

A Simple Plan

by chivalric

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

Winter Night

Chapter 1 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

A/N: Many, many thanks to shellsnapeluver, CharmedForce and Sampdoria for betareading. The last check was done by kittylefish. Thanks, dear!

All in all, the story will have nine chapters plus an Epilogue.

Warning: This chapter describes rape and contains severe violence.

1: Winter Night

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It was November and a perfect night for a little stroll in the woods. Not too deeply into the forest, of course, but merely a walk along the trees. It was cold, the stars were twinkling and a small moon hung on the night sky. The frost had covered grass and trees with little diamonds, and it was silent outside. No one apart from her was up and about.

Her feet didn't make much noise as Hermione wandered by the lake towards the Forbidden Forest. There was a certain clearing she liked to visit when she couldn't sleep after a hard day's work. The clearing was far enough away from Hogwarts for her to be certain that no one would see or hear her, were she to be in a singing or a shouting mood. And although it was outside the wards, it was close enough to feel safe, given the fact that Voldemort was still alive.

Hermione Granger, Arithmancy teacher since the new term, had found it necessary to have a quiet spot, a secret place where her colleagues wouldn't follow her. Having always been a solitary person in general, she had learned that sometimes even the library was too crowded and that her rooms were too close to the rooms of the other teachers for ranting aloud about the dreadful little monsters called students whom she had stupidly agreed to teach. She was twenty-one and unmarried; she had taken on Professor Vector's classes, as the old professor had been killed quite unexpectedly during the summer break, right after the end of Hermione's apprenticeship. She was still feeling quite insecure in her new position as a professor at Hogwarts; she didn't feel that comfortable yet sitting at the head table, next to Minerva and Albus, looking down at the new students. Somehow, it didn't feel right not to be a student herself anymore.

So Hermione went for walks when the day's routine was done, when all dreadful essays had been corrected, when dinner was finally over, and when she didn't have to patrol the corridors. She had a tendency, though, to look around on her way out of the school in case a teacher jumped on her for being up after curfew.

Whenever she found the time, she went to the clearing and sometimes just hummed some songs, sometimes she talked aloud to the trees or shouted at them, sometimes she took a book, and sometimes she just sat and daydreamed.

A soft wind blew her hair out of her face, and her breath stood in white clouds in front of her mouth. Somewhere behind her was Hogwarts, where her job, her books, and

her room were. In front of her was the wood; there she was, at her clearing. The frost bit her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. She needed half an hour of peace.

Huge old trees surrounded the clearing and protected everyone within from curious looks. A few leaves danced silently over the frost-crusted ground. Taking out the blanket she had brought, she placed it on the ground as it was icy, and a warm seat underneath her was more than welcome. She had enchanted it the blanket would stay dry and keep the cold at a distance as long as she sat on it.

Wind rustled the few remaining leaves, and the moon shone through the branches.

Tonight was neither a singing nor a talking night; tonight she would just sit with her back against the ancient old tree, warmed by the blanket, covered in her heavy cloak, and think about whether she should accept Ron's invitation for dinner or not. He had asked her out a lot lately, and sometimes they had ended up in bed together, sometimes not. She expected him to propose any time now and wasn't sure if she wanted him to take that step; maybe if she refused his invitation she could cool him down a bit, as she didn't feel like marrying him. She didn't even feel like dating him anymore, if she was entirely honest with herself.

Snow began to fall, a flake here and there. The wind was chasing the clouds across the sky and the moon; in two weeks it would be Christmas. Hermione wondered if it was appropriate to give presents to her colleagues or if she should only choose something for her family and her few friends. Maybe something for Ginny, as well, and little James....

A small noise distracted her: the tiny crack of a breaking twig. A squirrel? A bird? No, the animals would be asleep, as were the students and her colleagues. *It is nothing*, she persuaded herself with a small grin. *You get scared too easily*. She pulled her cloak closer around her body.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione enjoyed the sensation of the cold winter air filling her lungs and the wintery silence that surrounded her. Another star twinkled from above into the clearing, and a snowflake landed right on her nose. It was a beautiful, perfect night.

Suddenly, a hand shot out of the darkness, went straight for her throat, and started strangling her. The world, her world, shattered into glittering pieces and became hell.

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Strong arms ripped her up and crushed her against the tree she had been leaning on. The rough bark thrust sharply into her spine. A fist was slammed hard into her face, and she felt blood spurting out of her cracked lip; a second blow broke a tooth, and she just spat it out, far too shocked to scream.

Then she started to struggle, to kick, to fight, but her attacker was taller, heavier, and a lot stronger. Her arms were pressed mercilessly against her body her wand, buried deep in her pocket, was well out of reach. Her only option, her only possible weapon, was to use her voice to raise an alarm and hope someone would hear. She opened her mouth to scream.

A second blow made her stumble, and instead of the scream, a low groan emerged from her lips.

Her head was ripped back when a hand brutally caught hold of her hair, pulled until some strands came loose, and she gave up fighting in the hope that the pain would cease; instead, a rough rag was stuffed into her mouth.

Too late. Too late to scream.

She could hear nothing but the harsh breathing of the one who held her, crushed her, broke her. His face under the mask was very close to hers a Death Eater. When she tried to kick him, he slammed her head hard against the tree; dizzy, she wondered if Voldemort was close enough to observe the actions of his follower. She wondered if Death Eaters were attacking the school at that very moment. She wondered when he would kill her, hoping that it was just a simple kill he was after.

It wasn't.

Panic washed over her when his hands ripped her cloak open, discarded it onto the grass, only to have a go at her jumper, her trousers, her knickers. Her clothes were flying through the night air like large, clumsy birds, spreading their wings only to crash moments later on the frozen ground.

She struggled to break free; whenever she moved another blow came, hard, cruel, casual, causing her pain and making her bleed, but not hard enough to knock her out.

How she wished she were elsewhere when her attacker snatched opened her bra and tore away her knickers. How she wished she were unconscious when he threw her to the ground, onto the frozen grass, only to fall on top of her an instant later, his left arm across her throat, his right fumbling at his own robe now.

A stray thought wandered to her blanket, lying crumpled and torn under her tree, a few feet away *He could at least have thrown me on it* whilst the freezing cold claimed her body, touching her with skeletal fingers.

How she wished she were dead when he forced her naked legs apart, ignorant of the fact that her soft skin on her bottom and upper legs was cut by the gruesome ground.

How she wished she could scream, but the rag in her mouth prevented every sound, and the screams stuck in her throat, dry with fear. She balled her hands into fists only to find them bound by a spell.

When she felt his hard cock against her ice-cold thighs, her mind yelled with terror: she finally fully realized that she was being raped, raped by a nameless Death Eater whose face she couldn't see and who ignored her frightened, pleading eyes and her hopeless attempts to shove him off. A nameless monster who used his elbow to strike a blow against her temple and who, with cruel force, now penetrated her, thrust hard inside her, causing her pain too burning and searing and cutting to be endured. But she had to endure it, helpless as she was, half unconscious whilst he just pumped in and out, harder and harder with each movement, simultaneously leaning on her with his full weight so she nearly suffocated whilst feeling him everywhere on and inside her, with blood running down her legs and tears down her cheeks, unable to scream, unable to move, unable to think.

He finished it fast, but for her, it took an eternity. When it was over, he rolled off her, was on his feet in an instant, buttoned his trousers, and was about to go, to run away even.

Then, as if having second thoughts, he came back, hauled her up, and started beating her, again and again, until she reached out, half-blinded by the blood that ran into her eyes, trying to block his blows, and instead, ripped off his mask.

She recognized the face, the hair, the eyes of someone she had slightly feared since her childhood, had never really liked, but had always respected. A face full of horror and self-loathing, but a face so familiar that in the end, finally, she did lose consciousness, falling into oblivion, if only for a few blissful moments. She knew that face so well: she sat next to the man at breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Severus's face.

# Consequences

Chapter 2 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

## 2: Confrontation

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She awoke screaming from pitch-black darkness, from an ocean of pain, and continued screaming in the light of the hospital wing. She didn't stop screaming when soothing hands held her, and she fought against these hands even after she had seen that it was only Poppy.

But she couldn't stand those hands, any hands, on her skin.

When Poppy finally stepped away from her to give her space to breathe, Hermione stopped screaming and just cried. Silent tears ran down her face, and she hugged herself, rocked herself, tried to soothe herself, but failed. Every bone in her body ached. Breathing ached; crying ached, as her eyes were bruised from the beating. The insides of her thighs were sore, her most intimate parts felt as if they had been burned with a hot iron, her back muscles were hard as knots from fighting against...

"Severus," Hermione whispered, and her voice was hoarse from the cries she hadn't been able to utter. "It was Severus. He... r-raped me. Beat me. Unconscious, he beat me unconscious, and he raped me. It was him, I couldn't stop him, Severus..." Her head snapped up. "Did you catch him? Did you kill him? Tell me someone has killed him for what he has done!"

Only a moment ago she had been at the edge of hysteria; now there was nothing but cold hate in her voice when she asked about her tormentor.

Poppy shook her head gently. "He's with Albus, Hermione," she said, trying to calm the young woman, but her words only caused the horrors to jump back into Hermione's mind.

"What?" she whispered and couldn't stop her beaten body from shaking with fear at the thought that Severus... that he was even in the same building with her.

The pity the matron felt for the young professor showed clearly in her eyes. "He's been under the Imperius Curse, Hermione," she explained as gently as possible. "It wasn't his doing; Albus verified this as soon as Severus brought you here. At the moment, he is in the Headmaster's office. His state is nearly as bad as yours."

Hermione bared her teeth and got up. "Now, is it, really?" she managed but found it was too much to bear. That that monster had touched her, had even dared to carry her to the infirmary, after... after what he'd done to her was simply far too much to consider. Hermione fought against the spinning, dizzy sensation in her head, lost, and fell back into blackness.

Poppy was only just able to catch the woman's falling body; otherwise, Hermione would have landed on the floor.

The following days were a nightmare.

Hermione had recovered fast and was about to be released from the hospital wing, as her physical wounds from the rape, though serious and painful, had been quite easy to heal. Three days passed, and Poppy considered her fit to be up and about again. She had confirmed as well that Hermione wasn't pregnant, and she had sworn that no one apart from Albus, Severus, Hermione, and herself knew what had happened that night when the first snow had fallen. "As long as you don't tell, no one will know about it, Hermione," Poppy said for the tenth time in five minutes. "But you might like to consider visiting a Healer at St. Mungo's; there are some especially trained for your..."

"No," Hermione said and heard the panic creeping into her voice again, which happened nearly every time she opened her mouth. "I don't want to talk about it."

She sat on her bed and refused to get up. She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to go out into the corridors, into the normal world outside the infirmary, ever again.

He was out there. She might bump into him whenever she turned a corner; she would have to sit near him at meals. She might even see him in the library...

"You might consider a Memory Charm, then..."

"No!" Hermione screamed, her voice cracking. "No Memory Charm! Just think, Poppy I would forget this, wouldn't remember what he's done, would even greet him with a friendly smile! Don't ever mention it he would win, and that is intolerable." She had gone white with the words and was shaking. Again.

Poppy sighed in despair. Hermione was beyond reason and refused to accept the fact that the Potions master hadn't raped her deliberately but had been forced to do it. She focused all her hate on him Poppy didn't know how to deal with that.

The door opened. Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts headmaster and a genuine friend of Severus Snape, came in, his spectacles sitting slightly lopsided on his nose. The look on his face was very concerned: he had heard the last few sentences. "Would you leave us alone for a minute, Poppy, please?" he said, taking his youngest staff member's hand and looking into Hermione's eyes. What he saw troubled the old man deeply, as he had seen the same look in Severus's eyes only an hour ago when he had visited the Potions master in the Dungeons.

Hate. Deep, scarlet, burning hate.

"Hermione," Dumbledore whispered. "I must beg you to forgive. For the sake of the both of you..."

"He raped me. And he beat me nearly to death after he raped me," she said coldly, and Dumbledore cringed under the words. They were true, of course.

"He had been cursed, Hermione," he pointed out gently as if he knew that a woman who had gone through such a horrible experience would be quite unable to think straight.

Hermione looked at her employer. "I don't care," she bit out. "And if you think I will leave, leave Hogwarts and my job, you are mistaken, Professor Dumbledore. That bastard will have to pay for what he has done to me, even if it is only by seeing me every morning over his porridge." Slipping off the bed, she snatched up her wand and headed for the exit. Now was a good time to leave the infirmary, she decided. She would face Severus; she would stalk him, and she would bring him down.

A thought crossed her mind. With a cruel little grin she turned round to the Headmaster and asked, "I assume Professor Snape didn't ask you to Oblivate him from the memory of his precious little... adventure?" Each word dripped with sarcasm she would have bet her soul on the answer. And yes, she would have won.

Shaking his head sadly, Albus answered, "No, Hermione, he hasn't asked me for that favour, although I strongly suggested it to him. As I strongly suggest it..."

She was no longer listening as she left the infirmary.

After that, after she had been thrown back into the real world, she tried to meet up with Severus face to face but didn't manage to see so much as a corner of his robes. Wherever she went, he wasn't there; wherever she looked, she couldn't find him. He wasn't in the library, he wasn't in his lab, and as it was the break for Christmas, she didn't even have the chance to corner him after classes, as there were simply no classes to be held. Fortunately. She couldn't have faced her own students.

But she needed to see him. She needed to look into his eyes, and she needed him to know how much she hated him, how much she despised him. She needed to make it clear to him that, in her eyes, he was worth less than nothing. She needed for him to hear from her own lips that she would never, ever forgive him.

Except that he seemed to be gone.

Christmas came and went without her even noticing it. She stayed in her room until the festivities were over, she ignored the owls that tried to deliver parcels and letters, she refused to open the door to anyone who knocked.

A few days after Christmas she cornered Dumbledore. She had lost a few pounds, she was pale, her hair was even wilder than usual, and her eyes bore a haunted look.

"Dear Merlin, Hermione," Albus exclaimed, shocked at the sight of her. Gently touching her shoulder, he continued, "You really, really need to talk to someone. If you would please let me take you to St. Mungo's..."

"Is he here?" she snapped, involuntarily wrapping her arms round her waist. "Is he here at Hogwarts or did he sneak away?"

"He is in his rooms, Hermione," Albus replied calmly. "I have not seen him in days, as his wards are up and I don't want to break them, but I know he is here."

"Fine. All I wanted to know. Easy to find him, then," she replied dryly and was gone.

Dumbledore shook his head and, not for the first time, thought of casting Oblivate on them both without their permission.

Banging on the closed door of Severus's rooms turned out to be a hopeless cause. Either he wasn't in, or he was in and had put a Silencing Charm on his door so he wouldn't hear anyone requiring entrance or the most likely possibility was amused by her attempts to get in contact. And as his wards were strong enough to keep out even Albus, she didn't bother to try taking them down.

After another few days she gave up. Once the holidays were over, he wouldn't have any choice but to leave his rooms, and then she would be there, waiting. Until then, she only had to survive and stay sane.

She didn't go to meals anymore but wandered round Hogwarts' empty corridors during the night when she couldn't sleep. And when she slept she dreamed horrible dreams; haunting the school was the better option in her opinion. She declined all offers from Poppy and Albus to talk and for several days now had been avoiding them in order to prevent further attempts to help. She didn't want help. She didn't need help. She only needed to see him and curse him for what he had done to her.

During the day she went outside, fled her colleagues she didn't want to see anyone. They knew something was wrong but didn't know what nagged at her and left her alone following Dumbledore's explicit wishes. Still, she didn't want to see anyone, so at first light, Hermione usually snatched her coat and went outside. She would wander aimlessly for hours, but always in fear that a dark figure would jump out at her once more. This fact, that she feared him and yet searched for him at the same time, tore even more at her fragile mental state.

A habit occurred in her daily routine that disturbed her, but that she nevertheless couldn't control. At first she had thought it to be an accident, somehow, when she had found herself near the Forbidden Forest, as she had been avoiding that area.

The second time it had been dark, and well, one couldn't see that clearly when the sun was down.

But when it happened again, and again, and still again, sometimes several times in one day, she realised that she did it on purpose or that at least her subconscious did it on purpose.

She was seeking out the clearing. She was drawn to it as the tongue is always drawn to the aching tooth, as a bystander of an accident is drawn to watch the victim die, and she could do nothing about it but to go there, day and night, before the breakfast she had stopped attending and after the dinner she now refused to eat.

She had turned haggard and bony, and her face was as pale as the Grey Lady's clothes. Ron wouldn't have recognized her had he bothered to contact her personally after she had refused to open her window for his owls.

Although drawn to the place where she had been raped, she never set a foot into the clearing itself but lingered under the trees, circling round and round in endless patterns. Sometimes she thought she could hear her own screams in the still winter air, and although she knew she was fantasising it, the screams were there; they followed her back to her rooms, into her bed, and into the few minutes of sleep she managed to grab now and then.

She stopped reading. She stopped talking. She hadn't listened to either Poppy or Albus, who had tried to help her, but now, over three weeks after the incident, as she called it, she had stopped even thinking. She wasn't herself anymore, and the mixture of fear and hate was eating at her, devouring her, without her even realising it. A little bit longer and madness would claim her.

One day before the deadline Dumbledore and Poppy had set for her to come forward, to ask for help, one day before they would have put a Memory Charm on her whatever her opinion about it might be, she sneaked out to the clearing again but found it occupied this time.

There he was.

She had run there this time, hair flying, robes clutched tightly round her fragile figure. The ground was still frozen; the last leaves had fallen from the branches. The new year was young, just a few days old. It was almost as if he had waited for her in the near-darkness of the fading day. It felt as if she had known that he would be there, finally, after so many days when she had wanted nothing more than to put her hands round his throat and simply strangle him to death.

But when she saw him, Hermione's face became ashen, and her breathing stopped at the sight of him. She clenched her teeth, balled her fists, and welcomed the pain from her cramping stomach, as it reminded her to go on, to do what she wanted to do.

Time to crush him under her feet, with her wrath and her righteous accusations and her loathing of the very sight of him.

She got her wand out but hesitated, for some reason unknown to her, in the shadows of the trees. It was late afternoon, just bright enough to see that it was him; soon, it would be too dark to shout at him and still see his face whilst doing so.

But instead of facing him, she continued to observe him for a very long moment.

He sat on the cold ground, ignorant that the wet snow that had fallen the previous night soaked his clothes. He hadn't bothered to bring a blanket; he didn't even wear a cloak. He just leaned against the tree under which he had raped and beaten her, his back pressed to the bark and his arms wrapped round his knees. Staring into nothingness. He didn't move, didn't even seem to breathe. He was paler than usual, and with bitter triumph, Hermione saw that he quite obviously had given up food as much as she had: the hands that stuck out from his sleeves were not only slightly blue from the cold but also far too bony for a man who ate regularly.

Hermione was by then very close to cursing him, as hate bubbled up inside her like boiling water, burning her heart, her soul, and her mind. She already had her wand out when Severus gave a low cry and, with a sudden, brutal jerk of his neck, smacked his head against the tree, once, twice, again and again, with sickening thumps.

Hermione nearly dropped her wand; the cruelty and casualness of his actions shocked her more than she would have considered possible. She had expected joy at the sight of him getting hurt, even if he was doing it to himself. But she didn't feel joy, and that fact caught her off guard. She stared and stayed where she was.

He buried his fingers in his long hair, pulling his face down to his knees, wrapping his arms round his head, cradling and rocking himself in utter despair.

Are we feeling a little downhearted? Hermione thought, pushing the shock aside quite easily. That he might suffer as much as she did hadn't occurred to her until this very moment, and the knowledge that he did suffer was very much unwelcome. She had wished for him to be here but not truly expected it. She had thought... well, it didn't matter what she had thought. He was here, and now he would face her. She would force him to face her and to listen to her.

A few steps and she stood in front of him. At the sight of his black robes, sudden fear began rushing through her body, but she ignored it. She was a Gryffindor; she could handle fear.

He hadn't heard her. His arms were wrapped round his shaking shoulders, and his hands were clutching his back. For a brief moment, she couldn't take her eyes off his long fingers, pale from the cold.

Damn fucking hell, she thought, looking down at him. *How dare he look so vulnerable, so human, so sad.*

Then she kicked him, as she would have kicked a pile of rags lying in her way.

Snape ripped his head up, saw legs in front of his eyes, looked up, and was on his feet an instant later. His eyes were huge with shock at the sight of her, and she saw with satisfaction that he looked every bit as lousy as she felt. Under his eyes were deep purple shadows that were the twins to the shadows under her own eyes.

