen climbed down from her stool and walked as calmly as she could out to her brother's room. Rickie was sitting on the floor playing with his Lego-bricks.

"Brother, brother! There's a unica...unaco.. you know, a horse with a horn on its head... in our backyard!!!" she was so excited she didn't have the time to stop, just charged straight for the window.

"Yeah, right!" Rickie said as he got to his feet, just to see of course. Not that there would be anything there.. But as her sister had told him a few seconds ago there WAS a unicorn in their backyard. Rickie gaped as he looked out the window.

"WOOOOW!" he gasped.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Ellen said with a dreamy voice: "It invites us out to play with him! And I've decided to call him Mr. Ulrik"

"You know we're not allowed to go out after dark, Ellie. And there's a bogeyman in the forest, Pal and Myra saw it a couple of days ago. It's not safe!"

"He said he would protect us from the bogeyman!" Ellen said, a tad impatient and irritated: "We're safe as long as we're together with it."

"He tooold you did he?" Ricky said, with the mocking tone he knew his little sister hated more than anything else.

Ricky almost fell over in surprise when the voice appeared in his head.

"See?" Ellen said with a grown up voice to state her point: "He talks to us!"

Rickie wasn't as easily convinced as his two years younger sister and he knew better than to go out after curfew. The unicorn gazed at him, its silver eyes made him almost dizzy.

Rickie looked at his sister, saw the eagerness and the complete trust she savored for this creature and decided he would trust it too. Silently he opened the window, eased his sister out the crack and thereby followed himself. Hand in hand they followed the fairytale creature towards the forest, two children making a little evening stroll protected by a new friend.

Fifteen minutes later Martin discovered both his children were missing.

"They're gone!" he screamed, hand clutching his chest: "Ellie and Rick- they're gone!!!!" Magnolia looked up from her knitting, looking like she'd just been interrupted in an important business meeting.

"They know better than to go wandering off at night, Martin. They're probably up in the attic or something."

"No, you silly woman, they are gone!" Martin screamed at her while he entered the living room, rifle in hand: "I knew we should have left while we had the chance!" The sight of her husband, close to hysteria and with a loaded shotgun in his hands finally hit Magnolia's calmness and killed it in one sharp blow.

"Where?" she breathed as she followed her husband's hasty steps towards the door.

"The forest," Martin answered, gravely.

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The two children followed their new companion with easy steps, unaware of the uproar their absence would cause in a couple of minutes back at their home. They felt completely safe with this magic creature, as it had reassured them they were completely safe as long as they were together with it. Small children's legs move slower than a grown man's, therefore the walk to the outskirts of the forest took them nearly ten minutes, double the time a man would use in a steady pace. Both children paid no attention to the dark sky and the shivering trees, they were blinded by the beauty of the unicorn who kept just as far ahead in front of them so they couldn't touch it.

"When are we going to play?" Ellen asked as her legs were starting to grow tired. They had reached the forest now. The unicorn stopped by a tree and threw its head so the silvery white mane was flying through the air like silver threads.

"Are they coming too?" A big smile grew on the little girl's cheeks, that would mean they too knew about the unicorn and wouldn't mind Ellie playing with it.

"What about the treasure you promised to show us?" Rickie was growing impatient, and he was starting to wonder if it had been such a good idea to sneak out into the night after all.

The unicorn moved aside, and there just by the tree's side a treasure chest was standing. That's weird? It didn't stand there a minute ago? But Rickie soon forgot his worries and ran to see what the chest was hiding.

Behind them their parents were now running towards the forest. Martin moved with such assurance and haste Magnolia wondered how he could be so sure were the children would be. But she didn't dare question his instincts now, there might be no bogeyman in the forest, but that didn't mean it wasn't a shelter for lots of dangerous animals. She stumbled and twisted her foot, but her husband didn't even slow down to see if she was injured. He stormed further down the path leading towards the forest. Magnolia got to her feet with a silent moan as her ankle hurt a little, but it wasn't too bad. She could hear Martin's distant cries as he was running further and further away from her. Magnolia started running again, fear was really starting to get to her now. Suddenly she could hear Ellie wail in terror, and Martin's rifle went off, lighting the edge of the forest for a split second.

"Ellie!!" Magnolia screamed

as her maternal instincts screamed at her that her daughter was in mortal peril. She

continued to scream until she finally saw her daughter, kneeling beside something sparkling white. It looked like a horse. She barely looked up when her mother came charging, screaming and crying all at once.

"Daddy killed Mr. Ulrik!" she sobbed when her mother snatched her and embraced her with her shaking arms. Magnolia couldn't believe her own eyes. By her feet lay what she had believed to be a horse. A great horn on its forehead proved otherwise, together with the silver like blood it bled from where the bullets from Martin's shotgun had hit its target.

"That's no horse!" Martin panted as he tried to keep Rickie from touching the dead creature: "We have to get away from here Magnolia, we have to leave NOW!" But Magnolia saw no threat in the dead beast, she felt pity for it.

"Why did you kill it Martin?" She looked at him accusingly. Martin stared back at her as if she'd just fallen down from the moon.

"It was standing besides our two kids! Did you SEE the horn on that thing?!?!?!!" he screamed and waved the shotgun carelessly around: "It could have speared them just as easy as you spear little cubes of meat when you barbecue!"

"Martin, look at it! I don't believe for one second that this... horse would have killed Ellie or Rick!" She put the crying girl down on the ground and went over to the spot her husband was standing to pry the rifle out of his hands. Martin took a few steps back as she came at him and before anyone even realized what was going on he raised the shotgun at his wife and aimed at her.

"Stop, you silly bitch!" he roared. Magnolia stopped dead right in front of him staring at the muzzle of the rifle.

"Have you lost you mind?!?!?" she screamed, but her husband didn't nudge. Behind her Ellen suddenly started screaming, but not in horror or in fear. No, it was joy that filled her lungs this time.

"Mr. Ulrik! You're all right!" she screamed as the unicorn rose to its feet not bleeding any more. But before her small feet had brought her to her newly risen friend it changed somehow. It was still sparkly white, but its legs started to return into its body, in fact the whole body started to transform. Little Ellie Richards stood aghast as her former friend turned into something she'd only seen in her imagination.. the bogeyman. An indescribable laughter rose like a tidal wave and plummeted into Ellie's wildest fears.

"Turn around, Ellie- it's play time!" the voice of the bogeyman roared.

"Let her be!" Rickie screamed. His parents might have forgotten to protect his little sister, but he still knew and handled under his responsibilities as Ellie's big brother. He ran towards his petrified sister only to get a sharp whack over the head that sent him tumbling down onto the ground, unconscious.

"Patience, your time will come, boy!" the bogeyman said lazily while he forced the little girl to turn around to face her parents. They were still standing opposite each other, like nothing else mattered or went on in the world. Her father was still aiming the rifle towards her mother, and her mother looked at her father with disgust in her eyes.

"You're some man! Don't you dare battle your simple wife without the security of a firearm?!" the woman that once had been Ellie's mum spat sarcastically. The man that once had been Ellie's dad threw the shotgun away, an insane glare making him unrecognizable.

"Happy bitch?!" They stood like that for a while, eyeing each other before the attack came. The

woman lunged forward at precisely the same time the man lunged towards her. Their bodies crashed together and screams, moans and snarling were heard from the fighting duo as one thing was carved into both their minds: kill! Ellen Richards, ten months from her sixth birthday had to watch the bodies of her parents collide and fight like they both were insane. They didn't react to her screams, they didn't react to her tears and when they both collapsed five minutes later, both dead, they hadn't had a single glimpse towards their daughter.

Rickie awoke to a headache beyond anything he'd ever felt in his seven years old life. He woke just in time to see his parents tear each other's necks open. And there, a few meters away from the horrible display his sister was standing, so incomprehensibly small towards the massive white wall standing behind her, clutching her neck in a death lock. It was almost looking as if the bogeyman fed on his sister's fears. Sounds assembling the sounds his father used to make while eating his mums famous pot roast chuckled out from what Rickie believed to be the monster's throat. His parents were beyond rescue. Mere seven years old, he knew that. But his sister was very much alive and screaming, and Rickie would rather die than to abandon her with that.. devil!

"Let her go!" he shouted and ran towards the thing, hatred exhilarating his steps.

"Stop right there boy! Or else I will snap her neck like a match!" the creature roared and lifted the weaver body into the air. She looked just as a porcelain doll, white in the skin and fragile. Tears of anger stained the boy's cheeks. He was no match to this monster, and he'd done.. something to his parents.. making them kill each other. What would the bogeyman do to him and his sister if he came to close?

Out of thin air a figure suddenly appeared with a light "popping" sound and a sharp flash of light.

"Release her Voltimore!" A strong voice that belonged to someone with great power, or believing to be in possession of it.. Rickie looked at the man as he stepped forward, eyes fixed on the beast in front of him. It was an old man, and Rickie would have believed it was Santa Claus if it weren't for the clothes the stranger were wearing. The bright colours and shining fabric, not to mention the swirling cloak made the boy think of circus-artists. The dreaded laughter the boy had heard for the first time just minutes ago filled the air again.

"Old fool, what makes you think you can stop me?!" the beast roared, still with Ellen Richards in a firm grip. Then all hell suddenly broke loose. Angry cries and shouts flew through the air and with a soft "thud" Ellie fell down to the ground, passed out by the looks of her.

"Take her! Get her away from here!" the old man screamed: "I can only keep him at bay for so long! Head for the church, you'll be safe there. Wait for me and do. not. go. anywhere!" Rickie nodded, confused and scared, mere seven years old he now was the man in the family and his sisters sole provider. The girl came to immediately as he touched her and the boy dragged her to her feet, knowing their survival would depend solely on old Santa's abilities to keep the bogeyman at bay and if Rickie managed to drag his sobbing sister all the way to the church in time.

Albus had seen young boys take on a man's responsibility before, but to see weaver Rickie Richards drag his crying sister away was nearly too much for his heart to cope with. This beast had lured them into the forest to feed on their fears, he'd even made their parents kill each other in front of their very eyes. The horrors that would hunt these sweet children's dreams in the years to come... He remembered another boy who'd been through something of the same at the age of nine. His whole life had been marked since that fateful night and Albus feared the same would happen to these children. With renewed strength he lunged himself at the beast, determined Voltimore wouldn't have the pleasure of devouring the pure souls he was aching for tonight.

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Chapter 4 by Restina Lovebug
Secret desires

~past~

Severus slowly settled down in his quarters up in the west-tower. Since these were his living-quarters as well as his classroom he seldom left the rooms. He had a feeling he wouldn't be welcomed by anyone in the village due to his striking resemblance to the town Sheriff. The curse seemed to dissipate during the following days, but he still felt uneasy and off balance somehow. Through a small window he had a view of the Sherwood Forest. He liked the woods. It reminded him of the forbidden forest back on the grounds of Hogwarts, and he wondered if he would ever see it again.

The witch showed up for her lessons, just as her son, and she also had the look of someone hiding something. He taught her in potions, answered her questions, listened to what ever she found interesting to talk about. Her mind was sharp and her intellect stilted in this backwater, still.. Her greed showed itself too easily, although she was an apt student. As the days went by the history of this land unfolded itself for him. And to his surprise he realized he had landed in the very fairytale he never believed as a child and still denied could have taken place as a grown man... It's funny how things work out sometimes...

For the witch talked about her land's history and the struggle and strain with great passion. It was perilous times. The power struggle between the Old Saxon lords and the French nobles. The witch wanted to restore the true line.. a line none other than Robin Hood himself was part of. Yes, Robin of Loxley was of the old blood and heir as true king. Severus had no difficulty seeing that the witch savored no warm feelings towards this man and he had no problem guessing she wanted her son on the throne instead of him. He had heard the legend, after all. But Robin would not fight, and rule on the throne as the old high kings did. Therefore he was the enemy, hunted by the crown as an outlaw, and hunted by his cousin the Sheriff. The Sheriff hated Robin with all of his passion. Severus could tell by the way he spat his name when mentioning him. And his eyes always got colder if Severus asked him about his cousin.

"He betrayed me!" he could cry out furiously and leave the room in anger. Twenty minutes later he would return with a sweet smile on his face, as if nothing had happened, sit down and ask Severus to continue. And Severus followed his inner voice whispering "Don't let him annoy you!" and continued the lesson where they'd left off.

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With a lazy eye attached at the newcomer , while the other one remained behind a closed eyelid, the Sheriff was attending his lesson in Statesmanship. He didn't bother learning anything that wasn't particularly interesting to him, and right now there was only one thing occupying his mind.

He wondered if the stranger could read his mind and chuckled, he reckoned his teacher would lose his neutral look if he overheard his student's longing to try out how he tasted! In front of the small blackboard the black clad man continued his lesson.

He wanted to touch it. He wanted to touch it so badly, knowing the secret that was growing within that very body. A flashing image of a knife caressing that soft skin, the blood- so red against the white.. A smile slowly grew on his face and his fingers started twitching.

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Severus stopped dead in the middle of a sentence, a shadow fled over his face while he stared at the man sitting by the desk in front of him. The man had a smile on his face, a smile that no matter how humiliating it was to confess, scared him. The beam in his eyes, the far away look of them, told Severus his pupil wasn't paying much attention at the moment. He was staring at him, but at the same time he was staring straight through him. The Sheriff rose from the chair, the smile still

on his face, his hair partly hiding his magnetic gaze. Unaware of what he was doing Severus backed a few steps as the man approached him. He was so close now Severus could smell sweet newly sprung sweat.

"For me to continue this lesson I need you to sit down," Severus said and gestured for the empty chair. His back hit the blackboard and he was furious with himself for showing his weakness. The Sheriff didn't stop. He came closer still, the smile changing a little as he lifted his right arm. Severus had to use all of his willpower not to shove the man away. He was already invading his personal space, and Severus wasn't a man who savored physical contact with psychotics or anyone else for that matter, no matter how good looking they might be! If he did anything to enrage the Sheriff in his current condition he could very well end up dead, or at least severely hurt. And that would risk his return to the Hogwarts if he ever had one.. He HAD to be patient and he HAD to be careful. And to be careful included not offending the spoilt brat in front of him. A slender finger touched his cheek, and Severus could see the other man's nostrils take in the smell of him like it was perfume. Two lazy eyes with a burning desire in them rested on his face and the man showed no signs of retreating.

"Isn't it amazing how we can look so much alike?" A tone of amazement and awe in his voice. The finger brushed his lip on its way down Severus' cheek and continued down his throat.

"Yes... it truly is.." Severus voice sounded nothing like its usual old scorning self. He just wanted to get away from the insanity evolving in front of him. Finally the man removed his finger and stepped back, so that Severus dared to breathe again without being afraid the other would assume that for being some sort of invite. In one week's time his month was up, and hopefully he would find a way to return. He had to cling to that hope, no matter how much he doubted it.

"Now, well.. Just had to watch you up close," The Sheriff said, and with that he spun around and left the room with firm and steady footsteps. Severus had to sit down to absorb the shock of the whole unnerving scene that'd just unfolded itself in front of him. Was that man.. teasing him??!? He could still feel the trail the Sheriff's finger left down his face, like the itch of Poison Ivy. He tried to rub it away with the sleeve of his cloak, but the itchy sensation remained. He had to find a way to keep the man at arms length and at the same time not risk to have him blowing up in his face. Damn this curse, or what ever it was! He was weak and vulnerable as a child!

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Later that same day Severus had a visit from the Sheriff's mother. The witch barged straight into the room without knocking or in any other way announcing her arrival. Severus who was looking forward to a night off had just dressed in his night-shirt and therefore was quite surprised when the old wrinkled woman came charging.

"I would prefer it if you'd knock," he said, not afraid to show his annoyance. She may be a witch, but she was still no match to him, no matter how dampened his skills was.

"Oh, ready for bed I see?" she grinned.

"Yes," Severus answered: "It's late and I'm tired. What do you want!" The witch clapped her hands together and took a deep breath:

"Well, it just occurred to me that your month here as we agreed on is almost up. But I feel I have so much more to learn, that there's so much more to know that I would like you to stay longer."

"How much longer." The words escaped his mouth before he had the chance to think, and an alarm bell went off in his head.

"Oh, for a year or two, or longer even" the witch replied and the foul smile on her face broadened:

"You see, it's in my interest to keep you and your services here a little longer, and I know you can't leave without my help, so.." Severus took a step forward, anger burning in his eyes as he wished to strangle the miserable old being causing his anger and despair.

"I agreed to do your bidding for ONE month woman. Not two, nor three, four or five- ONE!" He kept his voice silky smooth but showed no sign of hiding the building anger inside him.

"Now, now there, Lord Snape! There's no use in getting agitated," the old woman said and shook her finger in front of his face as if he was a sulking child. Something inside him snapped. To see this.. inferior witch gloat in front of him made him lose his temper. He snapped the arm of which the waving finger belonged and squeezed it until he heard old bones creaking. A contemptuous laughter started ringing in his ears as he felt her pull away from his grip like there was nothing to it. All Severus could do was to gape his own weakness, the feel of his grip slipping was more terrifying than the old woman's laughter.

"Don't wear your self out, boy!" A little of her son's madness floated to the surface of the writhed face as she let go of Severus' helpless arm. And with these words she left him, realizing his wildest fears. He was here to stay...

The night followed without sleep. Could the curse have taken from him all of his natural skills for good? Was it a curse that had turned him into a simple muggle? No, he didn't think so. It felt more like his strength and skills were trapped, somewhere inside him. Caged, needing some sort of counter spell to get out. As weakened as he was now he couldn't even send a dream-message back to Hogwarts pleading for Albus' help. And the physical strain he experienced lately was alarming. Climbing stairs left him panting and heaving on the top, like he was an old man with a heart condition. Eight hours of teaching every day left him so drained he had problems undressing in the evening without falling asleep. And when he finally got to bed, he couldn't sleep. He would be dead tired, but he just wasn't able to rest. He considered himself lucky if he got four hours of sleep every other day. Severus' only hope now was for the headmaster getting suspicious when Severus didn't return after the agreed month, and that he would send him some sort of rescue party. Little did he know that Albus Dumbledore was well aware of the fact that Severus wouldn't return after the agreed month and that he wouldn't send a rescue party to save him.

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The following days Severus calculated his chances for escaping the living-quarters that now had become his prison. Mournfully he realized the chance to be pretty slim. The entrance of his room was now heavily guarded and whenever he left the room someone followed him everywhere around. And even if he DID manage to escape, where would he go? He carried the face of a hated man and he would no doubt be hunted down and killed by anyone who recognized him walking around unguarded. So he had to wait and he had to hope, for his powers to return...

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~present~

The month had come and gone since Severus' departing. And although Albus Dumbledore knew for a fact Severus wouldn't return, yet, he still stayed awake during the night Severus had told him he would return. His poor child, trapped in perilous times, stuck with a mission he probably wasn't even aware of yet. Something unexpected had happened the night of Severus' departure. The strong aura surrounding him got weaker the second he stepped through the void, Albus had felt it- the draining of his powers. Because of that he would probably not be able to call for help, or leave when he wanted to. For the longest he had hoped Severus would stay behind because he choose to, now Albus knew it was because he had no choice...

In the Sherwood Forest evil was spreading like wild fire. All villagers had now fled from the village, the only ones still remaining in the area was some muggle Archaeologists refusing to let

go of their "find". They reckoned the scary things happening at night were stupid children pranks and nothing to worry about. In a couple of weeks they would finish their work inside the castle, to continue it out in the forest. Albus had daily reports coming in from spies in the area and knew that sooner or later he had to get down there to confront this evilness. And if he wanted to spare the lives of a gang of reckless old men, it had to be soon. He would set together a team of his top-wizards to assist him, and together he hoped they would be able to trap the beast one more time, or better- destroy it.

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Chapter 5 by Restina Lovebug

Werewolves and maids.

~past~

Severus awoke one night with a terrifying scream. The dark shadows in the room seemed to creep up on him and he sat up while his heart was racing. God, what a terrible nightmare! He slapped himself on the chin to clear his mind of the images that were still floating around in his mind. He was there.. touching him, tasting him.. He was soaking wet from sweat, but there was one place... there on his neck, it was like someone just had been... licking him!

He calmed his breathing, and five minutes later he lay down and slowly drifted back to sleep. That was just as well. For in the far corner of the room a dark shadow was lurking and as soon as it sensed Severus' heavy breathing it slowly and silently crept out the door, licking its mouth.

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Severus played his part well. He looked like he didn't mind spending some extra time in the dark ages. He had played many parts before so he had no trouble fitting in most of the time. But when "he" was around... He couldn't get used to the way those eyes followed him, the hidden desire, the possessive way he behaved around him, like Severus was his, and his alone.

On his way down for breakfast this morning the Sheriff joined him on his trip down. It wasn't always Severus was allowed to dine with the "finest", that being the Sheriff and his mother. That was just when there were no other guests around. They obviously wanted to keep Severus a secret from the outer world, but Severus didn't care much. He didn't like to dine with a "costume-party" anyway.

"So.. have you had a pleasant night's sleep?" the man next to him asked as he followed Severus' side down the winding stairs like a well-trained dog.

"Can't complain," Severus answered, unaware to hide a touch of morning grumping. He hated to be followed around like this, it was so unnerving! And he knew there was just a matter of time before the Sheriff would lose his temper towards him. No matter how careful Severus watched his tongue, something would set that man off sooner or later. It could be enough to ask him to name England's three most valuable collaboration-countries. How can you teach when you constantly have to choose questions your pupil CAN answer? And to think he had been here for almost two months now... He had waited beyond hope for Albus to appear to get him out of this smelly hole, but he was starting to realize that wasn't going to happen. That would mean Albus had to be pretty busy in the present, or that something was blocking him somehow.

"I'm really looking forward to my lesson today! What was it you were planning to go through again?" Severus snapped back to reality:

"I'm sorry, what?" A discrete color of disapproval entered the Sheriff's face as he had to do the unthinkable task of repeating himself.

"I SAID: I'm looking forward to your lesson today, what was it you were planning to teach me!" The happiness in his voice faded to a thin shade of ice and Severus knew he had to watch both

his back and traitorous tongue for the rest of the day.

His appetite vanished the second he stepped into the great hall where the Sheriff and his mother ate their meals. It was a room easily suited to seat three hundred men, and with all the empty tables Severus felt the room closing in on him as he walked down the midsection to find his usual seat. He was thankful the Sheriff used to throw parties almost every night so that he could eat most of his dinners up in the tower. As usual the servants brought in enough food to feed a small battalion, and although Severus was used with Hogwart's feasts this easily conquered any meal on the old wizard- school. And to think of all the starving people in this country! Severus had no problem cheering for Robin of Loxley... He was suspecting the chefs of the castle weren't all that used with thinking about hygiene before preparing meals. He had experienced some pretty nasty side effects, especially after breakfasts for about two weeks now. He'd also stopped drinking water in case that could be the cause of his attacks of nausea.

This morning was no different, except for the fact that he was starting to feel queasy already as he sat down by the table. That was weird? Maybe his body knew what was coming and tried to warn him before he ate anything. The Sheriff had sat down opposite him as usual, while his mother settled on his side. The tables in the dining- hall was arranged in a horse-shoe pattern so that the natural place for Severus to sit would be on either side of the sheriff or his mother, or at least anywhere by the tables, but on the other side. The way he sat now he sat in the middle of the "horse-shoe" facing the very man he feared the most in this place. Some days he could eat his meal in peace and solitude, other times the Sheriff started to intervene, bugging him about what food he should try and other times he simply decided it for him. Today, thankfully, Severus ate his food without any meddling from either one of the two fairytale creatures sitting in front of him.

He had just about finished a bowl of porridge and managed to keep it down when a servant came barging into the hall with an ___expression of great haste in his face.

"Maid Marion, she's coming my Lord!" he panted as he ran the long way up to the table where the Sheriff was seated.

"Marion?!" The Sheriff of Nottingham got to his feet in a heartbeat: "Quickly! Escort Snape to his quarters!" Severus followed his example and rose from the chair. He knew there was no use in trying to drag out the time, that would only cost him later. He turned to follow the servant, but in the same time a woman stepped into the hall and made him forget to move. She had long, curling red hair flowing down her back and shoulders like a wild untamable river. Her skin was white and fair, like winter snow and she had two big, green eyes that made Severus freeze to the spot, although he was standing by the other side of the room. So this was maid Marion. The woman the Sheriff was courting but who's heart belonged to Robin of Loxley, if the legends were true. She was angry. Severus could feel it like heat hitting him in the temples as she strode over the floor towards the people by the table.

"Get him out of here!" The Sheriff hissed to the poor servant who looked like he was waiting for someone to smack him down with a frying pan.

A strange sensation rooted itself in Severus' stomach by the sight of the woman strolling towards him. Somehow he felt connected to this beautiful creature although he had no idea why or how. A dangerous longing to defy the man standing behind him made Severus stand still despite the servant tugging desperately in his sleeves. He could feel the burning anger behind him. But who was he kidding? If Severus left now he had to pass the woman on his way out and the damage would be done. She would notice the striking resemblance between Severus and the Sheriff. Severus heard the man behind him swear silently as he no doubt realized the same.

"Marion, stop!" he yelled and in a jump he was over the table and on his way down the hall to intercept her before she came close enough to study Severus' face. The upset woman stopped,

confusion lit her face, but her anger remained.

"I just heard from a poor monk, you've raised the taxes AGAIN!" She backed away when the Sheriff tried to take her hands.

"Marion, Marion, dear! You know I wouldn't raise the taxes unless there was no other way!" The Sheriff's voice was like expensive silk as he made her turn around and walked her away from Severus. When he could no longer make out what they were saying the old witch gave the shaking servant yet another order to follow Severus to his quarters. This time Severus let him.

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By the evening the Sheriff was suffering from a severe headache. The incident by breakfast this morning still held its grip on him. The simple fact that his fair virgin was inches away from discovering the manor's secret inhabitant made him act harsh and restless for the remains of the day. He was sweet and well behaved as long as in the company of his beautiful bride-to-be of course, but when she left half an hour later... One of the maids had the "pleasure" of revealing him of the pressure building inside him. He smacked her around a few times, treated her like the animal she was, but he found no satisfaction in her battered face, not even after beating her some more. All the while there was another face occupying him, taunting him. That pale skin, white as the skin of his future wife, the delicacy of the condition he was in and didn't even know about... And who was it that was the cause of his stress right now? With his mind blackened with anger and a growing desire, the lord of the manor left the room, in which a girl was silently crying, and headed for the tower in the west wing.

He sat by his desk when the angry man came barging in the door. There was a slight surprise on his face, but it soon settled. Severus Snape had expected this, he could feel it, see it and by God, in a minute he would taste it!

"What are you doing here at this late hour?" The voice was calm, soothing and Severus rose from the chair to meet his guest. Maybe he saw the secret desire, the forbidden longing that was pulsing inside him right now? Forbidden... Suddenly he remembered this man's special abilities. His skills to make things happen, sort of speak. Was he making him feel like this? Was he the victim of one of Severus Snape's spells? And as he stopped in front of the man who smiled causally towards him the black cloud in his head shouted the answer. Yes! He was to blame for this!

"Are you alright?" His teacher's voice was still calm, but now the Sheriff could feel the hollowness, the falseness. Without warning his right arm flung out and hit Severus Snape hard on the chin. He watched as the man stumbled backwards, a trail of blood dripping from his lower lip. So red, so real. The Sheriff gasped as he realized what the action of his right fist had dissolved to. His mirror image looking at him with badly hidden fear behind his eyes, the blood dripping down on the floor where he were standing, his hand- red with blood, his blood. He spun around and run away, like a child. The maid back at his private quarters had better worry....

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He had smelled the sex and the blood on him the second he came waltzing down his door. He saw the raw lust and hate playing in an insane man's eyes. He had nowhere to run, no way to protect himself. And now Severus was tending his own slit lip while he was trying to calm himself down. How long could he continue like this? How long would it be before this cursed weakness left his body?! And how long before the man who'd just attacked him would settle for nothing less than his life? He had to use all of his will from not banging his fist into the stone walls. All the fury, all the despair and hating stayed within. He bottled it up as he had done so many times before, that was the only way he knew to keep sane.

The next morning he sat by his side as he awoke. Strangely Severus wasn't alarmed or even surprised by finding the man there. The man was crying silently, and when Severus opened his eyes soft sobs came up the man's throat. Shame was all over his face and he brushed Severus' lip with a trembling finger as if to check how much damage his fist had caused.

"Forgive me!" It was an order, not a prayer. Severus slowly sat up in his bed, with the result that the Sheriff more or less threw himself into his lap. Severus froze by this unwanted contact. His inner voice screamed at him to speak up, to throw this filth away before it contaminated him. But at the same time another voice told him to do whatever this creature wanted if that was his only way to freedom.

"I... forgive you." The words sounded flat and without context. He even managed to raise a hand to pat the shivering man in his lap on the top of the head. So this was how it felt like to be the pope? The Sheriff stopped crying immediately. He sat up, looking like a new man, like a child who's just been granted a passport into heaven. He got to his feet in a jump, smiling towards Severus who looked mildly stunned by the transformation.

"Well, have to dash, have taxes to collect, orphans to feed!" he said in the happiest of voices: "And by the way, you're having all your meals up here from now on. We won't be the cause of another accident will we?" And so he strolled out of the room as he used to.

Severus withheld a silent curse as he stood up from bed. He was grateful for the fact that he wouldn't have more meals down in the dining hall and that he would be free from those staring eyes from over the table. But his body was starting to react to the imprisonment. Although his living quarters back in the present was down in a dungeon and that he wasn't exactly the athletic outdoors type, he was starting to miss the smell of fresh air. And there was nothing like a good old storm with wind wailing around your ears and lightning striking beside you. Severus couldn't count the times he had snook out from Hogwarts during thunderstorms in his student years to laugh into the rain and embrace the tiny spot of fear somewhere down in his heart. After he became a teacher he usually stayed inside when the autumn- and winter-storms approached, as the risk of embarrassment if some of his students found out about his weird fascination was for him too great a price to pay. He had missed it though, as he at night could hear the rain thundering on the stonewalls, and his rooms were lit up with the flickery light of a lightning scorching the night sky. And now, up in this rotten old tower, he missed it more than ever. He had no problem with staying inside his dungeon as long as he chose it himself, but the minute he would become trapped there he would want nothing else than to leave. Maybe if he behaved really nice and caught the Sheriff off guard in a weak moment he could persuade him to let him go for a walk in the herbal garden. The old witch had been bragging about it for quite some time now and for Severus it could be a simple patch with grass with one single weed on it for as long as he cared. He needed to feel something else than stone beneath his feet again.

A knock on the door announced that his breakfast had arrived.

"Come in," His voice was curt and stern and he finished the last top buttons of his shirt while he watched the girl enter with a tray in her arms. She was a skinny creature, with long black hair presumably tied in a knot on the back of her head. Severus had seen worse beatings in Quidditch matches but this was different. She was a servant, no education, no home other than this place. Had she said no to an order or just got in the way, or didn't get out of the way fast enough. Underfed too.. and in a great deal of pain. It was the way she crept in that perhaps hurt the unflinching potions master more than her piteous looks. Defeat and terror, her whole body showed utter defeat and a terrible bone crushing acceptance of her life. She had a black eye, a swollen lip and even her hands and legs of what little Severus could see of them was battered and bruised. She limped a little on her left foot and as she set the tray down on his desk, Severus could plainly see what had to be a bite mark on her throat. She did a little, ashamed curtsy and turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Severus held out a hand to make her stop. A look of terror appeared on her face as she looked Severus in the eye.

It was all she had and she could expect from her miserable existence. How old was she 14.. 15.. older... no... he thought not. Severus Snape knew she was terrified of him, the mere sight of him alone was enough to start her trembling. What else had she... no.. there would be more damage underneath those rags. Severus for once did not want to dissect the rest of the situation.. but he felt a terrible shame nevertheless. There was one thing he had to ask, though..

"Who did this to you?!" he asked and noticed how she slowly backed away for every step he slowly approached her.

"No one, I fell," she whispered and tried to hide the bruised eye with a small hand.

"There's no fall that could have caused that," Severus answered calmly: "Someone did this to you and I want to know who." He needed his suspicions confirmed. He watched how she looked at him in absolute terror and was certain she had only bad experiences with this face that he wore.

"I fell," she repeated, voice revealing she was near tears. Severus was a man knowing when not to push any further. It would do no good hauling an explanation out of her. Drawing a small vial out of his robe he rested it on his study table.

"Take it, it will help the pain.." He turned his back to her and returned to the bed to put a teaching robe on. Behind him the girl quietly left the room, the tiny vial leaving with her. It was all he could offer her...

Severus Snape didn't know the meaning of pity or compassion, he knew that. He was incapable of so many emotions that others were born with. Somehow they had been left out of him, others felt it to and it had molded both his character and his life. His lack of joy and vitality as a child gave others the opinion that he brooded and plotted against the others and therefore already was on his way to becoming a dark mage. His lack of participation, his solitary habits eventually kept children at a distance and later gossip turned into distorted truths. Then a spate of malicious pranks aimed at him left a small, confused and misunderstood boy, grieving for his dead family at the mercy of his house master and sole confidante Tom Riddle.

He sat down by the desk and tried to eat his meal, but the image of the battered youngster kept hunting him. There was no doubt in his heart the sheriff had done that to her, and to think that someone with his the exact same face as him had done something so vicious, so cruel made him sick with loathing. And the feeling manifested itself in his stomach so bad he had nothing more than a bite from his food and decided he would lie down for a bit of rest instead.

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~present~

No, Severus Snape did not know the meaning of pity or compassion.. unlike Albus. But the old man had always seen Severus as he truly was and not what he believed himself to be. Yes, Riddle had done a wonderful job with Severus, confirming the child that he was different.. lacking certain qualities both noble and ignoble.. and the boy believed him. And why shouldn't he? Riddle was the only one, besides Albus, who showed him some kindness. Albus knew Severus didn't know the true meaning of those words, he just did what was in his heart. He just didn't show his feelings the same way as others.. but it was there and he showed it in unobtrusive ways.

Albus Dumbledore considered more and more the fate of Severus Snape, true the danger in Sherwood would soon take up his time as battle would again be inevitable. But this was different,

Severus would be...become ...and Albus admitted to himself just what he had let Severus in for.

Not even Lupin knew the whole truth about Severus' aversion to werewolves.

It was a nightmare with one living witness to tell. Severus Snape, aged 9, was waken late one night from his slumber and hidden in a closet by his mother. From his hiding place a scared little boy watched his mother being dismembered and eaten by her husband in wolf form, his death eater father Suspicion Snape. The boy never spoke of it since the trial and with no living relatives, his home and family fortune confiscated the child was destitute.

He was placed in a foster home. Here the child simply existed. It seemed something had died along with his mother that night and the child would never be ...could never be considered as a normal boy under any circumstances. He was gifted certainly but not a communicative child. The boy was cold to everyone...even being near him people felt uncomfortable...pinned down and slowly dissected by those big, answer-seeking black eyes. The day the letter arrived from Hogwarts the family breathed a silent sigh of relief. He had not misbehaved in any way but the quiet boy frightened them, it was as simple as that. Death had stayed with the child, it had not left him but stayed with him as a companion, almost an entity in itself like a comforting blanket. He simply had not let it go. And no child or adult was meant even in the wizarding world to be capable of this feat ever. It would take years for Albus to understand why, and even more years for Severus to finally let go of it. At Hogwarts the boy finally loosened up a little, as his growing trust towards Tom made him slowly open up- the wrong way. He was thrown into another living nightmare as his trusted friend's lies and manipulations led him into the dark life as a death eater. Albus was the one waking the 20 year old Severus this time, letting him know he was "his" child now and that he would never let him go.

Albus could only curse himself as he realized he had given his child this time. He had open-mindedly given his innocent child to a pack of medieval wolves. During the past years Severus had been tortured, cursed, imprisoned and reviled, yet the thought of him being.... impregnated revolted Albus more than he ever thought possible. What would it do to him, would he even survive this time? And if he lived what would he be like afterwards? If there were to be an afterwards. Could he ever ask for Severus' forgiveness, would he ever forgive himself?

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Chapter 6 by Restina Lovebug
Black stallions and nosebleeds

~past~

Robin Hood. How he despised that name! The Sheriff of Nottingham wanted nothing more than to never hear that name again and for whom it belonged to vanish of the face of the earth. Sadly the man had the ability to vanish, when it suited him. He somehow seemed impossible to catch, he was like a fox, knowing every hiding place in the forest and the village. His men had cornered him so many times, still the Robin of the Hood had found a way out in the last second, leaving his cousin's men stunned. How could that intoxicated blood be the same as ran through the veins of a pure man like him, the Sheriff?

Today messengers had arrived with news of Robin and his gang ambushing one of the tax-carts. It was the fifth one in the last six months and the Sheriff was furious. How could this pest work against him, his blood?! And his men, so afraid to step into the "cursed" wood. The only curses left by the boundaries of that wood, HIS wood if he might add, would be some childish booby traps anyone with a average brain would figure his way by.

He had played with the thought of bringing Severus with him for a ride into the woods. The look on Robin's face if he saw the two together! But he knew his mother wouldn't allow that, after all no one outside this castle should never know about the secret guest, and he knew that the risk of Severus trying something funny when on horseback was to great. Still it would have been great, though.

In six and a half months time he would become a father. The thought of the actual baby meant nothing to him, it was the power that followed this fatherhood that was tempting. He was arranging for a family portrait to be painted. He'd ordered the best painter in the county to drop what he was doing and come to paint the future family of the Nottingham Manor. The fact that the poor man was a farmer and had no one to look after the farm when he was away but his eight months pregnant wife was none of his concern. The only thing that mattered to him was that the painter would arrive some time later today and that he would start his work early tomorrow morning. His fair Marion had thanked yes to be portrayed and would be the first to be added to the canvas. She believed it was a portrait of only her. Little did she know she would end up with a husband, baby and a mother-in-law by the time the portrait would be finished. Flashing images of his twin-image on horseback, his cloak like a black cloud chasing him. The sheriff shook his head clean and headed for the dining hall.

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There was a magic atmosphere over the woods tonight. Severus was watching it from his window in the tower and longed to set foot on soft grass, to feel the velvet night's embrace on his weak body and mind. Nor the witch or her son had needed his teaching services today and he felt restless. By the door he had placed a chair as some poor excuse for a lock to avoid unexpected guests. He had enough problems with sleeping as it was, he didn't need to wake up in the middle of the night imagining there were intruders lurking around in the shadows. He was starting to loose weight. He ate less and less as the queasiness didn't seem to let go. It was worst in the mornings. Then it settled during the day so he managed to squeeze down some dinner. Curse the food and the water around here! And the orange juice he'd started to drink instead of the water didn't seem to help either. Could it be something else than what he ate and drank? This day he had tried to move the little cauldron he'd brought with him from Hogwarts and ended up with a nasty surprise. He couldn't lift it!

Damn, how he longed for the safety of a wand in the palm of his hand! He even missed teaching Potions back in the present. To give poor Neville Longbottom the lecture of the day, to treat him the way he wished he could treat the Sheriff. But in this classroom the roles were reversed. It was Severus who were the weak and defenseless one and the Sheriff who had all the power. Severus actually felt some sympathy towards Neville at the moment..

His mind started wandering toward the glimpse he had caught of Marion the other day. She was in truth a beautiful woman, and the connection he'd felt.. if it was ever so brief made Severus' mind wander by her from time to time. It wasn't love, by all means, but then again he probably wouldn't know what love was if it hit him in the face. He was thirty-seven years old and he hadn't had one single love affair in his whole miserable life! How could he? He'd been recruited as a death eater eighteen years old and up to that point no girl had ever turned her head after him. So came the trial, the stamp as being an outcast freak and the salvation. Albus Dumbledore had given Severus the parental love he'd never experienced with his real parents, he'd showed him the light and given him a home and a job- at Hogwarts. To receive so much help and trust from a man can change your life. And Severus saw his flaws and as a sacrifice for the man he considered his one and only father Severus went back to Voldemort, but this time as a spy for his new father. Albus knew nothing of this, at first. Severus reckoned his new father wouldn't have allowed his son risking his life no matter how great the cause he was fighting. Severus could never forget the image of Dumbledore catching him as he snook back into Hogwarts after a summoning with the dark lord. Severus had believed the headmaster was weeping because he assumed Severus had betrayed him and worked for Voldemort all along. He was mistaking. Albus cried of shame because he knew Severus did this for him and that it would cause him a future of nightmares haunting him. Severus was young, he had no idea how things can come back and hunt you later no matter how great the intentions were in the past.

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Marion arrived early, just as she'd promised so that the painter would have the best possible light to work in. The peasant was surprisingly strict on that matter and he would paint her in no other place than in the garden, because of the light conditions. The autumn light was a hasty affair and it was important to start as soon as the sun was at it's brightest. The sheriff was in a good mood today so he let the poor man rant a little and wave his brush importantly in his face. After all this had to be a perfect painting, it would be the portrait of his future success as a king! He smiled to himself as the fair virgin, dressed all in white for the occasion- like a bride, followed the man with the canvas.

So, what to do in the mean time. He pondered for a while and came to think of his twin in the tower. An idea formed in his head. Now, he knew Marion would stay in the garden, and that would mean all other areas of the castle would be safe. Safe to bring Severus Snape along for a stroll.

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Up in the tower Severus was in a poor condition. After all the mornings he'd managed to withhold from vomiting, this day his stomach betrayed him. He was kneeling by the side of his desk. Hot, foul tasting acid wrenched its way up his throat and down on the floor. A thin coat of cold sweat pierced its way through his brow as cramp after cramp raged his body. Severus was sure there could be nothing worse than this, he was wrong. Because in the door a well known face entered with a big grin on his face and seemed to be on his way to announce something, up until the point he discovered the shivering black lump down on the floor.

"Eeewwww!! What are you doing?!" he squealed and looked at the small lake of half digested food. Severus looked up for a bit, humiliation marking his eyes before he lowered his head again as a new cramp shook his innards. The Sheriff stood for a little while tripping with his feet as if he was unsure of what to do and then he ran out to the hallway while screaming for one of the servants to come clean up the mess.

Severus dried his face with the sleeve of his jacket. He didn't care of the stain it would leave, he just needed to get up on his feet again before the Sheriff came back. The room started spinning as he slowly got to his feet. Footsteps in the hallway, he would be here in a second. Severus tried to shake his head free of the dizziness, but there was no way he could manage to stay on his feet so he slipped down on the cold stone-floor again just as the Sheriff returned with a servants girl at his heal.

"Clean up the mess!" The girl went to work immediately and Severus discovered it was the same girl that had brought him his breakfast some days ago. At least she didn't wear any new marks of this man's terrible urges.

