

Dying in the Cold

by averygoodun

One-shot. Several years after Voldemort's fall, Severus hasn't been found, and that's the way he wants it.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: *These characters have never been mine, so why would they be now?*

Being wanted dead or alive might seem glamorous, but the appeal wears off very quickly.

Seven years. Seven years I've been hiding in these wretched mountains. Granted my lifestyle isn't that bad, considering my little wood stove does an acceptable job keeping my shack cozy through the winter nights. And the local villagers leave me alone, which is also acceptable. I don't even need to put up any wards, which is good, seeing as magic would probably be a dead giveaway to the authorities.

Food isn't scarce either. In fact, I eat better here than I used to over summer break during my tenure at Hogwarts. It isn't anything compared to Hogwarts' meals, but then, only the Malfoys dined better than the ungrateful students.

But still, I crave the ability to stroll down Diagon Alley, hell, even Knockturn Alley, without dodging any number of hexes and jinxes. I want to visit with Minerva, find out how Hagrid is doing, ask Filius for a rematch. I want to read the news in that worthless rag again.

But I'm a notorious killer. It doesn't matter what the circumstances, and it doesn't matter how much information I fed the Order after my rapid departure; I killed the most powerful, beloved wizard on the face of the planet. Even if, by some miracle, my name was cleared, no one would ever be willing to even look at me without a hex on their lips.

It might not be so bad except I'd grown fond of the comforts Hogwarts provided. I had grown accustomed to the good food, smooth sheets, warm showers and intelligent company. Over the years, all of the perks of the job had wormed their way into my lifestyle, and doing without them now seemed utterly and completely unfair.

It *is* unfair because without the information I provided, Voldemort would have taken out the brat that summer. Even with his friends there, ever loyal by his side, he wouldn't have lasted three months.

But... my efforts were unrecognized. I killed Albus Dumbledore. I fled the battle scene as soon as Potter started attacking the Dark Lord. I didn't want to see the outcome, either way. I gathered from Dedalus' shooting stars that Potter saved the day, though. So here I am, condemned to this paltry existence out in the middle of bugger-all with only my blasted dog for company.

I sigh, swear, and decide that it's time to do the rounds.

Donning my cap and cardigan, I grab a rifle and set off, whistling for Brisco as I stride up the slope into the forest. A happy yap meets my ears, and soon, my overtly

cheerful mutt is trailing after me, intent on using his sensitive nose to dig out every rotting leaf and muddy grub in these woods.

I come to a small stream and step across with a bit of a stretch. After a pace or two, I stop, realizing I haven't heard Brisco's usual playful splashing. Looking back, I scan the area, but Brisco isn't to be seen.

After a slew of obscene mutters, I whistle quietly and wait a moment. Usually Brisco responds quickly, heeding my call as if under an Imperio.

Scowling at that metaphor, I begin to feel a niggles of concern as I listen for any movement in the brush that might indicate my dog's whereabouts. Frustrated, I cross the stream and retrace my steps, keeping my senses alert. This is all highly unusual, and I can't help but fear that I've finally been discovered.

It doesn't take long before I find Brisco's tracks in the damp soil, and I whistle again. Almost immediately I hear a faint bark, but I can tell it's quite a ways off. After the relief fades, the frustration kicks in and I curse roundly, wondering what the stupid mutt has found this time, then follow the paw prints down a treacherous ravine.

After awhile, I come to a clearing and finally am able to see Brisco, who is standing guard over a lumpy pile of blue fabric by the stream. Comprehension dawning, I swear again and quicken my pace.

In very little time, I have dragged the body of a woman out of the water, sighing with relief when I find a weak pulse. She is unconscious, and much too much on the blue side, but she is alive.

I quickly debate with myself on whether I should use magic to warm her up but decide it isn't worth the risk. Not only will it bring up awkward questions when she awakens, but I'm not willing to risk exposure and death because some chit has been bloody careless whilst trespassing on my land.