"Good evening, Severus," she said with a sweet smile, and for a moment she looked every inch as mad as Bellatrix Lestrange on her worst days. "It's been a while since I saw you. Have you been feeling unwell?"

Severus just stepped back from her, turned, and walked away without a word.

She screamed after him, disbelieving and furious, "Don't you dare turn your back on me!" Rushing after him, she thrust her wand between his shoulders hard enough to rip his shirt open. Her wand bent; a little bit more force would have broken it.

Slowly, he turned round but refused to look at her. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice strangely lifeless. "There is nothing I can say other than that I'm very sorry."

She cracked there and then. He was sorry? That was all?

With a swift move, she slapped him hard across the face; a moment later, she balled her small hand into a fist and hit him again. He didn't hinder her.

Her hate and fear took over, and she lost control of her actions. All she could think of was how marvellous it felt to beat the man who had beaten her. Blows to his chin; punches to his stomach. She used her fists and her feet to pound and kick him, his chest, his shoulders, anywhere she could reach. Repeatedly, her fist found its way to his face, and she was delighted at the sensation that she was actually able to make his head fly under her punches. She didn't feel the bitter sobs that emerged from her throat or the tears that ran down her cheeks.

He didn't raise his arms in defence nor did he say a single word. He just stood there and endured her attack.

When she saw his blood on her knuckles, she suddenly stopped, out of breath and sick to her bones. Her eyes widened in horror, her stomach cramped once more, turned over like an hourglass, and she rushed away to vomit into the bushes. She cried hot tears at the same time, wishing that this nightmare would end, wishing he had killed her that night.

He stood under the tree that once had been hers, rooted to the spot, and when she was feeling fit enough to get up from the snow again, when she had vanished the mess, she came back, staring at him.

He still didn't look at her. Blood ran down his chin from his mouth and his nose; she had cracked his lips several times and might even have broken his already crooked nose, and she chuckled, remembering how blood tasted that came from such wounds.

She came even closer and tried to catch his eye. She was shaking with fear and rage, but she would rather die than budge, than flee from him. She wouldn't allow her fear to take over and make her run.

When he realised that she wanted him to look at her, he straightened his back and lifted his head.

His face wasn't just pale anymore but drained of blood, whitewashed, dead. His eyes, still black, were as dead as stones. All mockery was gone, all sarcasm, every bit of the black humour he had owned; the sparkle that had made him Snape was no longer there. Those eyes betrayed him: he was as broken as she was, and it wasn't because of her pitiful attempt to pay him back the beating he had given her.

Her heart stopped for a beat at the sight of it, but she didn't listen to it; she refused to acknowledge what she saw.

Hoarsely, she asked, "Did you enjoy beating me up as much as I just enjoyed beating you?" But her voice was unsteady and faint. This wasn't going as planned.

"You didn't enjoy that," he stated quietly. "Nor did I enjoy raping you."

Hermione paled. The evidence that he suffered as much as she did was too overwhelming for her. She didn't want that. She wanted him to be himself so she could put her burden on him, so she could blame him, so she could make him pay. If he was as broken as she was, how could she expect him to be strong enough to cope with her hate? And if he couldn't cope with it, who else should she blame? How could she find her way back into normality, into life, if the man who had done this was as scared and scarred as she was?

"Why have you been hiding from me?" she whispered and lowered her wand, something she had considered impossible only a moment ago. She had believed that she would never again be able to face him without her wand aimed at him, and now, a mere breath later, she had already stopped using it to keep him at bay.

He sighed deeply and pressed a thin wrist across his lips, wiping the blood away. "What else could I do but to spare you my presence?" he asked. "In another week term starts; until then, I considered it best to stay out of your way." How silken his voice had once been; now it was vacant and just emphasised his bone deep fatigue.

She barked out a laugh. "Why, Severus, thanks for your thoughtfulness, but if you were so eager to spare me the sight of you, you should have handed in your notice immediately after you... raped me!"

He flinched at her words. "I did that; Albus refused to accept it."

Stunned by that statement, she shed more tears; she felt as if she were made of water, not of flesh and bones. "Why would he do that to me?" she whispered in disbelief. "I wish you were dead, and he knows it but refuses to fire you?"

She started pacing, following the path her feet had made earlier in the snow. Her feet were freezing, but she didn't notice.

Severus said quietly, "He considers me to be as much a victim as you are."

"Oh, does he, now? And I suppose you agree with him!"

"No."

"What?" Hermione stopped pacing. To see his face in the dwindling light it was necessary to move close to him, and she didn't waste a single thought on the fact that she should actually be too scared to be in the same school with him, much less standing only a foot away from him. "If you aren't a victim, what are you?"

He didn't flee from her accusing eyes. "I'm the man who raped and nearly killed you. That is unforgivable."

The wand in her hand developed a will of its own. She pointed it at the Potions master and whispered, "I want to see."

For a long moment, Snape looked at the woman in front of him. Her lips were blue from the cold, her face white, her eyes filled with tears. "Do what you must," he said. "I won't hinder you."

"Legilimens," she breathed and was drowning in his memories a moment later.

He was looking at his knuckles, his hands, his sleeves, all covered in blood. The mask lay cast aside; the stars twinkled merrily. In front of him on the frozen ground lay the woman, his former student, his colleague, unconscious. He had just raped her. Then he had beaten her. It was her blood on him; he didn't even know if she was still alive.

Kneeling in the snow a few feet away, he threw up his dinner, whilst tears streamed down his face. In the distance, he could hear the faint laughter of his master, who had forced him, who had watched him, who had enjoyed the spectacle.

He picked up the broken body and ran as he had never run in his life. Storming through the dark corridors, he didn't care if someone saw him with his burden; he needed to get to the infirmary now, immediately. Briefly, he considered if it wouldn't be kinder to let her die. Briefly, he thought of the various potions down in his rooms that would end his own life, oh, so easily.

The door to the infirmary didn't stand a chance against him; Poppy's round face swam into focus, ridiculous under her nightcap, lips pursed concerning the late call and the broken door. But she was all efficiency again when she saw what he had for her.

After he had put the still-breathing, bleeding body down on a table, his knees gave way and he slammed to the floor, covering his mouth with his arm in order to prevent being sick again. He was shaking, and his eyes wandered to the huge windows. How easy it would be to get up and just jump out. How easy to kill himself, to end the stream of horrible memories.

First, he needed to tell Albus, to confess what he had done. Albus needed to know that the Dark Lord had been so very close. "I did that to her," he said to Poppy's back, not expecting an answer. But the matron spun round and stared at him. "I raped her. I beat her. If she dies, it will be my fault." Then he turned and staggered out in order to find Albus.

Hands on his shaking shoulders, soothing hands. Tears in his eyes and on his cheeks, his stomach filled with burning rocks, his veins flooded with icy poison. Dumbledore, probing his mind, searching for memories. A glass was pushed into his hands, but he couldn't hold it as his hands were shaking too badly. Finally, Albus forced the liquid down his throat, something that calmed him slightly, though not much. "She will live," Albus said, pity in his voice.

Why pity? "It was my fault," he said, hate and self-disgust in his voice. "I did this to her; I was not strong enough to fight the Dark Lord's demand."

Trembling, Hermione lowered her wand and looked into a face as ashen as her own. The bitter, hateful, self-accusing words she had just heard were still ringing in her ears. "You were Imperiused!" she whispered and wiped the tears off her face.

Had she just said that? Was she actually defending him? Hermione swallowed. For the first time in weeks, her brain didn't feel as if it contained only wet cotton. Silently, undramatically, it had taken up its work again and allowed her to think coherently. Maybe talking about this wasn't such a bad idea after all, although Albus certainly hadn't had this partner in mind for the conversation. "It was Voldemort... He forced you."

"So what?" Snape growled bitterly. "I should have killed myself rather than succumb to it."

"You know that's impossible." Since when had her voice sounded that calm?

"I should have just run away..." Severus whispered, his voice hoarse. "If only that had been an option."

A memory jumped at her. "You tried." She remembered it. "You tried, afterwards, but he made you come back and beat me."

Clenching his teeth, Severus turned half away from her.

"Albus has told you that there is no way anyone could have withstood him," Hermione pointed out she'd seen the memory in Severus's mind only moments ago. "No one stands a chance against Voldemort."

"I shouldn't have given my word not to harm myself," Snape said nearly casually. "I regret having given my promise; I constantly think about breaking it. For the both of us it would be an easy way out of this horrible situation."

Hermione felt a rush of horror wash through her at his careless mention of suicide, and watched as the different emotions crossed Severus's face. Quite unexpectedly, her hate melted like the snow under her pacing feet. It was gone in the blink of an eye, and the sudden relief to be rid of it, to be rid of the madness that had poisoned her heart and her mind caused her to start crying again. For several minutes, she just stood with tears streaming down her face, next to the Potions master, who was caught in his own private hell. For the first time since that night, she was determined to end this without cursing or killing the man who had done it.

No. Who had been forced to do it.

She looked at his back and saw that every muscle was tense. "What do you do to escape the memory? Albus told me you didn't want a Memory Charm, so how do you... how can you manage..."

Severus just shook his head and tried again to leave.

Again she held him back. "You owe me!" she cried after him, and he stopped, hanging his head. A long strand of hair was blown across his face by the winter night wind. Closing his eyes, he tried to speak, but couldn't bring his lips to part.

She came after him. "You owe me an answer! Tell me why you didn't want to be Obliviated; tell me how you can sleep at night!"

"I can't," he bit out. "Whenever I close my eyes, I see... It's impossible to sleep. And even if the Dark Lord didn't expect that memory to be in my mind, even if he wouldn't search for it the next time I am summoned I would never flee from my guilt by simply getting my memory adjusted. That would be... it would not be right. Now, would you please let me go?"

What? she thought, thunderstruck. It occurred to her that he would have to live with those memories for the rest of his life, whilst she had the liberty to just go and get rid of them.

Suddenly, her refusal to get Obliviated seemed stupid, even cruel.

Hermione needed to know every detail he could tell her. "Why did he do that to you? Voldemort? Why... this? If he was thinking of torture, why...?"

Severus was silent for a long time. Then he said slowly, "The Dark Lord has quite a sick sense of humour. This... wasn't meant as torture; it was meant as a reward. For me." He turned and looked into her eyes. "A few weeks ago, the Dark Lord found in my mind a little piece of information that made him laugh for an entire afternoon." Snape spoke hesitantly, as if the words caused him pain. "And as I'm his most devoted follower, he decided to take matters into his own hands and force me. He decided that, as I had never lain with a woman, he would push me a bit to give me a taste."

His voice was so bitter as to be barely recognisable. "And as he likes to combine a favour with a lesson, he chose you to be my partner in the hope it would break you one less brilliant mind to chase him. He sensed that I was unwilling, thus he made me beat you on top of it to remind me who gives the orders and who must obey. And he only allowed me to take you back to Hogwarts alive because a dead witch can't suffer from nightmares."

It was completely dark now, and the wind was about to become a storm. Hermione couldn't see Severus's face anymore, but she was close enough to hear him breathe. A loose strand of his hair brushed her cheek.

"Raping me... was your first time...?" A slight feeling of horror crept into her heart, a heart that had already seen enough horror to last a lifetime. But for a change, in fact for the first time in weeks, she felt pity not for herself but for the man she had hated most in the world until about two minutes ago.

His voice was a disembodied whisper in the darkness. "I have only loved once in my life, Hermione. When she gave her heart to someone else, I saw no reason ever to fall in love again nor to get intimate with a woman I didn't love." He said this as calmly as if he were talking of potions, but Hermione was certain that it ripped him to pieces to tell her that. For the last time, he turned and walked away.

"What would you do to right what you have done to me?" Hermione's voice called through the darkness.

She could barely hear his words when he whispered his answer. "I can never right it. But whatever you ask me to do to ease your pain, I will do it, if it is within my power."

Lies and Solutions

Chapter 3 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

3: Lies and Solutions

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She didn't need to bang on Severus's door three nights later, on Saturday night before the students were expected back from the Christmas holidays. When she raised her hand to knock, the door opened on its own, and she was grateful for it. Banging might have been heard, and she didn't want anyone to know where she was. It had been hard enough to convince Albus that she felt better. She had even forced herself to eat a bit; she had smiled and pretended that she had slept well.

To Albus, she had said, "Give me the weekend to sort this out. On Monday, if... if things are still the way they are now, I will go to St. Mungo's willingly and talk to every healer you appoint for me."

Albus had looked at her dubiously. "I cannot believe that a weekend will make a difference, Hermione. You both need help; I will watch neither you nor Severus be crushed by this."

She had raised her chin at the Headmaster. "I have no intention of letting that happen, Albus. There is a possibility of making it right, and I am not only talking about me, but about Severus as well."

That she had said his name so naturally obviously had made the difference for Albus. He agreed to give her the weekend.

And now, trembling with fear at the prospect of what she was about to do, she was in Severus's private rooms, as he had lowered the wards to let her in whenever she liked. He had promised to do whatever was in his power to ease her pain; giving her access to his quarters whenever she demanded it was therefore an obvious action.

It was icy down here in the dungeons, and she knew that he was sensitive to the cold. In his rooms, there usually was a fire in the hearth, and the floor was enchanted to please even a naked foot. She had been in here more than once, as she sometimes in the past had asked him for potion ingredients or for a book that wasn't available in the library. Always there had been dozens of candles lighting the rooms, and the heat from the fire had washed over her. Always it had been warm; always it had been surprisingly cosy, she remembered it clearly.

Tonight, though, it was not only cold, but nearly dark as well. The fireplace was swept clean; only one candle on the table cast a tiny circle of light onto some parchments.

"*Lumos*," she snapped, annoyed by the darkness. "Why are you sitting here without light, Severus?" she demanded, snappish with the fear she felt and addressing the man sitting at the table, his hands pressed flat to the surface in front of him. His hair was damp from the shower he had just taken, and he wore only shirt and trousers. He seemed to be cold; he was certainly shivering.

"It makes thinking a lot easier when the mind is not disturbed by the flicker of the flames," he answered quietly.

"Oh dear, I'm so very sorry for you," she said dryly, forcing her voice to sound hard. If this was to work, she needed him to believe that she wanted him to suffer. The need to sound cruel helped as well to keep her own fear at bay. It was imperative for her sanity that she saw her plan through, but doing it cost every bit of strength she had left.

Hermione took a seat opposite him, the table between them. Her own hands came to rest on the wood. Seeing his pale fingers clutched into fists, she remembered the feeling of her tooth breaking out of her gum and shuddered.

Piercing him with her eyes, she said, "Are you still up to it? You will do whatever I require to ease my pain?"

He returned her look steadily. "Yes."

She forced her lips to curve into an ugly half-smile. "We'll see if you are still that brave when I have told you what I want." Taking out a phial from one of the pockets of her cardigan, she rolled it between her fingers for a moment and then placed it exactly halfway between herself and him.

When he didn't move, she pushed it further on with one finger, slowly, deliberately, and observed with deep satisfaction that he couldn't take his eyes off the phial. "Take it. Drink it. Suffer like I have suffered," she purred.

His head snapped up. Staring at her, realisation dawned in him. It showed clearly in his face next to the pain and the guilt that had been there in the first place, fear appeared, fear of what she was asking him to do. But it was replaced with grim determination only a moment later.

"You know what this is, then," she said, smiling. Her stomach clenched, though.

He looked back at the phial. "Of course," he said calmly. "It contains your memories from... the night..."

"The night you raped me," she clarified, just to see him flinch once more.

"I assume it is combined with a binding potion. When I drink this, I will not only witness this night from your point of view, as would be possible in a Pensieve, but feel everything you felt, endure everything you had to endure, suffer from everything I have done to you. I will feel your terror and your pain. I will be the victim; I will be you."

"Precisely," she said. Her hands had found each other, and her fingers were entwined. *Drink it*, she thought with desperation. *Drink it, I beg you!* Aloud she challenged, "Now then it should be within your power to take a sip."

He had given her his word, and what she demanded was more than fair. Reaching out a steady hand, Severus took the phial, uncorked it, and drained the contents in one gulp.

Hermione let out a shaky little laugh; she felt as if she had held her breath for hours, not only a few seconds. Then she rummaged through her pockets again, ignored her fluttering heart, and found a second, similar phial. She held it in the light of the candle, and before she could have second thoughts about it, she drank the watery, foul-smelling liquid. "Horrible," she said, pulling a face. "Now that tastes absolutely awful."

Severus, still holding the small glass container between his long, pale fingers, was clearly confused. "What... why..." he started and broke off, surprised at the slur in his voice. He rose, but when Hermione ordered, "Sit," he did so, unable to disobey her.

"That was not..."

Her eyes were sad when she looked at him. "Did you truly believe I could be that cruel?" she whispered. "To force you to relive what happened that night? I confess, I wanted you to suffer. A week ago, I would have done this with pleasure. But then I saw you there under the trees, I saw your memories, and I now know that you are indeed as much a victim as I am."

Taking a deep breath, she continued, "I needed to find a way to heal us both. And I did. It won't be easy for either of us, but it will work. Unfortunately, I had to force you into it, as you wouldn't have done it voluntarily. It might be mad, but I will certainly lose my sanity if I have to live with those memories for much longer. And so will you. I can't let that happen." Reaching across the table, she placed her hand on his arm. Touching him was hard, but when he wanted to pull away, she whispered, "Don't" and he didn't.

Visibly horrified at his inability to do as he liked, he croaked, "What have you done?"

The question earned him a bittersweet smile, and Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. It had taken all her willpower to come down here, to come inside, to sit at his table. Touching him would have been impossible only a few heartbeats ago. But the liquid she had just taken was working already. "The potion you just drank can alter memories under the right circumstances. It doesn't erase them like a memory charm, as neither of us can stand that idea, and you, at least, need to keep them. But the potion flattens the memory in question, so it will seem as if what happened a few weeks ago instead happened a lifetime ago. The memory of you being forced to rape me will feel like something we might have read in a book; it will lose its colour, we won't be able to remember details, and it won't scare us anymore. We will be able to go on with our lives."

It took him quite a bit of strength to answer. "Impossible," he hissed and tried to regain control over his hand. "It doesn't work that way you need to overlay the memory you want to alter with a similar memory, a memory stronger than the one you want to..." He stopped in mid-sentence, ripped his hand away, and jumped to his feet, toppling over the bench he had been sitting on. White as a ghost, he stumbled away from the table. The terrified look on his face showed clearly that he had understood completely what she had done and what she was about to do.

She said, "Sit down again," and although he fought against this order, he took one step after the other, like a puppet on strings, back to the table, straightened the bench, and sat as she had demanded.

"You can't be serious," he managed. "You are terrified of me, and you are very right to be so. You need to go! You can't expect me... you honestly think that to force yourself..."

"There is no other way," she insisted. Getting up, she walked around the table and stood behind him. Her hands lingered above his shoulders before she forced them down and dug her fingers into his flesh. Touching him wasn't as terrifying as she had feared it would be. The potion worked fast desire was shining in her eyes and overlaid the fear, but she needed him to hear her out.

"I am going to sleep with you, Severus. Both of our potions contained a generous amount of a strong aphrodisiac. Additionally, mine keeps the fear of getting touched at bay; yours was laced with ingredients that suppress your will, allowing me to order you to my liking." Sighing, she continued, "You never would have taken the potion if I hadn't blackmailed you into drinking it, and I assume that you wouldn't allow me to go on with my plan with your will intact. I apologise, but this is best for both of us. I'll make it as quick as possible. Believe me, I want to get out of here as much as you want me to go."

He wanted to get up again, and this time she let him. He backed away from her, but she followed him, chased him until they stood in front of his bedroom door.

"Haven't you had enough of my cruelty?" he croaked, wrapping his arms round his waist. "You can't... you must not do this to yourself!" There was despair in his voice.

"Get into your bedroom," she replied. "I want you to know that at one point, I will ask you if I should go. You will then have the opportunity to throw me out of your room. But until then, you will do what I tell you. And at the moment, I want you to stop talking. Understood?"

Snape had to experience that he could nod but could not move his tongue. His pupils were huge; he was very clearly drugged. And by the look on his face, he was terrified as well *either by me or by what he might do*, Hermione thought. The aphrodisiac was already washing through his veins; she knew it, as she felt her potion at work.

Where she felt fear, the self-disgust she saw in him grew with every breath he took. His urge to run was immense, she could see it. Unfortunately for him, until she freed him, he had to obey her.

He stepped into his bedroom.

She lit a few candles and the fireplace, then she closed and warded the door. She dropped her wand and took off her cardigan. "Sit on the bed, and don't move until I tell you to," she said, her voice trembling, and when he did so, she hesitantly took one step, then another until she stood beside him. Her desire became stronger by the minute, but her heart thundered in her chest when she slipped behind him in a swift move.