"Let me help you up from there!" The voice was quite nice and pleasant for a change, and Severus let the man help him get to his feet without any protests. Although he wouldn't mind the Sheriff not touching his stomach like that. It was upset enough as it was.. He was just a defenseless heap of sick man and he let the man he normally wouldn't let anywhere near him lead him to the bed and even undress him. He was to blunt to hear the alarm bells going off in his ears. He was to numb to feel the needy hands fumbling all over him as they were undressing him. He was sick, it was probably just a bad dream. And as groping fingers caressed his body Severus drifted away into slumber, into peace.

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It was late afternoon when he awoke. He wasn't surprised to feel a shadow resting over his face. Probably the sheriff. But it wasn't the sheriff sitting by his bedside this time. It was the very young girl who'd had the displeasure of cleaning up his mess earlier in the morning. She had a mournful

__expression on her face and she almost jumped in her chair as Severus opened his eyes.

"Oh, it's you? I thought it was.." he didn't need to finish the sentence. He saw it on her she knew exactly who he was aiming to.

"Master said I should sit with you until you recovered," she more or less whispered: "And then I should take you to him." She stood up and fidgeted nervously.

"Alright, I'll just." It suddenly dawned to Severus that he was completely naked.

"Who undressed me, was it you??" He draped the carpet around his body and awkwardly fumbled out of bed desperately searching some clothes, any clothes. Holy shit, he had to have been near a coma not to remember anyone undressing him!

"No," came the answer flatly and nervous: "it was Master." Severus instantly felt sick in every nerve of his body. As if it wasn't enough that the man had to catch him in a vulnerable moment, he had undressed him!! He had seen Severus' naked body! The bed looked far more tempting than the prospect of spending time with the man who had groped him earlier this morning.

He still got dressed somehow, like a near death robot. He ordered the girl quite harshly to turn around while he dragged his clothes on and she seemed only too happy to concede. How appalling was he??? Really. Now he even got upset because a half to death frightened girl seemed to get grossed out by looking at him. His mood-swings reached a horrible peak as he followed the girl to his destination. He was worried out of his mind. What if she brought him directly to the Sheriff's private chambers or something like that?!?

To his great relief she brought him nowhere near any bedrooms. To his great surprise he followed her to a place he'd never been before during his stay at Nottingham castle, the stables. The smell of horses and horse-manure hit him in the face as he entered the dimly lit passage that led into the Sheriff's stables. Not a pleasant experience for his turning stomach for the moment, but the chance to maybe get a glimpse of the outdoors was more than enough to start Severus' heart racing with excitement. A curious thing actually. He had never felt attracted to horses or any other animals for that sake. But now.. he couldn't wait. He felt giddy as a first year at Hogwarts!

"Ah, Severus! I see you have recovered well!" The Sheriff ducked into view as Severus entered the very heart of the stable, the many rows of paddocks. Each and every one of them contained horses of different kinds. As usual the man now standing in front of Severus looked like he'd just won a costume-party. Although Severus had to admit the man had some taste, mainly in the choice of color he couldn't stop thinking how stupid he looked. The servant girl disappeared like a flickering shadow the second her Master appeared and Severus wished he could follow her..

"Come, I want to show you something. I was going to this morning, but I couldn't bring you down here when you were sick, could I?" The Sheriff made a face to state that that would be the most ludicrous thing in the world to do, and then his eyes wandered down Severus body. Severus felt his stomach wrench violently and had to lower his gaze.

He hesitantly followed the man down the row of horses. He wished the trip would end up somewhere outside. If only for a minute, so he could smell some fresh air, and maybe even get a glimpse of the setting sun. The Sheriff stopped by one of the paddocks, and thankfully he didn't notice Severus' wishful gaze down towards the exit.

"This," the man announced proudly as he opened the paddock carefully: "is Shadow. A truly beautiful beast isn't he?" Severus stepped forward to have a look. Inside the paddock a magnificent black stallion was tied. It seemed to try to get as far away from the Sheriff as possible. A nervous neigh told Severus that the servant girl who'd just escorted him down here wasn't the only one who'd experienced the wrath of the "Master".

"It's the best horse I've bought in years," the Sheriff continued as his eyes fixed on the stamping horse: "but it's damn near impossible to train. I believe one of my stable-boys broke his neck trying to break him in. That's when I decided to train him myself." The pride in his voice was in odd contrast to the hate reflecting in the black stallion's eyes. Severus saw the markings of a whip near its mule.

"One day, you'll gonna see who's master!" he said to the horse and smiled grimly: "And one fine day you and I'll catch our selves a fox." The fox he was referring to was Robin Hood, but Severus felt pretty sure that Shadow never would be part of that capture. He saw too much of himself in those black eyes and knew there was no way that man would ever be allowed on top of this horse's back. He suddenly realized the oddity of the whole aspect. Here he stood, beside a man who could have been his identical twin and a horse- and he felt more related to the horse! Suddenly the stallion reared up, neighing terrifyingly as it tore against the ropes tying it. The Sheriff reacted with pure rage.

"Are you defying me, is that it?!" he yelled and reached for a whip hanging on a hook on the side of the paddock. "I'm the Master, do you hear me! I AM!" The sound of the whip whooshing through the air made Severus turn away in disgust. He felt dizzy again, he wanted to get away from this sickening display, he didn't want to hear the mad shouting of his mirror image and he most definitely didn't want to hear the sound of the whip tearing into flesh or the screams of a defenseless horse. All he could do was to stagger a few steps away from the scene and keep from throwing up the rest of his intestines. He was trapped in this hell and no one came to rescue him, why? Why hadn't Albus come to help him? Why was he alone here, trapped and fading to but a shadow of his old self? Was he abandoned? Had something bad happened in the present? Why hadn't Albus at least contacted him, WHY?!?! Behind him an evil laughter rose to the ceiling as a howl of pain made all of the horses in the stable start to neigh nervously and turn around in their paddocks. The world started spinning around Severus. The smell of horse manure suddenly was all too intense and the sounds around him made him feel so small and helpless. He wanted to run away and hide. Severus Snape, thirty seven years old, known as the fearless bat who ate first years for lunch back at Hogwarts was so terrified he wanted to run and hide! There was no lack of courage in the man's heart. But now he saw himself helpless and weak as a child, his emotions flying everywhere making his mind grow weaker too. He hated this new him, he hated the Sheriff and the old witch keeping him here.

The stairs seemed endless afterwards. And to have the horse-beater dashing beside him with a handsome grin on his face while Severus was panting his lungs out didn't make things much better. How grand if he would collapse on the top of the stand and have a heart attack, it was the only thing missing now..

"Maybe one day I'll take you out riding with me," the man beside him said as he stopped to wait for Severus who was starting to fall back behind him. Severus raised one brow as he imagined himself hobbling along on a horse. He'd never ridden in his life and preferred to keep it that way. A wild thought about a great escape bubbled to the surface of his mind but he rejected the thought quickly. He was no match to the Sheriff when it came to the skills of riding a horse. He'd be better off biding his time here, hoping for someone to rescue him..

_

The following days Severus was busy as a teacher. The witch was eager to learn about astronomy and the Sheriff wasn't interested in learning at all, but showed up anyway. The straight eight hours of standing made their mark on Severus' features, but he never let any of his pupils know just how worn out he really was. It was one of these days, well into his second hour with the spoiled brat, more commonly known as the Sheriff, the nosebleeds began. Severus was lecturing the man by the desk about trading between countries when the Sheriff got an odd look on his face. He was staring on Severus' face, like hypnotized, and then Severus felt it. Some sort

of liquid was on its way out of his nose and a second later a drop of blood dripped down on his jacket.

The Sheriff got to his feet, apparently transfixed by the red fluid that now was streaming out Severus' nose. Severus feverishly grabbed a handkerchief and started wiping his face with it, more and more panicked as his student closed in on him

"Let me do that!" A tone of awe in his voice, still with that weird __expression on his face. He took the now bloodstained cloth out of Severus' hesitant hands and started wiping his nose, carefully and almost friendly.

"Tilt you head backwards a little my dear, "he said and nudged Severus' chin. Did that man just call him "dear"?!!?? Severus squirmed a little, but the nudge got firmer and he did as he was told. What was going on? He had never had a nosebleed as long as he could remember, and certainly not like this. The blood had started leaking by it self, like it had a will of its own. And now this man had a hold on him once again. He wanted nothing more than to give this man a lesson, to throw him across the room to go slamming into the brick wall for touching him when he didn't want him to. And to think that this filthy being had undressed him, seen his naked body. and lords knows what else..

"There, it seems to have stopped now," the Sheriff let Severus tilt his head back again and take control over the hankie. He felt nauseous when he noticed one of the Sheriff's finger covered in his own blood, and he felt even more disgusted when the man held up his hand studying it.

"It's red," he mumbled: "just like mine.. Like we were.. brothers." And then he licked the blood-covered finger. Severus only half succeeded in holding back the moan of horror threatening to escape his throat. The Sheriff closed his eyes for a moment, like a Noble- man savoring a fine vine. He licked his lips slowly and sighed as he opened his eyes again. For no apparent reason Severus thought of a line he'd once uttered in the presence of one of his students: That was the exact feeling lingering in his brain now. He had thought that he finally had figured the Sheriff out, found out how to keep him at bay and harmless, and now something like this- totally unexpected happened making the man dangerous again. It dawned to Severus that what ever he would do to keep safe, the Sheriff never would stop to amaze him, no matter what he did- he wouldn't be safe. As he opened his eyes a smile slowly crept onto his face like a lazy spider.

"Exquisite!" Severus had to bite his lip not to scream at the insanity. Three months and he was still alive, still somewhat sane, but to see this face, that smile to smell the fresh sweat that reminded him of a distinct feeling, lust. He was wondering if this was the right time to crawl together and weep like a little frightened girl but decided no. Besides he hadn't shed a tear since he was a small boy and intended to keep it that way..

"I'm tired." The words escaped his mouth before he'd even thought them. The other man's gaze pierced him like needles as he studied him like a lab rat.

"Tired? But we have two more hours!" The tone in his voice changed into a childish mock. Severus wiped his forehead where tiny drops of nervousness appeared in the form of sweat. The old all to well known Potions Master- temper started to boil somewhere inside his mind. He was sick and tired with handling this man in front of him like he was a bomb ready to set off. He wanted to show him who the real Master was, that Severus followed no orders but his own. He almost started laughing of himself. If he didn't follow any orders by his own, why was he still here? Why hadn't he clicked his heals and returned home? If he was his own master, why was he walking around on eggshells around this man? The only thing he was now was a weak, defenseless muggle with nothing to say in any matter. He was the servant obeying his master's tiniest wink. He sighed and raised his gaze again, looking at the man who still was smiling like a coyote looking at a meat- bone.

"I'm tired, but if you go sit down now we'll continue," Severus said flatly.

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Chapter 7 by Restina Lovebug

A walk in the park.

~past~

Severus Snape got used to the nosebleeds as well as the morning nausea. He got used to feel like an old bagpipe, out of wind and squeaky, when he climbed stairs or did anything else an old man would find challenging. He even assembled some kind of pattern to follow through the days. How to behave when the nosebleeds arrived and the sheriff came running to "lick the bowl", how to take the stairs in stages, how to manage to get to the pot beneath his bed before throwing up and so forth. But just as he sort of settled in, a new issue caught his awareness, he was starting to gain weight. But the weird part was that he only seemed to be putting on weight round his belly, and he still was eating like a sparrow with an eating disorder. His pants were slowly getting tighter as well as his jacket. What was the reason of this bloating? Was it another level in this disintegration he was going through? And he'd also noticed both the old witch and the Sheriff seemed pretty preoccupied with this new "development". They kept staring at his stomach as if it was made of pure gold, it was disturbing to say the least.

His mind was working overtime trying to figure out the puzzle. Why was he trapped here, for what reason? Somehow his intuition told him his role as a teacher wasn't necessary the reason. How big were the odds that he would end up in the past and meet a man who looked almost exactly like you? And how could the old witch keep him here? The curse that had hit him when he walked through the void seemed to be far too powerful to be the work of a single, untalented witch. There might be someone or something else in the picture here, and Severus felt that the answer lay in the sort of curse he'd been struck with. So far he'd lost his abilities as a wizard and he'd gotten weaker. And now lately he'd been starting to gain this weight on his stomach.. It resembled no curse he'd ever heard of. Sure, he knew several curses and hexes affecting your wizard skills, a powerful wizard could make your abilities fade, go away temporary and even disappear for good!

If Severus was right about his skills they were trapped somewhere inside him, needing a counter curse to be released. Maybe he was hit by two different curses! The more he thought of it, the more obvious it seemed. The other curse then had to be one affecting his body, making him weaker and more vulnerable, and this struck him as very odd. If the witch really was the one behind these curses or hexes, he could understand her damping his skills and making sure he arrived without his wand- for her own safety as she'd probably decided all along to keep him here beyond his time limit. But why would she weaken him? As his condition was now he almost collapsed after a day of teaching, and if he got worse he probably would. What use was he for her if he wasn't able to give her the knowledge she claimed she wanted? Could there be something else he was brought back in time to do, was the clock counting down for the real reason he was here? But his main worry was Albus Dumbledore. Something must have happened with him in the present. He couldn't believe for one second Albus would abandon him here like a lost lamb. Severus knew the headmaster was going to this very area some eight hundred years later to defeat Voltimore who were hiding in the very woods surrounding the castle and village, could it be something had gone terribly wrong during the battle- could Albus Dumbledore be dead? The very idea made Severus shudder. He couldn't think like that. But he had to face facts. Three months had come and gone and no one seemed to be missing him in the present. If he was to get out of this mess he had to do it himself. And to deal with this himself he needed his powers back.

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Sex wasn't the same any more. The Sheriff didn't understand why, though. The women he laid with weren't ugly specimens by far, although, not one of them were a match to Marion's beauty of course. But lately not even her face came to him during his hasty shags with various maids,

prostitutes, nuns and other women of the village. Only the image of the one carrying his future heir floated around in his mind, mocking him into coming to fast. Severus Snape. The Sheriff was repellent to the man and knew so. He saw it in his eyes every time he touched him, every time he backed away a little, the hesitation when he called him over. But that only made the attraction towards him even greater. The Sheriff had to fight himself every time he was near that delicate soft skin, so pale it hurt the eyes. The aura of weakness and vulnerability that oozed from the Potions Master aroused the Sheriff so hard he had problems keeping his fingers away from him. Each time he was near him he wanted to hurt him, make him bleed and do things, things he was entitled to do as lord of the manor. Every time Severus' nose started bleeding he wanted to leap forward and lick the blood streaming down his chin, dripping on his jacket and cloak. He vaguely remembered how it had tasted like and he wanted more.

Sometimes a great anger towards the man with his own face took the place of the arousal. Or more likely joined the arousal. He wanted to whip the man, make him pay for his sins and at the same time he knew he would feel enormous pleasure doing so. But he knew his mother wouldn't be pleased if she found out about him using the man carrying her future grandson as some sort of twisted sex-toy. Maybe after the nine months had passed..?

He was the one being portrayed today. The painter had spent a whole week immortalizing sweet Marion to the canvas and now it was the sheriff's turn. He sat on a pompous velvet-coated handcrafted chair, fit to be seated by a king, in the middle of the cherry-tree garden where the little man with the painting skills found the light best. The Sheriff had explained the man exactly how he wanted the family portrait done and after the nervous little man had drafted just about twenty sketches he finally found one he was satisfied with. He, of course would be the center of attention, placed in the middle of the painting, seated in the magnificent chair his father once got maid for him self. Three years later the man would end up dead, with a knife in the back and no witnesses. It was common knowledge amongst most people that the murderer was either his wife or his son, and that the only way to keep safe was to not speak openly about it.

Now his son sat in this very chair, with his chin high and proud while the painter tried his best to captivate the man as he looked and at the same time how the Sheriff saw himself. Yes. He would be the center of attention and as a nice touch, quite genius actually, he would hold his baby son in his arms. On his left, the face and parts of his future wife was already portrayed, looking ever bit as beautiful as the original. She had a childlike smile on her face, a face without worries, with no suspicion, pure. Might wonder how she would look if she knew that in a few month's time her life would be turned completely upside down. The Sheriff chuckled curtly as he imagined her face the day he would show up on her doorstep, handing her newborn son, a child she was the mother of but a man had carried to term.

"Be careful to portray my strong chin the way I explained!" he said lazily as the sun was teasing his eyes. "I need this painting to be perfect!"

"Yes, Sire," came the nervous answer from behind the canvas. The man was so small he disappeared behind the canvas and the easel it was placed upon. Now and again his head ducked into view from the side of the canvas, getting a glimpse of the Sheriff and ducked back again to add another stroke or two to the painting. The last person to be added to the portrait, besides the unborn baby would be his mother. He reckoned he had some pretty serious persuasion to do before she agreed to dress in something less filthy and witch-like, and to dress in a dress more suitable for an old mother. Usually his mother kept in the east wing, with the tower as her favorite hang out place, and that was just as well. He imagined having late night parties with her fluttering about between the guests as an old bat. The baby's face would be the last detail to be added to the family portrait. That would be his son's first task in his life.

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Severus was grateful the disintegration seemed to have stagnated, except from the bloating. His

belly was becoming more and more obvious beneath his clothes. If it didn't stop soon he would have a serious problem buttoning his jacket. Winter had shoved autumn out of the way now and the landscape beneath Severus' window in the tower was coated in a thick refreshing white. Severus was freezing his ass off in his cold and draughty prison.

he thought and almost started laughing. Who the hell packs clothes for winter when you're expecting to be back in early autumn? The room contained a small fireplace but it didn't provide nearly as much heat as the potions master would have preferred. Severus had to get used to the frostbites and the silent envy of the Sheriff's many fur coats.

Still he was no closer to adding the missing piece to the puzzle. He couldn't figure out what part he played in all this. The answer came, though, and it was beyond the poor wizard's wildest imagination...

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It was a clear winter's day and the Sheriff showed up for class while Severus frantically tried to button his jacket. He gave up with a reluctant sigh and drew the cloak tighter around his freezing body. He ignored the usual fascinated look the Sheriff gave his belly and turned towards the blackboard to write down today's topic.

"Wait!" his pupil interrupted and as Severus turned he noticed that the man had raised his hand. For a split second the lazy gaze and the arrogant features made him look like any Slytherin he'd ever seen.

"Yes?" Severus asked silkily and raised his brow like the old Snape would.

"I don't feel like learning today, so I have an offer for you.." the man by the desk said, looking like he couldn't care less.

"And that's what, if you don't mind me asking?" Severus hid his suspicion as best as he could. To take to lightly the lord of the manor's offers could be the last thing you'd do in life. The man in front of him got to his feet as elegant as any ballet-dancer.

"I get the rest of the day off- you can come for a walk with me in the herbal garden." Severus looked at him, not believing his luck. Finally, after four and a half months longing he would finally inhale fresh air again, feel the soft touch of ground beneath his feet. And then his brain started sounding the alarm. Where was the catch?

"Hmmm..." He gave his best attempt to hide the eagerness fighting to get out: "It sounds like a decent proposal.. "

"Don't worry," the voice was as dry as the Sahara-sand: "There's no foul intentions intended. I've seen the look you have when you look out a window. It's the same look as Shadow has when I won't let him out of the paddock for disobeying me. So I thought you could do good with a bit of fresh air, maybe it will help you relax a little, you're too tense." This man never stopped to amuse him. He could tell Severus longed to get out because he had the same ___expression as a horse?!? Now what the hell.. Severus wasn't about to turn down the offer because he resembled a four-legged animal!

The feel of pale winter sun in his face was exhilarating. Severus actually smiled as he closed his eyes and let the small feeling of being just a little more free embraced him. The garden wasn't all that he had to admit. It was pretty puny and with all the snow on top of it he would never have guessed this was the spot the old witch harvested many of her ingredients. But Severus didn't mind the snow, he didn't mind the cold- heck he didn't even mind the Sheriff in this state of euphoria. To think that such a small thing as true sunlight on his face could lift his spirit.. Severus

actually felt happy for the first time since he arrived this prehistoric place.

As he wandered around, inhaling every bit of nature he could before he would get hauled back inside- he felt it. He stopped dead and his hands instantly flew up to his midsection where he for a fraction of a second had felt.. Movement?? He held his breath as he pushed his hands on the spot where... There it was again!!

"What is it!" The Sheriff came running: "What is it!?" But Severus was caught up in his own mind as he felt it again and again- like something was tapping his stomach from the inside. The Sheriff had reached him now, grabbed a hold of his shoulders and started shaking him.

"Are you in pain? WHAT'S WRONG!" Finally Severus snapped back to reality. He looked up. Confused as he saw the fear and concern in the other man's eyes.

"I'm fine," he said as he slowly lowered his hands: "It's just.. well, it was the oddest sensation..." He couldn't believe he was actually telling the man in front of him.

"What sensation!" The Sheriff didn't nudge.

"A sort of "tapping" ...sensation, like something small was trying to kick me from inside my stomach." Severus smiled as he said it. He was still aroused on the fresh air and the sight of the sun, and this odd feeling amused him. But the smile on his face soon died a horrible death as he saw the reaction of the other man.

"It moved, did you say it moved?!" A grin, eager hands planted on Severus' belly. "Let me feel it, I want to feel it!" Severus took two slow steps backwards as he stared at the man, heart thumping in his ears.

"What.. moved." he breathed as he felt the movement again, this time the sensation filled him with disgust. The Sheriff followed him. A terrifying smile parted his lips as he tried to touch him again.

"Don't you feel it?" he whispered: "Don't you feel it growing inside you?" His head started to spin, and he wanted to turn around to go back inside, to get away from the insane man following him. But he didn't dare turn his back to this man...

"What's growing inside me.." Severus backed into something, a branch maybe, hidden in the snow, stumbled and lost his balance. He landed flat on his back and his mind screamed as snow never had felt any colder. The Sheriff hovered over him, still smiling that terrifying smile.

"I'm grateful to you in so many ways, my dear. You're the reason I'll get what I want more than anything in this world-: " He paused apparently for dramatic effect before he spat out the rest with a dreamlike __ expression on his face: "A seat on the throne!" Severus didn't even try to sit up. He just lay there looking at his insane twin, not making out what he was blabbering about. The man over him bent down on his knees besides him and planted a firm hand on top of his stomach.

"Within you, you carry my future. Quite an honor actually!" The hand pushed harder and the contents of Severus' belly squirmed in reply. Severus' mind went blank. The face above him became fog and a scream started to work its way through his mind as his subconscious slowly started to add two and two things together.

"Or to be less court," the Sheriff went on: "You're knocked up! That's my son you're carrying." No! That wasn't true! It was a lie, a big, fat lie! Severus was helplessly twisting under the stern grip of which the Sheriff now pinned him forcefully down to the ground.

"Let. Go. Of. Me!" Pure hatred melted his brain as he whispered the words. The Sheriff was lying!

The snow and ice were sending sharp needle-pricks of pain through his body. And on top of him, this incredible heat as the Sheriff started to lean closer. But it wasn't anything similar to the pleasant kind of heat you feel when your lover bends close, it was a dangerous heat, the sort of heat that can destroy you if you don't do as your opponent pleases. Lust raged this man's eyes and he leaned closer and closer.. Severus still was blind to the idea that this man wanted him for more than his forced abilities to produce his offspring. The man's breath strafed Severus' left cheek and even in this temperature his breath felt hot. Dangerously hot.

Panic started clouding Severus' brain. He couldn't escape, there was not enough strength in his faint body to throw the man off him. A tongue brushed the side of his throat and Severus suddenly remembered the night he awoke with the creepy feeling that someone or something was licking him. Severus lay still for a few breathless moments, too stunned and terrified to do anything. Then needy fingers fumbled their way downwards and ended up groping his lower regions. That was the final straw. The old Snape, the Snape no one dared to defy awoke with a roar.

"Let go of me you filthy beast!" he screamed and partially managed to loosen his opponent's grip.

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The Sheriff let go of Severus with a surprised look on his face. He had never seen Snape angry before, not like this. The hate and loathing in his eyes.. how could that be? He'd looked so happy when he'd felt the baby kick, Amused, proud and lovely. The Sheriff was aroused in a heartbeat. The beauty shining through this man's features, no longer looking foul and suspicious. The Sheriff actually believed for a moment that the man was contempt. The need to touch this new man, to take part in his new and exciting experience, he wanted to shag him right there and then.

Now he was standing aghast while Severus, trembling with anger, got to his feet, not taking his eyes off him at any moment. There wasn't a single trace left of what the Sheriff believed he had seen. Disgust, hate and anger colored Snape's black eyes making him look truly perilous.

"If you touch me again I will kill you!" Snape meant every word of it and the Sheriff knew it. Spite the fact that Severus wouldn't have a chance in hell keeping his promise in his current condition, the Sheriff felt the threat like a brick wall collapsing on top of him. He hated the disgust in the man's eyes! He took a few hesitating steps toward the black clad man, but Snape's raging gaze froze him to the spot.

"Severus," he said, his voice bathing in sugar: "don't be such a.." Snape cut him off with a snarl:

"I want this... thing inside me removed... now!! He growled and pointed at his stomach with a trembling finger. "I want this bastard, freak child of yours removed right now, or else..." But now the Sheriff had regained the deadly calmness that was even more dangerous than his furious anger fits.

"Or else what." A cold smile played on his lips as he let Snape slowly understand he had called his bluff: "There's nothing you could do to me- you're more fragile than a flower! You're too weak to even climb stairs without taking breaks every ten steps. And my mother made sure none of your so-called wizarding skills would endanger me or compromise any of my family plans during your stay here. I would keep my mouth shut and beg for your life if I were you, before acting up upon ME! I'm the one who decides whether you'll live or die after this!"

He could see Snape shrink as the words sank in. A sudden need to show him who was Master made him lunge himself upon him and push him backwards so he fell down again. He threw himself at him like a savage animal, the unstoppable need to own this man, to devour him part by part, limb by limb. His teeth sank down into soft flesh, the fresh taste of blood awakened his animal senses- making him want to howl like a wolf against the sky. Then came the soft, fearful whisper, the last resign of a beaten man:

"Please, I... beg. you... Let me be."

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Locked up in his prison, with blood flowing from a tear in his throat Severus tried to get a grasp of the brutal reality. He. Was. Pregnant. However how impossible, no matter how disgusting- he was pregnant with the Sheriff's child. The mere thought should be more than enough to send him halfway to insanity's oblivion but he had no such luck. He remembered his last dreadful minutes of the experience in the herbal garden with dread. He had begged. HE the potions master, the none fearing Severus Snape had begged this scum for mercy, to let him be! The only time in his life he'd ever crawled for anyone was for the dark lord, Voldemort. But back then he was young and inexperienced, now he was a well grown man who no longer was a stranger to the darkness that could possess other men's minds. And the look the Sheriff had sent him as he backed away... like he discovered something a horse had left behind, under his shoe.. And then he had left him to the guards to haul him back to his quarters.

Now Severus was sitting with his back against the door, trembling from the cold slowly creeping up his body from the stone floor. For the very first time in his life he felt absolutely petrified. The only private thing he had left, his body had shamelessly been taken away from him. He had something growing and living inside his belly he didn't ask for, never wanted, and this was turning his very body to a prison. He felt sick even touching his stomach. Now and again he felt the little twinges inside. Now that he was aware of it he seemed to feel it all the time. Some vomit lay in a small puddle beside him, but there was no strength left in Severus' body to deal with such things right now. He wanted out of this mess, he wanted to destroy the thing inside him! But he knew he had to live through it. He had sworn a solemn oath to protect any innocent life and no matter how he turned and twisted the facts, the life growing inside him was innocent.

the thought was bitter and desperate at the same time. He pictured the headmaster sitting by his desk at his office, the jolly smile, the wholehearted laugh. Why hadn't he rescued him? Why, WHY was he stuck here back in the dark ages set to do something he wasn't even sure he could manage? How would this... thing be born? He was a MAN for crying out loud, he had no vagina or womb! Nor had he been doing anything in his life where the outcome could be a baby. He tore his hair until it hurt more than his panicked breathing, until he was close to shed the first tears he'd done since he was a little boy.

He slowly crept to his bed trying to shut his miserable faith out of his mind, just so he could get some rest.

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The Sheriff found no peace this afternoon as he tried to shut the image of Severus Snape out of his head. He nearly strangled one of the milkmaids during a little orgy he arranged for himself to calm down. Now the different kinds of girls was kicked out and he lay flat on his back in his king size bed, nude and sweaty as his possessed mind brought him back to the episode with Snape earlier that day. What was it with this man that made him want him so? He had never fancied a man in his entire life, but this one was different. Was it the fact that he bore his face? Was it the magic and power infested into his very body that shone through no matter how weakened he got? Just because it had his face... did his mother do this to him as a joke? Did she think it would please him??? The Sheriff decided to see just how magical this creature was, at the end of a chain...

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Chapter 8 by Restina Lovebug

The room of darkness

~past~

Severus awoke with a start as his mirror image charged into the room.

"What... what do you want.." He was still drowsy and sat up in bed, confused and a tad concerned.

"Relax!" it came curtly: "I just have some questions I need answered." The Sheriff stopped in the middle of the room, legs apart, arms across his chest. Severus rose from the bed. He didn't like to look up at this man, when they both stood he felt a little more equal to the man.

"How can it be we're so alike, is this your true face or did mother change your looks when you came here?" A good question indeed.. Severus was wondering the very same thing.

"I don't know.. why we are so alike," he answered carefully, knowing all too well the wrong answer would set off one of the Sheriff's fits: "This is my true face, and it is as great a surprise to me that we look like brothers."

"So you don't know why?" The tone of his voice had a trail of suspicion in it, he didn't trust Severus' answer.

"Maybe I'm your descendant, and you my forefather," Severus said promptly, as he did his little eggshell dance of which he'd been so familiar with lately. As he thought of it didn't seem all that far fetched actually. Maybe he really were this mans direct descendant. That would certainly explain some of the bad blood in his family's bloodline..

"I think you're right," the Sheriff nodded as he seemed to do a great deal of thinking and then, just as sudden as he'd come barging in- he changed the topic: "Did you like the meal I sent for you?"

"Uhhh...yes," Severus answered confused. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and his stomach started protesting by the mere mentioning of food. What was this insanity? He had enough to handle in the moment if he hadn't have to stand here having an odd conversation with the source of his misery! But the Sheriff seemed patient and in a good mood so he relaxed just a little bit, denying the growing thing inside his stomach for the moment. One thing at the time! The Sheriff continued his weird questions. He was wondering if Severus could see the moon from up here in his window, if he'd ever eaten horsemeat before and all sorts of other insane questions. Severus answered them all as best as he could up until the one last question set him off guard.

"Do you find me disgusting, Severus?" And there it was. The dangerous glimpse in the corner of his eye again. Severus hesitated just a second too long before he answered him "no". The other man's eyes were piercing his soul and he didn't find Severus answer satisfying.

"Don't lie to me, Severus- you're smarter than that!" Severus took one step back, defense in his voice as he answered:

"I...don't. I'm not lying." But he was, and it was as plain as day. They both knew it.

"I give you one more chance to answer that question. Do- you- find- me- disgusting?!"

"Yes," it came from Severus after a heavy pause. The Sheriff started pacing back and forth on the floor, mumbling for himself. Unaware Severus tugged the cloak closer to his body as he stood there waiting for the man's next move. After about a minute the pacing madman seemed to have settled his mind and he stopped, fixed his gaze on Severus once more.

"I don't like it when people are lying to me," he said, every word burning with acid. "When I catch one of my servants lying I usually cut off their tongue. Would you like me to do that to you, Severus?"

"No." Severus wasn't able to meet his gaze.

"And how do I know you're not lying now, huh? How do I know that you really do prefer to keep your tongue, and that you're not lying to me again??!" Severus wasn't able to cope with this, not now. If that man left right now he would be eternally grateful to whatever unmerciful God it was who found it fit for him to watch his own father kill and eat his mother..

"I'm... sorry... I didn't mean to lie to you..."

"SHUT UP!" the Sheriff suddenly screamed, small drops of spit showering Severus as the words hit him as a sledgehammer: "Will you just shut up?!?! You think you're so wise and gifted, that I'm just an ignorant brat you have the displeasure to teach! If you're so talented and magic, so show me some of it. Huh?! Show me some of your magic tricks, curse me with your deadly eyes or something!" The man had gone from bad to worse in a split second. Now his eyes were lighting with fury, his whole body was shaking from decompressed anger and Severus stood in the middle of the line of fire.

"I..." he began, but he never finished. The punch came as a sudden relief to the whole constipated situation. The pain inflicted on his face made Severus finally wake up to the unreality unfolding in front of him. Last time he got away with one hit, this time he wasn't sure he would be equally lucky.. He stumbled backwards, but didn't lose his balance. A furious smile entered the Sheriff's features as he watched the blood dripping from Severus nose. It would be the size of a tomato by the evening. Then he turned and left the room in swift steps.

Severus was shaking all over. He was just about to drag himself back to bed, grateful the man finally had let him be, when the Sheriff came back. This time he wasn't alone. Two sturdy guards were following him inside, one of them carrying some kind of cudgel. Severus stood like a deer caught in the light of a muggle automobile.

The Sheriff threw in the first punch, of course. This time he hit Severus in the chest so hard he lost his breath. The next one sent him staggering to the floor, where a kicking-feast began. A wild image ran through Severus' mind as the kicks and the heavy petting of the cudgel hailed his body.

Instinctually he crouched together making himself as small as possible, making the surface these men were beating into a pulp no bigger than necessary. His arms went down to his stomach where he tried to protect the very thing cursed upon him, the thing he wished would be removed from his body. In that moment the true Severus shone through, the very person everybody but Albus had failed to see. Not for a moment he thought about his face or other delicate spots he should be protecting instead of a vulnerable creature that had no right occupying his body.

Somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness he heard the Sheriff screaming:

"Not the stomach, you idiots!" And then Severus passed out.

His attackers wrapped him in a cover and then the inert form was carried down to a small private room. The Sheriff entertained female "guests" in this little room. It contained all the things a man needs when he wants to let the victim know who's the boss. A bed with straps, a closet with various equipment suited to inflict delicious pain of all sorts. It was the Sheriff's favorite room in the entire castle. The guards left them on their Master's order and he strapped his twin image to the bed, before he sat down to wait.

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The fear stayed in this room. Dishonor, disgrace ..ugliness and pain... humiliation- it all stayed locked inside this room. And one bruised semi-conscious bound wizard felt it all. Much like the

blood running down his throat from his nose he felt it- suffocating him. To live with the fear was bad enough, but this... no other man had been here before him, of that he was sure. The Sheriff had brought terrified girls to this room, beaten them into submission and then beaten them again. This place had only one purpose and Severus Snape understood what the Sheriff really wanted to do to him, and would do- given any sign or dissent.

But why? The muggle was border-line psychotic at times but preyed on women. Why him?? Why Severus Snape, the man brought back in time to carry forth this bastards heir?! Finally the stone fell from his eyes as he finally saw the desire burning in the man's eyes as he leaned over him, checking the straps. And suddenly Severus wasn't only afraid the man would kill him...

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Pain is a curious thing. It's supposed to help you avoid damage to your body and further pain, as part of the body's many intriguing defense mechanisms. But pain can just as well kill a man as save him.. The Sheriff wasted no time with his delicate flower. To see the pain ripple through this man's body, to feel it twinge when caressed with a powerful blow to the delicate stomach. He knew he shouldn't but couldn't let it be. The soft curve revealing the life growing within his prisoner was so delightful to punch. Soft moans from the man he was hurting made him even more aroused. He wanted to do unspeakable things with this man, things no man should do to another man. But just around midnight he suddenly felt hungry and he decided this would do for today and so he left.

"George! What are you doing to the wizard?!" His mother attacked him the very second he sat down to have a well-earned meal.

"Mother, don't ever call me by my first name!" the Sheriff said calmly as he savored the memory of Severus' sweat. The little witch stumped her foot in anger as she gave him one of her most intimidating "mother-looks".

"That wizard is worth nothing to us if you kill him! Remember what he's carrying!" Her son smiled as he speared a piece of meat with his fork.

"Don't worry mother, I'm just giving him a lesson. I'll let him out in a day or two."

"I do not approve of this!" The old woman turned his back at him and left, mumbling furiously.

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Back in the little room down in the dungeons Severus lay as the Sheriff had left him. Sprawled out on his back, bound to the bed. At least he still had his clothes on and it only hurt when he breathed.. How long had he been beaten? He wasn't sure. Time was impossible to tell down here amongst the phantom cries of prisoners before him. But the Sheriff wasn't finished with him, Severus had been a naughty boy and needed to be punished, or so the man had told him during his beating sessions. Severus was worried the many blows to his tender belly would kill the offspring inside. It was ludicrous to think this way, he should be happy if the little rat kicked the bucket, but he wasn't. All his years of protecting people in his immense, unselfish way had left its mark on the man. He wanted nothing to do with it, but he was in no place to kill it, or let anyone else do it for him. Tiny movements made him gasp in relief. Maybe it was hurt, but it was alive.. still... What Severus would have to do to keep it that way he had no idea of..

For two long days Severus lay in his dark prison, listening to the distant sounds of prisoners screaming further down the dungeon. Rats were scattering around in the room from time to time, some of them even taking a nibble on the fragile wizard on the bed. Smelling the rot and fear reminded Severus more of Azkaban than he wanted to remember. Knowing that he would come back, even preparing himself to an assault that he had never experienced before or wished to,

made him despise himself for the coward he felt he was. A guard came by twice and let him urinate in a cup, still bound to the bed. How humiliating it was, it was better than the alternative.. But no one brought him any food or water, and the wizard was slowly getting more and more dehydrated. The cold was also starting to affect him and he was starting to think he would die here, alone in the dark while rats were chewing parts of his flesh, feasting on his blood.

By the break of dawn the third day the Sheriff returned with a mug in his hands. Severus could tell the time of day by the smug smile the man always bore after a solid night's sleep. He actually saw two of the men he hated as he approached him. They both sat down the mug on two small tables in a corner besides the closet with all his torture devices. Severus had to close his eyes as his prison keeper lit the torches hanging on the walls all around the room. The light scorched his sore eyes that had grown accustomed to the darkness. It made him freeze even more, made his throat even sorer.

Tender hands started loosening him from the harnesses, and Severus half noticed the Sheriff whistling a tune as he did so. A few minutes later he was released from his bonds, but the terrible thirst and cramped muscles handicapped him. Severus couldn't have lifted his arm even now, without the bonds. Still the Sheriff hadn't said one word. Now Severus felt him lifting his head and he opened his eyes to see the mug drifting towards him. Precious sips of water, medicine for his sore throat. Severus drank as fast and as much as he possibly could until the mug was taken away from his lips.

Now the Sheriff's hand started to rub feeling back into his limbs. Gently first, then briskly. Severus' body awoke with painful pricking and tingling sensation all over his body. But the rubbing did more than just help the weak and vulnerable wizard on the bed. The touches became more invasive and more aggressive. Severus felt well-known panic drift to the surface. For how could he try to kick out when he couldn't feel his legs or even move his arms properly? All he could do was to stare through sore eyes as the Sheriff did as he pleased, while the warmth slowly crept back into his body only to soon be replaced with pain.

The hands that had given the impression of helping him started to touch his clothing. And before Severus even knew what was going on he felt his clothes being pulled off like they were rags. The sound of buttons ripping loose, the sound of tearing fabric.. A soft moan escaped his throat as he tried to lift his arms to avert what was happening, his wrists felt like they were broken. Still the man was silent, and that was what scared the potions master more than anything. It was not the aggressive touches, not the fact that he now was half naked and that his pants were being ripped off at this very instant. The one and only thing scaring him was the Sheriff's deadly silence.

How could he have been so stupid? To let a pathetic squib catch him out and imprison him! His goddamn instincts had screamed at him that this was a deal too sweet, too dangerous to comply to, but his eagerness to please Albus, to help him in yet another perilous task had dampened his doubts. And here he was, caught in this nightmare trying not to imagine what the Sheriff would do to him. Sharp fingernails tore into his skin leaving fine trails of blood down his chest. Again the urge to protect what he carried inside made him try to lift his useless arms.

And so he did. He could not fight, he knew it, and the Sheriff knew it and savored the weakness of the trembling twin underneath him. Every movement was pain to the wizard and delight to the Sheriff, every bite, every scratch, every punch to the defenseless stomach. Severus' just wanted to close his eyes and shut it all out, like he'd done so many times during his time as a death eater. But this time it was different. Severus couldn't distance himself from this. If he did the Sheriff would double his efforts and he would be maimed permanently. The Sheriff wanted tears, and got them. Severus let the salt drops of submission slowly trickle down his face.

The tears would give the bastard what he wanted. The slaps became more violent, his hands became more needy and the Sheriff's breath could tell anyone with half a brain he was getting

more and more aroused.

Severus was turned on his stomach with hasty, impatient movements. His face was held down into a foul-stanching pillow until he nearly choked and then released for a couple of times, still while the Sheriff kept silent. His hands all over him, touching, groping- possessing. Teeth tasting his flesh, nails cutting through his skin. At least he wouldn't reach his stomach as long as he was placed in the bed like this. Blood filled Severus' mouth as the Sheriff had found a new spot that earned his full attention. The sound of a whip. The terrible pain as it ripped the skin off his back was nothing he hadn't experienced before. But the closeness, the unbearable closeness! Every touched spot on his skin left a burning sore that were going to haunt the wizard in his future nightmares. This never- ending breach of his personal space, this needy fumbling on his virgin body..

Suddenly the man was in the bed with him. His shirt was open far down to the chest and he'd removed his shoes. His tongue got to work in a wonderful symphony with his teeth, up and down the battered wizard's body.

The voice inside his head, like a frightened child. He felt the Sheriff's erection brush his thigh and thought to himself he was lucky he had no food left in his stomach.

The sound of pants easing down the other man's thighs. Severus felt his blood turn to ice.

Rough hands spread his thighs as the Sheriff sat down on his knees between them, panting.

Severus closed his eyes and his fingers grasped helplessly for some security in the soft fabric of the bedspread. The mental pain more than the actual physical one as the Sheriff moved inside him with a harsh, unmerciful movement was unbearable. The pressure.. The wizard on the bed shut the silent sobs inside his chest as he heard the loud moans of pleasure coming from the man straddling on top of him. It was over almost as swiftly as it had begun, but the few, violent minutes of rape were more than anyone should be able to bear.

The Sheriff collapsed on top of him with a moan. Somehow the feeling of the man's sweaty body touching Severus' naked skin was almost as repellent to him as the actual raping. And the weight... to much.. to much...