Cursing again, I quickly pick her up and make my way down the hill toward my humble cabin. Brisco follows obediently at my heels, whining slightly as he sniffs the woman's dangling hand.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm dumping another hot kettle load into my small tub. The young woman lies stripped and bundled in a warmed blanket on my bed, but she is dangerously chilled, and I need to warm her up quickly. I was briefly tempted to employ the body heat method of warming, but quickly discarded that option. No need to become so vulnerable.

So that leaves my tub. And water heated on the stove. Water that is infernally slow in giving up its bitter chill. I drum my fingers impatiently on the table surface and watch the unconscious woman.

She looks familiar somehow. I suppose she's one of the few lasses that lives in the area or maybe a visiting daughter of one of the locals. On the rare occasions I go to town for supplies, I'll catch sight of various villagers. Small as the population might be, I know I haven't seen everyone, and it hadn't taken long to convince the town that I'm not interested in socializing. I was rather proud of how restrained I was, managing to remain on the edge of polite while making my point very clear.

No, I wouldn't know if she is one of the locals, but she does look familiar.

The next pot is starting to show signs of heat. This one doesn't need to be quite so hot, so I test it with my finger. Finding it warm enough, I take it to the tub. The tub is only a third of the way full, but it will only need one more round of hot water before I can add the cool house water for a decent, but not scalding, warmth.

I'm restless, so I pace the room, finally coming to rest in front of the bed. Looking down at the girl, I scowl. The foolish girl. What compelled her to wander into my territory? Everyone around these parts knows how treacherous my land is. It's one of the reasons I feel safe here, knowing very few would be willing or able to traverse it. Not to mention it is foolish to go gallivanting around in these mountains alone in any case. Anyone with the slightest amount of common sense knows that.

My heart stops at a sudden thought. What if she wasn't alone? What if her traveling partner is searching for her or had gone for help?

I dismiss the idea quickly. No one, not even a child, would have left her in the water like that. The only reason anyone would be searching for her was if she had told someone where she was off to. If she had, then they probably wouldn't be worried about her for a few hours yet.

It is possible I'll be able to get her warm again before anyone comes looking.

Shaking my head, I look back at the stove.

Silly girl. To be so foolhardy... If she was a witch, she would have been sorted into Gryffindor...

I hold my breath and look back at her, dreading what I'll find. Sure enough, a flurry of quiet curses leave my mouth when I finally recognize the chit.

I immediately pick her up, quilt and all, and head for the door. I have to get her away from my home. She is most definitely unconscious and wouldn't have any memories of me. I could dump her onto the roadway a mile from here. Someone is likely to pass by at some point during the day. It is possible she will survive.

I stop at the threshold and swallow, running over the facts and consequences of every action. I looked around my home, my paltry existence, at everything I stand to lose. My eyes fall on Brisco, who is resting comfortably in his little blanket at the side of the bed. As if sensing my turmoil, he looks up at me curiously and whines.

Closing my eyes, I let my shoulders fall and sigh mournfully. I take the slight form back to my bed. I can't do it. I can't murder her just to stay here. I will warm her up, make sure she'll be okay, then Obliviate her and find a new home. It is the only livable option. Laying her down carefully, I give her another long, bitter look before checking on the water, then warm up another blanket.

While I wait for the water to heat, I slowly go round my shack, gathering my possessions. I carefully pack my remaining clothes away in a rucksack and dig out my shrunken cauldrons and supplies, carefully wrapping them to prevent damage. I look at my books, knowing I won't be able to take the ones I've collected while here. They are Muggle titles, so there won't be any harm leaving them. I lovingly trace the spine of one of my favorites with a finger, silently saying good-bye.

By the time the tub is full of warm water, I have sorted everything I'll be taking, half of which is packed, while the other half awaits a Shrinking Charm.

Reluctantly, I unwrap the girl from the blankets and carry her to the tub, looking only at her blue face as I lower her into the water. When she is immersed, I take her tiny wrist in my hand and feel for a pulse. I don't know whether to be pleased or not when I find it a little stronger than it was at the creek. I don't let myself think about it.