He was barely more than a shadow in the dim light, which helped her to go on with her plan. The potion she had brewed in the last few days kept her hands steady when she hesitantly placed them on his shoulders once more. Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard and moved a bit closer, kneeling behind him. Breathing fast, she took in his scent, the fragrance of his skin, in order to find out if the potion was strong enough to suppress the horrors she felt at the very thought of being close enough to actually smell him.

Flaring her nostrils and bracing herself, she breathed in.

He smelled of soap and shampoo, not a disturbing smell. Next, she brought her face closer to his exposed neck. When her breath warmed his skin, he couldn't suppress a shiver, and when he nearly touched her with the movement, she caught a whiff of his natural fragrance: autumn leaves, wind, and ash laced with a sweet note... like... like... a bit like the taste of wild honey. Relief washed through her body he did not smell like a monster. She might be able to force herself to continue.

He hadn't smelled like that a week ago; a week ago she hadn't consciously smelled him at all, and she was more than grateful for it, as she had feared this moment when she would be close enough to breathe him in. Luckily, his fragrance was not disturbing; it was, on the contrary, strangely appealing.

Allowing her hands to reach for the collar of his shirt, she let them wander down his front until her fingertips found the first button and opened it. The second button followed, and she had to lean in a bit, her chest pressing against his back whilst doing so. He didn't move a single inch. When she came to the buttons at the height of his navel, she stopped, leaned back, and pushed his shirt down his shoulders. "Open the last buttons and take your shirt off."

Seductive words whispered in his ears. He could not disobey them what she demanded was what he did.

The shirt slid to the floor, and he hung his head low in order to keep his face covered by his hair. His teeth were clenched; so were his fists, but the potion was doing what it had been brewed for: it heightened his desire, although he clearly tried with all his might to fight against it.

"I know what you think," she whispered. "You think that you won't touch me again, under any circumstances. But you are wrong. You will, as soon as I order you to do so."

Her cool hands touched his now naked shoulders; her palms were running down his arms and up again. Up to his head she went, burrowing her fingers in the strands of his hair, only to consider how strangely erotic it was, touching him wherever she liked with him being unable to resist. *I'm raping him*, she thought. *I actually made him the victim and he has agreed to play along by drinking the potion. This is sick!*

But she didn't stop. She was right about this. She was always right, and it would heal them, free them. If she managed to go on.

"I didn't realise how long your hair has grown in the past years. It's nearly halfway down your back," she murmured, trailing her fingers down his skull through the ink black strands and then over his spine until she reached the border of his trousers. Her other hand brushed the black curtain aside to have free access to the tender spot just beneath his left ear. On this spot she chose to place her first kiss, as kissing was important for her if she wanted this to work. Her lips brushed against his skin, and she couldn't help wondering if she had gone completely mad.

His skin was so cold, and he shivered continuously now she knew it wasn't all because he was freezing. Ignoring it, she told him to lie on the bed, face down. "Wrap your arms round your waist; I know it's uncomfortable, but I want to immobilise you like that, and I want to see your hands." His hands were the second most scary part of his body, at least for her. Although the aphrodisiac had awoken lust in her, and the other ingredients suppressed her fear, she didn't want to risk too much at once, and having his hands where she could see them and where they would be harmless seemed a good thing to order.

He obeyed, bereft of speech and the ability to follow his own wishes.

Stretching out beside him, she reached round his waist and opened his belt, then the buttons of his trousers. With a swift move, she had them off, but she was careful not to touch him. "Now your underwear. Take them off."

A moment later he was naked, lying on his belly, his arms clutched tightly to his body in a self-embrace.

She continued touching him: shoulders, arms, legs, calves, even his ankles and feet. The fabric of her blouse touched his skin, her trousers were rubbing against his bare legs, and her hair fell over his chest. She was stroking him with long, slow movements, and she didn't spare a single spot. Her hands moved firmly up to his neck, then down to his thighs, across his bottom only to find their rest at the small of his back.

"I know this is wrong," she said. "You might hate me at the moment for doing it. In a way, you are the victim; but I won't hurt you and I won't beat you."

Hermione allowed her eyes to wander across his body. That he was so muscular surprised her. She had not only known but experienced how strong he was and was amazed to find that he quite obviously didn't spend all his time in a sitting position, as most teachers did. "You work out," she stated, and talking kept her fear under control as well as the potion. Her fingers were trailing along his legs to each sinew she could find. "But I can't see you in a fitness studio or doing group sports; you would do something in solitude. And the shape of your body tells me that you go for stamina and tenacity, so a workout in your quarters wouldn't do, either."

It wasn't that cold anymore. Hermione took off her blouse and her trousers, only keeping on bra and knickers. Her stomach, which had been tight with fear before she had taken the potion, had loosened up, and now she felt a familiar pulling between her legs. A feeling she would have sworn impossible ever to feel again, especially when in the same room with her rapist. But then, she had taken special care to add the perfect aphrodisiac to her potion.

"Do you run? No your shoulders and arms are too strong for that, and there are too many people around who could see you jogging. Hmm. Interesting riddle." She placed her hands on his; his hands, wrapped round his waist, became less scary with every minute she was in his bed. His fingers marked his own skin with deep imprints when he clutched his ribs tighter under her touch. Unperturbed by this clear sign of his uneasiness, she mused, "So what sport requires strength, stamina, concentration, and is solitary enough for you?"

As this had been a direct question, he was able to answer, "Climbing."

"You climb mountains?"

"Whenever I find the time." She guessed he wanted to tell her there and then to leave; instead, he could answer only what she had asked. Good.

She told him to turn round and saw him fight against the order. His shoulders trembled, and he shook his head. He didn't want to face her, that much was obvious, but she needed him to. She asked, "Do you feel the mask against your face? Do you recall how you followed me to the clearing?"

"Yes." A faint whisper. "I had an erection when you tried to get away from under my weight. I remember your soft, naked skin under my hands and your blood spraying into my face. I could see how horrified you were; I always, always dream of the sensation of moving inside you whilst you tried to push me off. I... I enjoyed it."

She blanched at those words she hadn't expected him to tell her that. "Turn round!" she said once more and saw him fight even harder against her order.

Digging his fingers into his skin, he first left deep, white imprints on his back, then bruises, and then his nails ripped open his skin, drilling holes into his flesh. Blood trickled down his sides, but he managed to remain lying on his belly. His shoulder muscles stood out from the effort not to move, and after some very long moments, when she saw him fighting and observed that this was something he really didn't want to do, she ordered, "Relax," and he did with a shaking sigh.

"Severus!" Whispering his name in his ear, she now pressed her whole body against his back. "This either works for both of us, or it doesn't work at all. I can find salvation only with you and you alone; do you really intend to deprive me of it?"

"No! But I cannot face you!" She heard panic in his deep voice, and she felt his whole body go rigid.

*What is he scared of? I should be scared of him, not the other way round*she wondered. *What is it that he fears enough to refuse to simply face me?*"Why? Why won't you look at me?"

"Did you not listen? I enjoyed raping you! The Dark Lord cursed me, but I was hard enough to do it. I was horrified, but still I hurt you. I am a monster with no control over my actions. If I face you, if you force me to look at your naked body and make me touch your skin, I will rape you again."

"I don't believe you are a rapist under normal circumstances, Severus," she stated calmly and most surprised at herself. "You were under the Imperius Curse; Voldemort told you to rape me, and you did. Naturally, your body reacted in every necessary way to the Curse."

He drilled his face into the pillow. "I don't know how I react to women under normal circumstances. It might very well be that I am a man who actually likes to rape. I am cold and cruel it wouldn't surprise me if rape is the only way I want to be with a woman. All I know is that I ... spilled inside you. Conclusion: I enjoyed it. I believe I will turn into the same brutal animal again with you only inches away and arousing me into madness. You are mad. You are in danger! I won't turn round; I won't face you. And I will never, ever touch you again!"

Clear words. Maybe she would have listened to his reasoning and his fear if the potion wasn't running through her veins. She wanted him. She needed him. Soon.

Well, he certainly was terrified at the sheer thought of putting his hands on her, and as this was something she didn't want either, she said, "So I will prevent you from touching me. Turn round!" Placing her hand on his trembling shoulder, she turned him onto his back as easily as if he were a rag doll he was not able to withstand her order, accompanied by her hands.

Her eyes firmly fixed on his face, she stared at him. "You're as scared of me as I'm scared of you."

He turned his head away and closed his eyes, pressed them shut.

Swiftly she took his right hand, placed it above his head onto the bedpost, and murmured a charm; a moment later both his hands were tied to the bed as securely as if she had used chains. "I promise: I won't allow you to hurt me, Severus, and I won't hurt you, either. I will only do what pleases me, and I will allow you to stop me whenever you like..."

He opened his mouth to tell her to leave, but she went on.

"... but only if you really want me to stop."

He tried to force the words out. And failed. Since she had tied him up, he looked less frightened, as he was now unable to do her harm. And as he couldn't get the words out to tell her to go, she assumed that he wanted her to stay.

"Close your eyes. Feel my touch. Forget what has happened." Hermione shut her own eyes so she wouldn't see whom she was actually talking to, took a breath, and gently placed her hands on him. Her hands took on their task of examining him, followed by her lips, which left soft kisses on his chest, on his throat, around his navel.

She knew he had no option but to give in to her.

Hermione, having discarded the last of her clothes after she had bound him to the bed, was burning, a quite unexpected and even disturbing feeling. Of course, she had known that the potion would heat her desire, as she had brewed it to do so, but her touching him so tenderly, her soothing him in order to relax him was beyond the potion's and the aphrodisiac's ability. She was actually lusting for a man who had beaten her half to death only a few short weeks ago, and it didn't matter that he hadn't done so by his own will. She had wanted to kill him with her own hands; Severus, who was now in her hands. And she enjoyed being here with him now, how perverted was that?

She had planned to sleep with him rather quickly in order to rid them both of those dreadful memories. She had expected to be driven by the potion, unwilling and scared inside. She had not considered it an easy task, but a task that had to be done to free them and quite unexpectedly, it had become more. Additionally, the fact that she was in charge tumbled her emotions upside down. It was far more arousing to see him bound to her will than she would have thought even in her wildest dreams. Where had her fear gone, her hate, her panic at the very thought of him?

Still, it was more than obvious that Severus was torn apart by his desire and his fear, so she was very careful with every movement she made. Touching him became an art, as she knew that his physical reactions were caused by the potion she had forced him to drink. Therefore, she mainly used her mouth and her fingertips to arouse him further, to convince him that he needed to fear neither her nor his reactions to her touch. And certainly, his breathing sped up with every movement she made. When she finally slipped her hand round his length, he gasped and ripped his eyes open, only to find her face right in front of his.

She saw in his face that he didn't want her to stop anymore, and she decided that this was the right moment to ask him, "Shall I leave?" slipping on top of him whilst her words were still hanging in the air. She needed to ask him otherwise she wouldn't be any better than Voldemort, forcing herself upon him, even though she hadn't hurt him physically.

Moving her hands up to his, she nudged his fists with her fingers, and he opened his hands to allow her to wrap her fingers around his, clutching her tightly. She was staring into his eyes when she slowly moved down, until his tip touched her entrance, wet and hot at the same time.

"I'm not sure if this will work, and I am scared despite that damn potion," she whispered, her lips only an inch away from his. "Please stop me if you think this is a bad idea."

A hopeful smile appeared on his lips. "I don't want you to stop," he breathed, and she took him inside only a heartbeat later. She sat up slightly to adjust her hips and get a better grip on him, riding him slowly and getting used to the sensation of having him inside her yet again, only this time willingly. She didn't know anymore if this was only the potion's doing, and she didn't care, either. All fear was swept from her mind, and all she knew was that it felt right to be with him, that she was entranced by his desire, and that she simply couldn't get enough of the rhythmic movements of his hips, which he used to thrust himself even deeper inside her. She felt her climax building; there was only one more thing she wanted.

"Come with me," she murmured in his ear.

Her lips brushed his.

He had been forced to rape her, to beat her, but Voldemort hadn't forced him to put his mouth on hers. When she did so now, she could feel him tremble; when her tongue parted his lips, she suddenly felt his heartbeat speeding up, and when he surrendered to her, welcomed her, kissed her back, she definitely knew it wasn't the doing of the potion but him alone who responded to the kiss, as well as to her circling hips. Sharing their breath, tongues dancing in the darkness, they fell over the edge together, and in her last coherent moment before both her and his orgasms filled her body as well as her mind, she freed his hands so he could wrap his arms around her, hold her,

caress her, and take the past from her mind.

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Afterwards, she cried in his arms. Hot tears flowed down her cheeks and onto his chest, and she was shaking severely in the aftermath of her orgasm, as well as her ended nightmare. The only thing he could do was hold her, stroke her hair and her back, try to calm her until the storm of her emotions was over. His hands caressed her silently until her trembling subsided, and she lay still and safe in his arms.

"I have forced you." Her words were whispered into the darkness of his hair. She was lying as close to him as possible, one arm under his neck, one leg over his hip, one hand on his belly right underneath his navel. Her face was hidden between his neck and his shoulder; her muscles tensed in anticipation of his reaction.

The potion had worn off. It had been burned away faster than she had expected, but then, she felt that their heated passion would have burned away even poison.

Carefully, Snape got up and put on trousers and shirt. Wordlessly, he picked up her clothes, placed them on his bed in front of her, and left his bedroom.

She followed him only minutes later, dressed as well, and with a guarded expression on her face she didn't really know how to proceed from here. When she saw him sitting in front of the now lit fireplace, in his hands a mug, and with his long legs comfortably stretched out towards the fire, she hesitantly took the chair opposite his.

"If you want me to leave..." she said.

With his long arm, he reached behind him and took a second mug from a small table. Handing it to her, he looked at her intently. "Why have you done this?" His words were quiet, and there was a softness in them she hadn't expected.

His hair was ruffled, his feet naked, his shirt only partly tucked into his trousers. He looked as if he had just got out of bed, and Hermione saw herself forced to answer. "It's over," she said simply and took a sip from her mug. Hot chocolate. It warmed her not only because it filled her empty stomach but because he had provided it for her. "The memories are gone or can you remember much of what really happened?"

In his face, she saw the effort it cost him not to bare his teeth at her mentioning the rape, then a slight confusion, a frown when he very obviously raided his memory, and finally, wonder when he couldn't find any vivid pictures of that specific incident. "No," he finally said. "I can't. I still know what I have done, but..."

"... it is not connected to your emotions anymore," she finished. "Voldemort will still be able to find the memory, but for you, for us, it's history that happened to someone else." Leaning forward, she continued, "It was driving me mad. I wasn't myself anymore and didn't even know it. I blamed you; I hated you. I now know that it would have broken me. But then I saw you in the clearing, and my brain started to work again, and I just refused to allow those memories to dominate my entire life. I decided to do what is best for both of us. You don't deserve to live with those awful memories any more than I do. All of this was simply unacceptable, so I found a solution."

"And you basically did to me what I did to you. You raped me. In more subtle ways, without hurting me, but against my will, nevertheless."

She paled. She had hoped he wouldn't phrase it that directly. "Yes. And I'm sorry, on a certain level, but can't really regret it, given the outcome. And I gave you the chance to throw me out. You didn't, though. Do you regret what happened?"

Softly, he said, "Never. I am very glad that you did what you have done. And in a way, I agreed by drinking your potion."

Hermione exhaled her relief at this statement.

"But I think you lied to me." Reaching out, he brushed her hair out of her face. "You said you could find salvation only with me, but you could have altered your memory with anyone."

"That was just as impossible as being Obliviated," she said, taking his hand in hers for a brief moment before letting go of it again. "It wouldn't have been right to force myself onto someone who didn't know why I was doing it. So actually, you were the only choice. My choice." Tilting her head slightly, she asked with a hesitant smile, "Would you have taken the potion if you hadn't believed it to be a justified sort of revenge? Would you have drunk a potion knowing it would make you my... my sex-slave?"

Barking out a dry laugh and visibly surprised that he was able to laugh again, Snape leaned back in his chair. "I doubt it. But you must have been terrified, coming down here. Truly a Gryffindor: ready for action and bravery even under dire circumstances."

"I was shaking with fear," she confessed. "But my dad always said, 'Once you've got a task to do, it's better to do it than to live with the fear of it.'" And she realised that laughing with him was wonderful. "Now do you want me to leave, as the potion is out of your system?"

His face became stern. "What do you want?" he asked.

She studied the stones of the fireplace. "Dinner," she said. "Eat with me. Let's talk for a while about Potions and Arithmancy and students. Let's find out if we can behave as colleagues again without blushing or screaming whenever we look at each other."

## Tea Time

*Chapter 4 of 10*

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

### 4: Tea Time

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"Good morning, Albus."

"Hermione! Good morning to you as well. May I say that you look immensely tired?" Albus Dumbledore looked with concern at his youngest teacher. It was Sunday, and he had feared to see her. Poppy agreed with him that a forced healing was absolutely imminent, were she to remain a teacher at Hogwarts. He really didn't look forward to telling her that.

"She can't cope with it, Albus," the matron had said. "No one could. And I still think that we should have a strong word on that matter with Severus as well. They will both

starve themselves to death if they go on like that." Madam Pomfrey had looked at the Headmaster, as she wasn't sure what he thought about her insistence to send both Hermione and Severus to St. Mungo's, not only for a complete check-up but to seek out a specialist who would delete their memories.

Dumbledore had agreed when it came down to Hermione. But Severus was a different matter. "I know, I have suggested a Memory Charm myself, Poppy, only to realise that it can't be done for him. Tom would sense that the memory of one of his closest followers had been fiddled with, and he would search very carefully in Severus's mind for what had been taken and what had been left. He might find memories he must not be allowed to find. That is far too risky. In the worst case, it would cost Severus's life."

But at least Hermione could be treated, whether she wanted it or not. Seeing the young woman turning into a living ghost had disturbed the Headmaster immensely, and although there could be no relief for the Potions master, there could at least...

That was the moment when Hermione came to the High Table, sat down, and filled her plate with everything within her reach.

"Didn't sleep much, Albus," she said, snatching up her fork and starting to eat with as much appetite as one could wish for.

It happened rarely that the Headmaster was lost for words. It took him a few moments to find a sufficient reply. "I guess there were no nightmares disturbing the little sleep you could get?"

Calmly, his Arithmancy professor looked up at him. "None at all. And in case you are wondering, there is no need to worry about me any longer. Nor about Severus." Returning her concentration to her food, she finished her breakfast quickly, getting up earlier than the other teachers. "Sorry, Albus, but I have to prepare for classes tomorrow. I have abandoned my duties, lately."

Snape was no more informative than Hermione when called to the Headmaster's office. "I take it Miss Granger told you she would find a sufficient solution," he answered quite coldly to Albus's questions. "She has. That should be enough for you."

"Actually, my dear boy, I am delighted to see you back amongst the living, but I need to know if you are in any state to continue your tasks as teacher as well as a spy," Dumbledore said, his tone equally as cold. "If you have decided to delete the memory..."

"I haven't. I'm not stupid, Albus. The Dark Lord will search for the memories he has forced me to gather in the first place. If he doesn't find them, he will get very suspicious."

Turning, the Potions master headed for the door when Dumbledore called after him. "Can you assure me that, whatever solution you might have found, it is a safe solution for Miss Granger as well?"

Rooted to the spot, Snape spun round a second later and returned to the office, slamming the door behind him with such force that Dumbledore raised a questioning eyebrow, preventing the Sorting Hat from falling off his shelf with a casual movement of his hand.

"What did you just say?" Snape hissed, his voice cold enough to lower the temperature in the room by a few degrees. He was suddenly radiating power as well as rage, controlled only by years of training.

Dumbledore settled down in his chair with nothing more than a puzzled look. "I am certain that you have considered the possibility that Tom wasn't satisfied, cursing you with the Imperius, Severus. Don't you think he might find it amusing to go after Miss Granger now with more determination, if only to make sure she suffers enough from what she has been forced to endure?"

Snape was stunned into silence at that; he hadn't considered that possibility. For a few short hours, he had allowed himself to believe he was the only one whose memory might get raided by the Dark Lord. He was positive he could provide his master with what he was looking for, even though the memory of the rape wasn't too clear in his mind anymore. But that Voldemort could seek out Hermione... Another thought crossed the Potions master's mind: the Dark Lord might find it amusing to play the same game again.