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How he ended back in the tower on his bed he didn't know. Severus had passed out after the last tender touch of the Sheriff's fist before he got dressed and left the wizard once more. He reckoned he'd fetched a couple of guards to carry him back. Severus had crawled back into his shell. He simply existed. Nothing around him mattered any more, if he had the control over his heart it would have stopped beating a long time ago. He was too battered and bruised to move. The bed was his safe haven, or at least for now. Severus wasn't safe anymore, he never had been. And as his broken body slowly started to mend he drifted away, to that place he had visited so many times in his childhood years. A confused and hurt little boy tried to cope with the fact that his parent had abandoned him, just as his previous ones.

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Chapter 9 by Restina Lovebug
Enter the great trio.

~present~

Harry was well into his seventh and final year at Hogwarts school of wizardry. As autumn came something changed. There was no clear tell tale signs of it, Harry would probably not have noticed himself if it wasn't for his born ability to smell trouble. And somehow the smell of the old halls of Hogwarts now reeked of it. Albus was a seldom sight at meals any more, and every

teacher was acting tense and weird. Sure, there was one sign of upcoming trouble that worried Harry more than anything. Severus Snape was gone. He had disappeared without a trace about a month ago, Harry remembered the day clearly. He'd bumped into Snape in the hallway and gotten the usual reprimand for being in the potions master's way. Harry remembered the weird look on Snape's face, he looked farley agitated, but also eager somehow- an _expression never before seen on the scary old bat, of that he was certain. The next day he was gone. Albus told during breakfast that Severus Snape had taken a leave of absence, when he would return was not yet certain. Harry smelled cover-up a long way. The headmaster wasn't much of a liar. And the fact that Sirius showed up by the end of the day, telling he had got an urgent owl to come and take care of his old fiend's potions lessons for a while told Harry that wherever old Snape had snook away he had decided shortly before departing. He hadn't told Ron and Hermione about his worries yet. Ron was far to glad to be rid of the black clad man and Hermione was so busy cramming for her finals she spent most of her time in the library. This day all three of them had been summoned to come to the headmaster's office after classes, and Harry was certain it had something to do with all the weirdness that'd been going on around here lately. There were rumors flying about some old demon on the loose, maybe that was the cause of all this? Maybe Snape had gone to kill it and didn't succeed?

Dumbledore looked older than his claimed 150 years. The sparkle in the cheery eyes seemed gone and even his office looked miserable. Harry wasn't the only one to start suspecting something now, Ron and Hermione looked just as worried as him when they sat down in front of the headmaster's desk.

"I'm sure you're quite curious why I've called on you today?" the headmaster said as he passed a bowl of his favorite sweets, the smile on his face never reaching his eyes.

"It has something to do with Snape's disappearance, doesn't it!" Harry spat out before thinking. He might not like the git, but Hogwarts wasn't the same without him lurking in the hallways. Sneaking out in the dead of night was far too easy now. Dumbledore looked surprised for a second, but recovered well:

"I should have known nothing would escape your sharp mind young Potter! Indeed Severus has something to do in this, but his task is for him to do and him only. I need your help on another field. I guess you've heard about the findings in the old Nottingham Castle?" Now Hermione started twitching in her seat, the sign that clearly stated she knew everything about it.

"You mean the findings of the old bedchamber? Oh, it's so exciting! The archaeologists found objects not belonging to that decade, and still they were there and over eight hundred years old!" Ron sighed by her side and rolled his eyes to Harry's great amusement. Some things never changed.

"Indeed I do," the headmaster replied: "But the hid away quarters wasn't the first rooms to be discovered. Seven weeks earlier another room was found.." Here Hermione cut him off:

"Ah, the room with the family portrait in it! somebody even believes the portrait is portraying The Sheriff of Nottingham, Maiden Marion and their child! I of course wouldn't believe such nonsense no matter.."

"It IS the Sheriff of Nottingham and one of the women on his side IS Maiden Marion," Albus said, gravely. Harry and Ron couldn't help but giggle while Hermione's ears turned bright red.

"Have any of you seen a picture of the actual painting?"

"Yes, actually..." Ron said: "I remember Bill showing it to me when he stopped by on his way to Romania a couple of weeks ago. I remember it because the Sheriff-guy looked just like Snape. Heehee, I was planning to save the muggle newspaper for you guys to see, but old Ms. Norris

made use of the paper before I could do anything about it. Looks like we're not the only ones who doesn't like old Snape.. is..it." Ron suddenly remembered the man in front of him and the look on his face told anybody caring to notice that he did not approve of Ron's little joke.

"I'm sorry." Ron said. Now it was his turn to get that special red glow on his cheeks.

"Severus may not be what you call an ordinary teacher, young Weasley, but he's dedicated his whole life to students as yourself. He deserves a little more gratitude than that, don't you think?" The headmaster's voice was soft, no traces of anger- just sadness. Ron gave an ashamed nod.

"So the legends about Robin Hood is true then?" Hermione exclaimed: "I always believed that was just a fairytale!"

"It is indeed true Robin of Loxley, the Sheriff of Nottingham and Marion lived in that area for eight hundred years ago, but we don't know how much of the legends that are true. Don't forget how easily a feather evolves into five hen and how details can be left out of various reasons.

"What are you trying to tell us?" Harry interrupted. Dumbledore sighed and his fingers wandered through his beard:

"I want you, all of you to go to Nottingham where you will pretend to be archaeology students. I would have gone myself, but muggle archaeologists are very suspicious towards archaeologists they don't know either by name or reputation. Three eager, well behaving students on the other way, is cheap labor and no threat to the fame and honor they expect from this find. It's crucially important that you get access to everything they find and tell me exactly WHAT you find. Everything is important, don't miss a single little detail, how small and insignificant it may be!"

"What exactly are we looking for?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Anything, everything! Any trace that would tell me...." Albus' voice trailed off and a sad expression on his face told the three not to push for any more information on that point.

"We'll do this, Headmaster, don't you worry!" Harry assured. The thought of getting away from Hogwarts actually seemed quite tempting for the moment. Dumbledore looked at the trio of brave souls for a moment, as he thought of the one he may have lost.

"Don't agree to do this yet, young Potter- I haven't told you everything yet. To go to Nottingham may put you in arms way of a terrible beast hiding within the forest. Especially you need to be careful, Harry- if he gets the scent of you he will come to claim your life. If there were anyone more suited for this mission I would have chosen them, but you three are the most outstanding trio I've ever seen when you are working together."

"Why is it more dangerous for me?" Harry asked. By all means he was no longer no stranger to danger and knew how to take care of himself, but he still needed to know what threat he was up against.

"It's an old and foul creature," Dumbledore answered: "His name have been feared from the brink of mankind. Generations after generations have whispered his name throughout the centuries and he is the forefather of the very beast you killed two years ago, Harry." All three of the youngsters gasped in unison.

"Voldemort." Harry was shook, but reasonably calm.

"When the first room was cracked open an old demon escaped his cage of which he'd been imprisoned for eight hundred years. Voltimore is his name and he is every bit as dangerous as his more recent heir. He's now hiding in the Sherwood Forest, biding his time, growing,

collecting, feeding..." Here Albus got a particular strained expression on his face: "Some weeks ago I got an instant message from one of my spies in the area. I barely made it there in time to rescue the children, their parents were already killed, forced by Voltmore to kill each other in front of the very eyes of their children."

"That's... that's horrible!" Hermione gasped, eyes watering.

"Yes it is," the headmaster simply said.

"How.. old were they?" Ron asked, lip shivering a bit. He'd always loved children and the very thought of anyone trying to harm a child was repulsive. Anyone harming a child deserved the worst treatment his wand could provide.

"The little girl, five, and the boy, seven." was the answer.

"Oh, the poor little dears!" Hermione shuddered: "What happened to them?"

"I brought them to their grandmother in Kingsville. At least they are safe now, but any child surviving such torment..." Albus looked at the three and wondered if he was wrong to send them into such a dangerous area. They were only children themselves, and although they had survived and prevailed so many dangerous moments they WOULD die this time if they did anything stupid.

"Listen, children I need to be absolute sure you won't leave the castle at any times during the evening and night while you stay there. This is important, your survival depends on it!" Ron and Hermione gulped, Harry looked too calm.

"The area is practically deserted now. The muggle villagers who haven't yet been killed has fled the town. Only the group of muggle archeologists are still remaining as they aren't as easily frightened."

"You have that right!" Ron interrupted: "Just see what they dug out in Egypt, every bloody one of them ended up dead after opening that tomb, but did that stop them? Nooo!" The headmaster gave him a snide side look before he continued:

"Voltmore is most active at night, therefore it is crucially important that you arrive there at day and stay as much as you can inside the castle at daytime too. After sundown never EVER leave the castle! All right?" All three heads opposite him nodded.

"We'll be careful, Headmaster!" Hermione assured: "And if any of these two clowns tries anything they will have hell to pay, I promise you!" Finally a true smile bribed its way onto Albus' face.

"Good! I knew I could count on you three! You will leave tomorrow, I found an old deserted tavern that's connected to the Floo-line. From there you have a five minutes walk to the castle, a nice stroll after a floo-trip. I have already arranged with cover stories for you, here," he handed them a parchment each: "and the muggles are expecting you." He rose from his desk and led them towards the door:

"Oh, and one last thing before you go pack!" he added as a final note: "You'll get your hands on some very sensitive information, this information is for your and my eyes only, do you follow me?" Another simultaneous nod and the trio exited the office.

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Next morning Harry, Ron and Hermione rose with the sun. They would be traveling from the fireplace in Dumbledore's office, and it was of utter most importance to avoid any curious eyes

and nosy noses. Harry and his gang were masters in not dragging any attention towards themselves and nobody would suspect a thing if they'd seen the three walking casually down the halls as if they were on their way towards the library, except from the muggle backpacks that was..

Albus was waiting for them and more or less dragged them in through the opening that led to his office and private quarters.

"Quickly now, Old McGregor on the painting across the wall is one of the biggest gossip spreaders in Hogwarts! Hermione looked over her shoulder and noticed an old munch, snoring silently where he sat on his chair.

"Why don't you move him then?" She whispered as the door shut behind her.

"I tried, but he started complaining about the draft up in the east wing making his corns ache," the Headmaster whispered back: "I didn't have the heart nor the sanity to keep him hanging there, and that was the only available space, none of the other paintings wanted to trade spots with him. So.. I guess I'm stuck with him," he sighed, but smiled never the less: "He may have a loose tongue, but he's lousy at playing wizards scrabble. I beat him every single time!" The headmaster chuckled and showed his three students the way to his fireplace.

"I'll take down the wards protecting Hogwarts from any "flooding" when you step into the fireplace. And I want you to know this, children: I will not be there with you in person, or at least not the first couple of weeks, but I'll be with you in spirit. I'll contact you through an old fireplace down in the dungeon every night, just make sure you're alone before you give the "go-sign". And if something dangerous occur, contact me. And this I can't stress enough, no bravery from any of you will be tolerated! Voltimore has many shapes, he lured the Richard-kids out to the forest by transforming himself as a unicorn. If he finds out you are there he will definitely try something to lure you out. So don't go ANYWHERE after dark! You're safe in the castle, Voltimore won't go near it simply because it has been his prison for the last eight hundred years. I've also put up some wards to help the security for both yours and the muggles' sake.

Albus Dumbledore gave them each a hug before they entered the fireplace, one at the time, and disappeared.

But this was the only way for him to find out if Severus had left any clues for him in the past, and it could be the key to his survival. Albus saw no other way, but knew Sirius wouldn't be pleased with this, not to say Molly Weasley and a couple of muggle dentists...

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Albus didn't sit quietly and wait while his student's fled off to do his dirty work for him. There was a lot of area to search besides the closest village and the forest it self. Harry and Co. would be working with finding clues together with the unknowing muggle archaeologists in the closest town by Sherwood forest , and Arabella and Sirius were dealing with the forest, trying to find the secret hideaway where Voltimore slumbered by day. That left all the small villages and towns on the other side of Sherwood for the old Wizard to search. A thorough search was needed here, any clue any hint of what had happened to Severus in the past was useful information. And with Minerva handling the running of Hogwarts for him while he was away, Albus apparated in to one of the villages closest to Sherwood's other side of where Harry and his friend were to play muggle students- and started a new life. He signed in as Albus Underhill on the first old, weather beaten muggle motel he could find, this being his new headquarter from where he would run the secret operation that hopefully would end in the downfall of the demon named Voltimore.

Albus could feel the undercurrents of menace and fear drawing round the area. Each day seemed a little less real than the day before. The villagers were afraid, but they hadn't left their

homes. But in the last month scary things had started happening at night. People didn't leave their homes after nightfall, well aware of the abandoned town on the other side of the forest. Would the evil that had haunted and run those families away from their homes come and do the same to them? A gloom was settling over this land and it was beginning to leach away at the people .. like some hideous slow moving disease. But what the muggles around here didn't seem to notice was the invisible barrier settling itself around the area, slowly increasing its radius each day as the beast in the forest grew stronger. Keeping those inside it, unknowingly trapped, the muggles were unaware they were being herded and penned in like cattle. Soon they wouldn't be able to leave even if they wanted to..

Wizards however are a different race, and from the first moment Albus set foot here he felt it, and fought against the suffocating atmosphere.. It would be easy to be lulled into a false sense of security at first sight of the simple, friendly landscape and the gentle folk that greeted him with open arms like a long lost brother, but it was dangerous here, very dangerous for wizards and muggle alike.

He passed himself off as a retired schoolmaster and amateur treasure hunter. Good for a free drink and interested in all the gossip there was to be had, both real and imaginary. Surprisingly enough people couldn't resist him, he was charming and disarming and time seemed to fly by when you were around him. The villagers wanted to tell him things, things they didn't even know that they remembered, big things, small things, rumors, down-right lies, tales told them by their grandparents, memories they thought they had lost forever.

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Chapter 10 by Restina Lovebug
The Time Team

~present~

As the Richards' Harry, Hermione and Ron immediately fell in love with the tiny town. It was like time had stopped here, the small houses, the tiny river by the outskirts of the village, and the streets paved with stone bricks.

"Oh, it's beautiful here!" Hermione sighed as she took the first step out on the street. The small tavern inn they had floored to was indeed abandoned, just as well probably. It wouldn't be the best approach to arrive to a muggle village through one of their fireplaces..

"It's beautiful all right, but it gives me the willies!" Ron shrugged as they started the walk towards the tower. Harry was occupied inhaling the atmosphere. It almost felt as the town was weeping for being left behind. It was an odd feeling, but that was what he felt. During their walk through the winding and narrow streets he noticed one detail that struck him as really odd.

"Stop, be silent for a second!" he said to the two others who were bickering about a chocolate frog Hermione was supposed to have snatched from Ron's private storage.

"What?!" they both said and gave him the look an old married couple would have given their annoying, middle-aged and bachelor son.

"Listen, do you hear anything?" Harry said as he gazed into the sky. The two followed his example and listened.

"Nope, not a thing, actually," Ron said and was about to start walking again. Hermione looked like she knew what Harry was on to, though.

"It's too quiet here!"

"Exactly!" Harry exclaimed waving his arms: "Where are all the chirping birds?! Sure, they may

have brought their dogs and cats with them, even when they left in a great haste, but there would still be other animals around here, and birds."

"OK, NOW I'm freaked out!" Ron said and started walking again, faster than before: "Let's get inside that rotten old castle so I can breathe again!"

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They weren't really sure what welcome they would receive when they arrived the castle, but this was beyond any expectations! There were six of them, jolly old men with long beards and big grins on their faces. They greeted the newcomers with cheers and pats on the back, they looked like they just had found the meaning of life or something similarly outstanding. Norman Wellington were to be their "chaperone" and mentor during their stay. He had steel blue eyes with nothing but excitement in them, long and thin white hair that he tied back in some sort of ponytail, and of course, the long beard and the kaki-outfit.

"He looks just like someone dragged out of Time Team on muggle-TV!" Hermione whispered to Harry and Ron who didn't understand what she was blabbering about.

"Welcome to our humble little "dig out"!" Mr. Wellington said and shook their hands so hard Harry was wondering if his shoulder had jumped out of its socket. Hermione slipped right into the part as geeky student with big success. She took Mr. Wellington by the arm and snatched him away to look at some of their interesting findings as soon as he'd stopped wrenching her arm.

Harry smiled as one of the other muggles showed him and Ron where they would sleep during their stay.

"It's not much, but the crapper is a beauty!" Tom Libero roared and almost collapsed by his own outstanding joke.

"Heh, hee.. hee.." It wasn't as much as an attempt at a laugh from either Ron nor Harry but Mr. Libero smiled as he'd won an award: "Make your selves at home, lads. Later Norman will brief you about what we've found so far! But you can't tell anyone.. then we will have to shoot you!" he said with a dead serious face. Seconds later he burst out laughing again as the confused faces in front of him didn't know how to react.

"I'm just kidding lads! Ease up okay?! Bwahaha!" Ron and Harry repeated their stupid "you're-sooo-funny-laugh and the old man finally left.

"Man!" Ron moaned: "Muggles are SO strange! Harry smiled as he removed the backpack on his back and started to roll out his sleeping bag, as Ron continued: "I mean, did you HEAR that guy?! 'The crapper is a beauty! Bwa ha ha..' And these backpacks.. they're so uncomfortable and there's no space in them what so ever! Thank god Dumbledore didn't check my candy bag before we left, or else we would be stuck here with nothing!" The headmaster had given them strict instructions to this mission. They had to look strictly muggle, which meant no wands out in the open, no hexed pockets or bags to contain more baggage than it would normally contain and so forth. Poor Ron had never tried the muggle life before, the closest he was to experience such things would be the gadgets his father collected and the so called tenting-trips they made from time to time. Except their tent was charmed so that when you went inside it was as big and roomy as any house, with all the furniture and belongings you needed when you were a wizard on camping. The humble life of muggle camping was a large setback for Ron who imagined he could take all his belongings with him in a couple of roomy boxes. Now he had to settle for two months worth of candy, smuggled into the castle inside a little marble-purse..

"Not EVERY muggle is like that one," Harry said as he found a nice corner that would be his corner throughout this mission: "And you'll learn to love the muggle way of life, if you give it a

chance." He couldn't help but laugh after saying this, he remembered all the years living with the Dursley's- he wouldn't trade his wizard skills for anything in the world!

"Just remember to follow mine and Hermione's lead, we've grown up as muggles and know how it works. But don't worry, I don't think you can get into any trouble in this old castle, there's not so much modern muggle- stuff here." Just about here a grave faced Hermione entered the room.

"What's wrong Mione- you look like you've seen a ghost!" Ron rushed towards her as she rested her backpack to the floor with a far away ___ expression on her face.

"I actually wonder if I have.." she said as her big, hazel eyes seemed to deny something they'd just seen.

"What do you mean?" Ron took her hand and patted it.

"Mr. Wellington took me upstairs to see the secret quarters they'd found, you would not believe.." her voice trailed off and she started pacing back and forth before stopping with a determined ___ expression on her face.

"You have to come see this, so you can tell me I'm not insane!"

Mione, what are you talking ab..." Harry began, but got cut off as Mr. Wellington entered the room with a bounce and weird chirping sounds. Harry was silently wondering if there was some spill of any toxic or hallucinogenic drug from some medical plant nearby.

"I gave young Ms. Granger here a little sneak peak of the tour, hope you don't mind lads?" he said and smiled brightly. Both Harry and Ron shook their heads and tried to smile, but all that stood in their heads was what could have upset Hermione so.

"Fine! Now we'll have the grand tour! You won't be needing any paper and pens yet, this will just be the introduction to the lot," Wellington said and moved for the door. The trio followed him in silence, the once so energetic Hermione came last with a strange _ expression on her face. Their first stop was the wall where the family portrait was discovered. It still hang there on the wall, carefully dusted and cared for.

"We haven't had the heart to take it down yet," Mr. Wellington said: "We've taken it down once, of course, to look at the backside. You never know, there might be a tiny piece to the puzzle on the oddest places!" Harry and Ron went close to study the details and Harry immediately saw the similarities Ron had mentioned regarding the potions master.

"You're right!" he whispered as he leaned even closer: "He DOES look like Snape!"

"Magnificent details, wouldn't you say?" the man said and started to have a small lecture about how well preserved it was, who he believed the motives could be and who might have painted it. This went the two boys straight by. They were occupied studying the details of the man portrayed there. The features was Snape, but not the beard, the way he arranged his hair, and somehow this man's attitude seemed different. Both Harry and Ron figured this had to be what had freaked Hermione out. Little did they know they were in for a much bigger shock...

While her two companions studied the man portrayed on the painting Hermione asked Wellington about the baby.

"Why was it never finished?" she asked as she looked at the yellowed piece of canvas that should have contained the baby's face.

"A very good question indeed, Ms. Granger- we've been pondering the very same thing

ourselves. Our current hypothesis is leaning towards this: The young couple here, let's say it's the Sheriff of Nottingham and Marion for a laugh, they married and Marion, after a while got pregnant. Our dear Sheriff here decides he wants to give his lovely expecting wife a present, namely a family portrait. Look how happy she looks, doesn't she have that pregnant glow you women talk about? Anyhow, a painting takes a long, long time to paint if you want it perfect. Let's say the painter started before the little one made its screaming appearance. He painted the expecting mother slim, easy enough, and painted only the body of the baby. This would leave the artist with only the head left to paint when the little tyke was born and less wait for the new mama. Then tragedy strikes. The baby dies, maybe even the mother, Marion. The painting is never finished. In his grief the Sheriff decides to hide away the painting for all eternity and closes all entrances to this little room. This would match well with the unused crib we found inside the other lot." Hermione nodded:

"That sounds like a good hypothesis! It's awfully sad, though!" Ron and Harry had now seen enough of the painting and wanted to move on. Wellington led them upwards now, up in the west tower. Harry noticed how Hermione hesitated with every step up the winding stairs, as if she didn't want to go back up there. How could that be, could there be anything other than that scary picture here that would upset her?

Harry walked into the biggest shock of his life. Sure, when he entered the room it was nothing odd about it, but then the details carved themselves into his mind. On a desk, an alchemist's set stood - looking exactly like the sets they used at potions classes back at Hogwarts. A little cauldron, astronomy equipment.. and on a bed by one of the walls lay the remnants of an old, worn cloak.. Harry went closer to see and a silent gasp went out of his lungs when he noticed the small emblem on the black cloak's right side.. There was a seal.. very much resembling a certain house seal back at Hogwarts.. But the cloak was ancient, and the seal showed big signs of decay. It might just be by chance..

"Come! Come see the proudest piece we've found here so far!" Mr. Wellington said and indicated Harry and Ron should move towards the desk. There on top of it, carefully tucked into a plastic portfolio for protection lay a yellowed parchment, a charcoal portrait this time. Both Harry and Ron wouldn't believe their eyes at first. There on that eight hundred years old paper Snape was staring back at them!

"Oh. My. God." Ron breathed and pinched Harry's arm. Harry just stood there, gaping.

"Yes, it's magnificent, isn't it!" Wellington purred as he believed the two boys were gasping because of the portraits' worth as a find: "It's probably the best, and the strangest find I've ever done as an archaeologist. You may search for years and not come over such a treasure. And I can't believe the quality of the paper, regarding it's almost eight hundred years old! One little detail the two young wizards hadn't noticed - a young witch was watching with worry in her eyes.

"This... Saxon.. I notice how.. bloated his belly is.. Could it be he suffers from scurvy?" she asked, trying to sound casual and relaxed. In the corner of her eye she noticed how Harry and Ron suddenly noticed that little detail.

"Uhm.. what's scurvy?" Ron squealed with a wrinkle on the bridge of his nose.

"It's a disease you get if you don't get the proper amount of vitamin C. I believe it was quite usual to suffer from scurvy amongst noblemen.. because they ate almost nothing but meat?" Hermione was tiptoeing forward here, there was a lot of muggle history she hadn't covered yet, but she did remember something about scurvy and how one of England's kings had suffered from it because he ate almost nothing but meat." Mr. Wellington got an expression of awe on his face:

"Very good, Ms. Granger! You know your history! We also thought so at first, but then we found traces and remnants of an old greenhouse behind the castle where the garden area was.

Howard is pretty sure there were grown orange trees there. Freshly squeezed orange juice was considered a delicate luxury in those days, and if you were rich enough, you owned your own trees. But it's of course a possibility this Saxon didn't like orange juice, he might even be allergic to it. I guess that's one of the questions we'll never be able to answer.."

"What about this man and the man on the other painting- they look very much alike! Could they be the same person?" Harry asked as he finally managed to drag his eyes away from the drawing.

"No, we are pretty certain they are two different men," Wellington said blatantly: "They have the same features, but they do not wear the same kind of clothes, in fact this man here is wearing clothes that doesn't fit that decade at all... The other guy is a noble and a man of power. This guy also seems to be a noble, but he doesn't have the same aura of power."

"He just looks lonely and depressed..," Ron mumbled to himself.

"But what about the crib standing in the corner over there!" Hermione interrupted: "If there was a stillborn baby, that would be the crib it would be supposed to sleep in. If the two men on the pictures are not the same, what's it doing here with this man who's not the father of the child?!"

"Well, that's one part of the puzzle we haven't figured out yet," the old muggle admitted and tugged his ear: " But I have a couple of theories of course..

Let's assume the man who once lived here was the Sheriff's brother or half brother. He does the unforgivable, he sleeps with his brother's wife. Marion gets pregnant with his child. What they don't know is that the Sheriff is barren and knows about this. And when he finds out that his wife is pregnant he is outraged, at first. Then he decides to play along with her, as Marion doesn't suspect that the Sheriff knows about her infidelity and she is happily carrying her child to term. Her husband orders a portrait of his blooming family as a part of his play. When Marion gives birth, the Sheriff finally tells her that he knows. He kills the baby, and probably Marion and his brother as well. He places the crib in his brother's chambers as it is his child, not the Sheriff's. And after killing them, the Sheriff wants to hide their betrayal and the two rooms are sealed off for all eternity."

Harry was starting to feel depressed due to all this depressing theories of Mr. Wellington. There was defiantly a mystery worth solving here, and Harry had the distinct feeling this room were hiding other clues, clues only a wizard could spot..

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"Now, am I mad?!?!?" Hermione thumped down on Harry's sleeping bag with a thud: "Did you see a drawing assembling the very Potions Master who's currently away on some secret mission?!"

"I sure did," Ron said as he chased a chocolate frog around the room:" But he's gained some weight since the last time I saw him!" he laughed as he finally cornered his candy.

"It couldn't have been him, Mione. That's not possible!" Harry said as he sat down besides her.

"Oh isn't it?!!" Hermione's voice rose: "I know for a fact there's a spell for time travel. It's very hard to learn and you have to be a pretty powerful wizard or witch to handle it. And I think Snape is more than talented and skilled enough to travel through time if he wanted to. And did you see the equipment?! The cauldron had a Hogwarts seal on it for crying out loud! And one of his cloaks, the astronomy kit.. what more proof do you need?!"

"First of all Snape is anything but fat," Harry answered calmly: "And I believe this man is his

forefather, a great, great, great, great grandfather of some sort, slytherin as well as his descendant and one of the first Snape's ever attending Hogwarts."

"I don't know..." Ron frowned a bit: "Was there even a Hogwarts for eight hundred years ago?"

"Of course there was!" Hermione moaned: "You really should spend some time with..."

"Hogwarts, a History...Yes, I'm fully aware of that, Mione! After all, you've been pestering me about the blasted book for seven years!" Ron sighed and dried away a spot of chocolate from his chin. Hermione pouted angrily.

"I also remember some of the song the sorting hat sang for the first years.. our fourth year, wasn't it?" Harry pondered: "Let's see, it was something like this.. 'A thousand years or more ago... and so the hat went rambling on about Hogwarts' four founders and how they came up with the idea of a wizarding school..."

"Well, so Hogwarts existed eight hundred years ago, both the weirdoes we've seen portrayed today are the old bat's forefathers. And with the cheery stories our new friend Norman here has shared with us today I blame those guys for the rotten grades I got to my potions finals last year!" Ron was satisfied with Harry's explanation and wanted the whole issue dead and gone.

"But the haircut, those eyes..." Hermione whimpered, still not convinced. She was going through that room again later that night. If she was to dust the old stonewalls with a toothbrush to find evidence of the man portrayed on the paper being Severus Snape she would do it. She wished Harry's explanation was the right one, but she wouldn't calm down before it was proven. She overcame the sudden urge to call for Albus to get the answers she needed, but figured it had to wait until the evening.

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Hermione awoke with a start. She gave a wink to her muggle watch as she carefully and silently got to her feet. It showed 02.00. She had decided earlier that same evening to have another look at the room when everybody else had fallen asleep. She didn't bother nag Harry and Ron about it, they were already convinced the man portrayed on the parchment wasn't Snape. Hermione on the other hand needed to be sure. Of course she would have many occasions to search the rooms the following weeks, they were allowed to be there and part of their training would be to look for new clues to the archaeologist's puzzle. But Hermione wanted some private time with the room, alone with her thoughts and abilities to snoop up new details. She remembered the meeting with Albus in the fireplace earlier that same night. He had seemed so eager, and when they told him what they'd found out so far, he looked sort of disappointed. They asked Albus about the men on the portraits and their striking resemblance to the Defense against the dark arts- professor, but the Headmaster said he couldn't tell them anything about that point, that he was in the dark about who they might be himself. Somehow Hermione couldn't quite believe him. Even though he was sticking his head through a fireplace and there was a blue fire around him, Hermione couldn't quite shake the image she'd got of a sad man, worrying for his kid. Maybe he was worried about them, she didn't know. But she was going find out whether the man on that portrait was Severus Snape or not, this night!

Like a cat in the night she snook up the stairs with a muggle oil lamp to guide her way. She didn't dare use her wand in case one of the archaeologists would decide to take a night time stroll. Well up in the tower she rested the lamp onto the desk next to the agent drawing and picked it up. With trembling fingers she removed the parchment from the portfolio, afraid the old paper would crumble into dust with her touch. She flipped it over to its backside, lay it down on the desk again and studied its backside as thoroughly as she knew without using magic. Nothing. Then she picked up her wand and tapped the parchment while she whispered:

"Patesco." It was an easy way to hide information, you needed a minimum of skills to do it, and so Hermione reckoned nothing would appear on the parchment. If something was hidden in this sheet of paper it probably would be much better hidden. Therefore she gasped in surprise when a swirling handwriting in black ink started spreading across the paper, big loops on various letters so much alike the ones Hermione used to receive after written tests in a certain class.. She waited while the invisible pen finished its work, as her heart was throbbing heavily in her chest. It finished the letter with a small drawing of a Slytherin emblem down in the right corner. Hermoine took a deep breath and started reading..

Five minutes later she was storming down the stairs, heading for the dungeons. Tears staining her cheeks, Hermione contacted the Headmaster. This was the news he'd been waiting for...

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Harry hated mornings and this was no exception. Archaeologists were known to rise with the sun and this lot seemed to rise even earlier. Ron moaned as he to crept out of his sleeping bag, looking utterly miserable.

"How do muggles SURVIVE sleeping in these things?!?" he complained as he got to his feet and stretched his back with a frown: "Hey, where's Mione??" Harry looked towards the sleeping bag where their friend was supposed to be sleeping.

"Ah, well.. you know Mione! She's probably been up all night getting a head start!" Harry said and laughed: "I bet she's solved the mystery already and that she now knows Snape's relatives better than they did themselves!" Ron rolled his eyes in consent:

"You're probably right!"

Hermione wasn't to be seen by the breakfast table with the cheery old men, nor was she to be found anywhere in the room where they'd found the portrait of the "Snape-twin". Both boys were starting to get worried.

"You don't think anything has happened to her?" Ron whispered as they headed down the stairs again. They could hear a choir of old throats howling away on an old Beatles melody from one of the halls.

"I don't know," Harry answered him honestly. They were heading down to the dungeons in case Hermione was sending Dumbledore some urgent messages through the fireplace. And that's where they found her, sleeping on the stone floor in front of the old fireplace.

"Mione!" Ron sat down beside her and pinched her cheek. There was a low protest and then she opened her eyes, confused at first before she realized where she was.

"Oh, I must have fallen asleep after notifying Albus.." she began and then she turned paler than a corpse.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, and kneeled beside Ron. Hermione looked at both of them in turns and then her face dissolved in tears before she threw herself at the nearest lap, Ron's.

"Mione?" Ron ran his fingers soothingly through her hair as she was shaking like a leaf. After a few minutes her sobs died out and she calmed down enough to sit up straight. Both Harry and Ron stared at her, concern etching their every feature, but none of them wanted to haul whatever it was upsetting Hermione so out of her. She dried her tears with the back of her hand and forced her gaze upwards.

"I found a hidden letter last night," she whispered.

< I knew it, she couldn't wait!> Harry thought.

"It was on the backside of the charcoal portrait, hidden with a simple "Hide- spell", the ones wizard kids use to exchange secret messages. The letter was from Snape." Here Ron gasped, while Harry couldn't believe his own ears. How could that be? How could the note have been from Snape, what would he be doing in the past?

"What was he saying then?!" Ron was dying to know and his whole face now lit up in expectation, a famous Weasley trademark. Hermione drew a shaking breath and continued:

"It was a letter to Dumbledore, where he stated his mission was accomplished... and that he didn't know how to return home..."

"Oh my God!" Ron breathed: "Does that mean.."

"He's stuck in the past, yes," Hermione croaked and started crying again.

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"There has to be something we can do!" Harry said as he was tearing his hair in frustration. Hermione, Ron and himself had just finished a long excruciating day trying to act normal together with the group of constantly singing old men. Now they were back inside their "room" for the evening, excusing themselves early to "go to bed".

"I don't think so," Hermione shrugged. "I asked Dumbledore about it last night and he said that something happened to Snape while he traveled to the past. Dumbledore lost connection with him, and without that it is impossible for Snape to return home and for Albus or anyone else to travel back to get him." Both Ron and Harry resembled the distinct look of a question mark. Hermione sighed and gave them looks that could have killed a very strong beetle.

"Dumbledore works as some sort of homing beacon for Snape. For Snape to return he needs a signal to.. travel after. Without it he might as well end up in Africa ten years ahead in the future, or on the north pole ten thousand years ago. In the precise same way Dumbledore or any other needs Snape's "signals" to find him in the past. Get it?"

"I believe so.." Harry nodded: "But we don't know if Snape maybe found another way to return home after he'd written that letter."

"No, Hermione answered: "And that's why we're still here. The Headmaster won't give up before we've turned every stone and cobweb in this castle, just in case there is one final clue."

"Something bad must have happened with him," Ron said as he shifted in his sleeping bag: "He looked down right sick on that drawing. And anything slowing Snape down in any way , HAS to be serious!"

"Do you know anything about why he decided to leap through time?" Harry asked Hermoine. She nodded firmly and retold what Albus had told her last night:

"He went back to collect an artifact we need in the fight against Voltimore. Supposedly it is a stone resembling the philosopher's stone. If Voltimore gets his hands on it he will be more or less immortal and he will be able to take human form again. The artifact got lost somewhere in time and a witch, more precisely the mother of the Sheriff of Nottingham was the last known owner of it. Snape was sent back to collect it and it was to be used in a final battle against Voltimore, wiping him off the face of the earth for good. But something went terribly wrong already as he stepped through the void. Albus suspects the past Voltimore was aware of Snape's daring plan

and destroyed his chance for ever getting home again. Voltimore was seeking this stone already back then, and Albus believes he was the one behind the deal Severus and the witch made."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked as Ron handed him a lemon roll.

"The witch was the one who contacted Snape. She told him she knew he was in need of the stone and that she had an offer for him. In exchange of some favors she would give it to him freely. There follows a curse with this stone, you see- it can't be stolen from its owner it has to be given to you. And Snape agreed to her terms, unaware the witch already had made a pact with Voltimore."

"But why did Dumbledore lie when he told us he knew nothing of the man on the drawing? Why did he pretend he didn't know?" Ron suddenly intervened: "Why didn't he tell us immediately?"

"He wanted us to find out for ourselves," Hermione answered calmly: "He wanted us to find the evidence we needed instead of trusting blindly what told us. Just look at all the different angles Mr. Wellington is approaching the mystery from! Dumbledore wanted us to find all the pieces of the puzzle ourselves and not to take anything for granted. If we gathered the facts ourselves the chance for a precise outcome would be bigger. And that's what we'll continue to do. That's the only way we can help Snape now. If we find some clue on what it is keeping him from leaving, maybe, just maybe we could help him in the present." And so it was. Harry, Hermione and Ron were to continue their search for clues in hope something would turn up.

Days went by and the trio soon settled in with the notorious six- pack of muggle archaeologists. They were searching the castle for clues and hints, anything that could tell them a little bit more about what was happening with Snape in the past. They found no more hidden letters, but there was a carving in Latin on the desk, far down in one of the corner- almost invisible for the naked eye. The tooth of time had chewed on the old wood, but Hermione could read it easily enough with an enlargement spell. "Protect the innocent". There was no doubt in her mind this was something Snape had engraved into the wood, but she didn't understand its meaning. Albus did though, when she told him of the engraftment, but he didn't tell her. Ron also found some carvings in the stone above what once had been a bed. Six thin, scraped lines, indicating some time interval. Hermione guessed months or years. Thankfully they were under minimal distractions from Mr. Wellington. They could do more or less as they pleased, as long as they kept them selves busy with the archaeology- bit of course. The archaeologists were starting to wrap things up now, they would move their work out into the forest in a couple of weeks. That would mean Harry, Ron and Hermione would have to spend their days mainly outdoors. Dumbledore approved to this as long as they didn't use ANY kind of magic as they were outdoors, just to be on the safe side. As long as all of them were well back inside the castle's stonewalls before the sun set they would be fairly safe.

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Back at his new headquarter in one of the small muggle villages Albus had his eyes on the development in the Sherwood forest from minute to minute. He was ready to apparate in on a seconds notice and his nerves were starting to get used to the constant strain by now. But he couldn't battle Voltimore, yet. He had of course notified Black, Lupin, Figg and Fletcher the only wizards and witch besides Severus he trusted with his life. They all stayed in high alert now, ready to go into battle on a few minutes notice. But Albus had to find the hiding place of Voltimore and destroy it before there was any chance of destroying the demon itself. Sirius Black and Arabella Figg was scanning the forest by daytime, but they'd come up with nothing so far. The demon was well hidden, resting and feeding, growing for the near coming battle.

He'd been near distraught by the hidden letter Hermione had found. His worst suspicions were starting to come true, and there was nothing he could do about it. Albus couldn't bring himself to tell Hermione the whole heart-shattering truth about Severus' departure. It was his burden and his

shame to bear alone. Even Severus hadn't known when he left, a decision Albus now slowly was starting to regret. Severus was innocent in all of this, he was sent back to protect the past and to make sure a certain young wizard would be born in the future. A heavy burden for a tormented unknowing soul, how had he reacted the day he found out? Was there any love left in his battered heart for an aging, cowardly old wizard that once had taken him in as his child?

He had told Hermione that Severus was tricked by Voltmore and the witch.. Severus himself was the trading chip. And she had believed him and not asked for more, although he could feel her thoughts lingering by the reason why Severus would be kidnapped through time by the demon and his companion. Albus held himself responsible for the outrage that would be performed on his loyal spy. In his heart he knew that if the facts had been set in front of him, he would still have sent Severus into this version of hell on earth.

Yes, Albus Dumbledore knew it, and despised himself for it.

The truth, it had to be the truth, wasn't a pretty truth. Albus like many fighting on the side of light wasn't perfect. At 153 years of age, he'd matured and learned, he wasn't born an experienced war mage or strategist. They made mistakes all of them, and tried to learn and make amends where they could. But even on the side of right, you use other methods, one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. With no time for niceties and needs to be met, the fighters of good and evil often used the same methods to obtain their goals. No, Albus Dumbledore was no innocent, Severus Snape came to him when he was 20 years old. An ex-student and a death-eater, a repentant one at that who spent the next 17 years of his life atoning for the terrible mistake he made. Albus had used him ruthlessly as a spy for the cause. Sure, he wasn't the one deciding for Severus to go back as a spy, but he hadn't denied him to do so when he found out either, that made him just as guilty as if he'd been the one to order him. He didn't expect Snape's life span to be more than a few weeks but the young man continually surprised him.

He was a problem student.. right from the start. A family tragedy left Severus an orphan. He should have been at St. Mungo's where he should have been nursed back to health but instead he ended up fostered by a well-meaning family and then the letter arrived from Hogwarts. They had all been tricked, he was ill then and too young. They assumed he was 11 years old and small for his age.. they were wrong. There were incidents over the years, but the teachers of Hogwarts played them down, they never realized how badly they handled it all, playing Severus Snape right into Voldemorts open hands, he wasn't the only student either, nearly an entire year of Slytherine's and Ravenclaw's were lost to him in one go.

Almost all of the children Snape went to school with became death eaters, fewer were still alive and free. Somehow Severus broke away from Voldemort and came back to Hogwarts. He probably hadn't elsewhere to go. He offered Albus his services to catch and kill Voldemort, he was offered sanctuary in Hogwarts and a home. Albus did not push for him to return to his dark lord as a spy, but he didn't deny him either. The battered young man who didn't seem to fit in anywhere, who'd never experienced how it is to grow up in a loving and caring family once more became a flickering shadow in the halls of Hogwarts. And at nights he did the dark lord's bidding, risking his very soul to deserve the parental love he craved from the man that now had given him a home, al though not his heart.

The day Hagrid found him, beaten and tortured in the outskirts of the forbidden forest Albus' heart finally woke with parental fury. He swore an oath to himself that he would protect this boy, man in body but still so innocent and pure in heart. He'd suffered an unforgivable curse and had been left in the forest, it was a freezing November and he nearly died out there, as alone as he'd been the night his mother died. Albus became the missing constant in his life, the one soul he was dependant upon to some extent for his self-worth and sense of identity. But when had the parent given in to the pressure from the war-strategist? When did Albus start seeing his son as just a pawn on the chess board? Slowly Albus was becoming the person he'd fought against.. In his own, fatherly and lovingly way he had treated Severus as less than nothing, cannon fodder.. And

he vowed to never do this to another sentient being for as long as he lived. Somehow Severus had heard his oath, or part of it, and even now after all this years, he did these things for the only man he considered to be his father. He still needed his father's approval so he would be wanted. Albus blessed him and cursed him in turns, Severus did what his father asked him to do, wither he wanted it or not.

Albus had never turned the ministry down, even knowing how afraid his child would be. Back at Hogwarts Severus became Potions Master and watched over the Slytherines and to some extent the Ravenclaws, making certain history wouldn't repeat itself, making sure he would be the last one to be thrown to the wolves...

Albus' mind threatened to cave in on him as he lay in his bed thinking it all over again and again.

< I have never deserved such faith or devotion.. I am just a simple aged wizard, who wanted to be a learned scholar and I became the Headmaster of Hogwarts. I never intended any of this.. I simply could not stop it..> All Albus had ever done was to learn to deal with life and what is thrown in your way. He wanted a son for so many years but it never happened. Then he was given a second chance and it took him many years to realize what he'd been given, by Voldemort of all people, a son.