I cover the tub with a towel to retain the heat for as long as possible and then go about clearing my cabin of anything identifiable. I manually clean the cabin, sweeping the floors, washing the table, getting rid of any traces there might be of my existence. I don't want to leave even a strand of hair for the Aurors to identify.

The thought of Potter finding anything of mine is enough to make me double my efforts.

After a few minutes, I check on her again. Her flesh tone is improving, and her pulse is definitely getting stronger. I check the water temperature and find it cooling off, so I go to heat up another kettle-full.

As I put the kettle on the stove, I hear her moan. I force myself to relax, going over my escape plan once more, but when I look at her, I find her eyes are still closed and her body still limp.

I start putting spare papers in the fire, hoping to gain a little more heat while also destroying any evidence of my existence. When I straighten and look back at her, I am startled to find her looking back at me.

"You're awake," I say in a low voice.

She gives a halfhearted smile that fades into a prolonged shudder. She closes her eyes, and it is obvious she is in pain.

I stand helplessly by, watching the girl go through the reheating process, knowing that I can offer her a little relief, but she likely won't accept it coming from me.

"W-w-what's h-h-hap-pening t-t-to m-me?" she manages to stutter after a moment, looking up at me with fearful eyes.

"Your body is warming up. You were hypothermic."

She shudders again with a grimace of pain, crossing her arms under the towel. I can see the sluggish movement as she tries rubbing her arms. I try to remain dispassionate as tears start trickling down her cheeks from the sensations.

Her face is twisted into a mask of pain, but she opens her mouth and whispers something. My heart is beating too loudly for me to catch her voice, so I go over to the tub and kneel by her. On impulse, I take her face in my hands, letting her know I am here.

"What did you say, Miss Granger?" I ask softly, having no wish to scare her further.

I almost think she said, "Hold me," but that can't be right. She must have said, "Help me." She is whispering extremely faintly, so it's possible my ears deceived me. Also, her body is shuddering so severely that it's a wonder she can talk coherently at all.

Swiftly, I pick her up out of the tub and carry her back to my bed, tucking the towel around her as we go. I lay her down gently and cover her up with the cool blanket before fetching the warmer one. Quickly, I replace the cool blanket with the warm one, making sure as little heat is lost as possible.

By the time I have tucked her in, her shudders have subsided down to severe shivers, but she is still whimpering in pain.

"Where does it hurt, Miss Granger?" I ask calmly.

Hermione snuffles and says, "My hands and feet... please, make it stop!"

I think for a moment about what I can do, then swiftly get up and undo all the careful packing, shaking my garments onto the floor. I grab a couple shirts and take them to the stove, draping them on the hooks the blanket had been on. I then return to Hermione, untuck her arm, and start rubbing it. "I am afraid there is little to be done but suffer through it, but I will try to help stimulate your circulation." She nods, looking very much like the child I remembered with her eyes so wide and trusting. She obviously hasn't recognized me.

I rub her arm from the fingers up while trying to keep as much of her covered as possible. I'm trying to ignore how soft and smooth her skin is, so, to give me something else to concentrate on, I focus my attention on her face, avoiding her eyes, and belatedly realize her head is bare. I rearrange the top blanket so that it is wrapped around her head, leaving only her pale face visible.

She smiles at me gratefully and then closes her eyes. She continues to shiver and shudder, though I'm fairly certain she is asleep.

After I've rubbed her arm for a while, I fetch one of the shirts hanging by the stove and wrap it around that arm. I then move to the other arm and repeat my treatment. It doesn't take long before both her hands and feet are tenderly wrapped in warmed shirts and tucked back under the blankets.

I look at her resting there insensate and wonder why I'm going to the effort of saving her. Saving her means my doom, and I'm not eager to meet it. But then she whimpers again, and I find myself sliding my hand under the blankets to gauge her temperature.

Laying my hand on her chest, feeling the slight rise on either side of my hand where her breasts swell, feeling her heart beating strongly, and the gentle rise and fall as she breathes, feeling both her strength and her helplessness, something inside me shifts. I can see that her shudders are decreasing, and her body is starting to relax as I let my hand rest over her heart.