Dumbledore watched the face of his friend, again astounded that it betrayed next to nothing. He had known Severus for more than twenty years, had seen him growing up, had seen him suffer before, had seen him become the man he was now. The Headmaster was actually able to guess what was going on in the Potions master's mind: he was in a killing mood. "Don't you do anything stupid, Severus," Albus said quietly. "Although the only remaining Horcrux is Nagini, it is still impossible to get close enough to Tom to kill him. As long as the man has his wand, not even Harry, who is prophesied to kill him, could win a fight against him."

That was the moment when a plan unfolded before Snape's inner eye, so simple, so easy, so absolutely mad that he even considered it possible to get through with it. "Albus, may I borrow the Sorting Hat?" he asked, and when the Headmaster didn't object, Snape took the battered hat into his arms. With a small nod, the Potions master then turned round once more and was gone, leaving a quite befuddled Headmaster behind.

Snape stood for a while in front of Hermione Granger's door, unable to bring his hand up to knock. Instead, he studied her doormat, which was covered with books. Of course he was aware of how stupid he looked, like a schoolboy scared of a scolding; nevertheless, it took all his might to persuade his unwilling knuckles to seek contact with the wood.

It was not because he didn't want to see her or thought the sight of him would still terrify her. He knew her memories were as faint as his own, and he was pretty sure she would even smile at him were she to see him.

He simply didn't know how to act in her presence. She had spent a long night in his rooms and in his bed. She had slept with him and they had eaten together. When she had fallen asleep, he had carried her to the couch and protected her sleep. He had waited anxiously for nightmares to raid her dreams, but none came. Only once had she moaned, frightened, but instead of waking up, she had reached out a hand, found his, and relaxed instantly.

She had left whilst he was in the shower. Albus had informed him that she was in her rooms with the excuse of doing some preparation for her classes.

Now, at late afternoon, he stood in front of her door and needed to knock if his plan were to have a chance to work.

Raising his hand, Snape was just about to demand entrance when she ripped the door open. "How long are you going to stand there, Severus?" she asked curiously. "Come inside. Come on, I've made some tea." She even took his elbow and shoved the Potions master inside her rooms.

Surprised, he took a look round. He had never been here before; had she needed help with a potion or been looking for a book, she had always come down to the dungeons.

The walls were lit by dozens of candles, and a witchlight shone above the huge desk that dominated the room. Unlike his own very tidy desk, this one was buried under books, parchments, quills, ink bottles, mugs, and a plate with half-eaten sandwiches. So were the chairs in her room: everywhere books turned up, and Snape had the sudden urge to check if she slept on books as well. The room was friendly, bright, and welcoming. And it was warm—a fire was burning and Snape relaxed unconsciously. Where it was warm, he felt comfortable.

"Sorry, Severus," Hermione muttered and took a pile of books from one of the chairs, putting them on the desk where they disappeared in the chaos. "Here, take a seat and here's your tea. Two sugars, if I remember correctly?"

Snape took a deep breath, wrapped his fingers round the mug, and inhaled the sweet fragrance of the slightly flavoured tea—bergamot, if his nose didn't betray him. "How come you know how I prefer my tea?" he asked and took a sip. Delicious.

She smiled at him and jumped onto her bed that claimed the outer wall, sat on it cross-legged, looking like a teenager in her wide shirt, her hand-knitted socks, and with her hair braided in two bushy plaits. Every little bit of her was shining with happiness. Gone was the hate in her eyes, gone were her hunched shoulders, vanished was the fear. Only the shadows under her eyes remained, and they would be gone soon as well, after a few good nights of sleep. "What can I do for you, Severus?" she asked, effectively avoiding his question.

"You can tell me how you knew I stood in front of your door," Snape said, barely able to take his eyes off her. She looked so content, undisturbed by his presence, and only then did he realise how much it meant to him that she of all people wasn't afraid of him anymore.

She smiled at him. "I had warded my doors with a spell specifically designed to warn me of your presence," she said idly. "I didn't have time yet to lower it. Were you afraid to knock? Did you think I would rip your head off?"

"Something like that," he grumbled and searched for a place to put down his mug. Looking at her sternly, he said, "Listen, Hermione, I need to know where you found the potion you brewed for me. It was surprisingly strong, and it was definitely a Dark Art. I don't understand why I have never heard of it, but I need it. Please tell me its ingredients and how to brew the potion."

That stunned her. "Dark Arts? I didn't know that. What do you need it for?" she asked in confusion. "I made it... well, you know why I brewed it. I never had any intention..."

He silenced her with one hand. "I need it," he urged. "Don't ask me why, as I can't tell you, but it is important. Please, Hermione where did you find that recipe?"

She thought about that for a few moments, staring intently at her nearly empty cup. Then she made her decision, and she got up and leapt head first into a huge pile of old magazines. "It must be here somewhere, I know it," Snape heard her muttering. "Come on, I had you in my fingers only a few days ago, come on, don't hide, I know you're here somewhere! Ah! Here it is!" Triumphant, she dug her hand to the bottom of the pile and came out again with a battered leaflet, half falling apart and only held together with a bit of Spellotape. Handing it to Snape, she briefly touched his fingertips.

Instinctively, he waited for her to flinch away from him, then saw that she herself breathed out with relief when the reaction she also must have expected didn't come. Her fingers were cool and dry, and he remembered how wonderful she had felt when he had held her in his arms this morning.

Snape flicked through the magazine and found a page that was marked with a piece of parchment. A few notes were scribbled on it in Hermione's handwriting. He scanned her notes, then went to the text. "That's German," he said with surprise.

"You're stating the obvious, Professor." Hermione grinned and took the magazine out of his hands. "My cousin is German; she's a bit odd, and she keeps all sorts of strange papers. This is nearly two centuries old, printed in a small town near the lake of Constance. She lent me a few of her magazines the last time I visited her, and as I didn't sleep much in the last few weeks, I read everything I could get my hands on. When I saw it, I knew this would be the answer. I didn't even think of the possibility that it could be a Dark Art."

"You have some hidden talents, Miss Granger," Snape mocked. "Can you translate it for me? Now?"

"Certainly. Have another cup of tea whilst I am working on it. Do you need the whole recipe or only the basic one? That is, with or without the aphrodisiac lacing?"

"Without, thank you very much," Snape replied dryly and watched her whilst she took out a fresh parchment and a quill, settling down to work.

It only took her a few minutes, and when he looked at the recipe, he knew that he needed to adjust it just slightly for his purposes. "Not really complicated, but cunning this one would belong in the Restricted Section of the library if it were printed in a book. It seems someone invented it, published the recipe in this odd little magazine, and no one ever realised that it should be forbidden. Still, it is surprising that I never stumbled over it."

"Even you can't know everything, Severus," Hermione said. And then she added, "Would you like to come for a walk with me?"

Snape looked up at her, stowing the parchment with the recipe into his robes. He knew he shouldn't do it; he knew she shouldn't have asked him. Nevertheless, he said, "It would be my pleasure."

A few days later a fist knocked demanding at No 12, Grimmauld Place. It was late afternoon, just before tea time, but Harry knew that none of his friends would call round unannounced without a very good reason. Therefore, he told Ginny to stay in the kitchen, took his wand, and opened the door, ready to strike.

He had suspected a stranger, but the figure on his doorsteps wasn't. "Snape!" Harry exclaimed, stunned at the fact that the Potions master was visiting his home without an Order meeting scheduled. "What on earth are you doing here don't you have to torment some students?"

"Potter," Snape sneered, disgust in his voice. "I need your help, I need it now. Are you capable of controlling your mistrust of me for at least a little while?"

Harry frowned at these words, but lowered his wand and opened the door a bit wider in order to let Snape into the house. He would never trust Snape farther than he could throw him, but the man was their spy, Dumbledore vouched for him, and that was good enough for Harry as long as Snape didn't step over the line. "Get inside," Harry said, putting his wand on a sideboard next to the door.

Snape, who had only waited for this to happen, stepped forward, grabbed the younger man by the shoulders, and Disapparated with him.

Harry struggled and fought to get away from Snape as soon as the spinning sensation in his head had stopped. "You bastard!" he screamed, but Snape just carelessly brought up his elbow and half knocked Harry out with a hard blow against his chin.

"Shut up, Potter, and do what you are told for a change," Snape hissed, dragging Harry along and towards a huge old house in the middle of nowhere. Harry, having no chance but to stumble along, could only see a rotten door on rusty hinges before he was pushed inside, Snape's hand clutched like an iron around his upper arm. The pain from the blow was blurring his vision, and he could barely master his feet to follow in the right direction as Snape dragged him along mercilessly until they came to another door, less rotten, radiating icy danger.

Snape slammed Potter against the wall next to the door. His face was deathly white; his black eyes burned in their sockets. With sudden insight, Harry realised that the man was under a huge amount of pressure and very close to snapping, to losing control. He didn't dare ponder on what would happen then.

"This will most likely cost both our lives, Potter, and to avoid that, for once in your lousy life, I need you to obey me," Snape's voice whispered in Harry's ear. "Do not talk; behave as if you were under the Imperius Curse. And for Merlin's sake, shield your thoughts." Then he buried his hand in Harry's hair, smacked his head hard against the wall, and caught him when Harry's legs gave way. Snape knocked once, waited for a hissed order to enter, and pushed the door open.

Unexpected Events

Chapter 5 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

A/N: From here on, this story is written for my friend shellsnapelover. Without her, I wouldn't have finished it. Hugs from Germany, love!

5: Unexpected Events

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The Dark Lord sat lazily on his throne-like chair, one leg thrown casually over the armrest. In his hand he held a golden goblet, and his wand was placed on a cushion only an inch away from his fingertips. Apart from him, the room was empty.

Sunlight shone through a broken window apparently, Lord Voldemort had lost some powerful followers, as he now resided in this shit-hole of a mansion. It was large, but it was rotten as well. Only magic held it together still, and on the tapestries, large mouldy patches showed.

"Severus," Voldemort said, his voice crisp with excitement at the sight in front of him. "I haven't seen you in a while. I hope you are well." Leaning forward a bit, he threw the goblet aside. It landed clattering on the ground and rolled under a table. His snake-like eyes were focussed on the young man who hung half unconscious in Snape's arms.

Snape dropped Harry and then bowed deeply, much like a knight bowing before his king, and it would have looked ridiculous if the air hadn't been crackling with tension and danger. There was a lot of magic in this room, dark magic, that was only waiting to be released.

Dizzy, Harry tried to move only to feel Snape place his foot on his wand hand. His bones threatened to crack, and he moaned with pain. In the pale light he saw nothing but Snape's shoes, dust, and the legs of a huge chair. And... another shoe? Only one?

Slowly, he moved his head, carefully enough not to catch Snape's attention. What had the bastard said? Obey him? Never, never in his whole life!

Voices somewhere above him. One was Snape's, greeting someone else with devotion and respect in his voice. The other one contained a lot of hissed syllables, was hard to understand, and...

Harry nearly yelled when a huge snake slithered into his vision. A strange sound came along with it, like dry leaves getting crunched under bare feet the scales of Nagini, rasping against the rough wooden planks of the floor. Her tongue flickered in and out, her eyes focussed on Harry, and she came closer. Fear gripped him, and he struggled; he had no intention of dying on a dirty, dusty floor, bitten to death by a pet snake! That was way out of the question; that would be far too fucking humiliating!

"Master," Snape said somewhere above him and increased the pressure on Harry's hand. "I brought you a present. I finally managed to capture Harry Potter without the Order noticing. No one knows where he is; no one knows where you are. I beg you, my Lord: Take his life and end your misery."

Harry nearly laughed at Snape's words. Misery? Yeah, Voldemort had nearly lost the war, and certainly he was miserable about that. But that Snape so eagerly tried to get his master's attention was ridiculous. *Where's my wand?* he thought furiously. *I need my wand, and then I will kill him!*

Unfortunately, his wand seemed to be gone, and his head ached when Snape ripped him up to his feet. His glasses sat lopsided on his nose; he couldn't see clearly. Only Snape's hand on his neck, gripping him hard and mercilessly, held him upright. For the moment, he guessed he actually gave a good impression of a wizard under the Imperius Curse.

Voldemort got up from his chair and took the few steps needed to get close to his most devoted follower and his worst enemy. "Still a boy, I see," he hissed. "He will be easy to kill."

"Are you pleased with me, my Lord?" Snape asked eagerly and pulled Harry to the table where he slammed him face down on the rough and uneven surface. The table was made of dark slate and definitely too high for sitting at it comfortably. Somehow, Harry didn't believe that anyone had ever eaten at this table. Much more likely, far worse things had happened on it. There were dark stains on the stone. Blood, presumably.

A splinter scratched Harry's cheek, and then he involuntarily gasped with shock when Voldemort touched him. Lightly, and only with one fingertip at his exposed neck, but Harry felt soiled from head to toes.

"Very pleased, my Severus," Voldemort hissed. "I was right to trust you; I was right to reward you. Let us drink to this victory." He drilled his wand between Harry's shoulder blades, and Snape went to a smaller table where he snatched a yet unopened bottle of wine out of thin air.

One flick with his wand, and the golden goblet was in the Potions master's hand. He inspected it, then took a napkin out of his robes and polished it clean of dust and dirt. When he was satisfied with his work, when the gold sparkled again, he poured the wine. Dark red drops hit the gold, dark red like blood. Snape handed the goblet to his master, filled a second, smaller glass for himself, and said, "To Harry Potter's death, my Lord," and drank.

Voldemort waited for a few long moments before he raised his own goblet. Intently he stared at his Death Eater. He even murmured a word and flicked his wand towards the bottle. "Can't be careful enough, Severus," he said with a cold, thin smile. "You know how many have tried to poison me, but the wine is clean. So I will drink with you. To the death of Harry Potter!" And he emptied the goblet in one go.

Snape loosened his grip on Harry's neck ever so slightly. It felt wonderful, and Harry hated Snape even more for the small comfort he had just granted him. He flexed the muscles of his right hand and was most relieved to find no bones were broken or even cracked.

Less pressure on his neck. Snape merely held him down now, and Harry could have broken the grip at any time *Maybe he's drunk?* he mused and discarded the thought as impossible. Snape had barely drunk more than a sip; if anyone was drunk, it was Voldemort.

Harry moved his head so he could get a better view of the room, the throne, and the man who sat on said throne, only to be surprised at the fact that Snape didn't hinder his attempts. He touched his former pupil only with his ice-cold fingertips a farce, all of this was a farce, and Harry intended to live at least long enough to find out what all of this was about.

Voldemort stared at him, his eyes narrowed with curiosity and hate. "How long I have looked for you, boy," he hissed, and Harry expected to see a tongue slip through his non-existent lips at any moment. "How long I have wanted to kill you. But my followers have abandoned and deserted me, mainly since the Malfoy brat failed the task I had given him. Dumbledore is still alive. Yet I am not dead; I still have power. Power to hurt; power to reward my true followers." His wand twirled between his fingers.

*If only he would put it away,* Harry thought desperately. *I would strangle him with my bare hands.*

"Master," Snape said and bowed his head once more. "What you did for me, the present you gave me the other night, was most appreciated. I do thank you. I truly did not know what I had been missing."

Generously, Voldemort nodded once. "You earned a reward, Severus. You truly did."

*What the hell are they talking about?* Harry wondered. *What present? What reward?*

"You better have another glass of wine, master," Snape suggested, stepped away from Harry, and took the goblet out of Voldemort's hand. He polished it once more and filled it again with wine.

Voldemort, not even flinching at the fact that a mere servant had just told him what to do, accepted the goblet Snape had taken from him without asking and given back without lowering his eyes.

Harry rose to his feet, staggering and dizzy. "I will kill you," he stated, ignoring Snape's threatening gaze. "I don't have a wand, but I will kill you nevertheless." Taking a step, his vision blurred, and he had to reach out only to find Snape at his side, supporting him.

"The boy talks nonsense, master," Snape snarled and silently snapped his fingers once behind Harry's back. Instantly, Harry's head cleared, and the pain vanished in his jaws and his wrist.

This here was most strange, surreal even. Harry couldn't understand why Snape had used magic to heal the wounds he had caused in the first place. He shook his head, bewildered, confused.

Snape laughed coldly and mercilessly. "Even without a wand, you would always best the boy, master," he coaxed. "You are faster and stronger, and he is half unconscious after the beating I gave him before we got here. You could place your wand on the table, and still he would not stand a chance against you."

Voldemort tipped his head, a quite terrifying sight, as he was most inhuman-looking and the movement so very familiar. Hermione often tipped her head; Harry's heart ached at the thought of his best friend. She had changed recently, not for the better, and he hadn't yet managed to find out why.

But... what was that? Voldemort No. That was impossible. Completely nuts.

The Dark Lord had just taken one long look at his wand, had looked at Snape, and had then placed his weapon on the table as suggested by the Potions master.

Harry now really needed Snape to keep him upright. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe one of the blows to his head had broken his skull, and this was a coma-induced nightmare. He began to shake slightly and tried to move away, away from Snape and from Voldemort, out of the room and out of this rotten ruin of a house. Gone was his urge to kill the Dark Lord, the one who had murdered his parents. Gone was his lust to strangle him or to hit him or at least to shout at him. All he wanted was to get out of here, and he moved backwards, towards the door.

Snape tightened his grip again. "Your present, master I should tell you that raping her has broken her entirely."

Harry froze. Rape? Broken? Who?

Snape continued, unimpressed by his prisoner's obvious terror. "Granger is now unable to sleep, to eat, or even to talk. At first, she tried to find out who did that to her, but for more than a week now, I haven't seen her. It is said that she has gone mad."

Voldemort chuckled. When Snape suggested a third glass of wine, he poured it for himself and downed it instantly. It nearly seemed to Harry as if the man on the throne was obeying Snape's every order, which was, of course, an utterly impossible thought.

Harry ripped his arm free and whirled round to face Snape. "Hermione she has been raped?"

Snape laughed. Voldemort, as if infected, laughed with him. "Oh, yes, Potter, she has. I raped her. On a cold winter night about a month ago. Afterwards, my master allowed me to beat her nearly to death. Didn't you know that?"

Staying out of Harry's reach, the young man could see that Snape hid something behind his back, holding it with both hands. And what was that on the floor, shoved half under the table? A hat? Old and battered? *Looks like the Sorting Hat*, Harry thought before fury washed through him at Snape's words, as well as hate and loathing. He had known something was wrong with Hermione; he just hadn't known what it was.

Raped. His Hermione. His best friend. Ron's former fiancée. Only she wasn't anymore. She hadn't answered their owls for weeks, had refused to see both of them, and had told Ron a week ago in a short, polite letter that she didn't wish to date him anymore.

In Snape's eyes Harry saw that the man wasn't lying. A fire burned in their blackness, and a smug smirk curved the Potions master's lips. "She struggled quite a lot, but of course she didn't stand a chance against me. Her screams, though, were a bit annoying."

Mad, indeed. "You... worthless... lousy..." Harry stammered and felt his fists clench in the hopeless wish for a wand, a knife, a bat, anything to smash in that bastard's head.

Snape moved back a step, towards his master. "No need to take up your wand, my Lord," he said casually. "He is helpless and useless. Like a child. Weak. You can crush him under your feet. Get up, master, and come to us. Finish him with your bare hands." Sweat was showing on the Potions master's forehead, and his breathing seemed forced. He looked as if he was handling an impossible, deathly situation, and Harry wondered briefly why he didn't seem to enjoy this little game more.

Trembling, Harry reined in his rage for a second to ask one last question. "Raping Hermione that was your reward?" He turned to Voldemort. "You... you gave my friend to this monster?"

The Dark Lord chuckled, standing only a few feet away from Harry again he had done what Snape had suggested. His hands hung loosely down at his sides. Empty hands. Wandless hands.

"I did grant him his biggest wish. He seemed to enjoy it, didn't you, Severus?"

Snape cast another thin smile. "I did indeed. Take a look, Potter." And with a quick jerk with his head and a soundless spell, he transferred a memory into Harry's head.

Hermione, lying broken and bleeding on the ground. Snowflakes swirling in the winter wind. A Death Eater mask, cast aside. And laughter. Cold, high, snake-like laughter. Voldemort, laughing at the scenario.

Something snapped inside Harry. He had always wondered if he could kill, if he had the strength to take someone's life. When he heard this laughter and saw Voldemort standing so close by, wandless and apparently unaware of the hate the young man in front of him radiated, Harry didn't think anymore. He acted, reacted, and reached out to attack the man, his enemy, the one he was supposed to kill. He didn't even comprehend that Snape got in his way for a brief moment and shoved something in his hands; he didn't realise the Potions master had handed him a sword until he felt the handle in his sweaty palms.