No comfort came to the weeping old wizard in the creaky motel-bed this night..

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Chapter 11 by Restina Lovebug

Friends comes in the oddest shapes

The handiwork of her own son disgusted the old witch. How could he be in possession of so much violence? Sure, she loved her son above everything in the world and she was sure everything he did was for a reason. But why this? Why had he maimed this man when he knew the sacred treasure he carried? How could he risk his own future like that? And how could he hurt someone that looked so much like him?

She spent a lot of time nursing the broken man in the bed. Half the time he didn't even notice she was there. He had the kind of deserted look she once had seen on a dying old man. She changed his bandages, gave him freshly made elixirs for the pain, fed him and helped him urinate when he needed that seldom service. She had to keep him alive, for the baby's sake. She checked every day for signs of life from the little one and got them, to her great relief. Her son seemed to have lost all interest for the wizard. He never asked how he was doing, he never went to see for him self and when she tried to talk to him about it he turned his back to her and walked away. But if he didn't know what was best for him at least she did. This baby was going to be born, no matter the cost.

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Two weeks later Severus took his first, stumbling steps out of bed. His wounds were healing well, the witch was a talented nurse. But she could do nothing to the pain in his mind. He couldn't shut out the dreadful loneliness. And the little boy inside him wanted him to end it all. He'd been through so much already, he wouldn't survive another attack like this.. But he couldn't. He had a task, he was the protector of an unborn life. It was still alive, he could feel it moving almost all the time now and he'd grown considerably round the waist considering he'd been in bed for fourteen days and ate less than before. The jacket didn't fit him anymore and even the loose shirt was starting to stick to his body. Thankfully he could still fit in his pants, they had a low waist and would probably fit him through the whole pregnancy, and he'd brought one of his dressing gowns from Hogwarts just in case he would stumble into something where formal clothing were needed. Now it became his one and only maternity robe.

Every hour, every living minute he feared the beast that had done this to him would come

charging through the door and do it all over again. The only reason he kept moving was to heal faster and to get some strength back into his body. Although he'd nearly been broken, the Sheriff hadn't managed to kill the old stubbornness that made him the wizard he was. The little boy had to wait, now he had to get out of here, somehow. He had to wait for an opportunity, and he had to keep a low profile. Thank god the witch didn't see him fit to teach for the time being. If he was lucky the Sheriff would forget all about him. Somehow he doubted it, though.

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Patience is a virtue and the potions master knew all about it. He waited, he kept out of arms way and prepared. The Sheriff had paid him a couple of visits and it seemed equally painful for both men. The Sheriff looked shameful and he tried with his gentlest of voices to smooth things out between them. Severus kept his distance to the man as much as he could and as much as he dared. He never hesitated answering questions anymore and thankfully the Sheriff never mentioned the.. incident. The finest, most delicious food were brought to his quarters and he even got the offer to have a walk in the cherry garden every day in the morning, followed by a guard of course. Severus accepted all offers and tried to act and look grateful to the man he wished dead.

>The only thing keeping me sane right now is the lust to be the one watching you draw your last breath!> And as the wounds on his body slowly mended Severus felt the need to escape this place more and more.

>He'll wait until I think I'm safe, and then he'll do it all over again just to prove to me who's my master.> But no one was the master of Severus Snape and he intended to keep it that way. And while he waited his body grew with him. Severus savoured no feelings for the stranger occupying his body other than the need to protect it from harm. He'd never considered having kids of his own, they were loud and irritating and besides, no woman found anything remotely attractive in him or his appearance. To picture himself as a father was absolutely ludicrous. He had nothing to offer a child! He had no clue what so ever on how to raise them, feed them, and care for them.. Even his father the werewolf would be considered a better parent. But he had no choice in the matter of carrying the baby to term, and what would happen then he didn't know. He had no knowledge of pregnancy curses powerful enough to impregnate a man, and if this particular curse came with a solution for the actual birth- he didn't know. But he couldn't worry about that now, that was waaay ahead in time. Now his main job was to stay alive, and when the opportunity arose, escape.

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He couldn't believe he'd spent over six months in this stinking hellhole. And better yet, survived. To the captured wizard's great relief the Sheriff seemed to have little time to spare for the time being, caused by Robin Hood's many raids the last weeks. This meant he was seldom home, and when he returned he didn't have the energy to beat up defenceless servants or wizards, he just went straight to bed with the nearest whore who did the job of shagging him willingly. This way he saved all the energy he'd normally use in slapping someone around to next day's hunt for the Sherwood fox. And that left many anxious souls breathing a little lighter, as their days became a little safer.

The past month his stomach was starting to resemble an out of control bun dough, and to think he had three more months to go... By the end of this he would be big as a house, and this was a problem he had to consider in his plan.

>It's already uncomfortable walking, how will it be if I need to run?>

He was already starting to get slowed down by his growing abdomen and if he waited another month before he tried to escape it would be too late. Therefore he awoke to every new day with

his senses in high gear, just in case this was the day he would get his chance.

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The opportunity presented itself at the breakfast table one day the Sheriff in one of his better moods decided Severus was to join him and his mother. He had started to send Severus those.. looks again and the wizard found it most unnerving. And he was uncomfortable with the bulk on his belly that made him look like the Sheriff's fat brother.

He was halfway through his meal, the nausea finally seemed to have stopped hunting him in the mornings now, when a messenger came storming into the room like his ass was on fire.

"Sire, I bring news from Sir Robin of Loxley! He wants a meeting!" The Sheriff spat out his breakfast and jumped to his feet with a murderous expression in his face. Severus who was the lucky man who ended up with the Sheriff's half chewed food in his face was silently wondering if it was considered impolite to wipe his face.

"The nerve of that bastard!" the Sheriff hissed and dried his mouth with the tablecloth: "Where and when!"

"Right now, by the old tavern!" the messenger replied fearfully.

"Mother, escort Snape back to his quarters when you're finished, and YOU," he said, addressing the only servant present: "Saddle up my horse!" And then he ran out the hall with the messenger boy hot on his heels.

The witch was the next one to get to her feet. She had a hasty look at Severus before she seemed to make up her mind.

"Go up to your quarters when you're finished, you hear?! I need to do something!" And so she disappeared like a fluttering old bat up the stairway leading up to the east wing. Severus knew she was fond of guessing the future through her crystal orb, and he guessed she was anxious to know if her son would succeed in catching Loxley this time. That left only Severus in the dining hall, and a golden opportunity.

Thanks to the Sheriff he knew exactly where to go to get to the stable. Like a shadow he crept through the halls, his senses in high alert. Luckily most of the guards were called out to catch Robin and the servants were busy cleaning the many bedrooms of the castle at this time of the day, so Severus had the halls for himself. By the entrance to the stable Severus waited for a minute and listened. Leading to the stables there was a little room where some of the Sheriff's finest saddles were stored, it was a dark room where Severus easily could hide in the dark. But first he had to make sure there was no one in there. He heard voices at the end of the hall and now he would have to be quick. The ones the voices belonged to might come wandering down the hallway and find him here any minute.

He listened for a while until he decided it had to be safe and was just about to open the door and sneak in when a side door suddenly opened on his left. He had waited too long and now he was caught, even before he'd tried to make a run for it! Out the door a small figure came with haste in its steps and Severus recognised her immediately. Her bruises seemed to have healed well, the potions master wasn't the only one who'd escaped the Sheriff's needy hands lately.

She stopped the second she saw him, fear screaming from her every pore. And why shouldn't she? She looked straight into a face that had never shown her any mercy or kindness. The voices seemed closer now. The girl's duty was to report him to the guards. If she didn't and later was discovered not doing so she would be beaten to death, it was that simple. And now she was standing there with a petrified expression on her face, her breaths shallow and scared. She

reflected every trace in Severus' face down to the begging eyes. Severus just waited for her to scream so it would be over with quickly. How could she not report the man wearing this hated face? She had every right to scream up, to destroy his chance of freedom for the pity sake she might save her own life doing so. And he wouldn't blame her for doing so. In an intense moment they just stared at each other, and then she lifted her tiny hand and brushed some of Severus' fingers. Big blue eyes wished him good luck without words, then she turned and walked away from him. Severus' heart ached for her.

He managed to slide through the door just in time before the guards rounded the corner and stumbled right on top of him. He hid in a dark corner in the small, leather-smelling room like a vampire waiting to strike. Patience embossed his every feature. He had waited for a chance for so long and now finally it was here. He didn't dare to stay here any longer, the Sheriff was too dangerous, and strolling along the very edge of sanity he could snap any second. He would regret murdering him, of that Severus was certain, but that wouldn't be much of a comfort to Severus who would be dead. And his mood swings were getting more and more long lasting, and Severus had sworn that he would rather take his own life than to end up in the Sheriff's bedchamber again. He could hear voices from the other side of the wall, it sounded like men saddling up their horses and leaving in great haste. Five minutes later he heard no more sound from people in the stable and carefully he opened the door to see. The stables were deserted, except from a very few horses that were left behind. The main gate leading out into the courtyard had been left open by the hasty retreat of guards and the Sheriff himself.

With swift, determined steps his feet carried him to the very paddock he'd visited once before. Shadow was left behind and Severus knew why, the Sheriff hadn't managed to break him in yet. One might wonder what exactly made the wizard choose this precise horse. He had no riding skills what so ever, he hadn't touched a horse since he was a small boy and back then they petrified him. Now he slowly opened the paddock where the fiercest beast he'd ever encountered without a wand was locked up and had no idea why.

>He's like me, somehow.>

The black stallion backed away as it saw who was coming, and Severus could tell why. It believed the man that was trying to tame him had returned and that he now was going to teach him another lesson. A nervous, spiteful neigh broke the silence, hot air was steaming out of the horse's nostrils and he stamped his hoofs against the sawdust- coated floor. It was telling Severus.. no the Sheriff to stay away from him. The wizard took one step into the paddock. Spite the danger of the horse kicking him with one of his front hoofs he stood still. Not saying anything, just staring at the stallion with the long, curling mane, giving him the chance to discover that the face was the only thing he and the Sheriff had in common.

Intelligent black eyes gazed on him, and the horse slowly settled down. Still suspicious, but calmer. He searched the man standing in front of him, felt the power running through the man like an untamed river. This wasn't the monster that came at him with sticks that denied him his natural urge to move and to run, unless he would accept to carry the man on his back. This was another man. He looked the same, but he smelled different and he could see he was kept in captivity much like him self. And he carried a great burden, the stallion could feel it. This man was just. He was a worthy master.

And in that moment the champion stallion given the name Shadow and the potions master by the name Severus Snape tied a very special bond. Mutual respect were exchanged between the two. Together they had a chance for freedom, and they both knew it. Shadow, the horse that had not allowed anyone on his back in his entire life had found his master and showed him so by brushing his muzzle against his stomach. Severus simply nodded to the horse and started to release him from the ropes tying him. He had let the horse come to him, he had shown him he wasn't like his evil mirror image, and now they both had signed a soundless pact to get out of here together.

Severus had no time to saddle the horse and bridle him, nor did he know how to. And how to even get up on the horse's back was a problem he hadn't foreseen. He was in no shape to jump, and even if he would have been his stomach would have weighed him down.

"It seems I didn't think of that little detail my new friend," he sighed as he loosened the last rope. As it understood perfectly the horse went out of the paddock and stopped besides a small stool placed by the side of the wall. Severus followed him with a surprised look on his face.

>This stallion isn't only fair, he's wise as well!> Even with the stool to help it wasn't an easy task to climb Shadow's back. But the horse had the patience of an angel and stood perfectly still as Severus clumsily entered his back. The wizard even had time to cling to the horse's mane before it started walking towards the exit.

"Through the village and to the forest," Severus whispered. Shadow neighed curtly as to tell him he understood. The streets were probably swarming with the Sheriff's men, and they would have no problem recognising both Severus and the stallion. Their best chance would be to make a run for it. Severus didn't even need to tell the horse this or instruct him in any way. And of that he was truly grateful, for he had more than enough to hang on.

The sound of galloping hoofs on the stone. A mass of black thundering down the village street, fleeing for the forest. On the streets people stopped in their chores, their conversations and daily business, as the black cloud stormed by. No one caught the face of the stranger with the billowing cloak, but there was no doubt in their hearts this man was on the run.

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At the tavern by the end of the village a mighty pissed Sheriff was starting to understand that Robin Loxley was a no show. How could he have been so blind?? It was so obvious when you first looked at it. By ordering all his men to come with him to the meeting place the Sheriff had opened every door for Robin Hood and his plunderers. Right now he was probably back at the castle or something equally yielding, robbing him blind. He was about to order his men to break up when the sound of galloping hoofs reached his ears and interest. And into his view a very familiar horse came storming down towards him on its back a very familiar looking shape... Fury beyond anything he'd felt in his entire life exploded in his body and mind as he recognised the two figures. A madness threatening to suffocate any reasonable thinking made him roar in anger as he started the hunt.

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Severus had never ridden a horse in his life, and the experience was anything but pleasant. He had nothing to hold on to except for Shadow's mane, and his curving stomach didn't apply to the shaking sensation at all. The horse tried its best to run smoothly for his new master, but it sensed the man wouldn't be able to hold on for much longer. The wizard could see the forest now. In there he could hide if he were lucky, die more probably. Just a few hundred meters and they would be on the open field. A furious cry made him cold with dread, and then he saw him, at a white horse by a bridge and a small brick house, probably the tavern.

"Run, Shadow.. run!" Severus gasped into the stallion's ears. The horse quickened its pace making it even harder for the man on its back to hold on. It made a sharp left and ran into a small alley. A hundred paces and he would pass the gate and run into the snow-covered fields where he could outrun any horse, with his back free, that was.. The Sheriff's angry cries made the wizard's soul freeze with fear as sharp images of what the man would do to him if he was caught flickered before his eyes. He was about five hundred horse paces behind now, and closing.

"Faster, faster!" he urged the glistening black stallion, which obliged in a heartbeat. Faster, faster.. the trees in the horizon were growing slow, too slow.. They would never make it. Still they both went on. None of them wanted to give in to despair, to give up hope. After all, a small fragment of hope was the only thing both of them had left in their beating hearts. Some creatures don't do well in captivity, and in years to come people would remember the sight of the two-showing them how they wouldn't stop fighting even when all hope seemed lost. And behind them a screaming man and his footmen were closing in by every second, the man in the lead with murder in his eyes.

Life is not fair to some. And now the wizard was out of luck. It was a miracle he'd lasted as far as he'd come with the bulging stomach protesting every unwelcome move, and his body suffering from a weakness now making his heart starting to protest to the strain it was put upon. He closed his eyes as the chase continued, let Shadow lead the way and concentrated on one thing only, to hang on. A sharp pain in his lower abdomen made his hand instinctively race to the aching spot to ease the pain. The horse sensed his pain and slowed down, afraid the one he carried might fall off if it continued in this pace. Behind them their chasers yelled with renewed energy, getting closer and closer.

"No.. don't slow...down, don't let them catch... me..." Severus moaned, still grasping the aching part of his body. He was starting to get sick and he was afraid he would vomit all over the delicate black back of which he was seated. Shadow hesitated. He was torn between the urge to run, flee for his life and the urge to protect and serve his newfound master. And now his master asked him to run faster even if that meant he would hurt more. And then he understood. The man on his back would rather die trying to escape than die in the hands of the Sheriff, the dark man. He obeyed his master's wish with a heavy heart as he felt the grasp of Severus' remaining hand around his mane getting weaker.

A cramp roared through his body with such heat Severus lost control over the last fingers entangled in the silk black mass of thick mane. He had the oddest sensation of flying before he crashed down to the ground, only cushioned by ten centimetres of snow. His left hip was the unfortunate to suffer the hardest blow as he landed on his side and got the wind knocked out of him. No! This wasn't happening. But he could hear the stallion stop and turn around with a fearful neigh as he understood he'd lost his companion.

>All is lost.. and he's coming back to me! He knows there's no hope and still he comes back for me!> Severus, in his ache and fear of the Sheriff's coming punishment forgot his problems for a moment solely to the heroism by a simple horse. Blinding pain in his hip and lungs that seemed to have forgotten their task in life.

"Run.. Shadow... Run.. now!" he muttered through gritted teeth. He didn't want this magnificent creature sacrificing his life for him.

>Save your self! For pity's sake, leave me while you still can!> The sound of approaching hoofs in snow, ten folds of them. Severus arched his way up on his knees, waving his arms for Shadow to run away before it was too late. The horse slowed down, then stopped. Black, shining eyes gazing into Severus' equally dark eyes. Again an agreement were made between them, the horse turned around and ran, as fast as it could, into the woods. The black clad man found little comfort in the cold snow as his deadly enemy approached him with a face wrenched in anger and pain. Five men thundered by Severus' frozen body, following the horse on the Sheriff's order.

The Sheriff stepped off his white horse in a deadly silence. Behind him another ten men on horseback lined up. Severus looked up as he was approached. He was a poor sight, with clothes and hair bathing in sweat and his face contorted with pain from the bruised hip. Before his inner eye a glimpse of needy hands all over his body made him revolt in disgust and despair. If he'd had a potion to make his heart stop beating and save him... from what was coming... the vial would have embraced his lips in one final and deadly embrace by now. The man standing over

him started to pace around, fury steaming from every pore in his body. Then he suddenly went down on his knees besides his pregnant twin tugging him so close their noses brushed as he screamed the word:

"BETRAYAL!!" Severus closed his eyes as the rain of spit hit his face like acid. The man who now had a firm grip of the wizard's robe started to shake him back and forth:

You betrayed me!" he roared: "My own face, my own body!!!" Severus couldn't help the shiver running through his body.

>Have mercy, kill me now.. Don't haul me back into that... chamber... Kill me now, I beg you.> A sudden flash of the Sheriff standing naked in front of him, erect. The shaking became more brutal, the Sheriff's voice came close to hysteria:

"I trusted you! I gave you everything! And this is how you repay me?! I should kill you!" The pressure... the pressure... the memory of the unforgivable. How he longed to die right now, on this very spot. How he longed for the Sheriff to let his hands caress his throat the way he had caressed his body a couple of weeks ago. How he longed for the Sheriff to squeeze until there was no life left in his twin's black eyes, until he was free again. Then something happened that Severus wouldn't, couldn't have imagined. The Sheriff's angry face shattered into a million pieces and tears started flowing down his face.

"Why did you leave, wasn't I good enough for you? How could you betray me after all that I've done for you?? My dear, the bearer of my unborn..." He leaned backwards, away from the crying man tugging his robe, and did little to hide his repulsion towards the sobbing man in front of him.

"Get. Away. From. Me..." he whispered, too revolted to consider what was wise or not. He just wanted this piece of filth off him. Then a sharp kick in his rib made him once more aware of the life he'd sworn to protect.

>I can't do this.. too much.. no hope...> He wanted to scream, he wanted Albus here so he could tell him how much he hated him right now for leaving him here with this monster and an undoable task. He wanted to bounce to his feet as he once had been able to, and more than anything he wanted to show the pitiful creature with his face who the REAL Severus Snape was. He would make him shiver and bow down in fear, he would make him eat his own filth so he could feel and taste his own stench. And everything he'd ever done against another human being would be done to him, through the power of Severus' wand. Death would be too easy.

But he had a life to protect. And with a trembling voice Severus spoke up:

"Remember what I carry and that it's life is fragile! If you want the seat of the throne of which you lust so badly you can't kill me." The Sheriff rose to his feet as he dried his tears with the back of his hand, mumbling for himself. A gaze strafed Severus before the man turned and mounted his horse, and the wizard knew he would die after the life he carried within his body was born, or sooner- if the Sheriff found an excuse...

"Spare the stomach and the face," the Sheriff ordered his men before he slowly rode away.

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The forest has many eyes. And on this particular day the hunt on the field caught the interest of a pair of sharp ones. Wolf Little, Little John's eldest son was out hunting deer in the forest of which the rotten Sheriff claimed to be his, as well as everything else around the area. The sound of closing hoofs in snow and the yells of many men made him at first believe they were on to him and that he was the one they were hunting. Then, after climbing a tree, well hidden and out of reach, he could see the man and the horse heading for the forest.

All the black was an odd contrast to the white snow, and they were too far away for the boy to make out the face of the person riding the horse. He noticed, though, how the person, a man most likely, had a hand to his side as if he was in pain. He had to be in pain. No man with such poor riding-skills would ride bareback and use only one of his arms to hold tight. He was dressed in clothes made of a fabric and in a style the boy had never seen before. The billowing cloak stood out like a sail behind him making the boy think of old ghost stories his father used to tell around the campfire at night. Some two hundred horse paces from the tree line the man on the horse threw his head back, mouthed a soundless scream and fell to the ground. The boy could see how he struggled around in the snow, the horse which returned for his master and the chasers getting mercilessly closer and closer. There was no time for the stranger to climb the horse and escape, he seemed to be in a fair amount of pain and he didn't even try to get on his feet, he just waved at the horse.

And then the strangest thing happened. It was like time slowed down as the black companions exchanged gazes. Even from where he sat, Wolf could feel the power and magic in that moment. The moment was over as sudden as it had shot down from the sky. The black stallion turned around and ran, leaving the man in the snow, like they just had made some sort of deal. A couple of seconds later the men chasing the stranger had caught up with him, and still he made no effort to run or even move. He looked like he knew the end was coming.

A man on a white horse approached him, there was no doubt in Wolf's mind this was the dreaded Sheriff, while five, six other men followed the horse into the forest. Thankfully the black horse chose another path than the one leading straight by him, not that he thought its followers would notice him if it did, but he preferred to be on the safe side. Back on the field the Sheriff, more commonly known as "the bloated toad" in Wolf's community, now had stepped down from the horse and was pacing around and around, while talking frantically. Sadly Wolf was too far away to catch what he was saying, but still he had no problem sensing that the red-faced man was angry. The man in the snow still did no attempt to stand up, and from what Wolf's trained ears comprehended- kept his mouth shut. The boy in the tree watched as the Sheriff's rage evolved and the inevitable explosion came.

"Betrayal!!!" Wolf had no problem snatching that word, the Sheriff was screaming at the top of his lungs! And after that something more followed.. "my own body, my own blood..." What did that mean? And then the other man finally spoke up, or whispered- the boy could only see the man's lips move, but the effect was more than enough. The Sheriff let go of him, got to his feet and mounted his horse. He seemed to give his men some orders before he rode off, and the man dressed in black was beaten into a pulp, before he was dragged away.

The boy climbed down the tree as easily as a squirrel and snook back into the depths of the woods like a phantom with many unanswered questions in his young mind. Who was the stranger, why had he tried to escape, was he somehow able to talk with horses and why was the Sheriff so mad at him?

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He could have cried of gratefulness to the two guards kicking him upwards the tower and into his old quarters. That would mean no dungeon, yet. The fact that he had been kicked and beaten senseless two- three times before he ended up back here again was erased from the memory thanks to this simple bliss. One severely bruised wizard collapsed down into his bed and welcomed the pitch dark folding out in front of his tired eyes. If tomorrow ever came he wouldn't think about it now, couldn't.

As night slowly crept by Severus slept, or was blissfully unconscious for his poor body and mind to try and patch him back together. But a man does not heal in one single night, and Severus was strolling along at the very edge of what a man can take, no matter his powers. Maybe his

subconscious mind knew that if Severus woke up while the Sheriff sat by his bed, masturbating, he would lose what little will left to keep on fighting. Maybe his subconscious mind knew that the battered man didn't need one more dark night, chained and waiting for the beast to strike- as a silent figure bound his arms and legs to the bedposts, while panting heavily and mumbling about betrayal.

>I'll keep you alive. As long as your heart beats my mother is satisfied. And I... I'll have my reward in a couple of months, I'll be patient, and enjoy you... for now.> Faith works in mysterious ways, and for the poor man sleeping in his bed, right now was far away from the brutal reality that was his life.

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Chapter 12 by Restina Lovebug

Many discoveries

~present~

It was the last day Harry, Hermione and Ron spent in the west tower. Tomorrow they would join Mr. Wellington and his companions out in the forest. They'd searched the room so many times now, they were starting to believe there was nothing left to be found. Ron sighed for the hundred time that day and went to have a look out the window. He was fed up, there was nothing left to be found here he was sure of it. And as Hermione and Harry continued their search for any little clues indicating Snape's faith, Ron rested his elbows on the frame and gazed out over the Sherwood Forest. It wasn't much of a view really, just some fields and then trees as long as the eye could see.. But that wasn't exactly true, was it..

Ron suddenly noticed something in the landscape, an odd detail he'd never discovered before. There was an area of the forest where trees weren't growing at all, the soil on that ground obviously was barren, so that nothing could grow there. But that wasn't what now freaked Ron out. Now as he really looked at it, from this window he could plainly see a pattern in the missing trees.. a snake, a tree and a crucifix...

"Harry! Mione! Get your skinny asses over here!" he screamed excited. He'd found a lead, he was sure of it! Harry beat Hermione to the window and pushed Ron aside to see.

"What am I looking for?" Harry nudged the struggling and hissing witch behind him, blocking her view.

"Don't you see?! Look over there, where there's no trees, don't you see it?" Ron pointed, while Hermione continued her fight to get past Harry. Harry saw it. The pattern burned down in the landscape as a constant reminder of something that had happened there ages ago. A sharp elbow in his side made Harry yelp and finally move aside so that Hermione could have a look.

"Oh my god, why didn't we notice this sooner!" she cried, finding what she looked for instantly.

"Because no one cared to look out the window," Harry answered: "We were looking for clues inside, remember?" All three of them stood still for a moment, just watching the agent proof that Snape once had been in that forest.

"What the HELL happened there?" Ron said, a tone of worried awe in his voice.

"Could that be a battlefield, the place where Snape battled nasty old Voltimore?" Harry asked, as many confusing thoughts of worry for a man he'd never savoured any kind feelings for went through his mind. Hermione shook her head.

"No, I don't think so," she answered: "It looks more like a giant collaboration of powers once tried to push back an enemy there. And that gives us a clue where to look next!" she added with excitement in her voice.

"Where?" Ron and Harry both answered at the same time. Hermione was already heading for the door.

"Come on you guys!" she whined: "The crucifix... Snape had help! The landscape shows a snake, a three and a crucifix. Where can we find crucifixes?!"

"Aaaah, " it suddenly dawned to Harry: "The church down in the village!"

"That's right, now let's get a move on, we only have four more hours before we need to be back here!" Hermione sounded like a drill sergeant.

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The church was abandoned, just as the rest of the town. Although he was one of the last to leave the priest wasn't as sure of his beliefs as he'd thought he'd be and he'd fled right after the attack on the Richards'. The night the two children had entered his church, orphaned and with tell tale signs of an evil no God he'd ever prayed to had warned him about in the Holy Book, he'd lost his faith. He'd left the church unlocked though, in case some poor soul needed refuge in his absence. It was an ancient church believed to be more than thousand years old. That would mean this church was part of the landscape Snape had wandered a thousand years ago, and like back in the castle that made Harry feel he was closer to him somehow. They'd noticed it the second they entered the old stone building, very old magic was still in use here. Trails of spells and wards, placed here ages ago still did their job protecting something that wasn't for muggles to see.

"Can you feel it?" Harry whispered as they went down the communion, passing rows of ancient church benches. Nor Ron or Hermione answered, too awed by the compressing atmosphere.

"How can this be?" Hermione pondered when they reached the altar. A gigantic crucifix hang on the wall above it, sending weird shivers through the young witch.

"Witchcraft was banned and considered the devil's work. How come this place, that should be completely against heresy reeks of magic cast centuries ago?" Harry and Ron didn't know how to answer that question.

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They split up and searched the church. First superficially, then thoroughly. By the end of the day they had found nothing but old cobwebs and dust. Ron who had plummeted through a small attic beside the bell tower looked like he'd dived into a fireplace.

"There's nothing here!" he moaned and bumped down onto an old, creaking bench, taking a deserved break.

"I'm not giving up yet!" Hermione was trying to trace the trails of magic behind the altar and looked like she would go on forever, until faith got tired and decided she could be right after all.

"Come on Hermione, we're half an hour from sundown, we should head back in the castle by now," Harry argued, agreeing with Ron on the matter: "Maybe there was some clues here and they've been washed away through time."

"No, there's something here, I know it!" Hermione screamed in frustration: "It's here right under my nose, I just need to figure out... She screamed. Not a terrified scream, but a victorious one.

"Look!" she yelled, pointing at a gigantic tapestry behind the wooden crucifix. There in the left

corner a woven snake was to be seen.

"See!?" Hermione's pointing finger started to shake: "A snake and a crucifix! That leaves the tree.."

"Found it!" Ron said and rose from the bench. On the altar's front the roots of a tree was carved into the stone, the rest of the tree hidden by a linen tablecloth. Ron stripped the altar from some burned down candlelight's, a closed Bible and the tablecloth. And there it was, the tree.

"Did we ever stop wonder what the tree stands for?" Harry suddenly asked: "I mean, we know that the snake HAS to be Snape, and the crucifix most likely stands for something churchlike.. But what about the tree?"

"I have no idea, but it most likely is the third ingredient in a powerful cauldron of magic powers," Hermione answered as she looked at their discovery with stars in their eyes. She got the special look on her face she used to get when she tried to solve puzzles.

Ron was the one remembering what Harry had reminded them of twenty minutes ago. They'd all restarted the search with renewed energy after their find, and completely forgotten about time. Now they were running out of it.

"Oh, shit! We must head back, the sun is about to set!"

"But we're so close!" Hermione whined as she desperately continued her search.

"Yeah, we're SO close to being hunted down and killed by some demon- freak!" Ron wailed.

"Ron's right, Mione. We'll finish here tomorrow," Harry said and patted her back. Hermione let go of the brick of stone she'd just pried loose from the rest of the floor with a resigned look on her face.

"All right."

The sun was but a burning red glow diving into the hills far away. Harry and his friends decided to make a run for it. Dumbledore had been very persistent on this point, be in by sundown, or he would come to get them. The town looked a lot more scary and haunted in the semidarkness compared to the cosy atmosphere it oozed by day. Shadows crept everywhere and the unnatural silence made it even creepier. They made it in one of the side doors of the castle just in time, and collapsed on the floor after making sure the door was thoroughly locked. Norman Wellington came scrambling with a large tray and almost trampled them down on his way down one of the side halls.

"Come on, my young companions! We're having dinner down in the dungeons today!" he puffed behind some stables of various potato chips bags and a large bowl of dip. The archaeologists wasn't exactly known for their gastronomic abilities, and a bag of chips would be considered to be a feast. The trio exchanged glances, sighed and followed their jolly mentor. Tomorrow they would continue their search in the church, they were close now, so close...

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Hermione was the first to wake, of course. She was so eager to get back to the old church she hadn't been able to sleep much during the night. She had, together with Harry and Ron, decided not to notify Albus about their newest discovery, not until they had found more.

"Wake up, sleepy heads!" She nudged both Harry and Ron in turns until they finally opened their eyes and protesting moans erupted from both of them.

"Pleeeeeaaaaaase, have some mercy!" Ron whined and tried to crawl further down in his sleeping bag. But there was no mercy to be found in Hermiones impatient stares and twenty minutes later they were heading for the church again. It was a chilling winter morning and the three were happy Dumbledore had ordered them to pack enough clothes to break a sweat on the North Pole. The church looked as deserted as it had done the previous day. Hermione more or less ran up the archway to get to the altar where she'd left off last evening. She'd been pondering and thinking most of the night of where she'd start her search and she finally decided somewhere after midnight. The stone altar. Ron and Harry watched her silently as she tucked up the arms of her knitted sweater and raised her wand. She sure was persistent! Flick and swish:

"Effrigo!" Hermione shouted the word at the top of her lungs as she swung her wand with a manic look on her face. Harry and Ron exchanged silent glares as they both thought of what mad witches their friend assembled more. There was a weird cracking sound from the altar, and then suddenly: BANG! The massive stone block was reduced to millions of pieces of tiny pebbles. Ron and Harry yelled and leaped backwards, while Hermione threw a triumphant fist in the air.

"I knew it!" She fell on her knees beside the objects the altar had been hiding successfully for eight hundred years. She picked up what seemed to be a bundle of leather, what the church used as parchment in the old days. It was rolled together and tied with string, she started to open it, carefully, as Harry picked up the second object the altar had contained, a map. There was a heavy sigh and a:

"Oh, no.." Hermione closed her eyes and forgot everything about the leather parchment she was unrolling. That "Oh, no" was a bad "Oh, no.."

"What is it?! Harry tell me!" Ron looked over Harry's shoulder: "Oh.." It looked like they had found what they'd searched for. Hermione put the roll absentmindedly down in her backpack for a later read, now they were to follow the map and see..

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The Sherwood forest was intimidating even by day. And as the old church it also showed signs of old and distant magic. It was a silent trio that arched their way through both natural and magically created obstacles that Monday morning. They knew they weren't allowed to breach the borders of the forest, even by daytime, but this was too important. Wards were trying to keep them out of the area they were entering, and Harry, Ron and Hermione knew why, they knew what the forest was guarding. After a long walk they reached the centre of the map, a small clearing in the forest. The sun was on its highest now. It reeked of wards even from the limited view of the landscape, they could feel it before they could see it. Hermiones wand flew up into the air once more, Dumbledore would know immediately that the three was out of bounds and used magic when not allowed, but if they were right they would have to call on the Headmaster none the less.

"Aperio!" Hermione's voice was but a whisper this time, her heart wished desperately they had been wrong this time. Spells had been cast here on this very spot centuries ago, to hide and protect a tomb. And it magically materialised before their very eyes. The lintel on the doorway held a snake motif, not Celtic or Saxon.. a unique design for such an antiquity. The wards set on this grave were from the Slytherin house. This time it was Hermione that uttered the "Oh, no.."

Dumbledore apparated in one second later, just as they'd expected. Worry for their safeties were etched on his brow, but when he leaped forward and discovered no evident enemies he first halted with a confused look on his face, then his gaze rested on the agent tomb. He took some stumbling steps towards the massive blocks of stone, warding his child caught by the infinite slumber no wizard can save you from.

"NOOO..." he moaned as he fell to his knees. Harry, Hermione and Ron stood silently at the back

as the headmaster dissolved in tears and embraced the cold stone, overcome by grief. Severus Snape was dead.

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Albus hid the grave again with a silent "Abscondo" and turned to face his young students. Hermione threw herself round his neck and started sobbing violently and the headmaster gave in to the pressure once again.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Dumbledore!" Hermione slowly backed out of the embrace as she watched the distraught being in front of her.

"I was hoping we would be wrong about this, but..." Albus silenced her with a mournful gesture.

"It's not your fault child. I'm glad you found out rather than not..." a sad smile swept over his face as he lifted his gaze and recognised tears both in Harry's and Ron's eyes.

"I suppose Severus was more liked than you care to confess, hmm?" Ron nodded silently, but didn't tell the headmaster the little sigh of relief that had brushed through him when he realised Potions Finals would be without Snape this spring. It was a sudden thought, a brief one, forgotten and rejected the very instant he'd come up with it. But he had thought it never the less, and that made him more ashamed than he wished to admit.

Albus followed the silent party back to the border of the forest before he apparated back to Hogwarts as the carrier of sad news. Hermione stood still, watching the spot where he'd disappeared for a long time before she finally turned and slipped her hands into Ron's and Harry's.

"I don't like sad endings," she wept. They went in silence for a while, joined by hands and grieve when Harry silently spoke up.

"I know it looks dark right now, but lets not abandon all hope. Maybe there's still a way..." It was ridiculous. Harry heard the poor comfort the words were meant to provide wouldn't bring ease at none of their souls tonight. They just had to accept it. Severus Snape was beyond rescue. But they still had a task to finish. They would continue their search to try and find out what had happened to Snape and also they would have to protect the archaeologists that now had moved their work out into the forest. For two days they'd been scurrying around like squirrels, apparently without no obvious clues of where to look. Harry, Hermione and Ron were to make sure the reckless muggles got safely inside the castle by night and stayed there. Apparently a battle was drawing closer and Harry wouldn't like to be in Voltimore's shoes now. The one killing one of Dumbleore's dearest had hell to pay! But they decided not to join with the old men right now, they needed some time to work through the stomach wrenching discovery they'd just made. As they plummeted down on each their sleeping bag back at the castle, Hermione remembered the roll of leather parchment she still carried in her backpack, unread. Could it be.. the final clue to Snape's tragic death? She tore the string off and unrolled the old parchment with shivering fingers. Ron and Harry watched her silently, was it a tad of hope to be found in their eyes?

The writing on this old leather was beautiful done, someone had taken great time and patience with writing this. Small boards and various drawings decorated the letters.

"Well, what does it say?" Harry asked, impatience filling his features as he hardly managed to sit still.

"Well, the first fragment of text seems to be a bible verse of something," Hermione said as she worked her way through the agent English writing.

"It goes something like this:" she read the numbers of where the verse was collected from the Bible and continued," Then I saw a beast rise from the ocean. It had ten horns and seven heads and a crown on each head. On each of the seven heads, names that spotted God. The animal of which I saw, resembled a leopard, but its feet were a bears and its mouth was the mouth of a lion. The Dragon gave the beast his power, his throne and great power. One of the beast's heads looked like it had a mortal wound, but the mortal wound healed, and all the world wondered over the animal and they worshipped the animal and said: "Who is the beast, and who can fight against it?" The beast was allowed to conduct war against the holy and win against them, and it gained power over each tribe and every folk, tongue and every nation."

"That's just the kind of cheery reading I need right now!" Ron muttered: "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's a bible verse, it's SUPPOSED to be cryptic!" Hermione spat: "Now, if you please- I'll continue to the last fragment!" Ron gave her a snide look but kept quiet. The next piece of text was written with even older English and Hermione slowly worked her way through it as she spoke.

"There's an old prophecy telling about the dragon and the beast, how they in unison raped the country and its inhabitants.." A sudden thought struck Harry's mind.

"What if the dragon is a symbol for the Sheriff of Nottingham and the beast is a symbol for Voltmore?!" Hermoine ducked up from her reading for a second and agreed with him.

"I think you're right, Harry. Now, can I continue?" she added, a bit agitated. Harry nodded with a silent sigh.

"The dragon was the obvious one, the one of mortal power, but the beast, the immortal was far more dangerous.. and hidden. A selection of priests, monks and nuns were chosen to serve as protectors against the beast. Many times they defeated the beast and trapped it, but every time it escaped, growing more powerful and perilous each time. The time came when the protectors, a dying race, no longer had the strength to imprison the beast, just stall it. Earth was on the brink of destruction, the forest would be painted red with blood, all life would be wiped off the face of the earth."

"Okay, now I'm depressed!" Ron mumbled and earned another one of Hermione's chill looks. A look of recognition appeared on Hermione's face as she slowly continued:

"An angel hears the cry of man and comes to earth to defeat the beast." Now she was the one that interrupted her own reading: "Oh my god, that HAS to be Snape!" Harry silently pictured Snape sinking down from the sky with a pair of enormous wings attached to his shoulders and an expression of great holiness on his pale face. If it wasn't for the grave circumstances he would have giggled.

"Oh my, listen to this!" Hermione said and continued her reading once more:" Hair and eyes, black as the night, skin white as milk and heavy with chi..." She suddenly stopped reading, all colour vanished from her face.

"Heavy with what, Mione? Heavy with grace, sulking, attitude, what?!" Ron whined. He was starting to get impatient now. Harry noticed the weird look on Hermione's face, it wasn't translation difficulties she'd stumbled onto.. Hermione drew a long, shaking breath.

"Heavy.. with child, the angel will be found by them that serves God."

"Heavy with child???" Harry was confused: "What's that supposed to mean, that Snape was..."

"PREGNANT?!?!?!?" Ron finished for him.

"Let me see that, Mione, Obviously you must have interpreted that last sentence wrong," Harry said and reached for the leather parchment. Hermione tucked it to her chest.

"I read it right!" she croaked angrily: "That's just what the parchment said!"

"Then the angel simply isn't Snape," Ron said and raised his shoulders matter of fact. Then he suddenly remembered the charcoal portrait of Snape, where he'd been portrayed with a belly large enough to contain a well-grown piglet, not to say a baby...

"NOOOO," he moaned: "Not Snape?!" To picture Snape pregnant was as to picture his parents having sex, impossible.

"I'm afraid so," Hermione whispered.

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Chapter 13 by Restina Lovebug

The story of the foreigner

Hidden in the forest a secret community thrived within the shelter and protection of Sherwood Forest. The old stories about the cursed and haunted forest had made it a safe haven for outlaws with price tags on their heads. It was perilous times, the Sheriff's hand was strict and ruthless in the absence of King Richard. To steal a mere loaf of bread was enough to be handed a death sentence if you got yourself caught. This secret village in the treetops of Sherwood was the home of many unlucky soul that couldn't return to their home in fear of getting caught, but they didn't complain. There were many people back in the village who were far worse off than them.

Wolf Little was the centre of attention in this night as the little community gathered round the campfire. Over and over again he told his tale about the foreign-dressed stranger on the black stallion and how he'd been hunted down by the Sheriff himself and many of his men. As the darkness came closer and it was time for the smallest of the children to go to bed, Wolf had just finished round four of his story. As most stories this also tended to grow more spectacular by every repeat. Wolf was a skilled boy who knew how to keep his listeners on their toes wanting more, and his father was silently wondering when the lad would start telling how this stranger started to whinny at the horse, telling it, it had to head home and put the kettle on.

"There now, Wolf! We've all heard your tale! Now it's time for you to join your sisters and brothers! Off to bed with you now!"

"But dad!" the boy complained and put on a miserable face: "I haven't got a chance to tell Robin yet!" John Little was a tall man, vigorously built and strong as a bull. But he was a big softie who couldn't stay firm to his own kids if so his life depended on it.

"Oh, all right then," he sighed as the boy lit up in his entire face: "But just one more hour! I don't know where Robin's hiding out tonight, but I bet he'll be home no earlier than the previous nights he's been out lurking in secrecy.

"Come on!" the round bellied munch beside him moaned: "Are you blind my good man? Have you seen the face of that man when he rides in here at night, the smile, the perky walk.. The man's in loose! He looks just like me when I can relax with a keg of delicious mead!" Brother Tuck laughed and patted John on the back with an unsteady hand: "I'm telling you Little John, our good friend and leader has found him self a lady friend!"

And indeed the munch had struck bull's eye this time. For Robin of Loxley had in fact fallen in love, and head over heels in love to be exact. A secret love-connection was blossoming between Robin and the fair Maiden Marion. They had secret meetings in the woods, and tonight was one of these nights when they met in a clearing in the woods, taking a midnight stroll while Marion's

servant girl minded their horses. The two of them were made for each other, a match made in heaven. The stubborn, rebellious Robin and the wise, clearheaded Marion. They had fought as cat and dog in their childhood years, but when Robin returned from the crusades only to find misery, he found solitude in Marion's sparkling green eyes and untameable red hair. Now they met in secrecy as often as they dared, just to spend some treasured minutes together. On their small walks they would talk about what went on in their lives and about rumours that were spreading both in the forest and the village.