When her shivers stop completely, I carefully remove my hand, trying not to disturb her slumber. She makes a little mew of discontent and frowns briefly but doesn't wake up. I think she will be all right now. I'll cast a warming charm on her before I leave to make sure she doesn't get chilled again, but now I need to re-pack my rucksack and start shrinking my possessions.

That's when I notice my wand is missing. I had packed it away when I'd first arrived here seven years ago, hiding it to, unsuccessfully, keep myself from brooding on what I'd lost, but now that I need it again, I can't find it. I was positive I had placed it in a box under a loose floorboard by the bed, but when I open that spot up, I find nothing but spider webs.

Thinking I already removed it, I search the cabin, looking on every shelf, in every pile, I even empty my rucksack again, though I have no memory of packing it.

It's not anywhere. I find myself on the verge of panicking. The last link to my world has disappeared.

I look around the room wildly, hoping that with one more scan I'll see it, but when my eyes pass over the bed, my attention is brought back to Miss Granger. She's shivering again. Badly.

Torn between the desire to find my wand, my only hope, and help the girl, I find myself walking toward the bed, sitting on it, and gently sliding my hand under the blanket to feel her temperature again. I'm confused when I find her warm.

Why is she shivering?

I begin to remove my hand, but the small movement wakes her, and she looks up at me with fear in her eyes. Ah, so she's finally recognized me. Of course it figures she would when I don't have a means of escape. I'm cursing my luck and trying to figure out an alternate escape plan when she whispers, "Please... Hold me."

This time there was no mistaking the words. I look at her, frowning, before I realize she's probably suffered some brain trauma. That would account for her being out in these woods with barely a layer of clothing on. It would also account for how she ended up in the stream.

"Miss Granger," I start, but she interrupts me.

"Please..." It's barely a breath, but her terror is loud. It's persuasion enough. I take off my damp sweater and boots, and then I climb under the blankets beside her, scooping up her frail form to hold her. As soon as my arms surround her, she lets out a relieved sigh and relaxes into me.

I can't deny that she feels wonderful. I had forgotten how wonderful it feels to have someone in my arms, to feel their heart beating next to mine and know that they are taking as much comfort from the embrace as I am.

I had forgotten what magic it bears, connecting two strangers so strongly. I also forgot how relaxing it is, but soon find myself drifting off, completely content for the first time in years.

The first thing I notice when I wake up is how cool she is. Then I notice how still she is. I roll her off of me and frantically check for a pulse, first at her wrists and then at her throat. Looking at her grayish skin, I know it's fruitless, but I can't believe she's gone. I can't believe I failed her.

I retreat, stunned, hurt, and much more upset than I should be. It feels as though I've lost something precious.

"How long has she been here?" a familiar voice asks, startling me severely. My attention had been so focused on Hermione, I never noticed the man sitting at the table, watching us.

My mouth goes dry when I recognize the man. Potter. At first I think it's James, but I quickly remember the brat. Harry.

He's looking at me calmly. I find it odd that there's no malice in his demeanor, just curiosity. Then I remember he asked a question, but I can't remember what it was.

"What?" I rasp, embarrassed that my voice is revealing so much.

"How long has she been here?" he asks again, leaning forward slightly as if to see me better.

"A day, maybe less," I answer, not sure how long I had been asleep. Swallowing, I add, "I didn't... She was... I didn't hurt her."

A brief smile crosses the boy's face before he leans back again with a weary sigh.

"No, I doubt you did." He continues watching me, though it is obvious now how sad he is. It is then that it occurs to me that this is his friend in my bed. This was one of his best friends. He has reason to be upset, hurt and stunned, but instead he just looks sad.

I look from him to Miss Granger. She looks at peace, at least. She's even smiling slightly, though I don't know why.

I crawl out of the blankets and tenderly cover her back up, but I'm unable to go beyond her face. It seems unfair to shroud her. I then stand up to face the Boy Wonder.

He isn't looking at me, though. His eyes are resting firmly on her face, and if I cared one whit about the boy, I would feel sorry for him.

I clear my throat, grabbing his attention.

"Well, are you going to arrest me or just kill me?"