Gryffindor's sword, taken out of the Sorting Hat, which lay innocently again under the table in the Dark Lord's mansion.

Harry took it. He swung it high, in a wide arch, and beheaded Tom Riddle with one neat strike.

Time stopped, frozen to glass.

*What have I done?* Harry wondered, then felt the pulling of the sword, the power of the movement. Whirling round his own centre, driven by the strength of his movement, he couldn't help following the curve Voldemort's head took before it landed with a hard, full thump on the dusty floor and rolled against the wall.

Nagini hissed with pain and loss, ready to attack. Her big, flexible body moved fast.

Harry was faster. He speared her right through the centre, and when the Horcrux in her died with an agonising scream, she exploded into millions of little, dirty flakes. So did the body and the head of her master dust, whirling through the mouldy, smelling room. Dust and dirt, flittering slowly to the ground.

Nothing was left of the Dark Lord and his snake. But before his inner eye, Harry could still see the smile on Voldemort's lips when talking about Hermione.

One thing left to do. Feeling sick down to his bones, tears running down his face, Harry swung the sword once more and drove it right into Snape.

## Dead or Alive

Chapter 6 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

### 6: Dead or Alive

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Snape didn't even scream when the sword stabbed into his shoulder. He just gave a soft, surprised *Oof* and sunk to the floor. Blood spurted out of the wound, mingled with dust and dirt, and soaked his shirt from collar to belt.

"Bastard," Harry whispered and staggered back to the wall, where he lost his footing and landed hard on his bottom. "Worthless piece of shit. You are dead. You will die here like your master, and I have killed him and you and... and I did it for Hermione... Hermione..." He couldn't finish the sentence. The words stuck in his dry, aching throat. Before his inner eye, he saw her again on the ground, her face nearly unrecognisable after the beating Snape had given her. Dropping the sword, he had to press his fists into his mouth, or he would have thrown up.

"Idiot," Snape murmured, kneeling on the floor. Slowly, he brought one hand to his bleeding shoulder. His face turned ashen, and his fingers trembled when he examined them, dripping with blood. "Stupid. Typical... ty... pical Gryff... Gryffindor." He was stuttering. Soon, he would be unconscious. And then, dead.

Good. On all fours. Harry crawled towards his former teacher. Nothing made sense here, but he didn't care anymore. "Fry in hell, Snape," he whispered and got up. "I'll go now. You'll die alone."

"Wards," Snape whispered and sunk over. Stretched out on the floor, it was obvious that he maybe had a few minutes to live, but not more.

"What?" Harry said and was at the door in an instant. It didn't open. Wards. Fucking, blasted wards. He was trapped. And from far away, he could hear footsteps. The remaining Death Eaters were coming.

Fear and panic, overlaid by icy determination. Harry's stomach clenched as his eyes darted from Snape's shallowly breathing form to the door to the pile of dirt and back to Snape. There must be a way out, he thought desperately. There must.

An idea managed to sparkle in his mind. "Where's your wand, Snape?" he demanded to know and jumped next to Snape, slamming to his knees and grabbing the Potions master's collar. "Where's your fucking wand?! I need it I can break the wards with it, so tell me where it is!"

Snape's head lolled helplessly when Harry shook him. "Table. Under... under the table." Barely audible, he bit the words out, clearly halfway through the veil already. Harry let go of him and wiped the remnants of the table cloth away, tossed the worm-eaten fabric through the room, and was under the ugly table with a Quidditch-trained move of his hips. His hands patted the floor, searching for Snape's wand, hoping against all odds that he would find it when a *Petrificus Totalus* hit him squarely in the chest.

His muscles went limp. His arms and legs became uncontrollable, and he felt like a rag doll as he slowly sank to the ground. His head, no longer obeying his orders, touched the planks, and he saw, as he was now at eye level with Snape, that the man had lied once more, that Snape's elegant black wand was in his bloody hands, and that he had managed to hex him despite the fact that he should be too weak to as much as pick it up.

"Bastard," Harry wanted to yell, but his lips wouldn't move.

Snape's did. Silently, he cast another spell, and Harry felt magic surrounding him. Not a Killing Curse. Nothing to harm him. He felt warm and safe all of a sudden and would have shuddered with disgust and fear at the fact that he felt good after something Snape had done to him if only he had been able to do so.

Snape's head fell back to the ground. His wand slipped out of his fingers the very moment when the door burst open and a Death Eater stormed in. Only one, but Harry could hear others behind him.

The man knelt next to Snape and took his mask off. Lucius Malfoy, for once not perfectly dressed and neatly groomed, stared down at the bleeding wizard. Sweating, he wiped a strand of blond hair from his face. "What the fuck happened here, Severus?" he asked and looked round, took in the empty throne and the fallen goblet. "Where's the Dark Lord?"

Snape moved his lips, but no words came out. Lucius bent lower. He will see me now, Harry thought and hated himself because he couldn't blink back the tears. Ginny, his wonderful, pregnant Ginny jumped into his mind, and his heart broke at the thought that he wouldn't see his child.

Lucius Malfoy looked up and right into Harry's eyes. But instead of grabbing his wand, instead of killing Harry, he didn't even seem to see him. Instead, Malfoy put a hand on the Potions master's bleeding shoulder and murmured a spell.

Snape yelled with pain. An acid smell filled the air, and blue sparks seemed to penetrate the wound. The Potions master's legs flailed uncontrollably; his fingers carved deep scratches into the planks. A strangled cry, and he lay still.

"Severus! Do you hear me?" Malfoy urged. "I put a stasis field around your shoulder; you may have an hour or so, and I promise I'll get you a mediwitch, but you need to tell me what happened here!"

Snape gulped visibly, then cleared his throat. "Dead," he managed. "Dark Lord... 's dead. Potter... killed him. Fled. Gone. Find him."

Now those were words Harry simply couldn't believe. True, he had killed Voldemort, and yes, the dark wizard was absolutely and entirely dead. But he hadn't fled, for Merlin's sake! He was here, at arm's length, and why the hell didn't Malfoy see him?

Come to think of it, why had Snape said he had fled?

Malfoy got up and looked around once more as if he had never before been in this room. Disgusted at the decay, he turned without another look back. "I'll come and get you, Severus, as soon as we have found the boy," he called over his shoulder, and Harry could see Snape's attempted snort at those words. It was much more likely that Malfoy would flee to his mansion, where it was safer than here and a lot cleaner and where no one could bring him into contact with this place.

The door fell closed. Silence rang, louder than anything Harry had ever experienced before. He was still alive; Voldemort was, quite unexpectedly, very dead.

And Snape was dying.

And Hermione had been raped. *What shall I do?* Harry thought, still immobilised. *Gods, please, someone needs to tell me what to do!*

Hoarse words ended his *Petrificus Totalus*. Snape only touched his wand with his fingertips, unable to pick it up. When life and movement streamed back into Harry's body, he crawled out from under the table and, without thinking, snatched up Snape's wand. Hastily, he pointed it at his former teacher, ready to shout an *Avada Kedavra*... and hesitated.

No. The Killing Curse didn't make it out of his mouth. He had never managed this task, had never been able to kill like that. Not in battles, not in war.

Not now, standing above a barely breathing man, his feet slipping in Snape's blood, armed with Snape's wand.

Lucius Malfoy's Death Eater mask was still lying on the table. He had put it there, inches away from Harry, but not seeing him.

Harry's eyes widened in shock when he finally came to a few conclusions. "You've hexed me to protect me," he managed. "And you've cast a Shield Charm. Malfoy wasn't able to see me. And you told him I was gone. You... but... You saved my life!"

Snape glared at him. "Take the mask. Get out. Go home." Few words, but they shredded Harry's reality to pieces. For so long he had thought that Snape was the enemy. For so many years he had hated him with all his might. When he had tried to kill Dumbledore some years back, right at the beginning of the war, Harry had known that Snape truly was a Death Eater. That Dumbledore had assured him it had been a necessary move to solidify Snape's position amongst Voldemort's followers hadn't been reason enough for him. Dumbledore was a fool, still trusting Snape.

And now Snape wanted him to go? Just like that?

"You've raped... her?" Harry croaked, unable to say Hermione's name.

Snape closed his eyes in agreement. "He forced me. The Dark Lord. Imperius. I'm sorry," he whispered. "Needed you to get angry. To hate him enough to wield the sword. Go!"

"Fuck," Harry whispered and dropped the weapon. "I'll go, but you will come with me. I need to know the whole story. And I will talk to Hermione before I judge you. Get up; we'll leave before Malfoy comes back."

Snape, too weak to move a finger, cast Harry a sarcastic smile. "I'm not really... in the best condition, Potter," he managed. "Can't breathe; can't talk... anymore. Can't walk."

Harry grabbed the wand harder. The footsteps had vanished for the moment, but Merlin knew when Malfoy or someone else would come back. A levitation spell wouldn't work with the stasis field in place, and besides, someone could see them and ask questions. They needed to get out of here on their own feet, Harry realised. Waiting a heartbeat or two, wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt, he looked at Snape and firmly said, "*Imperio*."

As if a big fist had hit Snape right into his stomach, he cramped over and gave a low howl when the curse hit him that put him under Harry's will. Trying to get away on all fours he didn't stand a chance, of course.

"Get up," Harry ordered, and Snape obeyed. Or rather, his body obeyed, heaving itself into a standing position. The Potions master looked like a puppet on strings. A broken puppet, destroyed by a cruel child.

"Walk. Take us out of here," Harry said and grabbed the mask, shoving it over his face. This was madness, of course. Utter, complete madness. On the other hand, he had often been successful when trying mad things. Had always survived mainly because of sheer luck. And he needed to know what was behind all this. He wanted to see Ginny again, and he had to talk to Hermione, and naturally, it was imperative that he tell someone that Voldemort was dead. The war was finally over, and yet no one knew it.

Snape took one staggering step and steadied himself against the wall. He was impossibly pale, and with each step he left a bloody footprint on the floor. Harry's will drove him, his own wish to get out of there came on top of it, and he took them out, out of the room and out of the mansion.

Behind them, the pile of dirt was stirred and blown apart by the wind that came through the open door. A broken window increased the effect. After a few moments, nothing was left of Lord Voldemort but nasty memories.

Harry and Snape left an entirely empty room behind.

The house wasn't as big as Harry had thought initially, but then, his head was clear now and his veins flooded with adrenaline. He controlled his former professor with Snape's wand in hand, staying two steps behind him. He could see the Potions master shuffle on unsteady feet; checking, Harry went round the next corner, relieved to see that all Death Eaters seemed to be looking for him elsewhere.

"You brought me here to kill Voldemort," he muttered under his breath and took Snape's arm in order to prevent him from falling. It wasn't enough. Snape was swaying like a tree in a storm and so he wrapped his arm round the waist of the older man. Both of them smelled of blood and sweat and fear; Harry dragged his enemy along, out of the house, to the dry, dead grass in front of it.

"You gave me Gryffindor's sword. You first made Voldemort think I was your prisoner, then you cleared my head, then you made me furious with hate so I was able to kill him. Why the bloody hell didn't you do it yourself?"

Imperius Curse or not, Snape couldn't stand on his feet any longer: he broke to his knees, clutching both arms around his middle as if he were trying to hold himself

together. "Prophecy," he murmured. "Only you could kill him." He would have hit the ground face first if Harry hadn't caught him.

Narrow-eyed, Harry checked once more to see if they were alone and was about to tell Snape to Disapparate to Hogwarts when he realised that Snape wouldn't be able to do so. The Potions master's head dropped to his chest, he shook violently, and then it occurred to Harry that more than likely the way to Hogwarts was blocked anyway. Everyone knew that he would go there for help, that he would try to seek out Dumbledore. Even a Death Eater would be clever enough to set a trap. And with Snape to protect, Harry wasn't in any condition to fight.

A safe place. He needed a place where he could hide, a place no one would ever think of checking for either of them. Somewhere outside the magical world, a house where he could take Snape and take care of him, at least until he found out whether what he had said was true.

"Damn," Harry muttered and nearly ripped a fistful of hair from his head in frustration. "Where to go? Where to take him?"

"Cold," Snape murmured and went limp in Harry's arms.

Cold? Harry wondered. *Hmm.* And instantly, he thought of the long winter nights he had spent under his uncle's staircase with only one moth-eaten woollen blanket to cover his body. A second later the idea struck. "Holy shit!" Harry shouted and ripped Snape to his feet only to find he would have to carry him. Scooping the Potions master into his arms and vaguely wondering why the man was not as heavy as he should be, he Apparated right into his Uncle Vernon's front garden.

As it was an ordinary Tuesday evening, the Dursleys were at home. It was a few minutes before dinner time, and Harry would have sworn on Snape's wand that Vernon and Petunia would be sitting in the kitchen. Or rather, Vernon would be sitting; Petunia would be preparing dinner. Dudley, if he still lived at home, would be watching the telly.

Unceremoniously, Harry kicked at the door, desperately trying not to lose his balance. Snape hung in his arms like a dead man, and despite Malfoy's spell, the young man felt blood ooze on his shirt from Snape's wound.

A second kick nearly broke the door. An irritated voice shouted indignant words, heavy footsteps approached the door, the handle moved, and finally, Uncle Vernon opened the door at Number Four Privet Drive. "I demand to know who makes such noise..." he began, but Harry shoved him aside and shouldered the door closed instantly. He hoped his Apparition hadn't been traced; otherwise there would be Death Eaters in Little Whinging any moment now.

"Hi, Vernon," he gasped, the weight in his arms getting heavier by the second. "Thought I'd come by and say hello. I need a bed. My... he... Professor Snape is wounded. Hope you don't mind." With that, he dragged Snape upstairs towards his uncle's bedroom, dimly aware of Vernon's red, shocked face and of Petunia scurrying out of the kitchen.

"You!" Vernon shouted after several attempts. "Boy, get down here immediately! I... You! Get down!"

Harry ignored him. He was upstairs already, horrified at how familiar all of this felt. The wallpaper was the same, the carpets, even the smell was not a bit different from last time he had been here.

Last time. The night Moody had died.

Harry kicked open a second door and found the big double bed his aunt and uncle slept in. Very carefully, he set Snape down on the duvet and propped him up on one of the snow-white pillows. Snape's facial colour wasn't much darker than the linen. Crimson drops painted a sick pattern onto the floor and the sheets. His breathing was uneven, and under his closed lids, his eyes darted as if seeing horrible nightmares.

A heavy hand landed on Harry's shoulder, and he whirled round, Snape's wand in hand, ready to hex his attacker.

It was Dudley. Large, bulky, but smiling Dudley Dursley. At least a head taller than Harry, he looked like a lorry driver back home after a hard day's work. Behind him, his parents were hiding, Petunia pursing her lips and Vernon still as red as a fire engine. "Man," Dudley said, his voice surprisingly high for a man so large. "You scared the life out of my old folks. Good to see you again, though. Who's that bundle of bones?" He nodded towards the bed.

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again, and gave it some serious thought before answering. They had parted on relatively friendly terms, but being greeted like that, being smiled at by his cousin, was somewhat gut-wrenching. "Dudley," he finally managed and held out his hand. "Good to see you, too. That's Professor Snape, my Potions teacher. Former Potions teacher, that is. He's injured."

Dudley took Harry's hand and shook it, half crunching it during the action. He didn't seem to be scared of the wand, he looked genuinely happy to see his cousin, and he startled Harry by asking Petunia, "Can you make us some tea, mum? Harry looks like a scarecrow. And I guess we need a doctor as well."

Petunia blanched. "But, Dudders, your father doesn't approve of him being in our house, and..." her voice faltered when her son looked at her. "Certainly, love," she stammered and hurried downstairs again.

Vernon, though, didn't give up that easily. "I will call the police," he announced. "This looks as if a crime has taken place, and I won't have criminals in my house. This man is covered in blood! He's bleeding on my bed!"

"Dad," Dudley said, taking a step towards the unconscious man. "The police will report this to the newspaper. Do you want journalists sniffing around? Do you want our family at the centre of *gossip*?"

Vernon paled. "No, son, of course not, but..."

Dudley ignored him obviously he had got used to his parents' constant nagging. Carefully, he placed his huge hand on Snape's forehead. "Shit, man, he's burning up!"

Harry sighed and slumped into a chair. "I know. I stabbed him with a sword. It wasn't that clean, as I had killed a madman and a snake with it right before I tried to kill Snape. And... I fear he will die. A doctor would be a great idea, but we can't take him to a hospital. Too dangerous. Death Eaters are looking for us. I can't perform a healing spell either. I'm not good at them in the first place, that's a bad wound, and I don't have my wand. I won't even try to perform a spell that complicated with an unfamiliar wand."

"Shit, man," Dudley said again. He grabbed Harry, pulled him out of the chair, and dragged him into the corner. Vernon, looking mortified at the events happening in his precious house, just stepped aside. "There's Dr Cameron, down the street," the large young man whispered. "He's retired now. Got nothing to do but sit in his living room."

Harry, feeling exhausted and light-headed, nodded. "Get him, would you?" he said and went back to the bed. He expected to see a dead man, but Snape seemed tougher than he looked. He clung to life, took one breath after the other and refused to die.

Dudley grinned, clearly delighted that, for a change, something interesting was happening in his parents' house. "Back in a sec," he said joyfully. His father had to press himself against the wall to let him pass.

"This will have consequences," Vernon snarled when his son was gone.

Harry just looked at him. "I have killed the darkest wizard imaginable today and wounded a former teacher of mine," he said coldly. "Don't mess with me if you want to survive the day."

Vernon gulped heavily and staggered backwards. Harry sat on the bed, looked at Snape, and waited for the Potions master to take his final breath.

"Goodness, young man, this patient belongs in a hospital!" The small, sandy-haired man stared at Snape and instantly bent down to search for his pulse. "I can't believe he isn't dead yet how on earth did this happen?" Fishing for his bag, he took out a bandage and pressed it to the wound. The stasis field Lucius Malfoy had created over an hour ago had faded, and now Snape was about to bleed to death.

Harry, too tired to lie, answered. "A sword wound. I tried to kill him. If he hadn't turned at the last moment, we wouldn't be here now."

The doctor snorted. "Nice tale. I can totally imagine you with a sword in your hand, my boy. Killed a dragon, have you? The truth, please, young man."

Dudley giggled. Harry, stunned that the doctor didn't believe him, was speechless. "I don't know..." he began, and then Dudley stepped in.

"A car accident. We were about to rob the liquor store, the guy on the bed was in the way, we skidded, and a shard of the broken windscreen went right into him. We pulled it out, and hey, will you do something about it? Don't want to bury him in the garden."

Apparently, Doctor Cameron wasn't interested in details. He had taken off his patient's shirt, had switched on the ceiling light, and was about to examine the wound when Snape stirred, moaned, and opened his eyes.

"Oh, fuck!" Harry exclaimed, which earned him a delighted laugh from Dudley.

Snape, delirious and confused, tried to get up. "Hold him down," the doctor ordered, already searching for a syringe and a sedative.

Determined, Harry jumped onto the bed and pressed one hand on Snape's uninjured shoulder, the other one at his stomach. The Potions master groaned and sunk back; his black eyes, huge in his pale face, focussed on Harry.

"You," he breathed.

"Of course me," Harry snapped. "Did you think I would leave you behind? You've got too much to explain. We are at my uncle's house. The doctor will fix you. Stop wriggling, for Merlin's sake!"

Doctor Cameron found a vein and injected his patient with the sedative. Snape sighed deeply. "You talk too much," he said before he was gone again.

"For Merlin's sake?" the doctor asked, fishing for a scalpel. "Now that's something I haven't heard before. Are you a foreigner, young man?"

Harry paled at the sight of the instruments now laid out on the bedside table. As Snape wouldn't move an inch again in the next few hours, he dashed out of the bedroom and downstairs, into the kitchen, Dudley close behind him.

Number 4, Privet Drive

Chapter 7 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

7: Number 4, Privet Drive

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Snape survived the doctor's treatment, he fought his way through a very long night, and he was still alive the next morning when Harry woke up in the chair next to the bed. After dinner, reluctantly prepared by his aunt, he had taken a shower, had managed to clean his clothes with a Scourgify, and had fallen asleep in the chair next to Snape.

The doctor was sleeping in Dudley's bed. Gently, but very resolutely, Harry had hindered him from leaving the house, explaining to him that it would be too dangerous. "Plus, if there are complications, you will be needed here. You can go and inform the police about us tomorrow." Luckily, the old man had been open to reasoning, had talked to Vernon and Petunia for a little while, and had been sleeping soundly all night.