Marion was as stunningly beautiful as always this evening. She wore a lavender cotton-woven dress, and the simplicity of it made her beauty even more outstanding. Her hair was braided and she wore a simple wreath of daisies. Her white, slender hand was tucked neatly into Robin's and her head rested easily on his shoulder. Oh yes, Robin was indeed very much in love. He saw nothing but her face these days, and to think he managed to rob tax-carts without screwing up in this joyous mood! In fact he'd pulled his last stunt this very day. To think the Sheriff was stupid enough to be lured into his little set-up! Robin and his men had collected more "taxes" this day than they'd been able to scrape together in a whole year! The money they had collected had already been handed back to their rightful owners by Bull and Will, two of Robin's most trusted companions.

They had been walking for ten minutes in blessed silence, just inhaling each others presence when Marion tilted her head upwards towards Robin.

"Have you heard the latest rumour from the village?" Ah, those green, green eyes- like emeralds. Robin smiled at her gaze and shook his head:

"No, this one must have escaped me, I've been so busy today I haven't had the time to sit down and squabble with any nosy old know-it-all's yet. But, please! Fill me in!" He laughed as he had to duck from a tiny fist aiming at his jaw.

"There, there! Temper, woman!" he ordered with a big boyish grin on his face as they both tumbled down on a moss-covered patch. Marion laughed and her bright smile shone up the whole forest as for Robin concerned and they settled in each other's arms with a tender kiss.

"So, tell me already, my fair maiden!" Robin kissed her nose and brushed her cheek with a brown hand.

"There's rumours about a stranger that tried to escape from the Nottingham Mansion today," Marion told and supported her head on an elbow as she continued:

"Buggwick, the miller told me he'd seen a strange looking man riding down the village-street as if his heels were on fire. He was dressed all in black, and he was riding a black stallion. He rode so fast no one was able to catch his face, but he had to be a foreign of some sort, because he wore strange clothes. Down by the tavern the Sheriff and his men caught eye of him and they drove him towards the forest. An hour later he was supposedly brought back, but they had covered up his face as if someone was afraid somebody would recognise him." Robin never got tired of looking at her face, or to feel the natural compassion this woman felt for all living beings:

"Sweet, sweet Marion, has the Old Buggwick been glancing into the old mead barrel again? I thought you stopped believing in fairytales a long time ago. I have my contacts in the old Nottingham Mansion, if there was anybody there I should know about, I would have." Marion sat up, a small frown on her face as impatience caught the better of her:

"Can you please let me finish before you start telling me what to believe or not?" she said in a rather irritated tone of voice:

"A couple of months ago I went to see George, the Sheriff, because an old and poor munch had

told me how the Sheriff had raised the taxes AGAIN and was threatening to burn down the monastery. I was so outraged I went straight into town to yell at him and he was still eating breakfast in the dining hall when I came."

"Ah, with the foul creature that's supposed to be his mummy?" Robin asked. "Yes, her and.. him." Marion answered with a far away gaze.

"Him, who?" Robin asked as he too sat up, pondering who it could be making his Marion get that look on her face. All right, maybe he was feeling a little prick of jealousy then.

"It's odd, really. You see, he was seated in front of the Sheriff, in stead of besides him. When I entered both men stood up, and then he turned... He was dressed all in black and had shoulder long, black hair. He looked like nobody I've ever seen, but before I could get close enough to see his face George came running to greet me, as if he was afraid I would get a glimpse of his guest. I know it sounds weird, but I felt some sort of connection with the stranger, and I really wanted to meet him somehow. But I was mad, as I told you, at George- and when he started talking to me it was like I forgot the stranger. And when I asked George about him he pretended he didn't hear me. I never saw that man again, but I'm pretty sure the man that was fleeing for the forest today and the man I saw that morning was one and same man." Robin had a puzzled look on his face:

"That's odd," he said and scratched his chin: "I've never heard anything about this man. I wonder..." He said no more for a while and Marion got to her feet, correcting her dress.

"I better start heading back, you know Mary, she'll be worried to death if I stay away to long." Robin followed her example with a sigh.

"I hate every goodbye we have to make, Marion." They folded hands and went slowly back the same way that they had come.

"I know, I hate them too," Marion said and leaned her head on his shoulder once more: "I only wish cousin Richard would be back from the crusades soon. What do you think of the stranger I told you about? I worry about him, you know, even before I heard about his attempted escape today. He's left some sort of mark on me, and I have this feeling he's in great peril.. Do you think there's anything you could do? Find out who he is maybe, why he's in George's captivity? Robin placed an arm round her slender waist:

"I'll see what I can do, Marion." He would definitely look into it. He needed to know who this man that was occupying Marion's mind was..

He rode into the very "Town of the treetops" as Little John had one last, hopeless attempt at chasing his eldest son to bed. As Robin's white horse made it's entrance, with their leader on top, Wolf ran towards him with an eager expression on his face:

"Robin, Robin- I have something to tell you!" he yelled and took the reins Robin offered him. "Not now, Wolf. I have something important to discuss with your father and the rest of the men," Robin said as he stepped down from the horse.

"But.." Wolf started, but knew the battle was lost. He sighed and took Robin's horse to the paddock he and his father had built a few weeks ago, to shelter the horses from the worst winter cold.

A plan was brewing in Robin's mind. He was going to pay this mystery guest a visit, tonight. He needed some of his men to help him, because he was planning a kidnapping, not just a cup of coffee and fond goodbyes. He wanted to know everything about this man, and the fact that he was dining with the Sheriff would have to make him pretty darn important. This was no ordinary prisoner or common man. But what and who was he? Why was he in the Sheriff's captivity? Why

had he tried to escape? What was the Sheriff's interest in him? And even more important, why did Marion feel this strange connection to him?

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Severus awoke with a silent scream as a strong hand clamped around his throat and squeezed it until he was near choking. Every bit of hope of ever getting away from this hell vanished as Severus realised he was more afraid than he'd ever been in his entire life..

He was blinded by the darkness and the lack of oxygen to his brain started to affect him, the wizard was sure his final hour had arrived.

Panic struck his brain as he fought to lift his arms, he was tied down again..

"Be silent, or I will kill you!" The voice didn't belong to the Sheriff. It was far too husky and growling, like the man of whom it belonged talked far down in his throat.

"Promise!" the voice said and squeezed a little harder. Severus tried his best to nod, and the grip eased a tad.

"Bull, cover up his face, but be sure to bribe him first!" a new voice whispered. Severus suddenly realised there were a lot more men in this room than he'd first reckoned, it had to be at least four-five of them, scurrying about. A piece of cloth was jammed into his mouth to keep him from screaming, and a sack that smelled like flour was dragged down over his head. The chains tying him down were loosened and the next Severus knew he was dragged on his feet. What was going on? Who were these men, and where were they taking him? Could it be the Sheriff had worked out some devious plan in order to psyche the broken wizard even more out? Was he waiting down in his secret bedchamber preparing to kill Severus the slowest and most painful way possible? Or worse, was he going to let him live..?

The battered and very tired alchemist had no idea where he was dragged. He had no chance to give away any sound, his mouth was too stuffed, and he probably wouldn't anyway. He had only one mission and that was to stay on his feet. If he fell now, with his hands tied on back, he could hurt the thing growing inside him. Down some stairs, too quick, he had no chance to keep up with the fast pace of his kidnappers or what ever they were. His lungs started to burn and he got far too little oxygen through his nose.

"Get moving, lard ass!" somebody hissed and shoved him forward. Severus tried his best to quicken his pace, but he was starting to get dizzy and his battered body was starting to cave in on him. He made a gurgling sound and fell down to his knees, too tired to stay on his feet.

"Get up!" the same voice growled and a small kick was placed on his lower back to state the stranger's point.

"Don't you see, he's exhausted! It won't help if you kick' im like that," a new voice interfered: "Let me carry' im!" The next Severus knew someone strong was carrying him in his arms like a little baby.

"Yeah, that's nice! Save him the trouble of walking!" the hostile voice hissed on what Severus believed to be his left as the journey continued to the unknown destination.

Sudden cold covering his body told Severus his captors had brought him outside into the thin winter air, that would mean he was being brought away from the castle, but where? Where in this rotten little area would someone be in need of a near death potions master who no longer had the will to fight? Could it be... the Sheriff's hated enemy had learned about his plans about taking over the kingdom in King Richard's absence? If so he was as dead in the rebels' hands as he

was inside his prison cell up in the tower.

He was thrown onto the back of a horse, thankfully on his side. A man, probably the man that had carried him all this way, mounted the horse afterwards and sat the defenceless wizard firmly between his thighs. An arm, hard as concrete was placed over Severus chest in case he would make any sudden moves and try to escape.

"Stop babying him, Little John, get a move on!" And with that the big man with the wizard, more resembling a potato sack, neatly tucked between his thighs told the horse to move with a sharp click with his tongue.

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Chapter 14 by Restina Lovebug

Familiar faces

~present~

Back at a draughty room in a motel in one of the little villages surrounding The Northwest border of Sherwood Forest a twisting figure tried to get some sleep. Albus Dumbledore was a wizard who'd never had any problems with sleeping, but these excruciating last months had drained him, both from the ever-closing battle with Voltmore, and the ever-nagging insecurity about his child. After the recent discovery of Severus' grave Albus never enjoyed the fine arts of sleeping any more. His nights were filled with nightmares and poor slumber, and now as the war drew closer little rest comforted the weary wizard. And it was in this state of restlessness his child's scream reached his mind. Six months without any form of contact, had left Albus convinced he had lost all contact with his child for good. Now he almost hit the ceiling in surprise and despair as one sentence carved its existence into his brain like a knife:

And then.. silence. Nothing but the dreaded nothingness of silence. Albus flew out of bed, not aware of the tears staining his night-gown or the frantic mumbling his mouth was making. Was that it? Was it the death cry of a dying man he'd heard? Had Albus just witnessed Severus' last living second on this earth? The wizard hyperventilated as he started throwing old books and parchments around, frantically searching for an old church book he had somewhere on his desk. For Merlin's sake! There had to be something there he could use! No time for reasonable thinking, no time to analyse, think things through. Just the primal urge to act, as a parent in great distress. Alone. That was what Severus was, alone. Albus swore while his eyes searched page after page of the old church book, tracing, searching, scanning... THERE!! He'd found it!

Albus had no idea whether doing what he now was minutes from doing would have any effect at all. Severus might already be dead, beyond anyone's saving. But he had carried the child to term before he died, of that Albus was certain. If not the world would probably look a whole lot different by now.. That would, hopefully, mean Severus was still alive, still in need of comfort and aid, both things Albus couldn't give him. But he'd found a lead in the church book, a name. Ronja Geasley was the name, one of the many pre-Weasley's during the time of earth. One of Ron Weasley's foremothers actually. According to the books she would be 14- 15 years old the year Severus went back. Merely a child, but Albus' only hope.. With determined steps Albus went back to bed. Breaking yet another rule that he had placed on himself so many years before he broke the wizarding code (or renewed it) yet again, he sent a dream into the past. Back into the muggle dark ages.. to a young orphaned girl.

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~past~

Ronja was one of oh so many girls her alike. She had no family. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father, who saw no use in a puny baby girl, sold her to the Sheriff of Nottingham for a limp goat. And Nottingham Mansion had been her home ever since. Here she took her first

stumbling steps, here she started working already as a three-year-old - a raggedy little girl whose tiny hands served as help everywhere it was needed. And here was where she'd lost her virginity merely eight years old.. She had accepted this sorry excuse for a life, simply because it was the only life she knew. She had learned to cope with the wrath of the lord of the manor, she knew how to act in all his given moods and how to mend her wounds after another encounter. A true survivor, but slowly drowning in her faith.

She shared room with five other maids and servant girls, a stinking hole in the wall served as their bed. And here the dream from the future found her this faithful night, waking the witch-instincts in a girl who'd never dared to stand up against anyone in her entire life. She awoke with a gasp. The dream had seemed so lifelike! And the old man's voice, so powerful, but yet so grieving. A man, a king, from a land far away, from the land where the fairy in the vest-tower came from.

With swift steps Ronja hurried down the halls and up the stairs, heart beating faster for every step. The Sheriff would kill her if he found her wandering around in the middle of night, dressed and with such a daring plan brewing in her head. The plan wasn't hers. The old man, the King that had visited her night's slumber, had planted it there. He had given her instructions, told her to hurry, for the fairy, his child, was in great peril, and she was his only hope for survival. A great responsibility to be placed on such young shoulders, but the young witch accepted it without questions. She knew in her heart this was important. No matter how she hated the face the fairy bore she had seen and learned he was not like the Sheriff. He was kind. He was fair. And now he needed her help.

Too late. They had already taken him away. Was it the sheriff? No. For there was a note on the fairy's bed. She had never learned the art of reading, but she could recognise the seal of Robin Hood any day. He had taken him, to the forest.

Deciding within a heartbeat a stout-hearted little girl headed for the secret pass ways only she and the Sheriff knew about. Light as a hare on the foot she ran all the way to the forest, hoping, begging she wouldn't be too late.

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The man placed between his thighs during the ride back to the Sherwood passed out after a few minutes. Afraid the stranger would choke to death John Little removed the bribe in all secrecy, making sure Will and Bull especially didn't see him while doing so. If the man awoke and started screaming now it wouldn't matter anyway. When crossing the boundaries to this forest the only men you could hope to come for your rescue was precisely the men this man was captured by. Therefore he could scream as loud and heart-shattering as he pleased, nobody would act upon his pleas. He didn't wake up though. And as familiar terms were closing in and John Little could feel the atmosphere surrounding the little forest community, he felt as if he'd been away for a thousand years. He was a gentle man, had a heart as big as the rest of him, and you didn't see this man lift his sword against another human being unless he deserved it. He was as curious as the others who the Nottingham Castle's secret guest could be, it was a mystery that Robin hadn't got wind about him before. They didn't get a glimpse of the man's face as they took him. The room in which he lay was pitch dark and there was no time to investigate any further.

Little John thought as they rode into the camp. Robin led his men to the outskirts of the clearing as he didn't want the entire village waking up and gathering round the camp's new addition as a pack of old women on a cattle-show. Brother Tuck came scrambling like a rat smelling blood though, but that wasn't surprising to say the least..

"Here, Little John. Toss him down so we'll get a look on this mystery- man," Robin said and pointed at a nice spot with some snow on it. Just about then the captivated wizard started coming back to reality with a soft moan.

"How nice! He's been SLEEPIN all the way!" Will Scarlet hissed as Little John instead of tumbling the waking man down on the ground did the "honors" of unveiling the stranger while he still was placed more or less on his lap. There was a simultaneous gasp from the men standing on the ground in front of Little John who was the only one left on horseback.

"What is it??!" he asked as the shocked faces around him looked like they'd seen a ghost. With a firm but still gentle grip, the big man grasped the hair of the half-unconscious man in front of him and turned his head as far as he needed, to see..

"NO!!!" he gasped and pushed the man away from himself with all the strength a criminal deserved. The man fell hard on his back with a thud and big, black alarmingly well known eyes glistened with pain, but they didn't shut. They kept staring at him, staring, staring... Little John climbed down from his horse that sighed silently with relief.

"The Sheriff," he breathed: "we have him! We actually got the Sheriff!" And as the memory of all the inhuman acts this man was responsible for ran through his head Little John raised his sword, ready to get rid of a filth not worthy of walking the earth.

"Let's kill the swine now, kill him while we have the chance!"

He wasn't the only one with this desire. It was burning in the eyes and hearts of all of them standing around the frozen heap down on the ground. But Robin grabbed the arm of Little John just before he would commit the only murder in his life done hastily and in cold blood.

"Wait, Little John, there's some things that doesn't match up with the Sheriff here.." John lowered his arm as some reason crept back into his mind and drowned the bloodlust he'd never before encountered in his entire life.

"What do you mean, "doesn't add up"!??!", Bull said and looked as irritated as his nickname: "Look at that face! Don't come here and tell me Mother Nature would be so cruel as to curse two men with that foul face!" he said and spat at the man down by his feet. By the looks of it his feet wanted to taste the stranger to.

"Bull, you're always talking when you should shut your yapper!" Brother Tuck finally joined the squabble with his hands firmly planted at his side: "If you're so sure that's the Sheriff, would you mind telling me when he added the extra 40 pounds??!" The man stared down at a considerable large belly, only covered by a thin black fabric.

"But how do you explain that.. face!?" Little John still didn't want to let go of the belief this man was the filthy beast he wanted to slay.

"Maybe they're brothers..." Will Scarlet nudged the stranger's fat belly with a toe.

"I actually think you're up to something!" Robin said and didn't notice the frown on Scarlet's face as he said it. He crouched down to look closer at the stranger. He was oddly dressed, and he looked sick. And the way he just lay there, as some dog that'd been beaten so many times it didn't dare to stand up on his feet anymore was creepy to say the least.

"Strip him!" he ordered and pointed at Little John as he backed a few steps away from the Sheriff's mirror image. Little John got a look of absolute disgust on his face:

"Why do *I* have to be the one to.." But he stepped forward nevertheless, as Bull and Will grabbed the now weakly struggling man between their arms so that he wouldn't think of running away when Little John were to strip him of all his earthly clothing. He came as far as to rip of the top buttons of the man's dress looking shirt, when a high pitched wail from some nearby bushes

made him jump away in surprise.

Suddenly the four men and one monk found themselves attacked with kicks and fists by a half-starved girl who came lunging at them through some bushes.

"You're hurtin him, you're hurtin him!!! You have to stop! Sheriff does that, you gotta stop!!!" Little John recognised her as one of the poor creatures under the Sheriff's "care". Now she was throwing herself at Bull and Will, screaming at them to let the man go as she threw her tiny fists around like sharp wasp-pricks. Will was stupid enough to laugh at her and kick the man he was holding on the shin. In response he got a terrorised howl and a kick aiming for his groin. In all the hoopla, the black clad man was dropped to the ground, where he lay like a stone, black eyes staring with terror at the scene unfolding before his eyes. The men watched as the girl curled up besides the alarmingly still and quiet man, crooning and gently petting him as if he was a sweet little baby boy in his mother's embrace.

"He sent me to you, Severi. I won't let them hurt you, I wont!" She patted the man's black hair and turned her gaze upwards, towards the gaping men standing round her. The motherly look on her face turned to burning anger.

"You're no better than Sheriff! You would've killed im, just like that, just because of that face!" She had a look of desperate concern on her face when she had another look at the curled up figure on the ground besides her.

"He's fairy! They took im.. I saw it.. he fell through hole in the ground.. right into the courtyard and the witch gave him that face... so no one knows he's fairy, but he is! Treat him bad they have, just like Ronja.. If the fairy die...all land cursed forever!" Now the girl gave in to some mighty sobs as she looked at the trembling man beneath her with all the pity and heartfelt sorrow a human being is able to possess.

"I know it," she whimpered between sobs: " he told me, the old man when I is asleep. Hide him from the Sheriff, or all will be lost. So I had to ..he told me to hide him.. take him to Loxley and ask for protection ..take me childe and hide him away ... if he dies, so does the land. But he's gone when I came there, you'd already taken im! But it wasn't kindness, no! You wants him dead, just as the Sheriff!! But I won't let you! You'll have to kill me before killing Severi! And then you'll have my blood on your hands as well!" She sent the lot of them a look worthy the absolute lowest scum , before she turned all her attention to the shivering creature in her embrace.

"Don't you worry, Severi! I won't let them hurt you! The King sent me, I gave my promise. I won't let them take you!" The man of whom she now was trying to warm with a small rag that served as her winter- coat glared at her dumbly, as if he believed the girl had fallen from the moon. His eyes were filled with such emotion even hot-tempered Will felt a twinge of pity for the strange looking man. Robin had watched the whole spectacle in silence. Now he sighed and said as he looked at Little John:

"I think there's been enough screaming for one night, I'm pretty sure the girl woke half the city with her howls. We'll place him in a tent for the night, tomorrow we'll decide what to do with him. I'm pretty sure we can raise the ransom, I bet the Sheriff wants his twin- something back soon enough."

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Severus was using the last of his strength to fight against two mere squibs that were holding him firmly as it wasn't an effort at all. The big man, beyond any doubt Little-John, came closer- disgust etching his features. The wizard went limp between the arms of his depressors. The battle was lost before it had even begun. Severus accepted his faith silently and prepared for the last minutes of his life.

It's truly odd how things sometimes can turn in a fragment of time. Just as he gave up salvation came. It wasn't Albus. It wasn't even a fairly skilled wizard. Out of some bushes something most resembling a human scarecrow flew out with a terrible howl. Red hair were flying everywhere and fractions of sentences were spitted around as the tiny raging figure lunged itself upon each of the wizard's captors in turn, while the flow of words continued. In all the confusion Severus was dropped to the ground. The man called Bull started laughing as the furious attacker turned its wrath against him. The next the alchemist knew, he was the centre of attention of the creature he first now recognised as the servant girl he once helped. But no angry words were shouted into his ears. Soothing and cooing incessantly, mentioning a King that had sent her. He couldn't catch the words, he was too preoccupied with his own deafening heartbeats.

Why wasn't the girl dragged away from him instantly, or killed even? She was no match for four strong men, even the monk should manage her rather easily. But she stayed by his side, while cooing at him and spitting harsh remarks to the others.

Through the ground where the wizard lay tiny tremors went down, deep into the soil and spread rapidly until the whole Sherwood Forest was awoken from a centuries old slumber. A silent whisper went from tree to tree as the treetops stretched and became aware.

One time the forest had been a border, and the land still held a great deal of the older earth magic. Blood of the ancient kings.. Loxley had it, so had a few others, but not the magic, not the spark. They felt the call from the agent woods. Like werewolves their blood still sang, but their hearts and minds could not understand and so the call went unheard. But the wood remembered and waited for the return of the other race. The man creatures were kin to them but their bloodline was so diluted and faded with time, they had forgotten who they once were.

So like and yet so unlike the ones here now, one of the others had returned. Young and hurt it was, big with child yet still too small.. too little to carry the child properly, the bones were wrong so there would be much pain as the child grew. The body of a man, carrying the child as a woman, starved on the magic both needed to survive. It was in their blood and entire being.. it thrummed in them and the wood heard them as they heard the heartbeat of the wood. Sanctuary was theirs, the wood would provide for them and protect them, heal them if it could. For it felt the loneliness and the terrible grief the special one held back. He was still too weak to understand, but he would, if the others let him live...

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Severus Snape was dragged to a tent and signalled to crawl inside. A blanket was tossed after him, soon to be followed by the ragged girl who were instantly all over the place, arranging for the most comfortable bed-lay for him. But when she turned back towards him after finding what were in her mind the ideal "spot" the wizard had already fallen asleep right beside the opening of the tent, lying flat on the ground. The latent witch watched with eyes that bore resemblance to both mother's love and great fear.

"Poor, poor Severi!" she whispered before she tucked the blanket around the sleeping man and curled up besides him.

He awoke to the steady gaze of a pair of grey eyes and strands of red hair tickling him on the chin.

Severus blinked in surprise when a shy smile appeared on the young girl's face. A small, yet surprisingly warm hand touched his cheek cautiously. He blinked once more in his condition of total confusion. What was going on here? And not to mention where was he? And why was this starved little girl suddenly forgetting the face that he bore?

"What... where.." was all he managed to stutter as he struggled to sit up. There was a protesting movement from his stomach as space down there decreased.

"You're in the forest, remember?" Her voice was as small as she was, tiny as the voice of a bird's and shy as the moves of a rabbit: "Right where the King told me to lead you!" Eagerness painted the girl's face as she made sure the wizard was as covered with blanket as possible. Then her face changed and she continued talking in her small voice:

"Only... they had already taken you when I came. Robin Hood didn't know Severi's true face. Only I did because of the King."

"What.. King?" Severus slowly asked. He was freezing and starved, and this girl's story was hard to follow.

"The King spoke to me in my dream. He said 'Take Severi to the forest, hide him for he will be safe there. For he is fairy and if he and what he carries dies so will the people!' The king... Could it be.. that Albus had found a way after all? That would mean he was alive, that would mean his father was trying to get him out of this mess!

"He told me that you is his son, the fairy Prince Severi and that I should be your protector." She looked down at the wizard's belly: "And I won't tell them, you trust me! I'll help you keep your secret. You're not safe here if they find out."

"You... know??" Severus swallowed as a foot stapled his insides to state its presence. The girl nodded gravely.

"It's the Sheriff's. If Robin Hood finds out.. he'll... he'll kill you!" she whispered with big, anxious eyes. Severus was tired merely by sitting up for a few minutes. All his muscles seemed do have frozen to ice during his cold night on the ground. He supposed he was lucky he hadn't frozen to death. As he sat there, eyes closed, he suddenly became aware of the life unfolding around the tent in which he was placed. He could hear the happy sounds of children, the squabbling of both women and men, the clumping of steel, the neighing of horses, footsteps that approached and grew distant. Unfolding for the wizard's sensitive ears was the pulsating life of the hidden village in the morning. Not far from the east side of the tent Severus picked up parts of a conversation.

"Have you heard about the stranger? He arrived last night, you know when all the racked began. He's inside that tent over there, where Little John keeps watch. Nasty bugger, apparently the Sheriff's brother or something. Why they haven't killed the geezer already beats me. I guess they're after the ransom, and that the Sheriff will kill everybody in sight if anything happens to him. Still, they should kill the bastard, in fact they should kill anybody as long as he related to that swine!"

"You DO know Robin and the Sheriff are cousins?!" the reply came in a mocking tone. Severus sighed as he opened his eyes again. He was no safer here than he had been in the west-tower under the Sheriff's care. Maybe his death sentence had been postponed for a day or two, but that would be all. As a response to the fairy's distress the redheaded girl curled up protectively beside him while she was whispering over and over again:

"Not to worry, my Severi, I won't let them!" Surprisingly Severus didn't nudge the girl away as she gently stroke his hair to comfort him. He just sat there with eyes closed, breathing rapidly, not aware that for the first time in his life he surrendered into the embrace of a stranger. So starved for some affection his mind and body had grown after the last brutal months that the old Snape fell victim to needs and urges older than man.

He fell asleep like that, embraced by his self-announced protector. For once his slumber was somewhat peaceful, none of his old demons had the heart to haunt him this time.

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Chapter 15 by Restina Lovebug

The twin brother

~past~

On the outside of the tent Little John had had his arms full the last couple of hours as more and more curious spectators wished to have a look on the newcomer that had arrived with such noise last night. The whole village was buzzing with rumours about the stranger, captured by Robin and some of his men last night. Brother Tuck had, of course, shared his version of the story to anyone who bothered to lend an ear. And his tale about the hideous monster with red, glowing eyes was succeeding even Wolf Little's tale about the stranger he'd seen failing to escape the Sheriff. Wolf on the other hand wasn't too impressed by the monk's ghost stories. Of what he'd heard of the man, that will say- what he'd been able to drag out of his father while guarding the prisoner's tent- was that the man they had captured was the exact same man Wolf had seen on the black stallion. The horse, by the way, had been sighted a couple of times by the boundaries of the forest-village, but every time someone tried to approach it ran away fast as lightning. There was no doubt this horse was people-shy, so how come it had come back for the stranger when he fell off its back?

Wolf decided he'd have another go at brother Tuck. His father denied telling him anything more about the prisoner, for Robin had ordered complete silence about him for now. With a keg of mead as a bribe Wolf tiptoed towards Tuck with a sly smile on his face. Tuck was just finishing his breakfast and looked stuffed and contempt- the perfect opportunity.

"What's that you're hiding behind your back, boy? It wouldn't be a present for ol' Tuck, would it?" The blue green eyes sparkled in the round face and his nostrils became vivid. Wolf's smile broadened.

"May be, my dear monk, may be!" He waved the mug in front of the sturdy man's face and Tuck raised his arms like a baby handing out for a bottle of milk.

"I was hoping you could give me some information on the man they collected last night. And by that I mean what actually happened, not your ghost story- version of it." Brother Tuck started laughing so hard his belly jumped up and down.

"What's wrong with adding some colour to a boring story? I'm not the only one enjoying to paint the dull details with some brighter colours!" Wolf sat down besides the much, still smiling:

"Ah, the secret of every good storyteller! I've learned from the best! But I would like to know what really happened, is it true a dwarf attacked you and nearly choked Bull for kicking his master?"

Uhm.. well, I may have stretched the truth a little on that one.." Tuck said as he snatched the keg right out of Wolf's hands.

"The truth is it was a little girl. A year or two older than you I'd imagine. She had followed Robin, your old man, Bull and Will back here from the castle. Apparently she is a servant girl there, or at least that's what your old man claims. She came screaming out of some bushes just as Little-John was about to search the nasty buggler. The little thing was hysterical, she kicked, screamed and hit anything within her grasp. The little rascal even bit me, a man of the church!" Tuck rubbed a sore arm and a shadow resembling loathing slid over the cheery face.

"Next thing she was all over the stranger, that Bull and Will had dropped in all the yahoo, cooing at him while still screaming at us. Then she started blabbering about the man being a fairy from a distant country, that she was sent to protect him and that his life had to be spared. Because IF he died, all the land and the people would perish too!" Brother Tuck started laughing again and small bubbles of mead shot out of his nose.

"Ain't it grand?! The real story is more unbelievable than the painted one!" He turned towards the spot where Wolf was seated to nudge him in the shoulder: "Ay... Wolf?" Wolf was already back by the tent.

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"Please, father!" Wolf was now pleading for the fifth time, desperately realising that the puppy-eye routine for once didn't work.

"No, Wolf! For the last time, I'm not letting you inside that tent!" John Little stood up to his feet to sate his point.

"Now, please- go feed the horses," he said and poked him fatherly on the shoulder. Wolf stared up at his father with disappointment painting his face, but he always did as his father told him, at least when his father was watching.

"What's with the long face, Wolf? Your father giving you a hard time?" Wolf looked up in surprise to see Robin approach them, followed by what seemed to be the exact content of the camp's male inhabitants. And as the men of the camp were approaching the tent where the stranger was kept, the women and children of the forest village soon followed. Wolf stepped aside as he soon understood he would get his glimpse of the mysterious stranger after all.

"Little John, you handle the girl. I bet she will cost us more trouble than the stranger," Robin said as people gathered around the tent in suspense.

"Are you sure this is wise," John Little whispered: "When everybody sees his face we might have a lynch mob ready to attack him."

"That's a chance we'll have to take. We can't hide him forever," Robin answered. Little John sighed and crawled inside the tent where he was met with loud screams as he separated the girl from her master or what ever he was.

"No, no! Let me go, let me go!! I'm not leaving Severi I'm not!" Little John had to drag her outside while she was kicking, biting, and scratching. Outside Will immediately stepped forward and tied her hands to prevent her from doing any more damage to soft skin in arms way.

"There! Try and hit me now, you little..!"

"Will, she's just a child!" Little John dragged the screaming girl away from the giggling man and tied her carefully to a nearby tree to prevent her from escaping. He went back to the tent where Robin was ordering the prisoner to come out and show himself. A dark shadow appeared in the opening and then the face John Little last night had believed to belong to the Sheriff ducked out of the opening. A gasp went through the crowd as the man silently rose to his feet, slowly and seemingly very awkwardly. No sound from his lips, just silent anticipation. By the tree the girl was sobbing loudly, jerking at her bonds, and a wave of recognition went through the people staring at the black clad man who looked like he was about to faint any moment.

"It's the Sheriff, they've caught the Sheriff!" an old man croaked and started jumping ecstatically on his old creaking legs. A roar went through the men, women and children. All had suffered great losses due to the Sheriff's iron glow and to see this face in this place, their safe haven made them combust with anger. As Little John had foreseen a lynch mob immediately took form. It would be enough for somebody to toss a stone at the stranger and everyone would attack him, and leave nothing to tell. Robin went forward and pushed the man down. This way he would seem less intimidating to the crowd, although he looked weaker than a fly already.

"This is NOT the sheriff!" he yelled and raised his arms towards the angry gathering to calm them down as much as possible: "Remain calm, I don't want ANY attempts on this man's life, he's more valuable to us alive than dead!" There was an angry growl from the men standing closest to the stranger. Their fingers were itching to give the creature down on the ground a severe beating at least.

"Then WHO is he!" a woman's voice shouted.

"That's what I'm going to find out now!" Robin answered calmly: "There will be no beating, no torture, just questions. Anyone who has a problem with that has a problem with me." He grabbed some of the man's raven black hair and pulled his face upwards.

"What's your name, stranger!" Black eyes were gazing back at him, if they were filled with fear or anger Robin couldn't tell.

"Let.. the girl go!" It was a command, not a prayer. Robin gaped in surprise at the miserable man who should be worrying about his own life and not bother with ragged little girls.

"I would be careful if I were you!" Robin barked and tugged the stranger's head backwards: "You're in no place to make commands!"

"Let the girl go, she's done nothing to you. She's just a harmless and innocent child!" the man hissed. Now Robin had no problem telling the man was angry. That was confusing him. If this man was the brother of George, the Sheriff, he wouldn't care less about the well-being of a commoner.

"Who. Are. You." Robin breathed firmly. The crowd behind him were getting agitated again. If this man wasn't careful he would cause his own death. The stranger's furious black eyes were beaming back at him, but he remained silent.

"I think we should let the girl loose," Little John mumbled beside Robin: "I don't like tying up children, and apparently he won't talk unless she's released." Robin sighed and gestured to Will who were standing next to the girl to set her free. Ten seconds later she was back at the prisoner's side, murder in her eyes as she snarled at anyone who tried to approach the man she was protecting.

"I knew it!" Bull sighed,: "Now we'll have hell separating them again." But then something remarkably strange happened. The stranger who was still on his knees in the snow stared the hysterical girl firmly into the eye one hand on each her cheek to calm her down.

"This is my fight, child. There's nothing you can do now, you have to let me go." His voice was calm and his face showed no traces of the anger that had just marked his features.

"No, Severi! I is to protect you! They don't know your true face, they'll hurt you!" the girl sobbed. The man pulled her close to an awkward embrace that calmed her down, and whispered something in her ear that seemed to do the trick. The girl named Ronja got to her feet and slowly pulled away from the man on the ground, but she shot Robin a warning glance that told him she still was willing to die protecting the man. He stepped forward once more, but this time he didn't have to do anything to make the stranger lift his gaze. He was staring right at him, and although his breathing was rapid he looked calm.

"What's your name, stranger." This time Robin's question was finally answered.

"Severi," came the reply.

"What's your relationship with the Sheriff?" Robin asked, satisfied the man was starting to

respond.

"None," he answered. A roar of distrust went through the people.

"I'd reconsider that last answer if I were you," Robin replied coldly: "Anyone can see that you must be the Sheriff's brother."

"I'm not." Still the dark eyes were staring back at Robin, still the man looked calm. Robin raised his shoulders and smiled back at him.

"Sure, if that's what you claim I'll believe you. Then would you please tell me why the Sheriff and you look so alike and why you're living at his manor?"

"Then would you tell me, please," the stranger said in a sarcastic tone: "why the Sheriff keeps his dear brother in chains, why he keeps his dear relative a prisoner within stonewalls, and why the Sheriff does THIS to someone who's supposed to be his own blood!" He raised the sleeves on his robe and showed Robin arms covered with scars and bruises. Old ones and new ones.

"And then would you please tell me why I'd try to escape the filthy bastard to join you in the woods, naive enough to believe this would be less of a hell than the one I had back at the "mansion"!" The man spat as he lowered his arms again. Robin was, for once, lost for words. This man looked so much like the one man he hated more than anything on this earth. But what he'd never realised was that this man, Severi, seemed to nurture the exact same amount of hate towards his mirror image as Robin did. And they had found him in the quarters of a common servant, chained to the bed and barely breathing, not the way one would normally treat a close relative, was it? The hate painted in this man's eyes every time he spoke of the Sheriff sent goose bumps down Robin's back. He was still sure they were related in some way, but he was also certain Severi hated George with more passion than Robin himself. And who wouldn't after the treatment he seemed to have been getting! As Robin looked closer he saw a sick and weakened man, the victim of deeds done by an unstable man who most likely was his twin brother. Hate seemed to be the keyword here. If George did this to this man he was hating Severi just as hard as Severi hated him. But why?

"All right, that's enough for now, you can return to your tent until further notice," Robin said and waved his hand towards Severi to have him moving. The man looked at him in silence for a few seconds before he crawled back into the tent followed once more by the girl.

"Listen, the man's going to freeze to death, Robin. He looks sick, and the clothes he's wearing are soaking wet and they don't seem warm at all." Little John watched the strange man in concern as he disappeared behind the tent's canvas. He didn't like the man one notch better than he had when he first got a good look at him, but he knew the value of keeping him alive. Robin on the other hand just raised his shoulders.

"If he's cold I'm sure he'll tell us. I'm not lifting a finger for that sour looking creature. And we only need to keep him barely alive so that we can claim ransom for him. I'm sending Will to arrange with that." And with these words Robin Hood left, not telling anyone the real reason why he was prejudged about the man with the hated face.

Little John sighed and returned to his spot by the tent. People were still gathered around it and some of them were shouting harsh remarks towards the man inside. The danger of a lynching wasn't over by far, but at least no response came from neither the man nor the girl inside.

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During the day the temperature in the little forest village rose to enormous proportions. The man they had captured grew less valuable than a rat as fake rumours about what the man had done

spread through the camp like wildfire. The beast ate new-born children and drank the blood of his lovers. The stories grew more horrid by the minute and the life of the man who called himself Severi was hanging by a thread. John and Wolf Little were helpless witnesses to the bad turn of the situation. Wolf who still remembered the man from yesterday and Little John who'd tried to kill the man himself but had been stopped in the last second. Robin did nothing to curb the angry mob, he just smiled as story after story about a monster far more hideous than the Sheriff took form.

"Wolf, I might be needing your help in this," John Little took his son aside: "We need this man to stay alive and the way things are going right now the man should be lucky if he lives another hour. I need you to help me stand guard, and remember- the man might be a murderer or worse, but he's worth nothing to us dead." Wolf nodded. Pride shone on his young face as he went to the other side of the tent to stand guard there. He didn't believe all the ghost stories that were floating around, he was convinced the man was someone special. He wished he could talk to Severi, find out if he was really a fairy. But he knew his father would stop him long before entering the tent and settled by the side where he noticed the shape of someone leaning against the canvas, the girl by the looks of it. He wondered if he should try talking to her, but found it best not to. He didn't want to do anything to rise his father's temper in this situation.

As light vanished the last reason within people's minds also disappeared. A whisper claiming blood spread from heart to heart as a silent conspiracy was planned against the only man currently holding stand against the mob, John Little. Robin kept in his cabin and didn't interfere. Dead or alive, the ransom for the man would be claimed, and he found no reason protecting the man who didn't bother to plea for his own life and seemed to have some strange hold on his Marion.

"NOW!!!!" a roar went through the village as a hundred men and women stormed towards the tent where the only prisoner was kept. Total chaos erupted as Little John and his eldest son tried to calm the angry mob running towards them. The battle was lost already before it was begun... The stranger was hauled out of the tent by his hair, and the girl was easily quieted by a forceful blow to her head. As she fell lifeless to the ground the till now limp stranger awoke with a howl and he tried his best to throw off his opponents. He was stopped easily enough with a rough beating to calm him down.

"Kill the Sheriff's freak brother!" came an angry cry.

"Let him taste the pain of his victims!" came another. Still the man fought back, desperately trying to get to the unconscious girl on the ground a few meters to his left.

"Stop this insanity!" But Little John's voice drowned in the angry growl. Nothing but a miracle could save the man now..

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He was alive, and for that he was grateful. But what faith awaited him? Severus didn't feel safe at all as he crawled back inside the tent. Still, he found some comfort in the girl who immediately curled up against him as he weakly lay down.

"These are kind folk, Severi, they will take care of you!" she whispered gently into his ear as he fell asleep once more. Little did he know about the process going on outside, and little did he know about the tiny changes taking form in his body. Slowly, slowly the magic in his soul sparked to life, as the agent wood did its best to heal the chosen one. He was hurt badly, it would take time to heal him, but the process had begun.

Severus awoke by nightfall as the cry of angry men and women reached his ears. This was it. The tent was ripped apart and men with murder in their eyes dragged him out by the hair.

Severus didn't fight it. He had accepted his faith a long time ago and knew when all hope was abandoned. Behind him the girl was screaming helplessly until a sickening 'thud' cut her scream off. That awoke his old instincts and fury.

"Let go of me!" he screamed and fought against the hands holding him down. By the corner of his eye he saw the young girl fall to the ground apparently lifeless. If only he had his wand!! He roared towards his laughing depressors, no decent men did this to children. Then the beating began, fists were hailing towards him, knocking the wind out of him. He ended up down on the ground with his clothes half torn off, silently begging for it to stop as a terrible pain spread down his spine. He was dragged up to his feet and a woman approached him, tears running down her face. "Your brother killed my little Emily!" she sobbed and slapped his face with a flat hand before she walked away. Severus would never forget her face and the grieve in her eyes.

"He's not my... brother..." he groaned, and was rewarded with a heavy blow to his tender midsection. He fell to the ground once more, no longer struggling to get away. What was the use, these barbarians had killed the only one who cared for him in this hellhole anyway..

A sudden sound of approaching hoofs made the entire crowd turn around to see, and what they saw made them gasp in surprise. They moved aside just before a black mass of massive muscles would've trampled them down. Ben Johno who was the one having the pleasure of beating the defenceless man in the side just managed to jump away as the furious horse headed straight for him. Shadow had returned for his master. It stopped besides Severus with an intimidating neigh and turned to handle possible attackers, stamping his hoofs in the snow, nostrils flaring.

"Shadow." it was barely a whisper from the man on the ground, but the horse turned instantly towards his master. It nudged him carefully with its muzzle, wanting him to stand up from the freezing ground but Severus was too weak to even move.

"What is going on here?!?" it was the fair voice of the woman Robin trusted his heart to. The wizard saw two of her as she jumped down from her white horse and ran towards the spot where he was laying.

"Robin!!!!" she yelled as she knelt besides the half unconscious man. Warm hands ran over the naked parts of his body.

"You must be freezing! Who's done this to you?"

"Marion.. what are you doing here???" the voice of Robin sounded surprised to say the least as he cautiously approached his love. She bore an expression of absolute disgust in her face, but to Robin's great surprise the disgust was aimed for him and the people of the camp, not towards the filthy creature down on the ground.