He furrows his brows in confusion as he looks at me, then his eyes pop open, and his mouth sags in surprise.

"You..." He seems to have become speechless. Unfortunately, as long as he holds a wand, I have no chance at overpowering him and escaping. Maybe it would be best to die quickly. He's too bloody noble to torture me. Much.

"Unless your compatriots are around, I can promise you will have no witnesses to my murder. I'm even wandless, so that obstacle has conveniently been removed."

I smirk at how angry he's getting, but I am surprised he doesn't make a move. Instead, he visibly tamps down his emotions and shakes his head.

"Well, it's nice to know you're the same bastard as always, Snape, but to answer your question, neither. I only came here to find Hermione. I have no argument with you."

I hope I'm not as obvious with my surprise as he was with his, but then I blurt, "I don't understand."

Harry looks at me appraisingly then says, "You were acquitted, Snape. Hermione, Remus, and Minerva all figured out you were the one sending us information. Even I couldn't deny the evidence, especially after they unearthed Dumbledore's Pensieve. We all thought you died after the battle. Everyone else with a Dark Mark did. It was a bit of a shock to find you here." He looks at the bed again, and my eyes follow.

I am confronted yet again with Hermione.

"You don't seem surprised to find her... here." For some reason, I can't bear to say the word "dead."

He looks up at me again, a sad smile playing on his lips. "She ran away yesterday evening, but we were only able to track her when she was conscious. By the time we noticed she was missing..."

I absorb this information slowly. "Was she ill?"

Potter nods slowly. "Dying. We were all amazed she'd survived as long as she had, but she was nothing if not persistent."

We both smile reflexively at the description of the girl we knew. He continues, still looking at her. "We were even more surprised when her tracking spell alerted us she was conscious this morning. We thought we were going to have to have her wake without a funeral."

Even though there are many questions in my head, I find I can't speak. Eventually, one question comes to the fore, and I wonder aloud, "Why here? Why did she run away to this place?"

Harry looks at me for a long moment before shrugging. "I don't know, Professor, but I'm glad she did. It seems she finally found her peace when she found you."

He stands up, his smile twisted with grief. "I'm grateful she didn't die alone."

He then moves toward the bed and tenderly strokes the hair out of Hermione's face before leaning down and kissing her forehead lightly. His tears are visible as he lifts the blanket over her face, hiding her from view.

I find myself more emotional than I want to be and wonder what it was about the girl that did this to me. I wonder why she wanted me to hold her and why my touch seemed to soothe her.

Harry points his wand at Hermione, but before he can cast a spell, I stop him with a movement.

I know that before the war, before today, it would have galled me to ask Harry Potter for help, but somehow it seems reasonable right now, though I'll probably regret it in the morning.

"I... I've misplaced my wand."

He looks at me surprised, though comprehension dawns surprisingly quickly as he looks around my messy room. I expect to find amusement at my naiveté, so I'm surprised when he only looks sad. "*Accio Snape's wand,*" he says, and in no time my wand flies from the pile waiting to be shrunken into Harry's hand. He looks at it for a second, and then he hands it over to me with a small smile.

I nod my head in thanks, relishing the feel of the ebony in my hand. He nods back and points his wand at Hermione again.

Before he casts the Portus Spell, he looks up at me deliberately, as if he's come to a conclusion.

"Over the last year or so, Hermione's been a bit obsessed with finding everyone she's wronged and apologizing. It's possible that she found you were alive by accident and figured out why you were hiding..." He pauses as if looking for the right way to say what he wanted. "She always... she always helped us, and I sometimes wonder if it was because she was terrified of dying alone."

We both look down at the body of the woman covered by fabric. I can feel the tears burning my eyes, but I will not let them go yet. There are too many to release right now.

Quietly, Potter casts the Portus Charm, and, just before they disappear, I quietly say good-bye.

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

You've released me.

Avery's Notes: Thank you Sun! I really appreciate you looking this over for me.

Southern's Notes: I really enjoyed this story...despite its ending. I think it's a wonderful form of release for him, and instead of leaving me feeling gloomy, I'm actually smiling.