Harry had talked to his aunt and uncle as well. Explaining what had happened wasn't his intention, so he stuck to the basics and promised them to seek help first thing in the morning. "At the moment, no one knows where we are," he said, sitting at the kitchen table. "I don't have an owl; I don't want to use magic to tell Ginny that I found shelter here. Magic is traceable. I need you, Dudley, to go to my house tomorrow and tell my wife what happened. Snape kidnapped me some hours ago; she must be terrified."

Dudley's face became stern. "You are married?"

Harry smiled involuntarily. "For a bit more than a year. And in a few months, our first child will be born. Wanna come to the christening?"

"NO!" Vernon shouted.

"Yay!" Dudley squeaked.

Harry grinned. Some things never changed. Some things did. That his cousin had managed to become human after so many years under his dreadful parents' wings was nothing short of a miracle. "I'll make sure you'll get an invitation," he said and was feeling surprisingly happy at Dudley's delight at the prospect.

"Yeah, man, how about that dead man, that Voldy-thing?" Dudley suddenly asked, even putting down his toast. "You said you killed him? Where? How? And wasn't that the real bad guy?"

With a sigh, Harry nodded. "The darkest wizard ever known. He killed my parents. I beheaded him. And I don't know where. It was an old mansion, more a ruin than something one would live in. It was surrounded by trees, and the stones of the walls were of a strange green colour. Mould, if you ask me. I have no idea where it was. Pity, as I had to leave the sword and the Sorting Hat behind."

"We don't want to hear about it," Vernon gruffed, but was silenced by his son.

"Green stones, rotten, surrounded by trees," Dudley said. "Was there a huge tree, split in half by lightning, and a chimney with a stork's nest on top of it?"

Harry nearly choked on his toast. "How the... Damn, Dudley, how do you know that?"

Instead of answering, Dudley went to get a big picture book. Placing it in front of Harry, he opened it, flicked through the pages and finally found what he had been looking for. "That one? It's called the Haunted Castle of Carrengroves. We visited it when I was little. Of course, we left you with Mrs Figg back then. I heard it's prohibited to trespass nowadays. Someone bought it, am I right, Dad?"

Vernon grumbled his "Yes," clearly unwilling to give his nephew any information whatsoever.

Harry, though, was struck dumb with happiness. "Big D, that is great news!" he exclaimed. "Someone can go and get the sword and hat back once Snape is safe. I knew it was a good idea to come here to seek shelter!"

Petunia snorted with disdain, and Vernon shot his nephew a look that could have made milk curdle.

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Now, as the sun rose, Harry could hear Dudley manoeuvring in the kitchen. Vernon and Petunia had spent the night in the living room, terrified at the thought that their bed was occupied by a half-dead wizard and even more shocked that their only son didn't mind having his cousin back home.

Harry touched Snape's cheek to find it less hot than the previous day. He nearly tripped and fell when he saw the Potions master's eyes were wide open. For a second, Harry believed the man to be dead, but then the eyes moved and focussed on him.

"Dust?" Snape asked, his voice husky.

Perplexed, Harry didn't know what the question meant, and therefore, he didn't have a clue what to answer.

Impatiently, Snape rolled his eyes. "The Dark Lord did he turn to dust? Saw his head in the air. Can't remember what happened afterwards. Apart from you killing me."

"I didn't kill you you are alive, aren't you? I even managed to organise a doctor for you, although I have to admit that he's a bit old and a bit slow. He worked for hours on you." Relieved, Harry looked down at Snape who seemed close to jumping out of bed, strangling everyone within reach. Reassuringly, Harry patted the Potions master's hand, which earned him a deathly glare. "Voldemort is dead, and he's dust, Snape. After I got rid of that snake, he was blown out the window. Well and truly dead."

Snape exhaled the breath he had been holding. "Death Eaters?" he then asked. It wasn't easy for him to speak, and Harry realised belatedly that the man probably had a throat as dry as the desert. Taking a glass of water from the bedside table, he raised a questioning eyebrow.

Snape took the glass and drank deeply. "I hope you were bright enough to let Albus know where we are?"

Harry sighed. "I tried to, but your stupid wand didn't comply to my wishes. So I sent my cousin..."

That was the moment when a flash broke the window, sending glass splinters into uncle Vernon's bedroom. Downstairs, Petunia shrieked and a kettle slammed to the floor. Snape, experienced in wars and battles, rolled out of bed, crashed to the ground, and hid under the bed.

Harry wanted to grab Snape's wand, but now that Snape was awake, the wand longed for its true master and refused to be used by Harry. With ice-cold, trembling fingers, Snape claimed what was his and cast a protection ward. Several flashes hit the invisible barrier, but it wouldn't hold much longer. Snape was too weak to keep it up, and Harry was helpless without a wand.

When several moments passed without more hexes, Harry crawled on all fours to the window, peeking out. "There are your colleagues, Snape," he whispered. "Five or six of them. I guess there are more in the back garden. We need to get out of here. You are in no condition to fight, I can't really handle your damn wand, and as much as I dislike my aunt and uncle, I don't want to see them dead. Can you get up?"

Snape was already half on his feet. "Anything, as long as you don't Imperius me again," he bit out through gritted teeth, pressing his injured arm close to his haggard body. "Unpleasant experience, Potter."

Against his will, Harry chuckled. "Sorry, I had no choice. I really need to know what you put into Voldemort's wine. I mean, he even checked it. Why didn't he detect the poison or whatever it was that put him under your will?"

Leaning against the wall, his face a sickly grey-yellow colour, Snape grinned maliciously. "Because the potion wasn't in the wine. I applied it directly to the metal when I wiped his goblet clean. Twice. Which is the reason his spell declared the wine clean. He didn't stand a chance. He obviously never watched Muggle spy movies."

Harry's head snapped up, and he stared at his former teacher in disbelief. "You... what? Don't you tell me you've got a telly in your dungeons!" Two steps, and he was at Snape's side, preventing him from sliding down the wall like wet paint by wrapping his arm around his waist once more.

"As a child, at Lily's house," Snape groaned. "Lots of television programs. Mainly ridiculous stuff. This specific piece of nonsense came in handy, though." Sweat perled on his face, and Harry could feel him tremble as they slowly made their way out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

Vernon and Petunia were nowhere to be seen. Good news, for a change, Harry thought, spotting another Death Eater through the little window next to the door. "Look, Professor, we need to get to Hogwarts. We aren't safe here, and as you are at least on your legs today, we might make it. I don't trust myself with your wand can you Apparate us there?"

The door burst open, and Harry could do nothing but prevent both of them from falling to the ground. He was just about to attack with his bare hands when he saw Dudley's huge feet and heard Snape hiss, "Bout fucking time that you turn up, Albus."

Dumbledore swept in with Dudley and Minerva McGonagall at his heels. Outside, a fight could be heard, and in the kitchen, more glass broke. Dumbledore, wand in hand, stepped in front of Harry and Snape, positioning himself between them and the kitchen door, ready to hex anyone who might have arrived. But it was only Rufus Scrimgeour. Behind him, through the open kitchen door, a dead Death Eater could be seen.

"Right," Scrimgeour growled. "What's going on here? I want to know everything, and I want to know it fast."

Dumbledore looked stern. "We were sent here by Ginny Potter and Hermione Granger less than fifteen minutes ago," he explained. "Apparently, Harry's cousin Dudley Dursley had turned up at Harry's house at Grimmauld Place, yelling her name until she opened the door and let him in. Dudley told Ginny that her husband was in grave danger, that Severus Snape was with him, wounded, and that they needed help. We came here immediately. It seems as if Dudley has spoken the truth." With his words, he turned his back to the Minister, facing his Potions master instead. "You look awful, my dear boy," he scolded mildly. "What in Merlin's name happened to you?" Carefully, he helped Snape to sit on the stairs.

"Potter happened," Snape snarled. "Who else but he would be demented enough to attack me with Gryffindor's sword?"

Incredulous, Dumbledore looked at Harry. "You did that? You wounded Severus?"

Harry blushed. "Well, yes, but..." he began. Thoughtfully, he looked at Snape and continued, "I stabbed him, and it was all his fault. He told me he had raped Hermione. In

response, I tried to kill him. I was... furious. Sorry."

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When every Death Eater was down or captured, when Snape sat safely on the living room couch, and after Petunia, Vernon, and Doctor Cameron had been Obliviated, three people were on the verge of hexing each other: Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, and Rufus Scrimgeour. Snape, arms crossed over his chest, watched in silence as they shouted at each other. Harry, who could have ended this farce in a matter of seconds by telling them what had really happened, wasn't there anymore. Dumbledore had taken him aside the moment he'd seen him. "Ginny's at St. Mungo's," he'd whispered into the young man's ear, and Harry's face had paled to an ashen grey.

"Is it... the baby?" he'd asked.

"I am afraid so, yes," Dumbledore had replied gravely. "That Severus had kidnapped you proved to be too much, and when Dudley banged at her door and told her the news, she collapsed. A miscarriage is... possible. You should go and see her immediately."

Harry's head filled with fear, and instantly, every thought of the past hours, of Voldemort's death, of everything apart from his wife and unborn child was completely wiped from his memory. He didn't even bother to say good-bye to Snape. He just stormed out of the house and straight to St. Mungo's, unaware of the mess he was leaving behind.

"You are crazy!" Poppy told the Minister. "You can't take him to Azkaban!" She was sitting next to Snape, supporting him and taking care of his wound. The Potions master was barely conscious and not in the condition to add anything useful to the question whether or not he should be imprisoned. "He won't survive there," the matron stated matter-of-factly whilst applying an additional healing charm. "I have to take him to my infirmary. St Mungo's would do as well, but not a cold and wet cell in Azkaban."

"Snape," Scrimgeour said loudly, trying to get his attention. "I have already asked you, but I will ask you again: Did you abduct Harry Potter and did you rape Hermione Granger?"

Snape didn't answer. Fever had claimed his body; he was shaking, and hadn't even heard the question.

"I have no other choice but to imprison him until his trial," Scrimgeour stated after a moment. "No one knows what happened. He might have tried to kill Harry, he might be still on You-know-who's side. Once Mrs Potter's life and that of her unborn child is out of danger, I will question Mr Potter, but until then, I have to put Snape under arrest." He didn't look too happy about it, but sounded determined nevertheless.

Coldly, Dumbledore said, "We cannot wait until Harry has the mind to answer your questions, Rufus. I have Legilimensed Severus. I know he was forced by Tom. Hermione has no intention of charging him, be assured."

Scrimgeour shook his lion-like head. "Miss Granger has to come to the Ministry and state that herself, in person and before witnesses. An accusation has been made. Rape and kidnapping are both very serious charges. You know that, Albus. How many have claimed to be under a curse, and how many have lied? I can't spare him, not with his reputation as a known Death Eater."

Shackles clamped round Snape's wrists, and two Aurors stepped to the left and right of him, supporting him as well as taking him into custody. Limply, Snape hung between them. A moment later, they were gone.

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A/N: I have to fix some logic-issues in the next chapter. It might take a bit longer than the usual week before I post the next part, but I will do it asap and definitely this month. Thanks for your patience!

## Trial

*Chapter 8 of 10*

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

### 8: Trial

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Hermione arrived minutes after they had taken Snape away, and she needed more than an hour to stop shouting at everyone at hand. It wasn't even so much that Scrimgeour believed him guilty of rape; it was that he had acted so fast and so efficiently without giving her the slightest, smallest chance to intervene. And when she learned that Harry had injured the Potions master, that currently, he was on his way to Azkaban although feverish and unconscious, only Dumbledore was able to hold her back from getting after her best friend and turning him into something small and nasty.

"All you have to do is testify, and he will be out of Azkaban before dinner time," Dumbledore assured her. "That's what Scrimgeour said. You need to say it before witnesses that he was under the Imperius Curse." He didn't look at her whilst saying those words.

Hermione, pale and out of breath, trembling still from rage and fear for Snape, finally sat on the couch. "If I had been here," she murmured to no one in particular, "I could have stated whatever was necessary, and he would be at Hogwarts now or St. Mungo's. But I stayed with Ginny instead. She was so very worried about you, and then she collapsed and began to bleed and I had to take her to the hospital! Afterwards, I considered it necessary not to leave her alone, assuming that at least someone here had some brains left in their skulls."

She sighed. Rising, she looked at Dumbledore, trying to understand how he could have allowed Severus to be taken away just like that. "I'm going to the Ministry," she said as calmly as possible. "Albus, would you accompany me?"

"Naturally, my dear," the Headmaster answered.

Snape wasn't released from Azkaban that day, nor was he allowed visitors.

Hermione couldn't believe that she wasn't even allowed to see Severus. Dumbledore tried to intervene, but all he managed was to confirm that his Potions master was indeed held captive in Azkaban and that he was alive. Madam Pomfrey demanded to be brought to him, but her wish was also denied.

By the end of the day, Hermione saw no other way to speed things up than to seek out the press.

"Sorry, sweetie, but my hands are bound," Rita Skeeter told Hermione. "In my opinion, there's something fishy here. If you allowed me to publish your opinion — an exclusive interview, maybe? — it could help his case, though." Expectantly, she looked at the young witch, quill ready, beetle-eyes glittering with excitement to get a juicy story any moment now.

"Sure," Hermione replied sternly, and when Rita handed her the draft of her interview, Hermione went to Xeno Lovegood. He sketched out a large article about Scrimgeour and the lack of justice at the Ministry. With both articles, Hermione went to the Minister, threatened to have them printed not only in *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet*, but in Muggle newspapers as well, and demanded that Professor Snape be released.

That worked. Three days after Snape had been taken from Vernon Dursley's house, the trial was set.

The courtroom was packed on the morning of the trial. Naturally, Harry, Hermione, and Albus Dumbledore were there, plus Luna and Xeno Lovegood, Neville Longbottom, Madam Pomfrey, and Minerva McGonagall. The Weasleys sat in the back row, Molly and Arthur holding hands. Ron was there as well. His face was stern when he saw Hermione, and she looked away, pained and embarrassed at the same time. Had she really considered marrying him not so long ago?

All of Hogwarts' teachers sat on one long bench, accompanied by students and their parents. The small courtroom was stuffed, every seat occupied, every free space taken by someone who was interested in this trial. Severus Snape was a well-known and heartily disliked man, but at least those who knew about the Order of the Phoenix had come to support him.

That fact obviously stunned Scrimgeour. "What's going on here?" he murmured, avoiding eye-contact and trying to push past Hermione in his haste. "I didn't expect you here. Actually, I didn't expect to see anyone here today. Goodness, woman, he raped you. How can you actually try to free him?"

"Did you really think we would allow you to hold this trial in private?" Hermione snapped. "You have no reason to keep Severus Snape in Azkaban. I don't press charges. There is no case, there shouldn't be a trial, and really, Mr Scrimgeour, this is a farce, nothing else."

Rufus Scrimgeour raised his lion-like head. "We need clarification concerning Mr Snape's role in all this. He refused to talk to anyone. He refused to let us Legilimens him as well. You demanded this trial will be held, Miss Granger, so held it will be." He sounded cross and angry, more or less shouldered the young woman aside, and went to take his place amongst the judges.

"I wanted him to be released!" Hermione shouted after him, but Scrimgeour didn't listen anymore.

Snape was already in the courtroom. He was standing between two guards on a podium in the far corner of the stone-walled room, head down, face covered by hair. Dressed in his usual black, Hermione thought for a short moment that he looked awfully weak, more like a ghost than a man made of flesh and blood.

She looked at Severus again, took in his haggard, tired face and the feverish red spots on his prominent cheekbones. He wasn't well, leaned against the handrail for support, and in his eyes, she saw bitterness and surprise. He very clearly hadn't expected to see her.

She moved closer to Severus. When she was right at the other side of the barrier, she looked up at him. "I have pressed no charges against you, Severus. I testified before witnesses that I have no intention of sending you to Azkaban. I tried to get you out, but they insisted on keeping you. No visitors allowed, or I would have been there immediately."

Snape rose an eyebrow. "Then why am I in a courtroom, Hermione? Who is behind this, if not you?"

"What the..." she began to ask, but Scrimgeour fast faster.

"Miss Granger!" Scrimgeour's voice thundered through the room. "You are not allowed to talk to the suspect! Sit down so we can begin this trial."

"Actually, there can't be a trial without a charge," Albus Dumbledore cast in. The look on his face was unusually stern, and he placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder as soon as he was close enough. "Professor Granger has made it clear that the crime against her was performed by Professor Snape whilst he was under the Imperius Curse. By law, no victim of this curse can be held responsible for his actions. I have used Legilimens to verify Professor Snape's explanation of what happened on the night in question. You are bound to release him, Rufus, and you know it."

Scrimgeour shot up like a cork out of a bottle. "Snape kidnapped your precious Harry Potter, Dumbledore," he shouted. "He took him Merlin knows where, and I want to know exactly why he did it and what happened afterwards, even if I have to keep your employee in Azkaban for the rest of his life. Is that clear, now!" The Minister's face had turned red with fury. "Potter nearly kills Snape, then saves him, then tells me your Potions master has raped Professor Granger. Too many open questions, Dumbledore. This trial will take place, charges or not. No one will make a fool out of me by keeping secrets. And if your employee doesn't talk, he's as good as dead, given his condition."

As if to prove Scrimgeour's words to be true, Snape swayed and had to clutch his bound hands to the handrail in order not to fall. His eyes, burning and lying deeply in their sockets, focussed on Hermione. A small, nearly invisible shake of his head told her all she needed to know. Reigning in her temper, she reached up and briefly touched his fingertips. Then she formally said, "I wish to testify," and stepped towards the bench.

"No!" Snape rasped. His voice was deep and hoarse. Leaning forward, his gaze became pleading. "This is... private. Don't reveal what happened. For your own sake!"

Scrimgeour shut him up with a wave of his hand. From the glow in his eyes, he was more than eager to hear everything the Potions master had been unwilling to tell.

Hermione slowly stepped in front of the court, fully aware of the fact that Severus didn't want her to testify. "From what you have just said, Minister, I can make a pretty good assumption as to what has happened," she began. "Severus Professor Snape, that is might not want to share this information, but if it is necessary in order to end this and get him back home, I have to ignore his wishes."

Scrimgeour impatiently waved his hand for her to continue.

Gathering her thoughts, she folded her hands together to stop them from trembling. "Last December, Voldemort forced Severus to rape me," Hermione said as loud and clearly as possible. Of course she heard the gasps her revelation caused; of course she saw Ron's head shooting up, staring at her with wide eyes. Continuing wasn't easy now. "Afterwards, he beat me unconscious, then carried me to the infirmary where Madam Pomfrey saved my life. He went to Headmaster Dumbledore and told him that he had acted whilst being under the Imperius Curse.

"I was broken. So was Professor Snape. We both suffered a great deal. I refused to talk to anyone; I refused to accept any help. I wanted to die, and I wanted Professor Snape to be dead, too."

One brief look in Ron's direction. He listened, hands balled into fists, and seemed close to attacking Snape, whose head was hung low.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She saw pity in many faces, which was all right; she saw something like feverish curiosity in Scrimgeour's eyes, which made her sick.

"Instead of killing myself or him or both of us, I decided to end it by weakening our memories to an extent where they couldn't harm us any longer."

Where there had been gasps before, there now was a ringing silence, caused by shocked comprehension. Only Scrimgeour was a bit slow in understanding what she had just said. "To weaken the memory, it must be overlaid with a similar one," the Minister stated indignantly. "In this case, it would mean to overlay the rape memory with one

of consensual sexual intercourse." Then, obviously realising what he just had said, he managed an, "Oh!" in a quite surprised way.

Hermione clenched her teeth. "Oh. Exactly. I used a potion to make Professor Snape... willing to comply. It was necessary, although you could very well say I raped him."

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione." Snape sounded as tired as he looked. "I never wanted you to accuse yourself. I didn't want anyone to know about this."

Hermione gazed at him once more and continued. "Severus then came to me and asked for the potion I had used to bring him under my command. There are several spells which can be performed with a wand to produce this effect, but no potion. I found it in an old German journal. I can only assume he used it to bring Voldemort under his command. Am I right?"

Snape nodded once. "I could never have hexed or cursed him; no one could. A raised wand in his presence meant immediate death. He always checked his food and drink for poison. Accordingly, I strengthened the potion, poured it onto a cloth, and polished his goblet with it. When he checked the wine, he found nothing. After a sip, he was under my command. When I suggested he should put his wand down, he did. He was helpless. As planned."

His words caused a tumult. Outcries here and there indicated that he had been heard even in the farthest corner, and Hermione could see from the corner of her eye how frantically Xenio Lovegood scribbled in his notebook.