"What the hell do you let these people do to this man?!?!? He's sick, and he'll freeze to death in these rags! What kind of mercy is the "great Robin Hood" granting this man, huh?! And what evil deeds has this man done to deserve such treatment?!" Then she discovered the girl. She stood up with an anger more petrifying than any anger fit the Sheriff could come up with and went straight towards Robin and smacked him on the cheek.

"I'd never believe you would steep so low as to start hurting children!" the loath in her voice burned Robin's soul like hot acid.

"Mary! Go back to the mansion and fetch some warm clothes and blankets, and some food too!" Marion yelled to her maid who immediately turned her horse around and galloped away.

"Shame on you, shame on all of you!" she screamed towards the crowd around her that now had

gone remarkably quiet. The black stallion was still standing loyally by his master's side, stamping its hoofs to anybody who tried to approach it. Little John walked forward towards Marion. He lay a heavy hand on her withering shoulder.

"Don't be too hard on him Marion, he's only human. He'll learn of his mistakes." he mumbled as he bent down and picked up the now unconscious man. The horse neighed warningly at him but seemed to understand that his intentions were good. Marion went to see to the girl. Thank god, she was breathing! She seemed to be knocked out, but she wasn't seriously hurt.

Chapter 16

Pain. Severus wished he'd stayed unconscious. He was fed up and tired of waking up like this, with his whole body aching from cuts and bruises, put to his expense by desire or hate. To his great surprise he wasn't freezing anymore, at least that was something. How could that be? After all he wasn't exactly dressed to be outdoors in the middle of February. And the town hillbillies had done a pretty good job ripping his dressing gown apart during the attack. The attack... The girl! He opened his eyes as he remembered the lifeless features of his young protector and felt sick to his bones. They had killed her in cold blood! He was inches away from having a heart attack when a hand brushed his cheek. He hadn't noticed the woman sitting by his bed-lay.

"How are you feeling?" The voice was kind and without traces of hostility. Her face was swimming in front of the wizard's eyes, but his soul immediately connected to the person. His throat was useless and all that hauled its way out of his mouth was unintelligible wheezes. A tender finger closed his lips.

"Don't try to talk, you've been beaten up pretty bad, Sire. I beg your forgiveness for these people. They've endured much hardship from the Sheriff, but that's no excuse for what they've done to you." A rattle went through Severus' chest.

"The... gihrl.." he managed to moan as his throat threatened to collapse: "They.. killed.. an innocent...gihh.." He closed his eyes, denying himself the opportunity to grieve both the death of his only companion and their just begun friendship.

"Dear Sire, she's alive and well!" the voice sang in his ear: "She got a nasty bump to her head, but she will be just fine. She's sleeping right over there." Hands were fidgeting over his blanket, tucking him in, making him comfortable. But Severus heard only five words, over and over again in his tired brain:

A cup of water was offered to him and he soaked it all greedily up in one sip, afraid the cup would be taken from his lips if he stopped drinking for just one second. He felt strangely safe, and almost forgot about the pain in the stranger's care. He was still in the camp, he was still alive and no angry mobs seemed to be in the immediate vicinity. There was just one thing worrying him right now and that was his stomach. It was too quiet. He'd received many powerful blows to his vulnerable belly, no matter how hard he tried to protect it. No tiny twinges, no kicks or careful brushes of a hand, nothing. He still savoured no feelings towards the thing growing inside him, but it was his job to protect it and Severus was now starting to fear he'd failed. As the woman was still sitting nearby him he didn't dare search his stomach for signs of life, he reckoned he had to wait until the stranger got fed up with watching him.

Finally his vision cleared and he was able to look around. Severus let out an audible gasp as he had his first real look on the woman that was nursing him. The long, curling hair, red as a Weasly, the big green eyes... Maiden Marion. She was by his side the moment his gasp escaped his lips.

"Are you in pain?" Her eyes bathed in concern as she held a hand to Severus' forehead to check his temperature. It came to him as a rush of uncontrollable feelings not making any kind of sense. The simple touch of this woman sent shivers down his spine and rooted deep down in his

stomach like a healing charm.

"Marion," he whispered, not even aware his lips were moving. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"From where do you know my name, Sire?" she asked and tilted her head curiously to the side.

"I.. asked the Sheriff.. about you.. the day.."

"we saw each other in the dining hall," Marion completed for him. She bent closer, gazing at his every feature: "It's so peculiar, ever since that day I caught that glimpse of you in the hall I've been wondering who you were, how you looked... Somehow I.. worried about you, feared for your well-being." She smiled awkwardly.

"I must admit, I got a bit of a shock when I first saw your face, but with a second look I saw that you are not like him. You're kind." Severus swallowed, not able to believe the kindness and open-mindedness from this fair creature.

"You don't know that.." he answered her with a raspy voice: "You can't know by one look if I'm good or evil. For all you know.. I could be more evil than the Sheriff..."

"No." Marion shook her head and a smile appeared on her face, revealing a string of white teeth.

"Somehow I felt it. There's no evil in your heart. For example, if you were evil your horse would never have returned for you. An evil man treats his horse with cruelty, and a horse like the black stallion that led me to the camp today has too hot blooded to be tamed by an evil man. He could break the horse's neck, but never tame his will. But a good man is a just master, and he treats his horse with respect and love. The black stallion led me to you because he knew I could help you, and he returned to you because you are a good man. The face don't make the man, his soul does."

"Shadow.. he.. led you here???" Severus gaped.

"That's right!" Marion said and smiled: "I was just getting ready for bed when Mary, my maid, came running inside my bedchamber like a stampeding cow. She told me there was a horse in the courtyard, black as the night, with steam coming out of its nostrils. The poor thing was near hysteria when I decided to go outside to have a look at it, and panicked even more when I decided we both should follow it. It was obvious it wanted to show us something, and it led us straight into the forest and to the forbidden camp of Robin Hood. We reached you just in time, they were going ballistic. Luckily they calmed down when we came; I reckon they were surprised to see me here." Her smile faded as a shadow appeared on her face.

"I don't understand why Robin didn't stop them.." Severus lay his hand on top of hers in a fumbling move:

"Don't blame him for this." Shadow had led Marion to him! During their short time together Severus had earned the trust and loyalty of this magnificent creature.

"Where.. where is Shadow?" he asked, as he filled with concern for his four-legged friend. Marion smiled as she answered:

"Right outside your tent together with Mary, keeping the nosy ones at arms length. He truly is a beautiful horse, I can't imagine how many hours of training you must have had with him."

"Actually we've just met twice," Severus answered sheepishly. He thought about himself as 'the great horse-tamer' but, given the fact he had no clue on horses what so ever he wasn't the man to take credit for Shadow. He had a feeling that was all Shadow's achievement alone.

"Twice???" Marion's eyes became dangerously large. At the same time there was a tiny moan from the corner where the girl was resting, followed by a sharp yell.

"Severi!! Severi, they took the fairy!!!" Marion rushed to her side to calm the now hysterical girl down as she struggled to sit up.

"Hush, my child. Your master needs his rest. You're only upsetting him acting like this."

"Severi.. is alright?" Tears welled up in the girl's eyes as she relaxed a little. But as soon as Marion let go of her Ronja crawled to the side of the fairy she was set to guard.

"No, child you're.." Marion didn't say more. The watery eyes of the battered man who was receiving the most heartfelt hug she'd seen in a lifetime said it all.

"I thought you was dead, I couldn't stop them, they were too many too strong. Ronja tried, but they took you anyway!" She snuggled beside Severus who discovered he was moved, almost to tears.

"So Ronja's the name of my guardian angel?" he whispered and ran weak fingers through filthy red locks. This child had lived through hell; still she didn't give a second thought to her own miserable situation. Severus had always been the one giving with all his heart, not demanding anything back, never had he been the one to receive such a gift, until now..

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The reunion between the girl named Ronja and the man called Severi was so moving Marion had to bite her lip from start crying herself. What was it with this man that made her so... determined to protect him? Why was all of her body and mind screaming at her to protect this man from any danger? Had she been hit by the same spell as this young girl now kneeling beside him? No, she thought not. The girl acted like a guardian. Marion was acting more from a feeling that this man was of great importance. Ever since that day she'd gotten the first glimpse of him it was like the protecting urge of a mother had awoken inside her. Her every nerve told her to protect this man, but they never gave her the answer why. It wasn't love, nor lust, just this weird feeling they were bonded some way. Her heart belonged to Robin, there was no way this stranger would ever replace him, but she had a sneaking suspicion Robin wasn't too sure of that. She remembered only too well how odd and far away he'd become the other night when she had told him about the stranger and the weird feelings she had for him.

"Marion! See me out side, please?" The well familiar voice came from outside the tent.

Marion thought and had one last reassuring look at the odd pair before she crawled outside. Robin had a desperate frown on his forehead and he immediately reached for her hand when he approached her.

"I'm sorry, Marion! I should never have let it go so far!"

"You're right, you shouldn't!" Marion answered briskly, but she didn't remove her hand.

"I think we all went over our heads. You know, the way he looks and all, it was like we had the Sheriff in our hands."

"But he's not the Sheriff!" Marion said: "He's an innocent man who's by the looks of it has been through enough hardship to last him a lifetime. He was covered in scars, Robin! Old ones and new ones. Mary could hardly believe her eyes when she removed his shirt to patch it up. Who knows what he's been through!" Her eyes reflected the sorrow her heart felt.

"Listen, Marion. We don't know anything about him. For all we know he might be the Sheriff's brother, sent here to stake us out. Thankfully he doesn't know where in the forest he is, therefore I'm going to have him exchanged for a ransom in the morning." Marion's cheeks went bright pink within a second as her fury re-emerged. She jerked her palm away from Robin's with a scowl.

"What did you just say?!" she whispered, scorched anger underlining every word.

"I'm sending him back." Robin said, voice no longer as certain and brisk as a second ago.

"Robin of Loxley, if you send that poor defenceless man back.. so help me god I will never speak to you again!!" she growled as her eyes narrowed to small slits and her hands clenched to fists at her sides.

"Marion!" Robin looked like his heart had been torn right out of his chest: "You don't mean that?!" The horizontal line of her lips told him otherwise.

"That man needs care and compassion, not a friendly ride back to a slow death! I'll pay you whatever ransom you demand if you let him stay here and let him be safe from your "well meaning men"!" Robin wasn't the wisest of men, but he knew when he had no options. With a sigh he agreed to her terms.

"All right, Marion, he'll stay. But don't expect me to treat him like a king."

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Back inside the tent Ronja gave the fairy a concerned look.

"You look sad, what's wrong?" Severi's eyes darted downwards for a short moment.

"Nothing." It was a lie. Ronja could tell a lie by a mile away. She tugged aside the blanket to where the fairy's naked belly was hidden. The maid named Mary had undressed Severi while he was sleeping to patch his torn shirt. The gasp of surprise from him told her he wasn't even aware he was laying there without his shirt on. She lay her cheek against the soft skin of the swell of his stomach, carefully waiting for any sign to reveal life from his inside. His right hand brushed helplessly against his own stomach as they both held their breaths in suspense. A sudden twinge from below the fairy's bellybutton made them both sigh in relief.

"He's a strong one," Ronja whispered and tucked Severi back into the blanket the kind woman had brought them. She couldn't read the expression on the fairy's face as he closed his eyes again. Was it relief or despair hiding in his features?

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He had never felt this way before in his life. Robin tried to drown it in a keg of mead, but it stayed with him as his gaze stayed by the canvas of the tent where the stranger was kept. It reminded him remotely of the dark cloud of anger that attacked him when his father found himself a lover after the death of Robin's mother. It never occurred to him that this feeling had a name, jealousy, and that jealousy was the reason he'd never interfered with his men when they had tried to exterminate the reason to all his bad feelings. What could Marion possibly see in that foul face? What could possibly make her choose that man in front of him? Why was she so set on protecting a man she'd never met until today? Robin felt his stomach turn of all the unanswered questions. Now Marion had returned to her mansion, after having him promise over and over again that the stranger would be safe here. He would never do anything to jeopardize what they had, so he would gladly offer her the moon if that would've calmed her anger. At least they parted fairly friendly, and she gave him a quick peck on the cheek not minding the ones around them looking.

Robin was starting to wish he'd never met the man with the Sheriff's face..

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Chapter 16 by Restina Lovebug

Discoveries

~past~

Marion had gently tried to warm Robin's heart to the fairy, but was met only with a blankness in his eyes and a coldness in his attitude. The months of care and protestations of love for him, seemed as nothing. The cold, vengeful anger was returning and the man she loved would soon start to slip away. She'd be damned if she let that happen, she pulled him back from the brink once before ...rotting in that prison.

A living corpse...less than human ...nothing but a mass of diseased rags and hate chained to a wall, an unrecognisable baggage of humanity. Holding down both fear and revulsion...she held her head high and whispered his name over and over again, when all she wanted was to flee that sight and pretend he never existed.

He was here and she would not lose him again.

In her whole life she had never once doubted her love for this man, her Robin of Loxley. Yet some things were even beyond her experience when it came to him, some things were never meant to heal, and some lessons were learnt too bitterly. Robin would always be haunted, she knew that...these last few years they all were to some extent.

The truth when used as some would say 'economically' can change events and Marion in her wisdom did something which many would find unethical to say the least.

< I will not lie to Robin, he knows me too well, besides I love him at times I feel more than he deserves. But I will not see him fall into the abyss>.

And so she did the unthinkable...she began a lie ...a great lie that would help create a legend and heal the man she so desperately loved. His anger and hatred would have to be turned and quickly, the fairy would have to become as dear and precious to him as Marion and more so.

If Severi was hurt by Robin or died in their encampment they would lose everything they had fought for. Robin would be seen as big and cruel a monster as the sheriff, from then onwards the people would lose their faith in him and then it would be only a question of time before he was betrayed for the bounty. That or the people would be slaughtered by a Sheriff blinded with the lust for revenge. Either one was a price too high to pay for the starving people, and not to say, Robin of Loxley.

But the more she thought about it the harder it was for her to find the lie that would keep the stranger safe, both from Robin's and the villager's anger.

Little Ronja, his servant, loved him; worshipped him even. The look of fierce protectiveness that overcame her could easily have been mistaken for madness. But she rarely left his side, this night was different however and Marion bid her visit her private chambers. Robin was out hunting with some of the men so they would be undisturbed there. The girl sent a hesitating glance towards Severi who smiled at her and showed her his approval without even opening his mouth. It was strange this power he seemed to possess, speaking with mere looks. He had opened up to Marion during the last couple of days, or at least he wasn't openly afraid of her. But he wouldn't discuss his past or his relations to the Sheriff. At Marion's questions about his stay at Nottingham Castle, Severi's face became a closed book. Therefore Marion decided she would have a talk with the girl somewhere private.

Marion had heard from Wolf about the kidnapping and the shock of finding out who the 'prisoner' was. Everyone thought at first the little maid was mad, but then the inexplicable happened. That

stallion damn near kicking her front door in and the frantic unspoken race to the encampment shortly after. It was so out of place so unreal, not one but two men sharing the same face yet so with souls so obviously different.

Robin just stood there watching from a distance...alive and dead at the same time. Rage and shame that's what she felt ..as she threw herself from her horse to block further blows to the stricken man. They disgusted her, the mob...preying on the weak and innocent. Her people, their own damn people, how could they, couldn't they see he was sick and defenceless, did they deserve her help and her pity when they became the mindless rabble, the beast.

It was a moment of blinding truth and pain for Marion. Robin would have stood aside and let an innocent man die at the hands of the mob without any remorse.

She had to bind the two together somehow and Ronja was the key. Her shouting and talking of a great king telling her to bring his son to the forest for protection seemed wild and fanciful. But in these dark days, why not ...there were survivors here from all over the country claiming sanctuary not in the churches but in the bowery and the old woods. Many were smuggled into these woods by priests and nuns ...knowing their own parishes would soon be under the scrutiny of the ever land hungry crown.

Strange, the church forbidden by the crown to harbour or give aid, did all this in secrecy at the even greater risk of ex-communication. The less a church or community had the more they seemed to help. In truth the riches and power had corrupted the church as many of the higher positions were bought and occupied by nobles and not the true men and women of faith.

As they entered the tent where Marion sometimes spent together with her lover and more secretly, her husband, Marion kindly asked the girl to sit down and offered her some bread. Ronja accepted the loaf of bread and ate it quickly, the habit of people not knowing when the next meal will appear. When Marion sensed Ronja felt settled in she looked at her with an open and wise gaze:

"I want the truth Ronja, all of it...tell me everything, everything you saw and you heard in Nottingham Castle. If you lie to me I'll know it...you are under my protection here in this forest, but I must know everything ...if our friend Severi is to survive. I need to know why the sheriff wants him back and why you must protect him from the men."

Oh, the eyes of this poor creature as she realised the secret she carried for her master had to be reviled. And crying she told Marion what she could, with her own tiny whisper of a voice. Severi was carrying a child, Marion's and the Sheriff's child, and the witch had prophesied a son. With Marion as the mother she would have no choice but to marry the Sheriff to save both her own and the child's life. Ronja told how Severus had been kind and how the sheriff would beat and touch him. She spoke about the day Marion met Severus at the castle and how Severus was beaten and taken down to 'the room'. She'd been there to clean him up when they brought him back. She'd seen ...what the sheriff had done...the blood and the dirt the bites and the master's mess all over him. Nearly killed him doing that, but the sheriff was happy about something, and kept smiling. That's when they ordered the painter to start the family portrait of Marion, the sheriff, his mother and the baby.

The sheriff seemed to go from sad to mad and back again. He was worse then....losing interest in the women and young girls ...but not Severi...he kept going back and hurting him all the time, and then she was there when the witch examined Severi and told the Sheriff that if he killed Severi the baby growing inside him would die and all their plans to gain the throne would die as well. This child, treated as a shadow her whole life, no one even noticed if she was in the room when secrets was discussed, why would they? She was almost invisible, barely skin and bones, and well aware that secrets should stay in the rooms they first had been uttered.

In a heartbeat Marion's world was turned upside down. She remembered the painting, she remembered the Sheriff telling her it would be a portrait of her, his gift to her on her 25th. birthday. She'd been so happy those days, she had Robin to herself for almost a month and they had never been happier. And now she was to be a mother. Mother! The word struck her mind with such force she was sitting there, completely motionless for a whole minute, her head struggling to cope with the immensity of the word. She was to be a mother and she wasn't even pregnant!

So it was magic. Magic was to blame for all this and magic would have to save them, or at least that would be Marion's plan. She sent the girl back to the tent where she told her to watch over Severus, and not to tell him what they had been talking about as that would only upset him. Back in the tent Marion began to think and thinking brought about recognition or skew on reality and how far the witch had gone to get her son on the throne.

Fairy or not, Severi would be killed if they found out he was carrying the Sheriff's child. But if he were carrying someone else's ..someone the sheriff wanted power over ...that would make the greatest of difference.

If this were to work then she would need help, the little maid certainly and the boy Wolf, maybe later on. Marion could not afford to be wrong on this, she had to bind Robin to Severi, quickly and publicly before the damage became too great and the encampment split into factions.

Now that she knew of Severus' condition it was patently obvious, and it was something he was trying to desperately hide. What a sensation, to suddenly have to face the fact that you are an expectant mother to be to the child of the Sheriff. And as if that wasn't enough, the child was created by dark magic, a forced life only created to help a mad man to secure the crown. And in the middle of this a defenceless, innocent man who'd also been forced, forced to carry the child forth as some sick, twisted incubator. Maybe he was a fairy, why else would he have been chosen to bear such a burden? For a man alone don't have the body to carry forth a child. She would have to act fast, of that she was aware, but first she needed to come to terms with the fact that she in a couple of months time might be a mother..

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Severus Snape was a man known for his ability to bounce back in no time. Years of training when it came to pain and bruises always kept his immune defence in high alert. But now he needed the aid of a wand and potions. And in the middle of nowhere in the year of 1194 AD Severus would have to rely on nature to take its course. He still was too faint to feel the small tremors beneath the ground where he was standing, sitting or laying. But his recovery shot forward although he didn't know it yet. Thankfully no one bothered him in his new living-quarters. The only one visiting him every day, besides the ever faithful Ronja was Marion. She had even woven him a black winter cloak, resembling to great extent the one he kept back at Hogwarts, to help him keep warm, and Severus treasured every moment he spent together with this kind-hearted woman. He knew little, though, of the contents of the conversation Marion had with Ronja the night she'd taken her away for a talk. Ronja didn't tell him what they'd been talking about and Severus saw no reason to ask. After all the girl had proven to be more than trustworthy..

Seven days after his arrival to the hidden forest village, Severus took his first hesitating steps outside. He was feeling as good as one could expect considering he'd been used several times as a punching bag and the fact that he was a man and somehow pregnant.. He was starting to get dangerously depressed, though. Out here there was nothing stopping dark, hideous reflections of the past from hunting him in his sleep. Things he'd kept in the dark, too awful to even consider, so ghastly that his mind shuttered by the mere thought.. Suspicious eyes locked in on him as he took some stumbling steps towards a group of trees nearby. At his heels Ronja was watching his every step as a mother watching her one-year-old son taking his first steps. He was allowed to go outside as long as he was easily spotted and didn't try to run away. No one really reckoned he would try to escape anyway, the way he was looking.

A boy strolled towards him as he leaned against one of the trees of where he'd sought refuge. He was about thirteen years old, maybe younger. Severus didn't try to start a conversation, in fact he preferred if he'd be let alone. But the boy seemed to have other plans.

"Hi, I'm Wolf!" the boy presented himself with a big grin. He was a small boy, not resembling his sturdy father at all. On the top of his head a knitted cap threatened to shoot off due to an abundant crop of blond hair. His face was open and showed traces of someone enjoying pranks. Severus simply nodded and turned his gaze elsewhere, indicating he wasn't interested in a conversation. But the boy was a resistant one and he turned to Ronja who was standing close by Severus.

"Is it really true he is a fairy?" Ronja nodded with a serious look on her face. Really! Severus sighed. She was so persistent with this fairy-story that there was no end to it. He had adopted her name for him, Severi, but there was no way he would pretend to be a fairy sent from a land far away. He simply didn't discuss his whereabouts with anyone. It was enough for them to know he wasn't the Sheriff's brother. Anything else was none of their bloody concern.

"I knew it! The boy's face literally lit up as he said it: "I knew you was special the day I saw you talking to your horse!" All right, now he was curious, the boy had caught his attention. He gave him a questioning look that the boy immediately translated to be an invitation to speak to him again.

"The day before you came here, I saw you being chased by the Sheriff and his men. I saw how you talked to your horse, without even using words. No regular man can do that, therefore you HAVE to be a fairy!" Ah, the simplicity of young inexperienced minds! Severus actually smiled.

"So you think I'm a fairy, do you?" he said, his voice settling smoothly in the cold air. The boy nodded proudly.

"I even bet you can do magic tricks!"

"And if I tell you I can't?" Severus asked mildly, amused.

"Of course you won't show me any, you don't want to blow your cover do you? And besides, its dangerous- doing magic tricks. You could end up being burned at the stake for it."

"Well then, maybe you could show a hiding fairy where you people keeps his horse?" Severus smiled and crossed his arms.

"Sure!" the boy answered: "Dad and I built him his very own paddock! I'm the only one he lets near, it almost bit dad in the arse the other day for getting to close!" the boy laughed and showed them the way. Shadow was a magnificent sight as always where it rummaged around in its closed inhabitant. It neighed cheerfully when the smell of its master reached its nostrils. It was as it was saying 'hello' as it stuck its head outside to greet the man he'd adopted as its master. Wolf eagerly opened the paddock for Severus to go inside, but he never got that far.. A sharp yell awoke the whole camp from its drowsiness and suddenly six, seven men came running towards Severus, with Little John in the lead. A strong hand jerked hold of Severus' shoulder and dragged him away from the opening of the paddock, where the horse now went rigid.

"Just where do you think you are going?!" he snarled at the wizard as the rest of the men had a hard time shutting the paddock. Severus met his gaze with an honest look.

"I was simply visiting my horse, my Lord," he added in a sarcastic undertone.

"I'm in no shape to ride away from here anyway, and if I did, where would I go? Surely the great John Little wouldn't believe his own personal punching bag would abandon him, would he?" A

cold smirk appeared on his face as he felt the grip around his shoulder tighten. Hazel brown eyes glared at him revealing nothing but disgust and loathing, but the gigantic man, much resembling Hagrid by his looks, said nothing. Severus was simply pushed in the direction of his tent.

As for Wolf, he was in much more severe trouble. John took his son aside doing nothing to hide the anger in his eyes.

"What did you think you were doing, son?! He could've escaped!" he growled to the boy who was now squirming in his grip.

"He just wanted to see his horse!" Wolf protested: "He wasn't gonna escape!"

"Haven't I told you to stay away from him?! That man is dangerous!" John's voice rose with each word. But Wolf had inherited the stubbornness of his mother.

"Severi isn't dangerous, dad! You're only afraid of him because he looks like the Sheriff!" A shiver went through the big man's bones with the mentioning of the one man his great heart could find no forgiveness.

"Do you remember, son," he breathed: "what the Sheriff did to your uncle, my brother? That piece of filth deserves every amount of pain, every ruthless breaking of his spirit as the Sheriff did to Peter!" Tears welled up in John's eyes by the mentioning of his brother's faith. He had always been a man easy to take to tears. Wolf looked at his father for a moment, sympathy in his face.

"I'm sorry for what happened with Uncle Pete, dad. But that wasn't Severi's fault. And he's not the Sheriff's brother, he just looks like him."

"Don't tell me you believe his lies, son," John said heavily before he turned and walked away.

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Back inside the tent Severus sat down, out of breath as usual. Ronja sat down beside him, watching him in silence. They often sat like that, cherishing the silence while the noise of the camp outside was the only thing reminding them where they were. The girl knew when not to talk, and that was what made Severus adore her the most. So wise given her age, yet still innocent and childlike those big, grey eyes were. But they hid a great sadness, the memory of a life no human being should have to face. One might wonder how the Sheriff handled his disappearance. Of what he'd snapped up of rumours the man wasn't too pleased. Apparently he had given Robin the respite of ten days to return Severus in one piece or else he would have hell to pay.

Those days were now coming to an end, and Severus could feel the tension rising once more in the forest. There were many who had wives, relatives and other loved ones staying behind in the village down by the Nottingham Castle, and as always when the Sheriff was furious these were the ones that would pay. They had accepted Robin's, that will say Marion's, decision to let the stranger stay. But amongst the shadows in night-time whispers spread as time grew short. Why should their loved ones have to pay for the life of one scoundrel, bastard brother of the Sheriff? Severus Snape knew only too well luck was the one thing that had saved him so far, how long it would last, that was another matter. Beneath his clothes his secret was growing rapidly by the day, causing both pain and worry in the process. So if he got so far as to carry the child to term, then what? He was a man, for god's sake, he wasn't able to give birth! Severus had ignored this simple fact as long as his mind managed, but now he could escape it no more. He'd never heard of any curses or spells able to impregnate a male. This would have to be an agent and long forgotten spell by his time in the future. It gnawed on Severus' tired mind all day and night these days. How could he do anything about a curse cast that he didn't even know the name of? And how could he do anything as long as his wizard abilities was vanished?

Down in his swollen belly there was a sudden movement as the creature shifted and stirred. He carried the Sheriff's son. What life would be granted this child created by force, inheriting the rotting blood of an insane father? If he was by his right mind Severus would cause the end of the poor creature's misery. If it by some miracle survived a birth and wasn't killed straight after, what faith awaited it? The curse of his father's blood would give him a poor life. If he wasn't killed he would be the killer. Many would suffer during his reign as king after his father. Severus was carrying the very pest that could end this miserable community.

'I cannot let that happen!' Severus closed his eyes as a terrible plan brewed in his despairing mind.

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Chapter 17 by Restina Lovebug

To protect the innocent.

~past~

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Outside the gentle breeze had increased into a biting howl. The last couple of days had been surprisingly warm, the snow had actually started melting. Also forest seemed to think spring arrived early this year. That was unusual to say the least at these parts of the land in February. But then the whole winter had been a peculiar affair. The sky was darkening dangerously fast, there was little doubt in most people's minds that a storm was approaching. By nightfall the wind was howling, rain was poring from the pitch-black sky and no one dared set foot outside as lightning bolts cut through the air making the heavens burn above their heads. People were only praying their tents would endure the torment from the storm.

Ronja was clinging to Severus' side like a frightened animal. She was obviously afraid of lightning, she jumped every time they lit up the entire camp, followed by rolling thunder over their heads.

"Don't worry child. You're safe here with me," Severus absentmindedly tried to calm the shivering youngster. He was thinking about the tree that he'd been leaning too earlier that day. Someone had left behind a small knife in the bark, it was a rusty old thing, probably blunt and forgotten a long time ago. But it would do.

"Sleep now, Ronja, I'll watch over you tonight," he mumbled to the girl who was yawning spite her terrified eyes. An hour later she was sleeping steadily, small snores curling up her throat and a look of pure innocence on her face.

'Sleep well, child. I release you of the responsibilities you've laid on your self. You are free now.> He brushed a rosy cheek and tucked her in with awkward motions as he heard the wind call. The bad weather couldn't have been more welcome.' Severus hurried outside, careful not to wake Ronja in the process. She wouldn't understand.

Not a human was in sight, the terrible storm had chased them all inside. Therefore no one noticed the crouching shape heading for a group of trees twenty meters west to the boundaries of the camp. He was drained within seconds. The old urge to howl against the sky awoke inside him, but he held his breath, denying himself to let go just yet. The knife still was driven far into the bark, and the wizard had a hard time extracting it. The old mantra fled through his mind as the blade was reflecting the light of a cracking lightning, 'protect the innocent'. That was what he was doing, finally. He had seen it all wrong. The innocent wasn't the latent maniac growing inside him, it was the many innocent people who would suffer if this thing grew up. He'd done it so many times before, erased evil from the earth so that good would prevail. This would be another good deed in the sake of mankind. He denied thinking about his body's impostor as anything more than a filthy creature that didn't deserve life.

'Protect the innocent.' He started fumbling towards the depths of the forest, needing solace to do what he'd planned. The lighting sky showed him the way until he found a little clearing a good ten minutes walk from the camp. Finally he let go. All the madness that had been gathered in his mind for the last six months erupted as he threw his face towards the sky and howled, the knife still held in a firm, shaking grip.

"WHERE ARE YOU WHEN I NEED YOU, ALBUS?!?!?! YOU SENT ME A GIRL TO DO YOUR BIDDING, JUST AS YOU SENT ME!!!!" Five meters to his left a lightning struck a tree, illuminating it, sending sparks to the air like firework.

"YOU SENT ME BACK, WELL KNOWING I WOULD HAVE TO END MY LIFE HERE IN THIS STINKING HELLHOLE, YOU BASTARD! IT'S UNFAIR, I'M JUST A SIMPLE MAN!!!! HOW CAN YOU EXPECT ME TO SIMPLY ACCEPT BEING A PAND ON YOUR CHESSBOARD?!?!?" the anger burned dry and he fell to his knees as his body shook in its loneliness.

"Why did you leave me here, father? Why must I go through this alone?" he whispered as his hands squeezed his own cursed stomach. He didn't sense the desperate cries around him, from the very wood surrounding him. He didn't feel the plea, the desperate power canalling through him to keep him from doing what he thought was the only way. But he was still too weak, still his ears hadn't grown accustomed to the drumming of his many allies. He only felt tired and alone, with one more task to do in his pathetic life.

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Ronja awoke just as a deafening boom rolled over the camp, the aftermath of a gigantic lightning. Horrified she discovered she was completely alone in the tent.

"Severi!" she screamed as she stumbled out into the storm, blinded by the rain. She screamed his name over and over again, as her fear rose to panic, her panic to hysteria. The fairy was alone somewhere out there, in the forest! He might die if she didn't find him immediately. But Ronja was just a scared little girl, and there was a greater chance she would get lost inside the forest than of her finding him. She did the only thing she could do, she went to the tent of Robin Hood.

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In the quiet dark cosiness of the tent the two lovers were gently entwined on the makeshift bed of furs and blankets. Outside the noise of the storm filtered in, but this was their time and nothing would intrude on their privacy. For a few hours this little tent was their haven where they could just be a man and a woman, deeply and utterly in love with each other. A small coal brazier both lit and heated the room, throwing shadows across the tent and adding to the intimacy and mystery of their union. The red embers highlighting his sleeping lover's hair and face in the semi-darkness, the long curves of white neck and shoulder suffused from pale white to a gentle amber from the fires glow. Warmth and intimacy no man could ask more of her, she was the fire that held his very being together and the embers to fuel him to greatness. Marion was everything to him, he'd loved her literally from the first moment they set eyes on each other.

And yet, this stranger had changed all that, all the anger and ugliness so long held in check begged to be let out. How he wanted to destroy this Severi, everything he hated and detested in another human being stood looking back at him, through those black eyes, and he wanted nothing more than to pluck them out with his bare hands and shove them down the creature's throat. Anger, a rage so long held back by calmness and his knight's training suddenly meant nothing to him. Let the crowd have him, let them rip his accursed body apart.. for I'll not bury him ...let the wolves and the maggots take what's left. The earth's too good for a creature like that...two of them are two too many. The sheriff is mine the blood right is mine but this thing the crowd can send straight to hell.

Then Marion rode in to rescue the accursed creature or both himself and the creature, and in doing so she changed everything again.

He didn't have to tell her, she of all people knew how much he wanted to take revenge on this man. It was his right... his god given right...an eye for an eye...a son for a father...a father for a son. A life for the destruction of everything he held dear...his parents...his home...his lands...his own name. Banished and disgraced by lies and treachery instigated by the sheriff, made a pariah and a vagabond by his own cousin...for what, a step closer to the throne.

But she stood her ground that night, challenged him and everyone else there...he was so angry and so damn proud of her at the same time.

They had enough, they were powerful and titled, his father was loyal to the new king, but for his cousin it was only the beginning, and the end of everything Robin had one time called dear to him. Except Marion, her father knowing full well the extent of corruption at court did nothing to defend his own kinsman such was the fear of drawing attention to himself. Loxley's family was made the scapegoat and accused of treason whilst he was in the Holy Land under the banner of the crusades. In a rare pang of remorse Marion's father secretly gathered what he could of the Loxley treasures and hid them. Loxley himself was arrested as soon as he set foot back on English soil and thrown into prison unaware of what had taken place. Marion's father did not realise that his act of belated kindness would condemn the remaining family to a hideous fate.

Only Marion seemed untouched, if anything she was more beautiful and bewitching than ever before. Her red hair so like a lion's mane at times highlighted her nature. Resilient and noble...more noble and honourable than he, he felt that. She was the rope that held everything together for him and she was far stronger in reasoning than any general he'd met. The crusades had taught him well, as he rode into battle against an opponent more wise and skilled in the art of warfare he'd ever encountered before. The continual slaughter of innocents left him sickened as he watched other knights and encampments loot and pillage their way remorselessly across the Holy Lands but still he held his tongue.

It was fate...'kismet' he'd turned a blind eye to the atrocities and horrors perpetrated by his fellow crusaders in their greed and lust for riches, only to return home to find ...what ...the madness and horror he'd left behind visited upon his own family. Strange ...ironic really...he was sure he'd gone mad...it was the only way to survive really, chained to a wall in a dungeon listening to the charges read out, hearing the trial and false witness of servants and paid cronies. Begging a deaf god for mercy on a family that had already been tortured to death.

Waiting day after day to be hung or worse still, having your eyes and tongue cut out and left to hang in an iron basket from the walls of the castle...like your mother and sister...not even allowed the sanctity of a burial ...the two rotting corpses hung from the battlements until he cut them down himself. Yes ...he'd gone mad in those dungeons as he felt the fear crowding in. Some nights he swore he could hear them, and he began to cry out their names. Strange that he should feel guilt over their deaths, he was not there and could not have stopped it, but he understood loss. He understood too well the pain and the horror, all the things that had never touched him before he felt with an unnerving insight.

But she alone had dared to find and rescue him from those dungeons. Bribery, blackmail and Marion's sheer will had got him out of there. Hidden and nursed back to health in secrecy by the friars in the Nottingham priory, Robin learnt what Marion refused even then to tell him. His young brother and sister had been bound, gagged and thrown into the pig pens when they refused to testify against their parents. The animals had been starved for days and repeatedly hit with barbed cudgels until they were in a near frenzy with pain. It was a punishment reserved for the worst crimes and cruel beyond belief, however punishment was a public sport and so the crowd watched and jeered and bet how long the children could survive in the pit. Some watched with

cruel pitiless eyes, others drew in closer to watch; fascinated by the horror and the screams. But the few loyal precious few, cried and prayed for their deaths to be quick. The sheriff and his mother sat and watched the entertainment in quiet repose with members of the royal court in attendance at the festivities.

And now, three years later he lived as an outlaw in his own lands. A lord of the forest with servants and villages under his protection. Where once they were his to control he now protected them. He, feudal lord was loved by them, no suffering had been greater than that of his family and all knew of their fates. Yet they flocked to him, knowing full well that he was branded a traitor and banished, yet they called him Lord willingly. It seemed to give him a nobleness or greatness that he knew he did not possess...a symbol of something greater...of a longing for freedom, of the ruler ship of a just and honourable man.

But it was Marion who was the just and honourable lord, not he. Everything they saw in him and his actions came from Marion, his light in the darkness, his salvation and his equal in everything.

The keeper of their vows Friar Tuck married Loxley and Marion in secret shortly after she engineered his escape. Such was her loyalty and devotion to him. However to save her own lands from being confiscated and her own family from imprisonment they hid the marriage. Better a maid, and free woman than a wife in chains and hostage to the crown. So began the game, and the increasing visits to the Sheriff's castle from Marion. What better way to have access to the castle and grounds, maps, and instructions for gold shipments and prisoners across the borders. The sheriff was courting her as she spied on him.

If Marion had been born male, he would have been a formidable foe indeed.

Outside the roar of the wind was so loud he didn't hear the terrified girl before she ripped open his tent.

"He's gone, he's gone.. you must find him, you must!!! He's so weak, he might die out there!" The little thing was hysteric and she looked like a drowned rat. Robin hauled her inside and tried to shake some reason into her mind. Marion awoke and sat up, bewildered.

"One more time, girl!" he said staring at her firmly. But Ronja just grew more hysterical by the second.

"Severi, he left while I slept! I'm afraid he's to do something terrible!!"

"That rat! I knew he wasn't to be trusted!" Robin snarled and jumped to his feet. The man was obviously planning to murder someone or escape!

"Do you know where he went?!" Marion asked the girl kindly, trying to calm the scared little thing.

"No, but I think he's in the forest." the girl cried as Robin gathered his bow and arrow, the sword Marion had given him and dressed to go outside to the raging night. Marion stared at Robin for a minute, her eyes searching him, he knew it.

"You stay here with the girl, I'll find Severi!" he said as he braised himself for the weather. Marion simply nodded her approval, a small warning in her gaze.

"Use Shadow, he will lead you to him!" Ronja urged and tugged his sleeve before he went outside.

"No, a horse isn't a good companion during thunderstorms!" Robin answered: "Besides, I think I know where he's going!" With these words he ran outside, anger burning in his mind as he hoped he would have a good excuse to exterminate Severi when he found him. There was a path

leading to a small clearing some fifty meters from Severi's tent. From there, there was three different paths leading in different directions. If Severi had any plans of escaping he would go that way. It was the path closest by his tent. If he would've murdered anyone Robin reckoned he would be on the top of the list. That made Severi a simple rat, trying to sneak away under the blessing of black night and the worst February-storm in centuries. He'd given this ungrateful bastard sanctuary, and this was how he repaid him! Robin wasn't aware of his own swearing as he fought his way deeper and deeper into the woods. He would pay for this, oh yes he would!

He reached the clearing just as a firebolt plummeted down from the sky and lit the whole forest in a heart stopping second. There, in the middle of the clearing, a kneeling figure was clenching a dagger, aiming it at his stomach. Despair painted the face of the man the second it lit up. His face a contorted mass of grieve and fear.

"Severi!" Robin yelled as the kneeling man slowly led the dagger an arm length away from his body with shaking arms to give it more force to run it through his flesh. He hesitated for just a second. The blade was shining like a star when it came to motion, rushing towards its goal. Time slowed down. Robin stopped thinking as he raised his bow, snatched an arrow and led it to the string. He aimed in one tenth of a second and the arrow left the bow with a choked whoosh as the dagger was centimetres from the man's abdomen. Robin hit his target. The knife shot out of Severi's hands just as the blade breached his clothes. One inch to either side and Robin would have missed completely and the man would have been dead. As time started rolling again it dawned to Robin he'd just saved the life of the very man he wanted dead.

Severi got to his feet, black eyes flaring. There was an intensesness about him Robin had never seen before and a desperation greater than any time he and his men had been inches away from killing him. The black clad man turned his back to him and staggered towards the spot where the dagger was glinting now and again during the lightning. Robin ran after him and grabbed his shoulder.

"You stupid son of a bitch! Why couldn't you just let me die???" Severi screamed at him as he was forced down on the ground to stop him from hurting himself.

"That's what you've wanted all along, so why didn't you let me save you your trouble?!" The well-known stench of fear was reeking from the man as he struggled against Robin's firm hands.

"I decided to let you live!" Robin howled into the wind: "Were you trying to kill yourself just to prove me wrong?!?!" A rattle went through Severi's body as his hands were grasping around his stomach.

"I had no choice, it was my duty..." Robin barely caught the words.

"What are you talking about.. duty?!" Finally the soggy man raised his tormented gaze upwards, meeting the younger man's bewildered eyes.

"If I don't die I might bring doom down on all of you. For I carry your death sentence within my very body!" Robin shook his shoulders harshly:

"I don't fear you, you're weaker than a new-born child! And IF you die the revenge of the Sheriff will be just as severe as if you'd to be brought back alive, in fact worse! So if you want to die a martyr death you can forget it this instant. The only way to keep us alive is if you stay alive, Severi! I don't care how ugly you look, if you're kind or evil, I promised to keep you alive, therefore you will stay alive!" He dragged the man to his feet and started to drag him towards the camp. Severi struggled free from his grip as a terrifying grimace contorted his face beyond recognition. With surprising strength he grabbed Robin's arm and planted his right palm on top of his stomach.

"THIS is what will bring doom over all of you!" he cried. And as a new bolt of lightning scarred the sky Robin felt it. Through the layers of clothes on Severi's body he could feel frantic movement. His eyes widened until they threatened to pop out of his head and he jerked back as if he'd burned his hand.

"What the.." he gaped as he stared at the man in front of him.

"If you value your own life, if you have any mercy in your soul, kill me now," Severi begged as Robin backed a few steps away, too shocked to even breathe at the moment.

"What the hell.. are you!" he whispered.

"A stupid man who went straight into a trap," Severi answered, voice barely audible in the storm. Robin had seen many horrifying things during the crusades, but this was the worse yet! The man standing in front of him was.. somehow pregnant.. What the hell was going on here?! Was this man a fairy from a far away land after all? No human male had the ability to reproduce by it self so this... creature standing in front of him couldn't be human. He continued to stare at Severi's stomach, as if he was afraid something would pop out of it and bite him. He'd felt it himself, and still he couldn't bring himself to believe. For god's sake, it wasn't possible!

"I don't believe you. It isn't possible!" he yelled on top of the wind, at the same time Severi's face contorted with pain. His feet caved in on him as he fell to his knees, and a deep rattle went through his body. Robin watched him helplessly for a few seconds before a decision shot down into his mind. There was too many questions unanswered and Severi didn't seem able to talk at all for the moment. Therefore Robin carried the man or what ever creature he was back to the camp, where he was met by Marion, and Ronja who looked like she couldn't have one single tear left in her body.

"Quickly, carry him to the tent!" Marion ordered, and Robin obeyed her as he always did. The now moaning man was laid down on the makeshift bed of blankets and immediately became the centre of attention of the frantic girl. Marion on the other hand was dragged out of the tent.

"Robin, what are you doing?!" Marion protested: "Severi needs our help!"

"No!" Robin yelled as he dragged her towards his own tent: "That man is reeking of dark magic! Something's terribly wrong with him and I'm not letting him anywhere near you!"

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Marion knew she could wait no longer, that her plan had to be set to life, for the sake of Robin's sanity as well as her child's and Severi's life. She'd waited too long telling him, as she'd struggled with her own realisation of the big news. There was no doubt in her mind Robin would kill Severi if he found out he was carrying a child that most likely was both Marion's and the Sheriff. And by the looks of his face he'd learned something about Severi's peculiar condition out in the forest. Just as he shoved her inside the tent and was about to burst into what had to be Severi's death sentence Marion stared him to silence.

"Robin, I need you to listen to me now, you hear?" Robin plummeted down on his behind, a fire raging his steel blue eyes telling her every second was precious and that she would have to weigh her every word.

"What, Marion. What could you possibly tell me that won't make me kill that unnatural creature this instant," he said heavily. In other circumstances this soaking wet man would have made her laugh, but not now. He looked deadly. And so Marion started telling her lie, a lie that was the only way to keep her love sane, and her child and its carrier alive. Breaking the news to Robin was easier than Marion thought. He knew there was a bond between this stranger and Marion. Yet

she insisted she loved only Robin and Robin alone. She could see her news was terrible and wonderful at the same time. She loved him and was faithful to him only and they would have a child. But the child was stolen and Severi was kidnapped and crippled by the witch, forced to carry the child and to bear the sick lechery of the Sheriff.

She didn't have to act this part ...revulsion and pity filled her heart and suppressed tears began to run down her face. All the sorrow she felt for Severus was put into those few intense moments with Robin. She had to make him believe it was so, he had to believe her and turn his anger and jealousy away from Severi and back to his real enemy.

"He carries our son Robin... our son."

It was a great deal to take in, but Loxley would not question it. He could not and would not, the stranger would be his saving or his undoing. Nothing made sense around this man that hated the sheriff as much as Robin himself. No man can carry child, it was against all the laws in creation and yet Marion told him that it was so and he was carrying their son. He looked at her, not knowing what to say. His heart was beating so hard he felt dizzy.

"Are we really.. to become parents.. after all?" he finally whispered. Marion nodded, a heartfelt smile on her face. But she could not linger. Severi had been brought back in great pain and he needed aid. But just as she thought she'd saved everything a new kind of flame burst into Robin's eyes.

"He tried to kill our son, Marion!" he growled and rose to his feet.

"What are you talking about, Robin?" Marion said and dragged him down again.

"That's why he escaped, Marion. I found him just before he was to stab himself with a rusty dagger!" Robin yelled, infuriated once more.

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Marion had no idea how she calmed her lover down and got his permission to go to the tent where Severi was. He had tried to kill the child, he had tried to kill her child! Why, oh why would he? Marion plummeted through the entrance of the tent and crawled right to Severi's side, pushing Ronja roughly away.

"Why, Severi, why would you?!?!" tears of anger and disbelief trickled down her cheeks as she paid no respect for the man's obvious pain.

"Doom.. you better off... without me..." Severi croaked.

"What about my child? When were you about to tell me about that, huh? For I know you carry my son within you. Ronja told me!" Somewhere in a corner a whimper came from the girl.

"Your...son?" True surprise painted Severi's features. Now Ronja seemed to wake back to life.

"Severi doesn't know! The Sheriff never told him!" she screamed and lunged a good old Ronja attack.

"Severi believed it was the Sheriff's son, he didn't know it was yours! That's why I worried about him going out into the forest alone. Maybe he didn't know... And I believed he knew..." she made a pitiful howl and curled protectively around her fairy.

"Forgive me, I thought you knew.." she whispered to the silent man. The atmosphere in the little tent was so intense Marion found it hard to breathe.

"Is it true?" she asked: "Didn't you know?" Severi's eyes showed both pain and remorse.

"No.. I didn't.." he whispered: "Fair lady... I would never..." Some sort of cramp roared through the man's body and he let out a low growl.

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Chapter 18 by Restina Lovebug

Mystery revealed

~past~

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He'd nearly killed Marion's son! During the last days of despair, Severus had never stopped thinking of just who the mother of the child might be. He'd just thought about it as the cursed child of the Sheriff. Never had he considered who the mother could be, but now that he was told it was Marion it made sense. That was why he felt so strangely connected to this woman, that was why she subconsciously was protecting him the way she did. She felt the urge to protect her child. If Robin hadn't found him in time Severus would be dead now, and so would Marion's child. A child with her blood in its veins.. it might fight the cursed blood of the Sheriff. And she would never surrender her child to that bastard's arms, that was certain. Maybe the child had a chance to a decent life after all, as long as it never had to stay in his father's care.

The cramps in his body slowly started ceasing, as the stress that had caused them slowly let go. Severus wondered if his very own body had tried to kill the impostor in one last, desperate attempt. But so what if Marion was the baby's mother. What about Robin? Severus doubted he would sit silently by the side and accept a child that was a mix of Marion and his worst fiend. Marion seemed to read his mind.

"I know a way, Severi. I didn't want to lie, but this is what I told Robin. I told him the child you carry are ours, mine and Robin's. The Sheriff could not catch Robin and I would not wed him, so he took our unborn child with dark magic. You were kidnapped, innocent in all this, to carry the child whilst he himself prepared the final attack on Robin. He was planning to use the baby to force me to marry him, and further more he wanted to raise Robin's son as his own, making the boy hate his father. He must never know this is a lie, Severus, I'm depending on you. For both our sakes and the sake of the unborn, take this to be the truth, I beg you!" Severus breathed her hope as air. In this merry-go-round of unexpected turns that never stopped Severus once more found himself forced to take a step back to life. He'd wished for the end the last hours, but now his resistant, stubborn soul once more took charge and kicked away the scared little boy.

"Severi, I don't want to lie, but it will keep you safe and you will not be ransomed. I will love and raise the child, together with Robin who for all eternity will be known as the boy's father. I promise you, the Sheriff will never lay a hand on him! And I believe that was the reason to why you went into the woods tonight, Severi, you were only trying to protect the baby from him, weren't you." A small, tired nod came from Severus who looked near fainting.

"Robin will not abandon or hurt you in any way, he will hate the Sheriff even more. If you want to live, you'll have to live with this... forgive me, but it's the only way to keep you alive."

The lies were far closer to the truth, and the truth at this moment in time was that Severus Snape wasn't firing on all 4 cylinders. He was tired, more tired than he could remember and for once he just wanted to pretend that this wasn't happening. This was simply a bad dream he couldn't wake himself from.

Survival. That's all he could hope for, now it wasn't enough.

'What if I don't make it this time...what about you my not so little bump. No one should have a father like that...no one. That's why I went into that forest... Better Robin of Sherwood and Maid

Marion than me for a mother and the sheriff as your proud father...how repulsive can a family get...even if I live through this the sick bastard would try again...look at me, I practically cringe every time a man comes within 10 feet of me...Where's my pride and self reliance now, eh.. ' Severus was tired of soul-searching, of trying to analyse everything to bits. His screaming mind would settle down with a preferred truth.

'She's right I could die tomorrow and no-one would care except for Albus and some half starved child. Albus, what have I done, why couldn't I be strong like you, why have you left me here...why. Oh...Albus what happened...did I fail you.....what did I do wrong?'

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Marion left Severi after making sure he was no longer in pain and that Ronja would notify her instantly if the pain returned. Now she had to deal with Robin once more. Thankfully he accepted her explanation, that also was the truth. Severus didn't know that he carried their child. He was afraid that he carried the Sheriff's future heir and that he one day would reign these lands with more fierceness than his father. Robin calmed down and promised Severi would be safe from now on, but first he needed proof that the man really was pregnant. And this was a matter he wouldn't wait with.

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There was no choice; to convince Robin he would have to see for himself in piece and quiet this time. Severus knew this would happen, curiosity or outright murder, perhaps even both and calmed himself for the inevitable arrival of his none to happy rescuer. Severus knew the maid would try and defend him, no he wouldn't be the cause of her death...she'd been protective and more loyal in the few short days of knowing her than he'd remembered of most his friends.

'Friends,' he mused to himself: 'I have as many here as I did at home...one hand to count them on with fingers to spare.'

As Robin was talking to John Little outside the tent, Severus bade Ronja leave the tent and go to Marion. Both Robin and John Little entered the tent, and Severus heart sank. No possible means of escape..2 to 1.

Pulling a weary Severus to his feet, face to face Robin without hesitation asked the question:

"Is it the truth...are you with child?" A set of simple questions. Yes or no that was all the answer needed. Severus barely nodded but it was enough. The grip on his shirt front lessened and he slowly lowered himself back to sit down on the makeshift bed.

"Show me!" a simple and abrupt order from a man used to both responsibility and being obeyed. Shame again flooded Severus when he thought of his body and someone looking at him but he had to do this for his guaranteed survival. This was not the sheriff and he did not need to fight or argue with this man. Curbing a shudder and the sudden urge to punch the man in the face and run, Severus did just the opposite. He opened the warm robe revealing a loose white cotton undershirt and simple woollen leggings. If Severus did this properly now the man would never look at him or touch him again. Offering his hand to Robin the seated man pulled Robin closer and placed his hand on the area where the child was pummelling madly. Letting the hand go, Severus expected it to be jerked back, but it stayed exactly where it was...feeling the kicks and rolling for the few brief minutes they lasted. For once Severus didn't want to answer...didn't want to lie..no voice was to be found.

Near to panicking Severus stayed outwardly calm as again the hand skimmed over his fluttering stomach, then shifted to rest on his shoulder.

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Through the shirt Robin could see that the curve of the body was wrong. The stomach jutted out like a fat belied man, but this looked hard and the skin looked stretched around the stomach. The life beneath Severi's skin jumped at him, as if his son greeted his father for the first time.

'My son.'

The urge to kill had passed leaving in its place the beginning of tenderness and sorrow for the stranger.

'We're blood kin, you carry my son and your blood runs through his veins, my blood, Marion's and yours.'

Through all this Severi had held still, these few testing moments felt like hours. He seemed to read Robin's need for stillness and quiet, after all Robin was reaching a tumultuous decision on unusual and outrageous evidence. Something far outside his normal range of comprehension and once taken he had to act accordingly with his decision.

Loxley leaned down and looked searchingly into the other man's face for signs of treachery, all he found was tiredness and pain, then it happened. The kiss was brief and unexpected. For the span of seconds Loxley leant in close to Severi and pressed his mouth against his cheek.

"Little John, make it known the fairy carries my son. He is to be treated as my family, he is no kin of the Sheriff's. Severi is as a brother to Marion and myself!" he said calmly as he rose to his feet again. Both Severi and Little John were gaping.

"Are you telling me that he is... that he is..." Little John stuttered as his eyes never left the naked belly which contents was a mystery to say the least.

"He's with child. My and Marion's child to be exact. The Sheriff has steeped so low as to steal our unborn son and place it in this man." There was a heartfelt hate in Robin's voice.

"We've all been deceived in this. Severi was fooled to believe he was carrying the Sheriff's son, I was fooled to think he was the Sheriff's brother and almost killed my own child in the process. That bastard is going to pay for this, Little John- I promise you!!" Little John was still glaring at Severi's stomach of which was now covered with clothes and thoroughly hidden once more.

"Of all the nights to skip my evening drink!" he moaned and followed Robin outside.

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The storm settled by morning as a new kind of storm chased through the camp. Little John had done as he'd been told and now everyone were talking in high pitched voices about the creature in the tent that supposedly was carrying the Lord Loxley's child. Sure, they were superstitious people, but they wouldn't believe anything served on a plate! By lunchtime Wolf was the only one convinced Severi was indeed pregnant, all others commanded evidence. Robin and Marion wasn't going to place the poor man on some freak display. He looked so self loathing every time he had to show his stomach they didn't have the heart to order him to show it to everyone who wanted to see.

"We need them to see that we accept him, Robin. If you are willing to do this I think they will believe." She told Robin what he had to do and got a shuttering 'YUCK!' in response. Men would be men... But he hesitantly agreed it had to be done. After all Severi was a fairy.. it wouldn't be like he was doing this to.. a man. But to do this.. in public.. he couldn't help but feel a little repulsed.

Severus was brought out from the tent and placed in front of a crowd filled with all sorts of expectations. He could feel their eyes undressing him, poking him, and he was so humiliated he wanted to fall dead right on the spot. He reckoned he was to be stripped for all eyes to see.. His disgusting body would be the new freak show and there was nothing he could do about it. The people had to believe if he would have any chance of surviving. Marion and Robin approached him, as Little John kindly dragged the ever suspicious Ronja away, promising her no one would hurt her fairy. Severus only wished someone would say the same comforting words to him. He had to look petrified, at least no one seemed to be frightened by his presence and children were actually smiling at him! That was a first... The fierce Potions Master, able to scare the most gruesome of demons when at his worst temper, was smiled at by five- six year olds! Back at Hogwarts the same children would have been scared to death to meet him in the hallway. How ridiculous did he look?? Was he somehow been dressed in that ghastly green dress and the vulture hat Neville's grandmother always wore some time during the night? Or was it the very idea of someone like him 'pregnant' that had them smirking like this??? Severus jumped a few inches into the air as Marion's light touch on the top of his shoulder ripped him back into reality and the fore-coming humiliation. She gave him a friendly smile before she turned and faced the now frantically mumbling crowd.

"I suspect you all have heard the great news by now," she began and found Robin's hand while she spoke: "Robin and I are to become parents. But there is also a sad part to these joyful news which I'm to tell now. The Sheriff found out about my pregnancy and stole my unborn child. To have revenge on Robin he planned to raise our son as his own, forcing me to marry him and our son to grow up without his father. Severi was kidnapped by the Sheriff as his evil plan took form. Our child was placed beneath his heart and the Sheriff imprisoned him in his castle and forced Severi to carry the child he had stolen. In great risk of his own life he tried to escape from the Sheriff to bring our son back to us! This is the truth, my good folk. As Ronja has been claiming the whole time, Severi is a fairy, and his survival is of great importance as what he carries is dear to us all!" With these words she turned back to Severus again, a kindness in her eyes so heart melting even Severus felt moved for a second.

"As a bond, tying my family together you are, Severi. Without you despair and ruin it would have faced. With my kiss, accept your undisputed place in this encampment, you're one of my own, one of my dearest!" With these words she kissed him, gently. Butterfly wings tickling his lips as she confirmed her words. Severus' heart jabbed at his ribs as she took a step back, still smiling. And so she stepped aside, and... Robin stepped forward.

'Oh god, what's HE gonna do with me?' Severus fought the strong desire to back away from the approaching man, then he saw the kindness Marion had showed him strangely enough was mirrored in Robin's. There was a small sign of uneasiness surrounding the man, but that was all. No open loathing or hatred, it was down right weird!

"You've offered your own body as a home to our stolen child, and for that I am eternally in your debt, Severi. You are welcomed to stay with me and my family for as long as you please, and during the term of your pregnancy nothing will be spared. For you are as precious to me and Marion as our unborn son that you're carrying within." And just as his young wife Robin leant in close and pressed his mouth against Severus Snape's. During the span of a few seconds the kiss lasted they breathed the same air from one mouth to another. It was an intimacy of some sorts. A joining kiss of acceptance that would change Severus' status in the camp.

Severus did nothing to stop the kiss. This wasn't a kiss of great desire and lust nor passion and sex. It wasn't resembling the needy mouth of the Sheriff in any way. This was a simple token of acceptance, showing Severus and all others his place in the encampment and the pecking order. The wizard was safe for the present and that was all he could hope for. Robin stepped back, no

longer any traces of uneasiness in his face. A smile actually appeared on his face and Severus no longer felt any hostility. Strange, how a simple lie can change a man's prejudices against you..

And from that day Severus Snape was Severi, the fairy- magically carrying Marion's and Robin's unborn child. The whole camp accepted it the moment Robin's lips embraced Severus' and no one longer doubted his intentions or relationship to the Sheriff.

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Back at Nottingham Castle the Sheriff had been in a deadly mood ever since the night he'd discovered the ransom-note from his hated cousin. He had given his rat of a cousin the respite of ten days to return Severus Snape unharmed or else he would have hell to pay. Now the tenth day was coming to an end and the Sheriff was slowly realising Snape wouldn't be returned to his rightful owner. Chairs flew across the room, valuable vases and other ornaments ended their glory days as broken pieces of pottery down on the floor. He screamed and roared within his private quarters, so loud one of the stable boys swore he'd heard him all the way down to the stables. His own mirror image had been taken from him! And for all he knew he might even be part of the disappearance. If he got his hands on him he would show him who his REAL master was! There wouldn't be much left of the man when the Sheriff was done with him!!! Several maids and servants had cowardly escaped too during the Sheriff's last days of bad temper, others were scarred for life... No one would escape the wrath of the Sheriff!! Endless searches had turned out without results, Loxley's filthy lair somehow was hidden for the naked eye.

Little did the Sheriff know about the old magic contained within the wood. It protected the special one as it could feel great danger threaten him from the black mansion besides the village. The old wards protecting Robin of the Hood's camp was reinforced and strengthened so that no one with the lust to hurt Severus Snape would find the secret village.

Starting from tomorrow the Sheriff would start his own little campaign to get Snape back. By the end of this month the wizard would be handed back to him willingly, there was no doubt in the Sheriff's mind. He knew how to torture a whole population and make them see what's best for them.

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Chapter 19 by Restina Lovebug
Potions and grace

Severus was stunned of the sudden turnabout of the village. Suddenly open hostility turned to withdrawn curiosity and hospitality. But he didn't stay outside very long. He wasn't used to be a spectacle in either way, evil bastard or pregnant fairy-creature. He crawled back into his tent followed by Ronja, and to his great surprise: Wolf.

"I don't remember inviting you," he said raising an eyebrow as he settled on the makeshift bed with some discomfort.

"Ronja said it was alright as long as I didn't bother you!" the boy answered with a huge grin on his face. Then his eyes darted downwards and ended on Severus' midsection. The wizard sighed and rolled his eyes as he knew what had to come...

"It's so odd, you look just like a lad.. and still there's a baby inside you!" Wolf breathed and Severus could have sworn the boy's eyes were closing in on his belly.

"Well, he is a lad!" Ronja shot in with her grown up-voice: "He's a fairy-lad!"

"Ooooh." A face of total awe made the boy look like a two year old. "Does fairy-lads have babies where you come from, Severi?"

'SERIOUSLY! I shouldn't sit here quietly listening to this!' Severus moaned internally as he gave the boy a strict look.

"From where I come," he started sarcastically: "Might that be the fairy-land where everybody dances around in pink tutus and bathes in milk?" He suspected the boy would lose all interest in him with that comment. Instead he smiled broader and turned his face towards Ronja.

"He's so weird!! Fairy's are sooo funny!" Ronja on the other hand had read the signs of sarcasm and decreasing patience.

"I think Severus is tired. Why don't you come back later?"

"Sure thing, I'll do that!" Wolf answered and crawled towards the exit.

"Mom's always grumpy when she's expecting too!" he added with a smirk towards Severus Snape who answered him with an intimidating glare. Really! The manners of that boy! A Potter/Weasley-hybrid! But he shouldn't expect less with that big bear of a father. Severus suspected John Little would have been at the shallow end of the gene pool when brains were handed out. He seemed to be the only one not warming up considerably towards Severus since Marion's and Robin's deceleration. There was this loathing in his eyes... Severus didn't like it one bit!

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Thankfully the obnoxious boy didn't return that day and Severus spent the evening and afternoon in peace and solitude without any more intrusions of any kind. Marion had kindly ordered people to leave Severus be as long as he stayed inside the tent. He needed his rest to mend properly and with her watching over him like a fierce lion Severus got what he wanted, peace.

His night was filled with old nightmares as usual, but with Ronja by his side he felt safe the times he woke up during the night. For the first time in over six months he felt somewhat safe and now in the hours just before daybreak he felt it for the first time, the heart beat of the forest. It was a low and steady beat, agent and youthful at the same time, pulsating in his body and in every nerve. He'd never experienced something like this before. Severus closed his eyes and let the beat work through him, felt how his body relaxed and responded to the very essence of life channelling through his soul. It was the forest. The forest was soothing him, comforting him somehow and all Severus had to do was to close his eyes and listen. He couldn't understand, but he knew he was welcomed. Sherwood Forest resembled the Forbidden forest indeed!

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Severus stayed by himself this day also. The last thing he needed right now was to remind that boy Wolf how much he fancied fairies! So he stayed inside the tent, and had Ronja pick up the meals as usual. Marion had returned to her mansion last night and Robin and some of his men were apparently on a raid somewhere in the county so Severus figured the less he showed of himself today, the less he would be bothered.

It was around dinnertime and Severus was drowsing off, helped by the gentle beat of the forest when an alarming scream stabbed his heart and sent him fumbling towards the exit. A man rode into the camp, Severus recognised him as Will Scarlet, the obnoxious badmouth. But he paid no attention to the young man, what made his stomach turn in horror was the little bundle in Scarlet's arms. The screams continued as more and more people gathered around the man and recognised what he carried in his arms. It was a little girl. She couldn't be more than two years old and by the looks of her, and Severus couldn't tell if she was alive or dead.

"Where's Tuck?! I promised her parents I'd see to that he'd give their daughter the last oil." His voice was a low and mournful growl and he stepped down from the horse with his light baggage weakly squirming in protest. All the women of the camp ran to him instantly.

"What's happened to her?" they shrieked as they discovered all the blood.

"There's no time!" Will spat and worked his way through the estrogen mob with the badly hurt toddler clutched protectively to his chest.

"Let me see her." His voice was curt and stern, a glimpse of the old Potions Master swam to the surface as Severus Snape stepped in the way of Will Scarlet.

"You?? You've done far enough, thank you!" Will growled and tried to slip past him, but Severus didn't nudge.

"Let me see the child, I might be able to help her!" He reached out towards Will and carefully removed the toddler from his arms. Will scowled but he didn't try to back away with the child.

"I'm watching you!" he snarled as he followed Severus who walked as fast as his feet were able to carry him back to his tent. He didn't want to examine her wounds out in the open. As he walked he barked out orders to Ronja who nodded frantically as she noted his every demand in her mind.

"Get me two small cauldrons, have a fire prepared outside my tent and gather the camp's eldest women, as I will need their help on this!" He swept inside the tent, Will hot on his heels and somewhere nearby he could hear the drowsy voice of friar Tuck mumbling what all the yahoo was about. He'd apparently just been waken from his nap and wasn't pleased. Severus lay the girl carefully down on top of the blankets that made his bed and bled within as he uncovered the bloody rags containing a starved little body barely alive. She was completely covered in wounds and gashes. By the looks of it she had been chewed and spit out.

"What happened to her, was she attacked by a wolf?" he whispered as a small fist opened and closed weakly, the little hand seemed like the only thing on her body not maimed to the unrecognisable.

"A wolf did this?" Will spat furiously as he watched the withering little figure, more dead than alive. "This is the work of the Sheriff!" If it wasn't for the poor creature barely breathing below his fingers Severus would have run his fist straight through the nearest target.

"How," he breathed and struggled to stay calm while all he wanted to do was to scream at the top of his lungs. He knew why he'd done this to the child. It was because he, Severus Snape, the Sheriff's personal incubator and rape puppet hadn't been returned to his rightful owner.

"He threw her into the pig pen down at the market place to set an example. It's a miracle she even survived. I fished her out from the pen myself after the Sheriff had left. He believed she was dead, we all believed it. But she was alive, but so hurt there's nothing to be done about it. Her parents' only hope for her was that Tuck would give her the last oil, and I intend to keep that promise, Severi!" Dark brown curls, stained red with blood.. a deep gash in her left cheek and on her throat. Half her right ear was missing and the injuries continued down the tiny body like some sick joke.

"That bastard. That god damn son of a bitch!!" Severus was shaking all over. How dared he! How dared the Sheriff let this innocent child pay for a rage aimed towards him!!!

"They're here, the women you asked for." Ronja stuck her head inside the tent.

"Good. I'll be out shortly. Gather Tuck for me, he'll read the girl her last rights while I prepare the potions. That way Scarlet will be both satisfied and will have kept his promise. And he will not have any intentions of why I shouldn't try and save her. By the way.." he added as an after thought: "do you still have the potion I gave you?"

"Yes." Ronja's hand shot down into a pocket and out it came, the little vial he'd given her month's earlier. There was just enough left of the potion to ease the toddler's pain while Severus would prepare some more, together with another emergency potion he'd hopefully be able to brew. It all depended on the old women and their knowledge in herbs and other growths of the forest. Severus wouldn't leave the little one in this state. He could only hope the girl would stay alive long enough for his aid to count.

He parted the tiny lips and gave the child the last contents of the pain-removing potion. A scream without sound rattled through the little body as the drops were swallowed. Severus tucked her in and sat Will to watch over her while he went outside to prepare the only thing that might be able to save her life. Oh.. what he'd give to have wand in his palm and his powers returned! Now Tuck finally made his way to the tent, huffing and puffing as he hurried along behind Ronja. But the wizard didn't have the time to squabble with the friar. He turned towards the old women impatiently awaiting his orders.

Half an hour later eight old women returned with various herbs, weeds, roots and even a toad and some beetles! Severus was surprised to see that everything he'd put on his 'shopping list' had been found, when it normally was too early to find any of it before spring. He got to work. Heart beating frantically while all the eyes of the encampment rested on him as he crouched over the cauldron. The girl was still alive, but Tuck was sure it wouldn't last long. So he had to work fast. That would mean breaking the main rule when it came to brewing potions, NEVER, EVER hurry! First a new batch of pain killer potion. He was so concentrated not even the most piercing stares bothered him as he worked. He refilled the vial and gave it to Ronja who rushed inside the tent, the remaining of the potion was set aside and a new cauldron was set to the fire to heat. The next potion was a specifically hard potion only two, three Potions Master's around the world had the skills to brew, Severus included. The Wolf Bane- potion was a walk in the park compared to this. Add the rush and hurry and Severus had a hard job ahead of him. The Traumaton Potion was lethal if it wasn't prepared right, a dangerous mix of gingerroots, various herbs, a crushed Blackhorn beetle and three and a half crushed Pinkadilly beetles. And the final and most crucial component: Three drops of blood from the heart chamber of a spotted toad. Prepared right the Traumaton Potion would counteract shock and infections, it would help wounds and deep gashes heal and last but not least- it would help the traumatised body produce large amounts of blood if it was suffering from severe blood loss.

He worked in silence, not distracted by anything or anyone, only haunted by the memory of the tiny body awaiting his aid inside the tent. Even the stunned spectators around him kept quiet as a new side of the stranger unfolded before them. Slender fingers worked so fast they had a hard time keeping up with their movements and his face was so etched with concentration all the signs of weakness had vanished, and he looked.. powerful somehow.

When finished the Traumaton Potion would simmer, thick and a vast orange in colour. But he needed to test it on someone! If he'd ruined the potion he would kill the girl if he made her drink it. Severus looked around for a second and for the first time since he started working with the potion traces of panic washed over his face. He couldn't ask any of these standing in front of him to try it. That left him. If it wasn't for the very fact he was pregnant he wouldn't hesitate. But he wouldn't be alone to take the potion now. If he'd screwed up somewhere along the way he would kill the.. he still denied to call it 'baby'.. thing that was using his body. It was a moment of truth for the wizard. He was fully prepared to risk his own life in order to save the girl, but would he risk the life of the unborn? Before he came to a conclusion Will Scarlet appeared in front of the tent. He had a desperate look on his face as he rushed towards Severus.

"If you're going to save the girl you better start working! She don't have much time left!" he growled, but his eyes betrayed him. Will Scarlet was scared. Scared the little hope granted him would be taken from him.

"I have a medicine for her here, but before I can tell if it was made successfully I need someone to test it.. I would do it my self, but I risk killing another.. child in the process..." Before Severus had the time to react Will had leaned forward, snatched the ladle out of Severus' hand and tasted the orange liquid. If Severus had done anything wrong Will would fall dead to the ground the same second the potion touched his tongue.

"Waah! That's plain foul!" Will yelled and spat angrily around. A sigh of relief was to be heard from the wizard as he scooped the ladle out of Scarlet's hands and rushed back to the tent. Ronja was sitting by the toddler, holding her gently in the unharmed hand. Brother Tuck was sitting in the corner, bible in hand, with a grave look on his round face.

"She's so little, so weak!" Ronja whispered as she moved aside so Severus would get to the little girl. There wasn't much life left in her now, she wasn't more than minutes from death. She didn't even protest when the foul tasting fluid was forced down her throat.

"That's a good girl!" Severus soothed as her eyelids fluttered for a moment. He unbuttoned his shirt, picked up the lifeless body and held her to his chest. He reckoned the child was in desperate need of some comfort and warmth, and even though he didn't know the first thing about small children his instincts told him to do so.

"What are you doing? You're disturbing the child's deathbed!" Brother Tuck suddenly felt the need to interfere.

"You're not her father! Lay the child back down, let her die in peace!" The look the wizard shot back made the friar crawl outside as fast as his stubby body would let him. There was no way he would stay inside there together with that.. fairy man or what ever he was. Not when he behaved like that, undressing like some disturbed creature and disturbing a small child's deathbed right in front of him, a man of the church!

"Ronja, go outside and tell the people the girl needs quiet if she's to survive." Severus looked down at the tiny face, and hated himself. This was his fault. The Sheriff had done this to her because of him, and him only. It would be his fault if she died.

He closed his eyes and wished with all his might, but none of his magic powers magically reappeared. Only the steady heartbeat of the forest was there to soothe and aid, and it rushed from Severus' body and over to the little one like a blood transfusion.

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Robin immediately sensed the tension in the camp when he returned from a most successful tax removal from one of the Sheriff's tax- carts. Both Tuck and Will rushed towards him when he jumped off his horse.

"The Millar's daughter! The Sheriff threw her into the pig pens!" Will shouted before Robin got to ask what the hell was going on.

"What?!" Little John who had dismounted right behind Robin was by Will's side in a second.

"Little Anna?? She's only two years old!" Robin could have sworn Little John grew an extra meter.

"I brought her back here, the poor thing was still alive... I promised her parents friar Tuck would

give her the last oil.. there was no hope you see.. and then Severi decided he would try and help.."

"with his dark magic!" Tuck interfered.

"All right, Tuck- shut the hell up! Will- is she still alive, where is she?" Robin yelled. There was too much information thrown at him at one time.

"She's inside Severi's tent. We don't know if she's still alive, we haven't heard from him since he chased Tuck outside." Robin drew a deep breath and ran to the tent, with Will, Tuck and Little John hot on his tail. He was met with the most peculiar sight as he crawled inside. There, in the corner, leaning against the canvas, Severi sat, sleeping. In his arms, tucked against his naked chest was Anna, the Millar's daughter. All the blood! Robin moaned and had to crawl back outside where he belched helplessly on Tuck's sandals. How could the child even have survived for minutes with such injuries?? He stopped Little John before he crawled inside.

"You better not, John. It's not a pretty sight.." Robin croaked. The big man hesitated for a moment before he continued. There was a muffled cry before he too crawled outside, but this time Tuck removed his feet in time..

"My Hannah is her age, Robin! It could have been her, Robin it could have been her!" loud sobs worked their way up his throat making the tall and muscled man look like a gigantic five year old.

"I think you should go get your family, Little John. I think all of you who still have family left in the village should go and collect them! The Sheriff obviously show's no mercy any more.." Robin said as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"The bastard won't stop with one little girl, from now on no one is safe!"

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Severus awoke as the shadow of John Little shot out what little light there was inside the tent. He heard how the man croaked and rushed back outside by the sight of the girl. He looked down at her. She wasn't bleeding anymore and her breath was steady. Severus brushed the toddler's hair as a feeling he'd never experienced in his life rushed through him. This little thing was entirely dependent on him to survive. He alone would make the difference if she would live or die. It was a responsibility almost too big to imagine. And it suddenly dawned to him that this was all parenthood was about. Some father he would make..

Robin came back inside as Severus gently lay her down to get her cleaned up. She looked stronger now, somehow and Ronja ran outside immediately, as if she'd read his mind.

"I'll get you some water, Severi, and some bandages."

"Is she still alive??" Robin gasped in disbelief. He came closer and stole another glance of her.

"I.. I think she will make it." Severus' heart jumped in joy when the girl made some sounds and opened her eyes. Big, blue grave eyes looked up at him, measuring him silently.

"Don't worry, little one. I won't harm you!" Severus voice was kind and gentle as cream and a soft smile made his horrible Potions Master from hell- appearance shatter into a million pieces. He stroke her cheek with careful fingers and showed the little girl all the kindness he'd locked deep down in his heart for his whole life. He didn't even mind Robin glaring at him as if he was looking at a maniac. He didn't even worry about his naked chest that was on display for everyone peeping inside the tent to see. The girl slowly lifted her unharmed hand towards him and a tiny hand locked around Severus' little finger.

"That's right I'm not leaving you. You don't have to be afraid, sweetie." And with these words he leaned down and kissed her brow.

Robin was gaping at this new person sitting in front of him. What had happened to the old and foul Severi? The fairy that always had some biting remark and never surrendered? Who was this man offering his heart to this battered little thing? How could he see the beauty beyond those bloody rags and gashes? He who had never seen the beautiful girl when she looked as a toddler should, healthy and bright with a rasped knee as the most severe bruise on her body? How could his face not retort in repulse by the sight of this destroyed human being?

Ronja came back without a sound as usual, and handed Severi water and a cloth to clean the girl. He went to work with utter most carefulness. Robin couldn't take his eyes from the fairy's gentle hands as they removed the blood and the dirt from Anna's body. There was nothing in those hands resembling the brutal hands of his cousin. Hands that took pleasure in hurting and maiming. These hands, on the other hand, seemed only interested in taking the pain away. And it finally dawned to Robin that the resemblance to the Sheriff lay in Severi's features alone. What was inside this man was the exact opposite of what was lurking inside his more famous cousin. Where the Sheriff destroyed and pillaged, Severi sought to mend the errors of his mirror image. Finally Robin dared let go of his doubts about the man, and he accepted him also in his heart.

Anna was cleaned and bandaged, and all the while she stared openly at the dark-haired man who was soothing her with his voice and careful fingers. She didn't complain with sounds of displeasure or pain, she didn't squirm when her sore skin was covered with bandages, she just lay there silently watching, accepting. When she once more was picked up and held close to this stranger's chest she fell asleep almost immediately, relaxed by the heartbeat of her saviour.

"Sleep little one, rest and grow strong," Severus whispered not even aware of the spectacle he was making of him self.

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Chapter 20 by Restina Lovebug
Of squirrels and boys

~past~

There were two men in the encampment who wouldn't trust Severi further than they could toss him, and that was friar Tuck and Little John, both with widely different reasons. Tuck was convinced Severi was a dark sorcerer, committing witchcraft. How else could one explain the unnatural pregnancy, his skills in healing and the strange power he had over certain people, and not to mention that foul beast of a horse? The child in that creature's womb was nothing less than the devil's child! He preached loudly about wolf's in sheep's clothing, but no one seemed to take interest in his words anymore as the situation back in the village grew more and more desperate by the day.

John Little was a man who had a hard time letting go of the past. Every time he looked into those eyes he saw the bastard who murdered his brother in cold blood. He knew better than to judge a book by its cover, but the memory of Peter grew too strong in his mind for him to let go. He saw the deeds the fairy did for the camp and he saw how the others grew to trust him. But that man also was the cause of all their suffering and pain. It was his fault he had to move the rest of his family out into the woods as well. So far him and Wolf had been the only ones in his family with a price tag above their head, now his whole family was threatened. How could Robin so blindly accept the fact that children were dying because of this man? Evil or not, he still was the cause of the Sheriff's terrible mood, and Little John couldn't see how the life of this man and the child of Robin and Marion he was supposedly carrying was worth the lives of so many. He'd been there the night Robin found out, he watched with his very own eyes as his leader touched the swollen abdomen of the stranger. But could he bring his heart to believe? No.. he didn't think so.

Things had turned from bad to worse back in the village. The Sheriff raised the taxes and made sure people who had no money to give would pay their taxes with blood. All this time Robin had kept quietly inside his wood, except from robbing a tax-cart or two. But he knew he couldn't sit quietly by the side no more. He had to arrange a meeting with the Sheriff and see if they could make out some sort of a deal. As so many times before he sent Will as a messenger. With Marion on the inside, providing him with information Robin knew that the Sheriff was going to intensify his brutal actions towards the villagers during the next couple of days and that he had to make an effort to change things to the better now. But Severi had to be kept in the dark about this as far as that could be done. Sure, the fairy was no ignoramus, he noticed all the maimed and escaping people, but he didn't know HOW severe the situation was becoming, or at least not yet. Robin was afraid the fairy might grow noble on him and run away to sacrifice himself for the sake of mankind. That was out of the question as long as he carried Robin's child! Afterwards... well.. that could be a completely different matter.

Still... Severus' knowledge of flora and fauna was invaluable. His potions, salves and tisanes was incredibly advanced and magical. Likewise his knowledge of anatomy and basic first aids, was convincing many that he, the fairy, was a great healer. This was a role Severus would not want to take, in clear conscience, but he saw how the people were incredible backward. It would keep him in the camps good graces as people probably were suffering for his sake back at the village. And even the horrible, fire breathing dragon known for chewing and spitting out first years would not let suffering go unheeded when lives could be saved or made easier by the application of a few simple potions, poultices and herbal remedies.

Then Severus' professional pride alone made him intervene at what he would see as crass stupidity or ignorance. What he hadn't reckoned was that his actions would be mistaken by the mass as the "the gentle ministrations and caring attentions of the enchanting healer...the faire big with child and love for all children and innocents, whose own tears had cured the blind".

It was obvious to Severus Snape the bard who wrote and was currently serenading the camp with this twaddle had never set eyes on him let alone witnessed any of this.

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But even in the gravest of times there were small glints of light making life easier for the ones in the forest. With the sudden spring the forest was coming back to life again. An abundance of animals were appearing. Plants and wild fruit-bearing trees matured well out of season. In effect the forest was giving access to extra food to its steadily growing population. Severus' had grown accustomed to the calming, low- levelled hum of the trees by now. He felt safe within the embrace of his wooden friends and he could feel the power slowly returning to his aching body. They were healing him, the trees. It was ludicrous, it was idiotic, still he could feel it and he believed it was so.

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Wolf Little was a stubborn boy. When he first decided something he would make it happen. And for the time being his main goal was to become friends with the fairy expecting Marion's and Robin's child. The fairy had a fierce look upon him, but Wolf knew a little about grown-ups. Often the most fierce looking men were the ones most in need of a companion. Thirteen years old he knew his fare share about masks and masquerading. He also knew his father didn't like the fairy, even after Robin had decided everybody in the camp should like him. He didn't show it, he treated Severi with outwards respect, but Wolf knew his father's face was lying. He knew he wanted to rip the fairy apart just for having the same face as his brother's murderer. He knew because of the stern looks his father sent him every time he was talking about the fairy or to the fairy. Sure, he made up excuses like: "Don't bother him, Wolf. He needs his rest., or he's busy.." Underneath those words the true words crept forward. "I don't want you anywhere near him!"

But Wolf was certain within his heart that Severi was kind and noble, and not at all like his mirror image. And he did his best to become friend with him when his father wasn't watching. But every time he tried, Severi treated him like a child and ushered him away. So Wolf did the next best thing as he waited for Severi to mellow. He became friends with Ronja. She seldom left the tent without the fairy she was so openly protecting, but when she did, Wolf was never further than a few steps away. She had the cutest voice, and her freckled cheeks were apple-red in the surprising spring. Her hair glowed like fire and her dark blue eyes revealed a girl who'd been through much in her short life. Wolf got butterflies in his stomach just watching her.

She told him the stories Severus was now telling her every night for the comfort of them both. She never told him anything about her self, though, and every time he asked she moved the conversation on to another topic. Wolf told her about the gruesomeness going on in the village, certain she wouldn't tell it to the fairy as she too knew the danger of him escaping to try and stop the treatment the villagers were receiving because Severi was in Robin's care. He also told her grand tales about himself and his many adventures as a skilled poacher. He grew tall as a mountain as he told her about his many insane trips to the borders of the wood the Sheriff considered his property, and how he used to escape the Sheriff's men as easily as that. He even promised to try and catch her a red squirrel she could keep as a pet. But there was one downside to this plan. After things had really started to go wrong down in the village and all his sisters and brothers had moved into the camp in the forest together with their mother, John Little had forbidden his son to set foot in the Sherwood Forest as long as he wasn't with him.

One look on that burning copper-hair rushed him to make his decision. His father would be furious with him when he came back, but for once Wolf didn't care. His father might stop him from poaching the Sheriff's deer as long as he wasn't by his side as a chaperon, but this wasn't poaching, was it. He waved softly goodbye to Ronja before he disappeared into the forest, not looking back, and not worrying the least for what dangers that might await him if he disobeyed his father.

The trick with catching a red squirrel was to know where to look. These curious little creatures fed only on hazelnuts and therefore could live only in certain woodland. Wolf knew of a patch of hazel trees where he'd spotted squirrels several times. It was about an hour's walk from the camp and the boy reckoned he would catch a squirrel pretty easily. They were a bit shy, but as soon as you offered it a hazelnut the tiny squirrel would soon forget to be careful.

Wolf was a light-hearted boy, and the promise of Ronja's smile would be more than enough reward for his reckless trip into the forest. He had brought with him two small, hand-sown bags, one for the squirrel and one for hazelnuts. He was going to gather as much nuts as he could lay his hands on, to make certain the little thing wouldn't starve in Ronja's care. A smile lightened his freckle-sprinkled face as he moved slowly upwards the country. He was going to pass the upper part of the wood line in very steep ground to get to the spot where the red squirrels were living. If he was lucky he might find a small one, that just had moved out from the nest. But that wasn't very likely, after all the last couple of weeks with sudden spring wasn't enough for the squirrels to mate, propagate and raise cubs.