Scrimgeour had to shout "Silence" several times before he was able to ask the one question everyone wanted to know the answer to. "What the hell do you mean by 'under your command', Snape? Do you mean to claim that You-Know-Who has to listen to you? That you can order him around? That he... obeys you?"

More questions, murmured from the audience, accompanied his words. Snape, pale as a ghost and about as stable on his feet, frowned. "I don't understand your question. Of course he is not under my command. He is under no one's command." Slowly, he brought his hands up and wiped them across his face, looking more and more tired and ill by the minute.

Silence. The courtroom's noises had died with his words. The small hope of the Dark Lord finally being under someone else's command had been killed the moment it had blossomed.

Snape looked up, confused. Then he focussed on Harry. "Potter," he snapped. "Did you by any chance forget to tell the world the most important news in more than twenty years? Could it be that you were stupid enough to keep this information to yourself?" Something close to amusement could be heard in his voice, accompanied by disbelieving disdain.

Harry stood, well aware of the fact that everyone was looking at him. Dumbledore had taken off his glasses and was polishing them frantically, Scrimgeour turned his wand in an endless circle, and Xenio Lovegood had stopped recording the events. Hermione tugged at his sleeve. "Harry?" she asked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I... um... ermmm," Harry began and blushed from head to toes. "I've been in the hospital with Ginny ever since Dumbledore told me she might lose the baby. I didn't think of anything else. And anyway, why you didn't tell them? Scrimgeour said they asked you and you refused to answer."

"I was bloody unconscious until a few hours ago, idiot, and frankly, had more pressing problems than testifying given that I am still barely able to stand on my own two legs. No one asked me anything, at least not whilst I was able to hear them. Now did you, Potter, or did you not tell them?" Snape hissed, leaning forward and completely ignoring his wardens who tried to pull him back. "If not, this would be the right moment. Tell them I had a reason to kidnap you. Tell them why I took you away from your home and your wife!"

"Tell us what?" Dumbledore asked mildly. He had managed to make his way to the young man and now put both hands on Harry's shoulders.

Harry had to clear his throat several times before he managed to mumble, "Voldemort's dead. I killed him with Gryffindor's sword. Professor Snape helped me to do it. He took me to Voldemort's house, he handed me the sword, he filled him up with the poisoned wine. Without him, I wouldn't have made it."

A pin could have been heard in the courtroom. Dozens of people stopped breathing, each heartbeat seemed to stop, and by the looks of it, people had abandoned the need to blink, too.

"Dead?" Scrimgeour whispered. "Like in... dead?"

Harry shuffled his feet a bit, clearly quite embarrassed. "Yes. Sorry for not having told you sooner."

Scrimgeour pointed his wand at Harry and nodded towards Snape's guards. They grabbed him and pulled him back, keeping him safely between them. "Prove it," he growled. "Show me the sword. I want the sword that killed You-Know-Who. I want to perform the Revelation Spell to show me someone has been killed with the sword and who this someone was. Where is the sword?"

"I don't have it." Harry's eyes darted back and forth between Snape and the minister. "I had to leave it at the house where I killed him. Otherwise, I would never have been able to get Professor Snape out. I don't have it!"

Scrimgeour cast him an ugly smile. "Therefore, I will keep Snape in custody, and probably Potter as well. Neither of you can prove your words; I don't need lies about You-Know-Who's death!"

Dumbledore rose to his full height. But before he could say a word, the door to the courtroom flew open. A large, blond young man with shoulders like a small wardrobe came in, easily pushing aside everyone in the way. After him a smaller man trotted, beefy and bulky and owning a moustache like a walrus. The older man was clearly unhappy about absolutely everything, especially his surroundings and the dozens of witches and wizards eyeing him curiously. "I dislike this, Dudders," Vernon Dursley muttered constantly, but followed his son nevertheless until they both stood in front of Harry.

"Dudley," Harry stammered. "How the hell did you get in here?"

Dudley grinned. "Mrs Figg told me where you were and what's happening today. Thought you could do with some help, with you having killed that Voldy-thingy and losing the sword and all."

Scrimgeour looked as if he'd have a stroke any moment now. "Who are you?" he demanded, but sunk back onto his chair. Dropping his wand, he even allowed Snape to sit down with a small nod of his head.

Dudley ignored the Minister entirely. Instead, he slipped the bag he had been carrying to Harry's feet. It hit the ground with a heavy 'clunk'.

Hermione felt the small hairs on her neck rise. "Is this... don't tell me this is Gryffindor's sword!" She fell to her knees and fumbled the latches open; a moment later, she cried out in triumph, holding the golden sword high into the air. "*Revelato Memoriae*," she said loud and clear. "Show us who has been killed by your blade."

The reaction to her spell was surprising everyone moved away from her and Harry. People who had been at arm's length tried to put some more distance between themselves and the young witch with the sword held high above her head. Wizards who would have called themselves brave turned pale and attempted to hide behind benches. Scrimgeour ducked, his wand lying forgotten on the table before him.

Only because each of them expected to see an image of Lord Voldemort. Only because each of them was scared to death by this prospect.

Harry didn't move, nor did Dumbledore.

A shadow formed in front of the High Court. It wasn't as tall as people had thought it would be. Wavering, it became more solid, gained colour and substance. Snake-like

eyes, bald head, and unnatural long limbs. A dirty robe, covered in blood, dressed the silent shadow. People gasped; sobs could be heard, sounds of fear and terror. Only Snape looked at the Dark Lord's shadow with clear disgust showing in his face.

Slowly, the shadow turned to Harry. Then, severed by the ghost of a sword, Lord Voldemort's head sailed once more through the air.

Shrieks, yells, and hurried movement. Those who stood there tried to move away from the place where the head would land.

A second shadow, the shadow of a snake, appeared on the ground. By then, people were too shocked to scream. They just moved farther away, the door to the courtroom was pushed open, and wizards and witches escaped through the small hole in the wall.

At last, both shadows exploded into dust once again, leaving nothing behind but a nearly empty courtroom.

Back Home

Chapter 9 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

9: Back Home

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There was pure chaos after the revelations of the sword, and everyone who had been there was out on the streets only minutes later, shouting the news out into everyone's face, into everyone's ears, be it Muggle or Squib, be it witch or wizard. "Voldemort's dead, really, really dead this time!" The cry rang through London's streets and houses, it got picked up all through the country, and by the end of the day, a special edition of the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler* were published with the same news, but slightly different headlines:

"The Boy Who Lived Killed You-Know-Who!" said the *Daily Prophet*.

"Voldemort Finally Dead Due to Severus Snape's Plan!" said *The Quibbler*.

It didn't matter. What counted most for Hermione was that Scrimgeour was too overwhelmed by the news to continue with the trial. Escorted by Harry and Dumbledore, she marched up to him, Gryffindor's sword still in her hand and Dudley at her heels, and demanded that Professor Snape be set free immediately.

"Whatever," Scrimgeour huffed and once more nodded to the guards. "Take him. Make sure he doesn't die. It seems he's a bloody war hero now. Get him out through the back door so no one sees him in this condition."

"You disgust me, Rufus," Dumbledore stated calmly, thus saying the very words he once had said to a young Severus Snape to the Minister of Magic. Turning, he waved the two guards away, opened the Potions master's handcuffs, and offered him an arm. "I propose you come to Hogwarts with me, Severus. You look as if you could do with a week or two at the infirmary."

Silently, Hermione stepped next to Snape and wrapped her arm round his waist. "Don't even think about arguing. I will kill you if you dare to die simply because you are too stupid to accept help."

Snape just snorted, too weak to give a proper answer. But he allowed them to lead him out of the courtroom and out of the Ministry, at which point Dumbledore himself took the Potions master back home to Hogwarts via Side-Along-Apparition.

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Snape was glad to be back at Hogwarts, away from Azkaban, away from London, away from the courtroom and millions of people who wanted to know details about the Dark Lord's death. He couldn't believe it himself, that his master was finally dead. "Such a simple plan," he murmured whilst Dumbledore helped him with getting through the huge gates. "Should have thought of it years ago."

He refused to go to the infirmary. "My dungeons, or I will seek shelter at Spinner's End," he insisted, and Dumbledore could neither say nor do anything to persuade him otherwise. "I'll be fine. It's just a little fever nothing my potions couldn't cure."

"My dear boy, it seems you underestimate your poor condition," the Headmaster scolded as Snape shivered in his arms, chilled to the bone and with skin too hot to be normal. "Poppy will take care of you..."

Snape ripped his arm free from the old man's surprisingly strong grip and staggered back, towards the staircase that would bring him down to his private quarters. Without wasting breath for another word, he took one stair at a time, slowly and carefully. Every bone hurt, breathing hurt, and he was slightly dizzy, both from the effects of Gryffindor's sword and the long time sitting in a cold cell at Azkaban. He might have fallen after a few steps if Hermione hadn't listened to their conversation and followed him.

Uninvited, she took his arm and ignored his attempt to push her away. "I will look after him, Albus," she said over his shoulder. "Could you make sure no one disturbs us? I think he would hex anyone who came into his rooms."

"I'll do my best," Dumbledore answered. "But if he doesn't get better in a day, you must promise me you will inform Poppy."

Nodding, she lit a few torches along the way so she could at least see where she was treading.

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It was a shock to her how easy it was to lead him to bed. By the time she had manoeuvred him downstairs and into his rooms, he was barely able to stand on his own. Luckily, he hadn't altered his wards before he had left to kidnap Harry; they opened at her command, and she sighed with relief when the door fell shut behind her. Outside, the world should go on as usual; inside, in those quiet rooms with the huge bookshelves and with walls several feet thick, she only hoped for a little peace.

And, of course, for Severus to get better. Therefore, she gently manoeuvred him into the bedroom despite his weak attempts to let go of her as soon as the doors closed

behind them. His steps were small, and he became heavier with every moment he was on his feet. "You need to rest," Hermione said sternly, trying to cover her fear for him.

"I'm fine," he murmured. "Tired. Sleep. Go."

The bed was unmade clearly, he had forbidden the house-elves to breach his privacy. Sweating, she clutched him closer, then finally managed to lower him onto the mattress. "You are not only tired, Severus, you are ill. You are burning with fever; you should be in the hospital wing!" There was no need to push him down; his muscles went limp once he was seated, and he slumped into the pillows with a heavy sigh.

But he wasn't asleep yet. "No," he murmured, eyes half closed. "Quiet down here. No screams. No people." With chattering teeth, he tried to pull the blanket up to his chest.

Hermione stopped him. "Let me undress you first." She knelt on the bed with him and opened the laces of his boots, pulled them off, then dropped them to the floor. For a moment she wondered if he would try to prevent her opening the belt of his trousers.

Obviously not. The trousers landed on the floor as well. Whilst she attended to the buttons of his shirt, she asked, "What do you mean, no screams? In Poppy's infirmary, people rarely scream."

He didn't answer. His head had sunken to the side; his breathing, though deep, didn't come easily. "What the hell?" Hermione said, startled, finally managing to take his shirt off. She gasped with shock. He was so thin! She could see his ribcage under the texture of his skin, could easily observe his heartbeat. Apart from his underpants, he was naked now, and the joints of hips and shoulders stood out far too much for a man of his size. At the right side of his chest, a deep, red wound clearly spoke of pain.

Azkaban obviously doesn't whet one's appetite, she thought and felt dizzy at the visible fact that he hadn't eaten much whilst in prison. "He was injured!" she whispered. "Still is. They let him starve there to make him talk, they didn't tend to his wounds... They wanted him to die!"

No wonder he was craving silence. Hagrid had once told her that Azkaban was never quiet, that there were always people crying or screaming.

No wonder Severus wanted to hide in the one place that was his the dungeons, his dungeons, where the walls were thick and where no one would dare to bother him.

No one apart from her, that is. Swallowing hard and wiping the back of her hand angrily across her face, Hermione decided that she didn't have time to be soppy. He needed help, he needed it now, and she was here to provide it. At least she knew which potions he needed, knew where to find a book with healing spells. And she could light a fire, could banish the cold out of the room and the darkness as well.

The bed creaked when she got up, and it creaked as well when she came back, carrying potions and books. Cross-legged, she sat beside him and used her wand to inject him with a potion that hopefully would bring down the fever. A strengthening potion followed, then a salve she carefully added to the wound on his chest. In between, she lit the fireplace and more candles. Within the hour, the dark room became warm and cosy and Severus looked considerably less dead.

With a sigh, she pulled the blanket over the man in the bed, carefully avoiding touching his right shoulder. He still shivered, even in his sleep, and he muttered unintelligible words under his breath. Every now and then, he tossed his head aside; every now and then, he tried to get up, tried to kick the blanket away, tried to wake up.

"Sleep, Severus," Hermione murmured. She sat beside the bed now in one of the big armchairs she had hovered in from the living room. With her legs up, chin resting in her hand, she watched him with furrowed brow. "Sleep. Everything is fine. You are safe, and I will make sure no one disturbs you." Reaching out, she gently touched his hand and nearly jumped when he grabbed her, pulled, and nudged his cheek against her open palm. He sighed deeply; only then did the tossing stop, and he slipped into a deeper, healthier sleep.

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That one night of sleep didn't change anything. Quite the contrary. It seemed as if now that he was safe, home, Snape's body decided that 'now' was the perfect time to give up service. After a horrible experience in November when the Dark Lord had forced him to rape and the several horrible weeks afterwards when he had tried to deal with the outcomes of his crime, he had neglected the needs of his body. When Hermione had decided to end it in early January, it would have been the time to recover. But then, his simple little plan had appeared before his inner eye, and the need to outline the task had taken up his time. Brewing the potion, kidnapping Potter, looking into the Dark Lord's face whilst hindering the madman from reading his thoughts hadn't been easy, either.

And now, after everything was technically over, after he was finally safe, having survived even Azkaban, he seemed closer to death than ever.

Unfortunately, he refused help from anyone else but Hermione. Hoarsely, he refused Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey, and Healers from St. Mungo's. "I just need some rest," he insisted, too weak to do much more than either lay in bed or sit near the fireplace with a blanket tucked round his haggard frame. "If you dare let anyone in here, I will throw you out as well."

"As if you could," she hissed under her breath and didn't open the door to anyone who knocked. Occasionally, she talked to Albus through the fireplace, calmed his concerns and told him that his Potions master only needed another few days to recover.

It was a blatant lie, of course. Severus was nowhere near recovery, and they both knew it. The fever went up and down like a yoyo, the wound caused him pain despite the potions she used on it, and his nights were restless and plagued by nightmares. Eating as sparsely as a sparrow didn't do anything to improve his dwindling health, either, and about five days after Hermione had closed the door behind them, she exploded.

"Do you have a death wish?"

Snape looked up from the book he had pretended to read since at least one hour. He had never turned the pages, though, staring into the fireplace more often than at the letters. "If I had, I wouldn't allow you to be here," he returned acidly. "I would brew myself a nice potion and be done with this life."

She stood before him, arms crossed over her chest and looking furious. "Then why don't you go to the fucking infirmary?"

"Language, Miss Granger. I think I should take a few house points from you." However, he didn't do it. Instead, he lowered his head so the curtain of his black hair fell over his face, allowing him to avoid eye contact.

"You can't take house points from a colleague, Severus, and even if you could, I'd say take as many points as you like. I don't care. I want an answer, Severus. I want to know why... why... why everything. You are not the man to give up that easily, but give it another few days, and this wound will bring you to your grave. You are fading! You get weaker every day, you barely sleep, you don't eat..."

"I'm not hungry," he said tiredly. "And as for the why tell me why not? Why not hide down here? Why not give up? I have served my purpose, and all that is left are nightmares of dying Muggles, tortured colleagues, and hateful students. I have done too much in the past twenty years to go back to normal. There is no 'normal' for me. The Dark Lord is dead; it seems logical that his second-in-command dies as well."

That left her speechless. She wouldn't have expected him to talk about death his death so easily, and she would have sworn an oath that now that he was free he would enjoy this freedom.

Apparently not. Working himself up from the chair in a painfully slow way, he turned his back to her and went into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He had never done that before, and she took it as a clear sign that he wanted her gone.

With a hissed curse, she lifted the wards, stormed out of the Potions master's private rooms, and slammed the door shut as loudly as possible.

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Returning to her rooms was impossible, so she went to the library instead, seeking out a dark corner in the Forbidden Section. Pulling her knees up and wrapping her arms around them, she lowered her head and began to cry. Hopeless, annoyed, bitter tears wet her jeans, and after a while, she shook with anger and fear. Anger that she hadn't been able to talk him out of his depression, fear that things wouldn't improve sort of immediately honestly, someone should slaughter the man for his awful... gruesome... dreadful...

"Hi, Hermione."

She jumped, the chair tipped and fell, and she didn't know whether first to wipe the tears away or to slam a book into the face of the young man who stood in front of her. "Ron!" she exclaimed, exasperated and dumbstruck at the same time that someone had found her here of all places. "What the hell are you doing here, how have you found me and... Goodness, did anyone see you?"

"Nice to see you, too," Ron stated dryly and let himself fall in one of the wooden chairs. "I have been waiting for you to come out of the dungeons for days, I followed you, and no, I don't think anyone saw me. Now tell me what's wrong with you?"

That was the moment when Hermione remembered that not too long ago, they had been together. Had gone for meals, had talked, had even gone to bed every now and then.

Not too long ago, they had been friends. She had told him everything, they had seen each other on a nearly daily basis, they had laughed together and...

And then things had changed that one winter night not yet three months ago when Snape had beaten her unconscious, when she had been raped, when her world had shattered to pieces. Back then, she had stopped talking to Ron. Answering his owls had seemed ridiculous in light of what had happened to her. Their friendship had dwindled and died in a few weeks simply because she hadn't been able to tell him what had happened to her.

*What is he doing at Hogwarts?* she wondered and couldn't help but wrap her arms round her suddenly shivering body. "I'm sorry," she whispered, taking in his red hair and the freckles and his friendly face, and there, her throat became tight and dry, and any second now she would begin to cry again. "I know you have the right to be angry at me for what I have done to you, but right now... I'm sorry. I really can't take your accusations right now."

Ron snorted once, pulled a huge handkerchief out of his trouser pockets, and held it out to her. "Blow your nose, Hermione. And then you will sit down and tell me why you are hysterical. You are never hysterical. I warn you I will try to Legilimens you if you don't talk voluntarily." A hesitant grin curved his lips, and Hermione couldn't help a rush of warmth and happiness welling up inside her. She had missed him so much; not his love, not bedding him, but his friendship. And now he was sitting in front of her, holding out a handkerchief and asking her what was wrong.

"Everything is wrong," she sighed and slumped into the chair beside him. "And I should have told you... everything. We were friends. We..."

"Are," Ron cast in. "We are friends. And I'm damn, stinking angry that you dare to think anything could ever change that. Now take the damn tissue before my arm falls off." A flick of his hand, and the thing landed in her lap.

"Shit," Hermione murmured. "Now you made me cry again, you idiot. Thanks so much, Ron."

This time, his grin was bigger. "My pleasure. And don't take me wrong I was shocked when I heard in the courtroom what had happened. I would have wanted to be there for you, to help you. As it is, you found your own solution. I just don't get why you have been hiding in the dungeons for more than a week. Everyone is celebrating Voldemort's death. Only you are missing. And the greasy git, of course, without whom the bastard wouldn't be dead."

"He wants to die," Hermione whispered and dropped her head. "And I don't know why. He's weak, the wound doesn't heal, he barely eats or sleeps. Half an hour ago he as good as threw me out of his rooms. Living seems a burden for him. I have no idea how to deal with this."

Silence claimed the library. Sunlight shone through the high windows and painted meaningless patterns on the floor.

Ron leaned over and took her hand in his. Her grip was hard, and she leaned against him after another heartbeat, seeking comfort and warmth as well as reassurance that she wasn't all alone. "What else has he said?" he asked, stroking her back. "And just for the protocol I'm not asking because I am interested in his well-being. Only because I really, really like you."

That forced a hiccoughy chuckle out of her. "He doesn't speak much," she said. "He's hiding in his rooms, doesn't want to see anyone, forbids me to get Poppy or Albus, and even his own potions can't keep the damn fever down. I fear... I truly fear he won't survive this if I can't find out why he is like this."

Ron nodded solemnly. "Thought so. You know, if someone had told you as much as half a year ago that you would fall in love with Snape the dungeon bat, you would have hit this very unfortunate person squarely across the head." Acting fast, he caught her wrists before she could jump up again. With a swift move, he pulled her closer. "I saw it in the courtroom, Hermione. The way you looked at him. How you avoided eye contact, clearly afraid someone could see that he means the world to you. And then you stood up and told everyone what you had done to save the both of you only someone who really, deeply cares would have done that."