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When Ronja returned to Severus' tent she was smiling from ear to ear. Severus noticed the change in the girl's spirit and welcomed it with all his heart. The past weeks she'd shown him all the trust and care his heart was longing for, and during these days of receiving instead of giving he'd grown to cherish her simple way and soul. She had come to be as dear to him as he'd grown dear to her. They made a very odd couple, and no one could point a finger at what made the girl stick up for the fairy the way she did. She never called him master, and he showed no signs of having power over her in any way. Still they stuck together, like a mouse and a cat not knowing why they shouldn't be together.

"You look happy today, Ronja," Severus said as she sat down beside him, glowing as only a fourteen year old girl can glow. Without even realising he ran slender fingers over her hair and watched how it shone red as a Weasley.

She looked up at him and her smile stayed on her young face, the skinny bag of bones with rags for clothes disappeared and the blossoming woman peeped out.

"I'm just happy, that's all." Her whisper of a voice had silver bells today, and there wasn't any doubt in Severus' mind- the girl was starting to fall in love. He'd seen how the boy named Wolf followed her like a shadow whenever she was out of the tent. At first he thought the boy was trying to bribe his way into the tent to see the ridiculous fairy with the big belly, but when he looked closer he could see all the signs of a fragile romance growing between the two. He had often wondered how it would feel.. to be loved. He'd never experienced to be loved for the person he was by others than his mother before she died ... and Albus. But Albus' love was only a sort of fatherly love, probably brought on by pity for the orphaned death eater. What would it be like to feel the love of a woman, the way Robin was caressed with Marion's heart? How he envied the two and the love they were sharing. He knew how rare it was just watching the two together.

"Does this happiness have a name?" Severus couldn't help himself but to tease her a little bit. Her cheeks went red in an instant:

"What do you mean?" she asked innocently as she started to braid parts of Severus' hair. He chuckled and decided to let it rest. When she felt comfortable she would tell him of her newly discovered feelings, she just needed some time. He leaned back and let Ronja continue braiding small braids into his hair, feeling as contempt as he could given all the circumstances. On the outside of the tent John Little trampled by while he was yelling for his son to take care of the horses.

"WOLF! Come do your shores, NOW!" the shout bellowed through the camp like a tidal wave. Ronja suddenly got a worried look on her face.

"Ronja, do you know anything about your little friend's disappearing?" Severus asked, kindly. Guilt painted her eyes as she tossed her gaze downward towards the ground. "Maybe," she whispered, folding her fingers into her lap, as if she was worried someone would start hitting her for being disobedient.

"Ronja, I'm not mad at you. And I won't be either. Just tell me where Wolf is to be found so that I can go outside and calm his father down," Severus told her and lifted her chin with a careful finger. Dark blue eyes stared at him for a moment, searching for safety, then the answer finally came.

"He's out in the woods, looking for a red squirrel for me. He went a while ago.. told me he would be back before nightfall." This was bad. Severus knew all children had been forbidden to take one step out of the encampment, probably because of the many search-parties the Sheriff was sending through the forest looking for his pet. The sight of the little girl that had been tossed down into the pig pens still haunted him, although he still knew nothing of all the children that hadn't escaped with their life intact. He headed for the exit as fast as he could crawl with his ever-growing stomach, (what was it now.. seven months and a week or two?) and got to his feet on the outside.

Little-John was standing in the middle of the camp, shouting. His face was starting to redden with anger, a seldom sight on this normally calm man.

"Wolf! I don't have time to play hide and seek, the horses need their food NOW!"

"I think I know where your son might be heading." He was nearly out of breath on the short run

towards the giant man. John turned towards him and the normal hidden disgust awoke in his eyes as Severus came closer.

"You do? Then where is he?"

"Ronja told me he was going out into the woods to catch her a red squirrel and that he told her he would be back before nightfall." Severus answered, trying hard not to pant too loud. Little John shook his head.

"Wolf wouldn't go into the forest without me, he knows he isn't allowed to wander off in these perilous times."

"With all respect, I think you are wrong this time!" Severus punctuated: "Boys are thoughtless creatures and when something comes them to mind they won't stop until they have it done. Believe me, I have first hand experience with boys that age." The big man looked at him and did little to hide his building anger, now aimed at the smaller man in front of him.

"Are YOU telling me I don't know my own son?!" Both fists were planted sternly at his side making him look even bigger. Severus had to step carefully unless he wanted the wrath of a man almost as tall as Hagrid coming down on him.

"No, I'm just telling you.. a boy at his age have a tendency not to think things through thoroughly before he sets his plans into action. I reckon Wolf's inner voice told him not to go out into the woods alone, but his urge to get the squirrel Ronja wanted was speaking the loudest. The boy is so evidently falling in love with the girl, I'm surprised you haven't noticed." Little John's face was slowly paling.

"After all the times I've told him..." he muttered through clenched teeth and darted towards his tent to collect his bow and sword. Severus wobbled after him, persistent to help the bigger man seek for his son. John stopped the second he realised he'd got a tail.

"Where do you think you're going!" he spat. He didn't want to hurt this man in any way, but he couldn't help the open hostility the fairy's face brought to his soul. He'd tried to kill him once and even defended him, and he knew he, if he would have to, would defend him again, as long as the fairy was under Robin's care. But there was no law forcing him to like this man. And there sure as hell was no point having his overweight ass slowing him down through the forest.

"I'm coming along to help you look!" Severus spat back. He was no patient man, but he was stubborn as hell and this was something he'd decided to do, for Ronja's sake.

"No, you're not! You're only going to waste me precious time!" John answered and started walking again, only to be followed still by the supposedly pregnant fairy. He stopped once more, now starting to get agitated.

"Didn't you hear me?? You're staying here! You should have enough children's life's on your conscience without adding my son to the list!" He shoved him away and started walking again. The fairy froze to the spot.

"What do you mean?" It was a shivering question, a question filled with so much fear Little John never would forget it the rest of his days. And when he turned to see, see those eyes filled with endless worry and fear, he was finally starting to get to know the real Severi, the fairy from the land beyond. No one could fake that, there was real concern bathing his features, making him look vulnerable as an infant.

"Nothing... I meant nothing!" he hastily mumbled: "Are you coming or not!"

Severus was slowly starting to regret his own damned stubbornness. Little John had been right all along, he was only slowing him down. He wasn't able to run, even walking was very uncomfortable, and the taller man had to stop and wait for him by every hundred meters walked. After half an hour Severus finally admitted defeat in the slowly rising terrain.

"Go ahead, I'm only slowing you down. You'll have an easier time finding your son if you don't wait for me all the time," he panted as he massaged a sore rib. John Little gave him a stern look that mellowed slowly and he patted the fairy's shoulder with a large palm.

"Wolf is a grown boy, skilled and talented as an escape artist already. I have no fear he will end up in the claws of the Sheriff. But I've told him not to go out into the forest on his own, and he should know better than to disobey his father's demand. I want to find him as quick as possible to assure my self he is safe and unharmed, yes- but I'm not in a hurry." He was lying. All of his instincts told him to run, run and find his son and protect him from all the evil this forest could hide. Both men knew it.

"I'll try to hurry, but promise me you won't wait for me!" Little John nodded slowly and they started walking again. He was moving away from the burdened wizard with every step and soon he disappeared completely from the wizard's view. Severus braced himself and let the heartbeat of the forest lead him in the direction it told him to move. He hadn't noticed their voices while he was walking together with Little John, now he could hear them, calling him forwards, showing him the way. He was worried he would collapse before he could find the boy, but he was no longer afraid he might get lost on his own. The trees were watching him, and they knew where the boy was headed. He could have called out for Little John, told him he knew where his son was headed, but he was afraid the voices of the wood would get lost again if he did so. Besides, he seriously doubted the man would believe him if he told him he could hear the united voice of the forest..

On and on, upwards, upwards the voice called him. Severus walked as fast as his feet could carry him, strengthened by the calm hum from the many trees surrounding him.

He had no idea of how long he'd been walking by himself when a sudden whoosh of warning flew through the leaves of the treetops. Severus' heart tightened. Wolf was in danger! He quickened his pace, accelerated by the sudden urge to find the boy, quickly. Something very bad was going to happen if he didn't get to him fast! He choked the cries wanting to rush out of his mouth. It wasn't wise, he didn't know what danger the boy was facing. Calling for him might kill him as well as save his life. He passed what resembled a cave on his way up the steep terrain, could it be.. Bears were long time extinct in England in the time period of where Severus originated, but in the dark ages bears still were roaming around the island, although their kind grew more and more rare by the day. There was a track leading from the den. Severus wasn't familiar with the marks animals left, but he knew enough to decide these ones descended from a large mammal. Around him the whoosh from the treetops grew louder, more fierce. What awaited him on the top of this hill?

The early spring had tempted a large she bear and her two cubs to cut their winter slumber short this year. The forest was already heavy with all the food a bear could desire, and therefore the mama bear had decided to welcome the abundance of food and sunlight. Her cubs had been playing on an open field, surrounded with hazelnut trees, while she'd been resting in the shadows. She hadn't noticed the human cub at first. It was climbing in the trees and with the wind blowing in the other direction she hadn't got the scent of him until he came down from the trees. One of her cubs cried out in fright as the human cub closed in on it and all the maternal instincts in the she bear awoke with a roar as she ran towards the threat to her cubs.

Severus reached the top of the climb, out of breath and completely exhausted. He was met with a sight that terrified the experienced wizard. In the middle of the field stood Wolf Little, apparently

frozen to the spot, while a huge she bear was coming at him with the fierceness of a steam train. And just as the bear started to run towards the boy, his father appeared in front of the trees on the other side of the clearing. He'd gone round the other way and was now a helpless witness as the raging bear charged straight for his son. He might have time to send away an arrow before a deadly strong paw would rip his son apart. But Little John wasn't as skilled with the bow as Robin Hood and if he were to kill a bear this size immediately he had to hit it straight through its heart. He screamed, trying to get the she bear's attention away from his son, knowing only too well he would never get there in time to sacrifice himself for the sake of his son.

Even at the long distance between them Severus could see the fear in the father's eyes, as he seemed to be forced to watch his eldest son to die. He could feel the desperation all around, it pulsed through him as he tossed himself forward doing what he knew in his heart was impossible

Not all magic is made by the flick of a wand and uttering of spells and curses. There is a kind of magic created by mere panic or anger, the feeling of mortal danger can make a young wizard get rid of that danger without even thinking it. But when you grow older this skill slowly fades until you are solely dependent on your wand and magic words. Only a few grown wizards and witches can do magic without their wands. They still need the "magic words" though and they are left almost drained of energy after the casting. Therefore you seldom see a wizard or witch without a wand no matter how skilled he or she is...

"Somnus!" His voice grew tall as all his will was bent around the spell to force it out of his mere hands. A sharp bolt of pain jolted through his body as a shimmering green light flew out of the tips of his fingers. The spell hit the bear in the chest, a moment before it would have caused a young boy's early death. With a confused roar it lost control over its legs, and seconds later it plummeted down to the ground, already fast asleep. It was a simple spell, not powerful in any way. An easy sleeping spell, the baby-brother of the far stronger "sopor-curse" that was the cause of a certain princess' hundred years old slumber. The bear would sleep for an hour or two before it would awake, a tad confused of what the hell had happened, but unharmed.

Severus' knees slowly started to sag and he too rushed towards the ground, completely drained. His body was aching in every nerve and every cell within his body. It wasn't possible. He wasn't strong enough to commit the simplest charm. Still he'd managed to do the impossible somehow, still his body had provided the immense force of power needed to do magic without his wand. He knew all along he might die if he should succeed in doing this. He could blow both his heart and some of the blood vessels in his brain even if he tried and didn't succeed. He could feel the infant in his abdomen kicking frantically, and he knew he could have killed the Sheriff's offspring too. Half blinded he could see John Little rush towards his son, now crying hysterically, and sweep him up from the ground in one gigantic hug. Pure relief in his sobs as he searched his son for any kind of scratch or tear and ended up with an unharmed son.

The hum around him tried to calm his adrenaline-flowing blood, but before he fainted Severus managed to give a prayer for the sake of the she bear.

"Please.. don't.. kill it... It was only... defending its... young.. Like any.. good.. mother." Severus Snape, the Alchemist and Potions Master finally gave in to the dark.

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Chapter 21 by Restina Lovebug
Darien

The camp was in an uproar. The moment Little John returned to the camp, carrying the unconscious fairy, everybody feared the worst. The fairy was dead. Killed in battle or by an assassin hidden within the forest. But he was alive, barely. He drew breath, although not steadily and his heart was racing way too fast. Little John rushed him inside his quarters where Ronja immediately started calling him back to life again. Robin lost everything in his hands and joined

Ronja and John as they tried to wake Severi. His lips were blue due to the lack of oxygen and his fingers showed signs of the fierce force that had rushed through his body the moment the spell erupted from his mind. John held his slack hand while huge tears ran down his cheeks. There were no more signs of hostility left in the tall man's heart now.

"Oh my god!" Robin whispered as he stared at the belly concealing his son.

"What about my son, is he alive?" he tugged Little John's sleeve. Little John hadn't even noticed his leader joining them.

"What about, Severi- Robin, do you care if he's still alive?" His voice was heavy.

"Of course I do!" Robin said, a bit too eagerly. Truth to be told, his only worry at this time was his son inside the fairy's body. In his mind he was already searching for ways to save the unborn infant if Severi should die. He knew of women who'd died in childbirth where the child had been saved by cutting through the mother's flesh and extracting the baby. He looked at the lifeless heap laying in front of him. What the hell had happened to him out there in the forest? And why was Little John suddenly showing him so much affection? As if the big man had read his mind Little John started blabbering about what had happened back in the forest. There was something about his son.. a bear with cubs.. and some heroic act done by Severi. So the kind and gentle fairy had put the life of Robin's son on the line for the sake of Wolf, a boy who knew so well he wasn't allowed into that forest in the first place.

"He saved Wolf's life, Robin. And he did it without even flinching like I did. Firework flung out of his fingers and forced the bear to sleep. I wanted to kill it, but he talked me into reason before he passed out. The bear was only protecting her cubs. He made me realise that, he saved two lives today." There was a tone of awe in Little John's voice as he looked down on the lifeless figure.

"I've never been more wrong than I have been with this man. I hope I will get the chance to ask him for his forgiveness.." Robin didn't look that kindly on the man. He was upset. Upset Severi had exposed his unborn child of danger. He couldn't help it. There was a low moan from Severi and a following gasp for air. Ronja was crying silently as she unbuttoned the top buttons of his shirt to help him breath. It didn't look good. Robin silently decided that if he stopped breathing he was going to do anything in his power to save his son.

Wolf came into the tent after being checked for bruises and missing pieces by his mother, and after telling the whole encampment about the fairy who saved his life. Even his freckles paled as he realised Severi's life was hanging by a thread. He'd been convinced the fairy would be all right after some rest. Now he wasn't too convinced he would make it. He noticed the strained and calculating look on Robin's face there he sat in the corner, watching Ronja and Wolf's father trying to talk the fairy back to life.

"What's wrong with him?" the boy whispered.

"I don't know! It's like he's slowly withering away," Ronja whimpered as she helplessly brushed his cheek.

His heartbeat was slowing down. It plummeted down after beating maniacally for the last hour to beat far too slowly. His breathing also declined as his body slowly gave away. It was simply too drained. He felt peaceful after fighting against it without results for a while. There was no use in fighting no more, it was over. He could feel the trees calling him, urging him to continue the fight. He felt the hum flowing through his body, trying to repair what was destroyed within him, but there was no use. He was too weak to struggle against the darkness slowly closing in on him. He didn't mind the cold any more, he didn't feel regret. Finally he would return to Hogwarts, if only in his dreams.

The day became night and what little life left in Severus body was now solely cursing through the veins of the infant hidden in his abdomen. He still barely drew breath, but it was only a matter of an hour or less before he would give in completely. The camp waited in silence. Robin had sent for Marion so that she could say farewell to the fairy, but he was seriously starting to doubt she would make it there in time. She was invited for a ball at Nottingham Castle tonight and had already left when Bull came to collect her at her mansion. When she returned from the ball it would probably be too late.

Ronja hadn't left her fairy's side for one second after Little John had brought him in. She wouldn't give up hope, but now that even Little John was shaking his head in sad disbelief she was starting to lose faith. The one she was set to protect was slowly slipping through her small hands. A shadow appeared in front of the opening of the tent and Little John and Wolf moved aside as Robin came inside. Ronja immediately felt unease. There was something about the young man's appearance that disturbed her, awoke her protecting instincts. And then she saw it, the knife he was trying to hide in his palm.

"Ronja.. there's nothing more we can do for Severi now. The only thing we can do for him is to try and save the unborn.."

"NOOOOO!!!!!" Ronja screamed in alarm as he brought the knife forwards into the dense light. She half threw herself in front of the fairy's body.

"You want to hurt him! I wont let you, I wont let you!!!!!"

"Robin.." Little John started, but was abruptly cut off by Robin.

"He's as good as dead! If we wait any longer my son will die as well!" there was a shaky calmness over the man and Little John understood he'd been considering this since the fairy had been brought in earlier that day.

"I need you to.. take care of the girl. She won't let me near him." Robin continued calmly as he moved closer to the wizard's belly, the only one dividing them now was the screaming girl. But suddenly her cries ceased. She looked at Robin with endless sadness before she turned around and embraced the lifeless figure. Small sobs and whimpers were the only sounds she made as she lay there trying to accept that she was about to lose her friend. But she would be damned if she'd let Robin Hood cut him while he still was alive!

Many are the tales of great wonders throughout the times. This wonder was witnessed by three, a boy, a young man and a bigger, taller man, all of whom had given up the hope of ever seeing the fairy Severi open his eyes again. As he lay there, lifeless in Ronja's desperate embrace Severus Snape opened his eyes like he'd just received an electric shock. He bolted upwards, gasping for air as his whole body shivered in tremors, before he fell down with a silent moan, glaring blindly at the shocked witnesses surrounding him. The young witch had done her second magic trick in her short career as a witch.

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The last thing he had remembered was a blinding pain, before he'd passed out- completely drained. He breathed heavily as his eyesight slowly returned and it dawned to him he'd been walking on the very edge of life and death, and that he was supposed to be dead. So how come wasn't he?

Tears fell on his face, tears of joy and relief. He could feel them running softly down his cheeks and knew Ronja was still by his side. A sharp kick that bruised one of his ribs proclaimed a certain foetus' abeyance to. He lifted a limp hand towards the blur he reckoned was the girl, but had to give in to gravity. Somewhere outside he could hear the happy cries of Wolf Little, who

was busy spreading the happy news around the camp. Severus couldn't believe his own ears. Was it cheers that reached his ears??

"Thank you Ronja," he whispered before he drifted away once more, this time into silent, blissful slumber.

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He had been on a search ever since the day the first promise of the prophecy had been fulfilled. The beast had returned. For the time being it was in hiding, growing in strength, feeding of the fears of the people as it slowly grew fatter and more fierce. It would remain hidden until the second promise of the prophecy had been fulfilled, the birth of an angel child. He was part of a secret community, that had solemnly sworn an oath to protect the world from the beast that over the centuries had tried to claim the world as his several times. They had succeeded in stopping him, but not in killing him. And with every defeat he grew stronger, making a promise his every future return would grow more impossible to defend.

It was crucial that their involvement in this and their methods were kept hidden. It was blasphemy to even think doing what they did, mixing the church with witchcraft. But this was the only way to defeat the beast, and their actions were done in the best of intentions.

Now the stars of the sky were indicating time was growing short, and the lone man with the hooded cloak knew he had to find the expectant mother before it was too late. When the child was born the beast would wake from his slumber and come to claim the infant, and what little hope the stranger and his companions had of succeeding their task depended on finding out where the woman was hiding. They would offer her their joined power as protection against the beast, while she recovered from the birth. All of them were scattered around the countryside, searching for a fair woman nearly nine months pregnant, raven black hair and skin white as milk. So far they'd come up with nothing. Now the stranger had stumbled over the outskirts of the very encampment where Robin Hood was hiding. The forest knew their third ally and made sure the stranger would find what he was looking for. He was no threat to them, and they knew that. There was a little left of the old magic inside him, not much, but when he was together with his kin he would make a fierce enemy. Much was at stake, and the lone figure knew it only too well. Although he'd never battled this demon himself, he knew the tales from his forefathers. The woman had to be found, before it was too late.

David of Doncaster, more commonly known as Bull, was the one standing guard by the outskirts of Robin's encampment this night. He hated these late watches. He missed out on the fun by the campfire and nutritious mead. No one ever found their way out here anyway unless they were shown the way by some of the camp's inhabitants. But Bull knew better than to argue with his boss, especially now when there was so much going on. The last three weeks the Sheriff had strengthened his efforts when it regarded the fairy's return. Robin's offers were not accepted, the Sheriff demanded Robin's prisoner to be returned, unarmed and not hurt in any way. Little did he know that Severi was in a very poor condition back in Robin's encampment after barely surviving an encounter with a bear. With all this going on, and with the villagers taking the hardest blow for Robin's stubbornness the lord of Loxley was in a very bad mood these days. And on top of it all the fairy carried his and Marion's child- therefore making an exchange impossible for the expectant father. Bull was no father himself, but he'd seen how parents guarded their young with other lives paying a terrible prize. Robin was arguing Severi was too valuable as a healer for them to toss him back to the Sheriff, but Bull was pretty certain the one and only reason the fairy still was in this camp was for the child he carried.

There were tales rummaging around the camp these days, telling of witchcraft, and both the fairy and his servant girl had been pinpointed as the devil's disciples by friar Tuck. There was much evidence against them. The fairy had been seen using witchcraft against the bear, and he'd most likely adopted a mage in Ronja who were the one which crafting him back to life again. Tuck was

slowly scaring the camp to death with his promises of an eternity in hell for letting the two continue their devilry, and the only one slowing him down was Marion. She was all over him like a hawk, not letting him have a minutes rest. She threatened to have him banned from the camp if he continued his shameless act against a man and a girl who'd done so much for the encampment. Bull wasn't sure what to believe anymore. He'd heard with his own ears Wolf tell about the green light flying from the fairy's fingers and forcing a grown bear to sleep. And he'd also witnessed Robin one night as he somehow flew several meters through the air, after being tossed out from the fairy's tent.

As he stood there, thinking hard and with a stupid expression of concentration on his face, he got aware of a silent noise a few meters to his left. There was a low scattering about in some bushes, probably an animal of some sort. Bull decided to check it out anyway. At least that would mean he didn't have to come up with some determination on the matter of the fairy and the girl. With his sword he poked the bush that had made the noise, and almost got a heart attack when the bush made a startling howl.

"Who be there! Come out and show yourself!" Bull cried and tried to look a tad more fierce than he felt. From the bush a hooded man appeared, wearing typical clothes for a monk.

"Please, I mean you no harm!" a calm voice uttered as the stranger lowered his hood. Bull gave him a doubting look. It was a young man, maybe thirty years old, in the darkness it was impossible to tell the colour of his eyes or his hair.

"Then what is a petty little friar like yourself doing in the forest of Robin Hood? You don't look like you're from this part of the land!" Bull aimed his sword at the stranger's throat. The monk still looked calm and didn't seem to mind the sharp blade centimetres from his flesh.

"I'm looking for someone," he simply answered.

"What's your name!" A bit desperate Bull was starting to realise his interrogation wasn't going to well.

"My name doesn't concern you," the stranger answered: "But I hope you can be at some assistance to me." Agitated at the stranger's bluntness Bull lowered his sword. Only a man of the church could be this stupid and god-trusting naive.

"Are you expecting me to accept every word of a complete stranger and simply ignore the fact that you're trespassing?!" The man in front of him blinked in a strangely reassuring way.

"I'm just gonna ask you a few questions, and when you've answered me I'll go and not bother you again. I'm a simple man of the church, I carry no weapons and I'm no ally of the Sheriff you fear in these parts of the land." Bull sighed. The man was only a scabby friar, what harm could it do if he let the chap have his way with a few questions.

"Alright, I'll answer your questions if I can," Bull sighed and rolled his eyes to put it straight to the monk that he was wasting a soldier's time.

"I'm looking for a woman," the monk started in a calm melodic voice: " She's got pitch black hair, milky white skin. The moment you look at her you sense that she's not of this world. And last but most importantly- she's heavy with child. Do you know of any women in your camp resembling this description?" Bull looked at him, trying hard to maintain his stern exterior, but burst into laughter as he thought of the only one that could resemble the description the stranger just had given him. Now, no one had ever claimed David wasn't loyal to his kin, but especially smart- that he wasn't.

"I'm sorry, my good man- there is no woman in our camp matching that description, but we DO

have a man here, both dark-haired, pale skinned and pregnant! Oh yeah, and he's not from this world either." A new wave of laughter overcame Bull and he didn't notice the vivid face of the stranger.

"Is he an angel?" the man whispered and grabbed Bull's sleeve.

"Nope, some claim he is a fairy, descended from the sky, others believe he's some sort of mage of the Devil." It was hysterically funny to discuss the ludicrously surrounding Severi with a stranger. Bull was enjoying it very much. But he had failed to see the changes in the other man's face and was caught completely off guard when the monk with a surprisingly stern voice commanded:

"Take me to him!"

"Hey, I've answered your question, now it's your turn to keep your end of the bargain. Go away before I decide to take you to the camp! When first you've entered its borders you'll never be allowed to leave!" Bull spat. He wasn't going to let this friar spin him around his little finger. The stranger gave him a long, hard look and then, with a sigh, he lunged forwards. Bull jumped back, confusion on his face as he raised his sword once more.

"You give me no choice! I'm taking you in!" Bull growled, not noticing the impatience in the monk's eyes.

"Fine, take me to this fairy already!"

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There was a low whoosh going through the camp as Bull brought the strange monk in. He was going to deliver him to Robin for questioning, and maybe if he was lucky, he would give him the rest of the night off. The stranger seemed to be taking in every little detail as he was nudged forward towards the campfire where Robin was seated.

"I found this intruder lurking in the bushes!" he said importantly and shoved the monk into the middle of the circle of people surrounding the fire.

"I wish you no harm, kind lord. I'm a simple monk on a quest, a quest that involves tracking down an angel I expect is in great peril. And I believe this angel hides in this very camp. All I ask is to see the man you call Severi and decide for my self if he is the angel of which I and my brothers seek." The monk didn't seem even remotely concerned about his own faith.

"You are brave, my good man!" Robin said as he got to his feet to show the young friar who was the leader of this camp: "You are brave, but sadly equally stupid. Once you have set foot inside this camp we won't let you leave unless in a coffin." The stranger bowed to show his respect to Robin.

"I'm a humble man of the church, and my only wish is to see the one you call Severi. If it be your will that I shall stay, so be it. I won't trouble you."

"Severi is no angel, brother! He's the Dark Lord's mage!" Finally brother Tuck decided to intervene. Robin's eyes lit up with anger immediately.

"Tuck, I will have no more mocking of Severi! You know what he carries is dear to me and that he therefore is dear to me as well! Severi is no Demon, and if you claim that one more time I swear I will do as Marion advised me to and ban you from this camp!" he roared and turned towards the round bellied friar who immediately made a run for it to the nearest tent. Robin sighed and turned back, looking much older than his years.

"Have you searched him for weapons?" he asked Bull who nodded eagerly.

"Alright then, stranger. I'll let you see Severi. But only briefly, his health is not well and he needs his rest," Robin quietly sighed and led the way towards the tent where the fairy was kept.

The last two weeks Severus had been recovering from the bear attack. He was still as fragile and weak as a brittle cup of china. Robin's concern orbited around the contents of the fairy's belly, but he didn't show it to anyone. The only one not trusting him was Ronja, who still hadn't forgotten the night he'd entered their tent with knife in hand, ready to sacrifice Severi's life for the sake of his son. Robin noticed the sudden change in the monk's appearance, he was breathing rapidly and his eyes widened with poorly hidden excitement as they approached the tent.

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Severus had gotten used to a lot of things the last weeks, but this was one of those things he would never get used to. Young Ronja was giving him an upper body scrub, and to let his pale skin and disgusting body be touched by someone else repelled the wizard. But he was too weak to do it himself and Ronja was complaining about his smell, so he had no choice. It was easier when he closed his eyes. This way he didn't have to see the disgust in Ronja's face or to look at the heavy stomach..

Ronja was just drying him carefully when Severus suddenly sensed that somebody were heading towards his tent.

"Cover me up, girl! Quickly!!" he whispered desperately as he heard the footsteps getting closer. But even quick-fingered Ronja didn't manage to cover up the wizard in time. Seconds later Robin crawled inside, closely followed by a young man neither of the two had seen before.

"Get out!" Ronja cried and tried to block the men's view to her fairy: "You're not allowed!"

"Relax, this man is just going to have a look at Severi and then we'll leave!" Robin barked. The agitated tone in his voice was underlined with his narrowed eyes. Severus felt completely naked. He wanted to run away, vanish into thin air, but he had to remain on the ground, torso uncovered. There was a gasp from the stranger as he crawled closer, and Severus finally got a glimpse of his face. He looked to be around thirty, sandy brown short hair, grey eyes with yellow dots in them. His mouth had an odd look of kindness of it, as did his eyes and the rest of his face, and with the clothes he bore Severus immediately guessed this man was one of the church. But there also was a strange, undeterminable look on his face, the face of a man that finally finds what he's looking for.

"Who... are you!" Severus breathed, trembling slightly as he tried to cover up his bare upper body with his mere hands. He was terrified it might be one of the Sheriff's lackeys. A great, comforting smile appeared on the stranger's face as he leaned closer.

"I'm brother Darien, I've been looking for you the last month now, my lord," the stranger answered and bowed his head in an act of respect.

"You are the chosen one, the one of the prophecies! I've sworn to protect you no matter what, for you and the child you carry are the key to the man's continued existence! I will gather my brothers and sisters, and together we will protect you from the demon mage, of whom's name we do not mention!"

What was this bullshit?! Severus Snape wasn't a patient man under normal circumstances, and he wasn't easily convinced either.

"Come again?" he asked, a mildly amused tone in his voice. If it wasn't for the fact that brother Darien was so openly staring at his stomach he would have enjoyed this display.

"I am a member of a secret community, sworn to protect the world from the threat of the demon, who's name I we do not speak," the stranger answered patiently: "The prophecy told of an angel, descending from heaven to fight the demon. But the angel is captured, and unspeakable things are done to it, the angel is impregnated with a human child. My task now is to assemble my brothers and sisters so that we can protect the angel. For after the birth the demon will come to claim both the infant and you, Severi- for you are the angel which I seek."

"Oh, please!" Severus moaned and rolled his eyes. The past weeks he'd been a fairy, now he had to be an angel also??!?

"Severi is no angel, he is fairy!" Robin interjected. The man named Darien turned calmly towards him.

"A dear child has many names!" he said and smiled: "I expect Severi is both your fairy and my angel."

"Yeah, and maybe I'm neither!" Severus growled:

"Maybe I'm just some poor smock stuck in a situation I'm not able to get out of! Have either of you ever stopped to consider that??" Ronja looked horrified by the mere idea and Robin and the stranger tilted their heads in surprise.

"Severi is tired, you should go now! Listen at what you make him say!" Ronja snarled to the two intruders. It was obvious to her that the fairy was too weak to be interrogated by this stranger, and Robin had no right to come barging in there like that. Severus had a tired look of rejection on his face as Ronja ushered the two men out of the tent. He was so fed up with living lies, that he'd been millimetres from spilling his guts. Not a very wise idea, but tempting none the less.. Why couldn't he have a few measly hours of peace??! Just when he thought there could be no more surprises coming his way, this man had to walk into his life. The man had told an interesting tale, though. Severus was supposed to be an angel. Well, it wasn't any less ludicrous than believing he was a fairy... But one little detail had glued itself to the wizard's mind. The mentioning of a dark demon mage. Could it be the Sheriff and his mother were collaborating with some dark wizard? That would certainly explain how the two of them could come up with a curse powerful enough to steal his powers and even impregnate him in the process...

There was trouble heading Severus' way and there was nothing he could do about it but sit and wait..

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By morning brother Darien was starting to feel restless. He should be on his way, gathering the brothers and sisters by now. But Robin had tightened the security around him, as he suspected the monk would try to escape. And they wouldn't let him back inside to the angel either. He seemed to be in a poor condition, no strength in a worn-out body, too fragile to carry a human baby properly. By the looks of it the angel was about eight months pregnant, and Darien seriously doubted Severi would survive a birth in his current condition. If they'd just let him in so that he could help him! He wasn't a fully trained healer, but what left in him of the old magic would be enough to get the angel on his feet again. But trust was a rare gift in this part of the country, and Darien knew he would have to break some of his Order's codes to give the angel the help he so sorely needed.

He decided to use Wolf Little, since the boy showed an open mind and huge interest in the stranger and his tales. Children are far more trusty than grown ups, and Wolf also had a big heart.

After a short conversation with the boy Darien knew why the angel was so drained for strength.

"Do you trust me?" he asked the boy by dinnertime. Wolf nodded with a grave face.

"Yes I do. I believe you are telling the truth. You are a man of the church after all."

"Then you understand that it is important to me to protect Severi, even though he doesn't want me to," Darien asked in a low tone voice. This camp had ears everywhere and he didn't want anybody to find out he was manipulating the boy. Wolf nodded and leaned closer with eyes wide.

"I know a way to restore some of his strength, but they won't let me anywhere near him. I need to get inside that tent and have a proper talk to him without Lord Loxley hanging around, and when I've done my best to help him here in the camp I need to notify my Order. If there is to be a tomorrow after the child is born we need to be gathered. Only gathered as one we stand a chance to keep the beast at arms bay while Severi recovers from childbirth." The boy let the monk's words sink in.

"Tonight," he whispered: "I'll make a diversion tonight. When everybody's attention is turned away you sneak inside Severi's tent. But pretend to be asleep in your tent or something, so that they won't miss you when they turn back again."

"Thank you, Wolf," Darien said and patted the boy's shoulders: "Your father must be very proud to have such a stout-hearted, clairvoyant son." Wolf lit up in a great smile as he rose to his feet.

"I think he's mostly annoyed with me," he laughed and ran to feed the horses.

The evening came and Darien excused himself early and crawled into his tent. There he waited for the distortion Wolf would make, and half an hour later a great bang from an explosion shook the camp. People screamed in alarm and ran towards the place where a tree was lit up with fire and where a howling Wolf was standing underneath it. Brother Darien snook out of the tent and ran crouching towards Severi's tent. The girl serving as the angel's protector had also been spooked by the explosion and had left her master's side to find out what had caused it. Good. That would mean that the angel was all alone and had no one to help him if he decided to fight back, fearing that Darien was an enemy.

He heard heavy breathing as he entered the tent of the angel he was sworn to protect. He lay on his back, hands clasping his belly and with a strained look on his face. Brother Darien immediately feared Wolf's explosion had scared Severi into labour. Due to the dim light inside the tent Severi didn't realise the figure crawling inside was an unwelcome guest.

"What was it, Ronja, has he found me? .. has he found me??!" Poorly hidden fear reeked of his whisper, and Darien realised it wasn't pain causing the angel's distress, it was panic.

"Don't be alarmed, Severi. He hasn't found you." Darien crawled closer so that the frightened man could see his face. A gasp escaped Severi's mouth.

"What are you doing here!" He tried to arch away from the impostor.

"I'm here to help you, if you let me," Darien told him kindly and offered the angel a hand.

"So the friar is here to help me, huh?" the angel spat: "What if I tell you I don't believe in your so called God?!"

"That's your choice if so. You've been through enough to make any human being loose their faith so I wouldn't blame an angel if it did so too. But I can help you if you just trust me," Darien explained. He knew he had to earn the angel's trust quickly. When the girl returned he would get

kicked out faster than the speed of light.

"Trust you?" the other man snarled: "Do you honestly believe I'm still able to trust someone?!?? TRUST is the reason I'm here right now! I trusted the wrong people! And I won't make the same mistake twice. So you can just give up your little agenda, I'm not letting you anywhere near me!"

"I am already near you," Darien smiled. He could smell the anxiety of the angel and knew he had no choice but to listen to what he had to say.

"Relax, this won't hurt!" he whispered and leaned closer as he brought his hands forward, resting easily on top of a ripe stomach. He winced when he felt the pain and distress caused by this unnatural pregnancy.

"You carry a heavy load, my lord," he spoke softly as he let his energy charge carefully from his body and over to the angel's. He could feel Severi tremble beneath his palms.

"Stop it!" he whispered weakly: "What ever you are doing, stop it! I may not harvest many feelings for the creature I'm carrying, but I won't let you hurt or kill it!"

"Relax," Darien assured: "I'm not harming the baby. In fact I'm strengthening it, and you. You are both weak and in desperate need of some energy. I expect it is mere willpower that causes both your hearts to beat." The monk closed his eyes as he continued to drain himself. He would be light-headed and limp the following 24 hours, but it was a prize he was willing to pay, gladly. A few minutes later he withdrew his hands.

"Take this as a token of my devotion to you and the cause. You should feel much stronger now, and if you let me I'll continue to give you energy when I've returned with my Order." He sat down heavily, as he now was the one drained.

"Trust is such a big word," Severi whispered, in the same moment as Ronja returned. She had one look at Darien and took a huge breath of air to scream her alarm.

"Ronja, it's alright, he's helped me!" Severi urged, choking her scream with kind eyes.

"If you want me to trust you, at least tell me the name of the demon who's responsible for all this," he then said, directed towards the panting monk. Darien didn't want to utter this unholy name, especially not in front of something so pure and innocent as an angel.

"The demon's name.. is Voltimore." The angel grew even paler.

"Nooo," he moaned: "How could I be so stupid?!?!"

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He'd walked straight into a trap set by the eight hundred years younger version of Voltimore! Severus cursed several times as the truth hit him smack in the face. Voltimore obviously had made some sort of deal with Mortiana, the witch, probably promising her son a pureblood heir in exchange for the very stone Severus had travelled back in time to collect. Irony at it worst.. A sudden need to roar tore at his chest as Severus fumbled to his feet. Surprised of the ease of it, he went outside- helpless anger and resigned despair flooding his veins as he stalked furiously up and down the camp. How could he have been so blind?! How could all these coincidences finally end up here, in the encampment of fairytale creature Robin Hood, what were the bloody odds for that?!??

Severus' furious pacing back and forth was watched by them who were still awake with unease. Earlier that day he hadn't been able to stand at all, and now when he seemed to have regained

some of his strength he looked like he was going to shed it all on a sudden urge to trample around.

His stomach started to cramp immediately, but the wizard didn't care. He was too caught up in his own mind right now, there was so many questions that needed answers! Severus simply patted his swollen abdomen absentmindedly as he continued his pacing, refusing to listen to the warnings his own body was sending him.

A sharp prickling sensation in his lower back started to etch its way up his spine. His lungs started to burn and he was wobbling more than walking.

The dark memories of the Sheriff and the dark room down in the dungeons hit his wide open mind and he started to tremble as he took one step after another, refusing to give in to the power trying to overwhelm him.

"Are you alright?" Severus spun around, he hadn't noticed the man approaching him and right now the last thing he wanted was anyone anywhere near him. John Little had somehow managed to sneak up on Severus without him even noticing him.

"I'm.. I'm fine!" Severus panted and started his walking again. He had to keep going, somehow he HAD to. He nearly jumped when a pair of solid palms clamped his shoulders and forced him to stop.

"There is something troubling you, Severi." The big man looked him calmly in the eye.

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but I'm not letting you go around exhausting your self like that. You have to think of the little one you're carrying, and you have to think of your self. No good will come of you hurting your self like this." Severus closed his eyes. Everything he'd kept locked deep down in his brain had now broken free and threatened to choke him. He could feel the Sheriff pawing at him, hitting him, licking him... He tried to jerk free of the firm grip around his shoulders but failed.

"No.. please don't!" he whispered at the imaginative Sheriff pinning him down: "Don't ..I beg you!" He was drowning in his own depressed memories.

"Severi!" A husky voice not resembling the silky tone of the Sheriff called for him.

"Open your eyes, Severi!" Severus opened his eyes and his eyes darted back and forth trying desperately to find something of comfort to lock on to. Finally he found the tall, bearded man who still were holding him firmly. Was it Hagrid? Severus was completely deluded, but when he was pulled towards the bigger man's chest for a rough hug the memory of the Sheriff's hands finally let go of him. A trembling rattle went through his chest as Little John embraced the man that had saved his son's life.

For once Ronja kept calm when Little John brought Severus back to the tent. And Darien who was so tired he had problems keeping his eyes open also kept quiet. Severus was silently sobbing, and odd sound coming from the wizard that hadn't shed a tear since the night the Sheriff had done the unthinkable to him. He wouldn't let go of the man he believed to be Hagrid when he tried to lay him down on the makeshift bed. He held on to him like a scared little child, convinced the Sheriff would reappear the second he was on his own again.

Little John watched the fairy slowly drift into slumber. Still the smaller man denied letting go of him, and Little John didn't even want to think of what horrors this fairy had been through that made him react like this. He'd been there the night Marion told Robin that the Sheriff had done unthinkable, unforgivable things to the camp's new addition, and John didn't envy Severi one bit. He was holding Severi like he would a little child, and cooed him with comforting sounds as he

carefully stroke his back. He could feel tiny movements from the fairy's belly and for the first time he didn't find the idea of a baby beneath this man's skin disgusting. The small flutters of life from Severi's belly was the same as when John's wife was pregnant. And before John knew it his right palm rested on top of the fairy's belly, a tender expression on his face. The son of Robin and Marion, carried forth by a man some believed to be fairy, angel or demon. To John he looked most like a tired man, with too much weight to carry. There was nothing demonic about him, he lacked the grace of an angel and he didn't own the stunning beauty of a fairy. Still he had ended up in this camp somehow, pregnant and weak. And with the face John believed he'd never learn to like. He'd been wrong. Now he was willing to sacrifice his life for the man who'd saved his son.

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After twelve solid hours of sleep inside the angel's tent, Darien decided it was time to leave the camp. He didn't want to leave the angel in this frail state, but he knew he had to assemble the Brothers and Sisters before it was too late. He trusted that Ronja and the huge man that weirdly enough was called Little John would take care of Severi. He was still sleeping in the giant man's arms, and John was also sleeping now, after watching over the black clad man through the night. Besides he had John's son Wolf who'd promised to keep an eye on the angel. The problem now was to sneak away, unseen.. But he was in luck. The guard set to watch him through the night had fallen asleep on his watch, and no one turned their heads when the monk vanished behind some trees.

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