She swallowed hard. "I don't know what you are talking about, Ron."

"And he loves you, too. Merlin, Hermione, he refused to say a single word simply to protect you! He would have been out of Azkaban in no time had he agreed to talk to Scrimgeour. But he didn't. He wanted to protect you, wanted to hide the fact that you used Dark Magic. If that's not love, my name's Percy."

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again without saying a word.

"Tell him you love him, Hermione," Ron said and got up. "The way I see it, he doesn't have a reason to live anymore, with You-Know-Who dead and his days as spy over and all. Give him a reason. And by the way, I haven't got a clue why you didn't figure this out on your own. It's said you're bright, 'Mione!" Holding out his hand, he waited until she had taken it.

"That obvious?" she asked hoarsely and allowed him to pull her up. "I thought... I didn't know..."

Ron slung his arm round her shoulders, leading her out of the library. "Not too obvious," he reassured her. "But I know you. You and Harry are my best friends. Now go and kick the greasy bat's bony arse. Tell him dying is not an option or you will come after him and... and... rip his head off or something."

This time, she didn't chuckle. This time, she laughed. Hugging Ron, she wondered how she could have ever thought that a little sex could interfere with real friendship.

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She feared that Severus had readjusted the wards, that she wouldn't be able to get back inside. She could see herself sitting outside his door, on the cold stones, hoping he would change his mind and worrying he was dying inside.

But he hadn't. The wards recognised her, and she slipped in silently, suppressing a relieved sigh.

The fire in the grate had nearly burned down; Severus was not in the living room. She knocked at the bedroom door once, wasn't surprised at not getting an answer, and sneaked in nevertheless. The darkness was complete no fire, no candles. Only slow, forced breathing could be heard, and Hermione was more than glad that, apparently, Severus was still alive.

"Go away," he rasped. "I thought you had managed to leave me alone, but obviously you have an urge to pester me. I thought I made it clear that I don't want company."

With outstretched hands, she found her way to the bed, where she sat down. A murmured word, and the candle on the little table next to the bed lit up. Just one tiny candle, but at least she could see him now, and he could see her.

Could have, anyway, if his eyes weren't closed.

"I need an answer, Severus," she said. "I need to know why you insist on hiding down here. As long as you refuse to tell me that, I won't leave." Gently, she pushed a strand of his long hair behind his ear.

He didn't move, didn't object to being touched, didn't open his eyes either. He was silent for so long she thought he might have fallen asleep. Therefore, when he finally spoke, she flinched with surprise.

"I wouldn't be able to answer their questions," he murmured, crossing his arms over his chest as if he were cold. "I wouldn't be able to tell them why I didn't come up with that plan years ago. I prefer being down here, Hermione, believe me."

"Right. So, why did you do it?" Her hand searched for his.

Now he looked at her. "I figured out the plan when Albus asked me if I was sure that you were safe," he said, fatigue making his tongue heavy. "He wondered if the Dark Lord would be satisfied with a single rape, or if he might like to play the same horrible game again. That was the moment I realised that Voldemort mustn't live any longer. I remembered your potion, I guessed I might manage to apply it to his wine, and I knew I could take Potter along, forcing him to strike the killing blow by letting him know that I had raped you."

Hermione entwined her fingers with his. Her heart began to beat faster when he responded by flexing his strong fingers. "I don't see the problem, Severus. All that counts is the result, is it not? And you don't need to answer the question, if it is asked at all." Carefully, as if not to startle him, she pressed her lips against his knuckles.

He laughed bitterly. "The Dark Lord killed so many people, Hermione. We were looking for a solution year after year and couldn't find one. I served him, I lied for him, I killed in his name. Still, that was not enough for me to find a way to finish him off. And then he forces me to hurt you and I just shoulder Gryffindor's sword and... do it? Because of a woman? People will be disgusted, Hermione, and they will be right. Everybody will think I could have done that years ago if only I had wanted to. I have failed despite the fact that the Dark Lord is nothing but dust anymore."

With a small shrug, Hermione let her cardigan slip to the floor. A quick kick, and both her shoes landed under the bed. Swiftly, she stretched out next to him and pulled a blanket over both of them. "Because of you, Voldemort is dead," she breathed in his ear. "No one will ever be able to get around this simple fact. You had an idea, and you acted accordingly. Less than a week after you learned about the potion, Harry was able to behead him. And I can't believe that you feel guilty for having saved the world with an ingenious idea."

She felt him stiffen at her touch, at the fact that her body was pressed against his. "I am guilty for not having saved the world years ago," he replied, barely audible. "What are you doing, Hermione?"

"I'm going to sleep, Severus. I have spent too many nights in your chair, holding your hand. My back hurts, my neck is strained, and I think it is only fair that you share your bed with me under the circumstances." Carefully avoiding touching his wound, she placed her neck on his shoulder and pulled his arm over her waist.

She heard him gulp. "Which circumstances are we talking about?"

Now she smiled. "Well, we are practically living together, and I have every intention to keep it that way. Although I have to admit that I didn't figure it out myself."

"Figure what out?" He sounded as if he feared her answer.

"That we have fallen in love with each other, of course. Pretty obvious once one properly thinks about it. And now we will sleep. Understood?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he pulled her closer and kissed her lightly on the lips.

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"It wouldn't have worked anyway," Hermione said a few days later when she and Severus sat at the breakfast table.

He lowered the newspaper he had been reading. His plate was empty, and he was drinking his third cup of tea. "Beg your pardon?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "What wouldn't have worked?"

"You saving the world before now." With a crunch, she bit off a bite from her toast and looked at the man she loved, searching for signs of fever, of returning weakness, of the black mood he had been in.

Instead, she could only confirm that he was not ill anymore. After she had slipped into bed with him, had held him close all night through, his health had improved literally overnight. The fever had been gone by morning, the wound in his chest finally stopped hurting, and no nightmares had plagued him since. He slept deeply, and so did she. Even his appetite had returned with a vengeance, and he had gained some weight as well. "Why do you say that?" he inquired, folded the newspaper, and put it onto the table.

"Because Voldemort was surrounded by many more followers until recently. You would have never caught him alone."

Snape nodded slowly. "True," he said. "Not many Death Eaters stayed with him once his plan to kill Dumbledore had failed. Many left; even more decided that he wasn't worth the constant danger of getting caught. He was forced to buy that rotting mansion Dudley Dursley remembered from his childhood. He often spent the days alone on his throne."

She smiled and Vanished the dishes into the kitchen with a flick of her wand. "Precisely. But with Death Eaters around, you couldn't have smuggled in the Sorting Hat. And they would have become suspicious at your manipulations. Harry would have never managed to get close enough to him with the sword. It was a now or never situation. Therefore, no reason to feel guilty."

"Thanks for pointing that out to me," Snape replied after a moment of consideration. "I must admit, I didn't think of that."

"Great," she said and got up. "Then let's get upstairs for lunch today. Please?"

He opened his mouth and she feared he would deny her this wish, but then he seemed to rethink. "All right. I must admit, I am tired of the sight of my rooms. I have never spent much time down here. The Great Hall will make a nice change. And if anyone asks stupid questions, you can hex him." Getting up, he headed for the bathroom, brushing crumbs off his shirt whilst he walked. The door creaked a bit when he opened it; he didn't close it behind him, though. Invitingly, it stood open just wide enough for her to see him getting undressed.

Heat flushed her from head to toes when she saw his shirt fall to the floor, heard the small jingle his belt made when his trousers dropped to the tiles. Then there was the tell-tale sound of water splashing into a bathtub, and suddenly, Hermione wondered if he had left the door open on purpose.

Slowly, she got up, taking one silent step after the other until she was right in front of the bathroom. Steam seeped out into the living room, scented steam smelling of spiced honey. With it came the sound of humming; it sent shivers along her spine. *Does he know I'm watching him?* she wondered and pushed the door a bit further open

with one fingertip. *If he does, he's more seductive than I have thought!*

Although they had spent the nights together in his bed since nearly a week, snuggled up closely and waking up with entwined limbs, they hadn't made love yet. His condition had been too fragile, his health not strong enough, and so she hadn't made an attempt to touch him in an erotic way. Not that she hadn't wanted to; the memories of the night she had spent in his room and in this very bed were a sweet torment, and she longed to kiss him, to taste him, to feel his naked skin pressed against hers.

And now he was in the bathroom, and she wondered if she should open the door a bit wider... Just a little bit...

There he was, lying stretched out in the bathtub. Both arms dangled over the rim, his head rested against the white porcelain. The ends of his hair just touched the surface of the bubbly, steaming water, and she hesitated to step into the bathroom. *He looks so relaxed*, she thought. *I shouldn't disturb him!*

Just when she was about to turn and tiptoe out again, he opened one eye and smiled. "I could do with a massage," he tempted her. "Unless you have something better to do?"

Silently, she pulled the door closed and placed the book she had been reading on the sideboard. "I could make the bed," she mused, rolling up her sleeves. "I could do some dusting or find out how to brew this anti-sneeze potion..."

Flexing his fingers, he playfully sprayed some water at her. "Come over here, witch, and do your duty," he growled. "It's your best friend's fault that my neck and shoulders are hard as stone getting stabbed surely is an unpleasant experience in itself, but the time it needs for healing is even worse. And if I remember correctly, your hands are strong. I would... appreciate a massage."

She grinned, delighted at his visible happiness. Still smiling, she stepped behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders. His skin was warm and, naturally, wet. Soap made him slippery, and it felt so good to touch him without a garment between her skin and his.

Slowly, she began digging her fingers into his flesh, thus relaxing the muscles in his back. He moaned at her actions, stretched his neck, rolled his shoulders about it didn't take her long to loosen him up, and soon, she was soaked from head to toes. "Do you mind if I take off my blouse and jeans?" she asked casually, but didn't await his answer. "And would you mind if I joined you in the bath? It's a bit fresh out here with nothing on."

He laughed and held out his hand to help her in. The water was deliciously hot, and only now then did she realize that indeed she had been cold, having knelt on the cool tiles for many minutes. "You don't intend to seduce me?" he asked when she wrestled her legs to the left and right of his hips. "I wouldn't mind, you know."

She grinned. "I am very much interested but considered it counter-productive to your health until now. Not to mention the fact that you fall asleep every night before eight o'clock. It makes seducing you quite impossible."

The bathtub turned out to be relatively small now that two people were sitting in it. Snape moved a bit and pulled her on top of him. "You could have woken me up," he murmured into the wet strands of her hair. His hands, as he couldn't put them anywhere else, began kneading her bum. "I might have been responsive to a kiss, witch."

"Really? If only I had known. A kiss like this, maybe?" As she was only an inch or two away from his face, she lightly brushed her lips over his. One more brush before she deepened the contact, parting his lips with her tongue, slipping a bit higher on his lean body and stroking his hard length with her belly simultaneously. Their legs entwined, her arms found their way round his neck, and she held fast so the soapy water wouldn't drown them.

It was a long kiss, sweet and tender. Her forehead rested against his, and she managed to part her legs and sit up a bit.

"A kiss like that would have been a good start," he said. His hands, though, developed a will of their own and glided lower to her breasts. Her time to get massaged; her time to moan with delight.

However, she didn't allow herself to get completely distracted, and just sitting on his lap was not what she had had in mind when getting into the bathtub. "How about... that?" She shifted, and he gasped when the tip of his cock slipped between her legs. It was impossible to say if it was just the soapy water or her own wetness that made this sensation so awesome. Only a heartbeat later, she moved again, this time with her hand wrapped round the base of his shaft, guiding it inside her.

The grip of his fingers was strong at her waist when she began to move with a slow, entrancing rhythm whilst his length was fully sheathed inside her narrow cave. His eyes were firmly closed, as were hers, and water sloshed out of the bathtub with every thrust of his hips, every push of her bum. Both seemed to be lost in their own pleasure; both held each other close, shared their breath, moved as one until they both climaxed.

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"Good thing you figured that one out," Snape murmured contently, dripping soap bubbles on her neck and shoulders. "That love problem. Makes things a lot easier now that we know what we feel."

"Agreed," she said dreamily. Still lying on top of him, she was in the perfect position to lightly kiss his throat. "But it wasn't me who put a finger on it. It was Ron."

The floor of the bathroom was already a small lake when he suddenly moved, causing another splash to land on the tiles. "What?" He sounded incredulous. "Weasley... what?"

A kiss calmed him down a bit. "Ron had waited for me. When he saw me coming out of the dungeons, heading for the library, he followed me. And then he... scolded me. Thoroughly. I must admit, I was flabbergasted that he had seen something I hadn't. That's the reason why I came back so quickly. Without him, I would have probably hidden for a day or two." Nudging his chin up, she rested her head against his shoulder and pushed her hands under his bottom.

A most comfortable position, in her opinion, but he seemed too shocked to lay still. Pushing himself up, he opened the drain with his big toe. The water vanished with small, gurgly sounds. "You mean are you saying I owe the fact of you being in my arms to Ronald Weasley?"

"And you being in mine," she confirmed, getting up reluctantly. Soapy water decorated her heated skin. Maybe Snape would have considered a second bath if she hadn't Summoned a towel and wrapped it round her. "So be friendly to him. I am certain he is upstairs in the Great Hall, waiting for us. Like everyone else, by the way."

"Good gods," the Potions master muttered under his breath. "I fear this will have unusual consequences. Most unusual."

"Ready?" Hermione called, already dressed. "I'm hungry. In fact, I am starving. Come along, love!"

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A/N: And now only the epilogue is left.

# Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

The Dark Lord's sick sense of humour pushes Snape and Hermione to their limits.

## Epilogue

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The sun was warm on her back when she climbed the last few feet to the top of the mountain, secured by a rope and a spell designed by Severus especially for this occasion. For more than an hour, she had worked her way up, one grip after the other, squeezing foot after foot in the small cracks in the rock. "Madness," she muttered to herself and wiped the sweat off her forehead. "Idiocy. We could Apparate up here, we could fly, we could have stayed home, come to think of it. Instead, I'm behaving like a spider, crawling up this bloody mountain!"

Well, Severus had been able to persuade her to do so for the third time now. Considering that, she supposed that climbing had its own way of seducing newcomers. It certainly had claimed her heart and her mind, as she dreamed of going back as soon as they were home.

"You are doing well, Hermione," Severus called from above. As usual, he had led the way, hammering the iron into the rock as grips for her hands and feet. Now, he secured her with the rope, standing at the edge of the mountain as if it didn't go down for several hundred feet. The wind blew, but his hair was pulled back to the base of his neck, and for once he didn't wear robes but tight jeans and a jumper. No boots, but soft climbing shoes made him look as un-Snape-ish as possible.

She loved it. He was so different out here, in nature, far away from Hogwarts. He laughed more, he kissed her at every possible and impossible occasion, and it had taken him only three years to persuade her to come with him, accompany him to one of his mountain trips.

Three years, she mused and reached up to catch his hand. *Three years we are together now, and I love him so badly that it hurts.*

One last push, and she was up, panting and sweating and cursing silently, as she had strained a muscle in her leg a few feet before the peak. Staggering, she leaned on Severus, who just scooped her up and carried her away from the abyss. "What about..." she began, but he just kissed the tip of her nose.

Snape peeked over the edge. Far below, three figures dangled in the ropes, obviously trying to figure out how to get up without falling down. "They insisted on coming with us, now they have to deal with the rock themselves. They'll do fine," he assured her. "They claimed in loud and clear words that they are, and I quote here, 'bloody capable of crawling up a bloody hill'. So let them crawl. Lie down and tell me what you think of this place." Carefully, he lowered her onto the soft grass and sat down next to her. A shrug of his shoulders and he held the rucksack he'd been carrying in his hands. After a bit of rummaging, he came up with a sandwich and a bottle of water, accompanied by a small bar of chocolate.

"Hmmm," she sighed. "You really know how to improve my mood. I thought I'd fall when I hurt my leg. But for chocolate I'd even go to hell and back."

"I know. That is the reason why I packed it. There must be a prize waiting for you at the top of each mountain, and I know by now that you have a sweet tooth." Teasingly, he held the bar right in front of her face until she boxed him in the ribs and snatched it out of his fingers. Opened in a second, she had devoured the better part of it before Severus fell upon her like a falcon falls on its prey, pressing her backwards into the grass and pinning her arms to the ground. "Greedy witch," he grumbled and stole the last bite.

Settling her head comfortably in his lap, she followed the slow movements of the clouds above. "Thief," she scolded. "Honestly, sometimes I wonder how you managed to talk me into your bed."

The sun was behind him, so she couldn't see his face when he answered. A strand of his long, black hair had escaped the ribbon and tickled her cheek. "Now that's easy," he said. "I'm tall, dark, extremely good looking, my nose is as crooked as any sensible witch could wish for, I am ridiculously intelligent, my climbing skills are extraordinary, I have a job that earns me enough money to provide for a family, I'm neither married nor drug-addicted, and, most importantly, I am of a decent age. I am the perfect candidate for a romantic relationship, and obviously, you were at least clever enough to admit a few of those facts because otherwise, you wouldn't have claimed me as yours."

She just snorted. "Not to forget your modesty."

"Not to forget that, correct. Thank you for reminding me to add this to my list of qualities."

She tugged at his hair, then brushed her fingertips against his cheek. "Considering all of this, I must be daft, risking you getting snatched away by an eager young girl," she mused. "I should bind you to me. Actually... I think... Yes. I think I should marry you. What d'you say?"

He bent a bit lower. There was a sparkle in his eyes she hadn't noticed before. "I wonder why it took you so long to ask me, Hermione," he whispered, his lips curving into a grin. "I have been waiting for you to ask the critical question since Christmas. I had already considered the possibility that you are not truly a Gryffindor, given your lack of courage."

"Oi!" she exclaimed. "I am Gryffindor. I asked you, didn't I? And besides why didn't you ask me if you are so desperate to become a respectable man?"

He just chuckled and kissed her, and properly this time. "I preferred manoeuvring you into a situation where it became obvious that marrying me is what you really want," he murmured. "Asking you might have resolved in you saying yes without being sure if I am the man you want sleeping next to you for the next few decades. By making you ask me, I can be quite certain that you are."

"Slytherin," she breathed. "Horrible, manipulative, sneaky Slytherin. Marry me, or I will throw you off the mountain."

He let himself fall backwards into the grass, taking her along. Now she lay on top of him, pinned him down, and caught his face between her hands. "Marry me, Severus. Say you want me for your wife!"

"I will," he said. "I will and I do. Of course I do."

When Harry, Ron, and Dudley finally reached the top of the mountain, they were swearing and cursing as loudly as possible. Ron's trousers were ripped along the knees,

Harry's hands were both badly scratched as he had forgotten to put on his gloves, Dudley couldn't talk at all and all three of them were dripping with sweat.

When they saw the kissing couple, they went silent immediately. Harry had Ginny, Ron had Lavender, but Hermione was their best friend and neither was used to seeing her snogging so thoroughly. Of course they knew that she and Snape lived together in his dungeon rooms; of course they were aware that, possibly, they... kissed every now and then. Or snuggled. Or maybe even hugged each other.

But... this here? This encounter right in front of them made both young men blush up to their hairlines, and Ron as well as Harry turned away quickly. It looked so very passionate, far too close to... sex, to be blunt.

Dudley, on the other hand, was just grinning from ear to ear.

"Scary sight, isn't it?" murmured Harry.

"Very," Ron agreed with a shudder. "Can you imagine them like... naked? I mean, Hermione naked is an acceptable thought, but... him?"

"Huh!" Harry gulped and shot a glance over his shoulder. "That image will cause me nightmares for the next couple of years." Then he relaxed visibly. "They've stopped!" he said and grabbed Ron's arm. "Now look, Snape, that's definitely too gross to be allowed. Can't you do that in your dungeons?"

"I'm not having them witnessing our marriage," Snape snapped and put an arm round Hermione's waist.

Ron and Harry paled. "Marriage?" they managed in unison, staring at Hermione. "You and... Snape?"

"Yay!" Dudley cheered. Ever since he'd been at the christening of Harry's son, he simply loved to go to a feast organised by wizards and witches.

Hermione laughed. "Of course. What did you think, that I'd marry someone else after all we've gone through? After three years of living with him, after enduring all his moods for such a long time?"

Ron leaned towards Harry a bit and whispered in his ear, "If they aren't careful, they'll reproduce!"

"I heard that, Mr Weasley, and I thank you for the suggestion," Snape said silkily and smirked. "That was something I hadn't even considered until now."

A/N: Thank you so much for reading and reviewing this story - every single word you left means the world to me!