

No Dungeon So Dark

by *WonderfulChild*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Be warned: a naughty word and implied character death.

The sound of their voices wakes him.

Severus opens his eyes to inky darkness. The tracking charms so recently embedded in his Dark Mark are burning with an intensity that tells him the others are looking for him and getting closer. He places a hand over his aching, bruised chest and listens to them moving around beyond his cell, speaking in worried, urgent tones, their anxiety seeping through the walls.

He wonders if they know he can hear them. He wonders if they care.

"... think this is a very good idea," says a man with thickly accented voice. It is somehow familiar, but he cannot place it, "considering your past."

"Viktor is right." This voice he recognizes more easily, from the accent as well as the timbre Ginevra Weasley. And now he knows the owner of the other voice, Viktor Krum. Strange that he can recognize their voices after all these years, considering how he loathed one as a student and met the other only a handful of times. "You don't have to do this."

"But I do, Ginny." This voice he recognizes as well. He closes his eyes as a heady rush of relief and anger overwhelms him. Four years since she slipped through his wards and out of his life, but he can still picture the determined look that accompanies that impatient tone of voice. "I need some kind of closure."

"Closure? Hermione, he's a Death Eater and a traitor..."

"I know what he is, better than you, probably. If you're worried I'll release him, let me assure you, I won't. Not after..." her voice hitches and there is a pause, "... not after everything."

"I don't think that at all." Weasley sounds apprehensive, skeptical. Strangely, that gives him hope that he will survive long enough to be rescued. "I'm worried about you. After what you went through, I can't imagine that seeing him again can do you any good."

"The sentiment is appreciated," Hermione says, and he can hear her temper behind her words, just barely restrained. "But you have no idea what I went through. Now,

give me the keys."

"Herm-own-ninny..."

"The keys, Viktor, or I will blast the door off of its hinges."

A beat of silence, during which he can imagine Krum and Weasley trying to determine whether their wills are stronger than Hermione's, then there is the jingle of keys and the click of a lock and the door creaking open.

Hermione's will has won it seems.

Severus clenches his eyes shut and turns his face away from the painful light spilling in from the hallway, but the light only accosts him for a moment before the door is closed again.

He cannot see her, but he hears her, hears the susurrations of her clothes, the soft sound of her footsteps on the stone floor as she moves towards him. It is a sound he recalls trailing behind him from their few excursions into public together, from listening to her pace restlessly in the hallways of his home at night, from her efficient movements around his lab; her tread is as identifiable to him as the voices of Weasley and Krum, even after all the time that has passed.

She stops nearby, and he catches the merest whiff of her scent - vanilla and cinnamon and something unidentifiable but clean, like the crispness of the autumn air. Severus suddenly realizes that he is alone in the same room with Hermione Granger for the first time in four years.

Of all the ways he envisioned this, he was never the one in chains.

Glass and metal clink on the flagstones as she sets several objects on the floor to his right. He hears the strike of a Muggle match and smells the scent of sulfur, and then the cell is lit with the soft illumination of an oil lamp. He squints against the light and watches her kneel next to him, so close that he can see the lines etched into her face by years of running and hiding and hand-to-mouth survival.

Foolish girl. She should have stayed with him.

"Healing potion first?" she asks. "Or water?"

The shackles around his wrists and ankles clang loudly as Severus shifts and pushes himself into a seated position against the damp stone wall. The dull ache in his chest sharpens into needles of prickling agony and he coughs wetly, tasting the coppery, salty flavor of his own blood in his mouth. It is the cough of a severely wounded man.

Whoever hit him with the Crushing Curse did a thorough job.

"Healing potion it is."

Metal scrapes against glass as she unscrews the lid of the bottle and puts it in his hand. The potion tastes like lavender and eucalyptus, and the pain in his chest begins to fade before he has even finished swallowing. He sighs with relief.

"Water, now," he says.

She picks up another bottle, a plastic Muggle bottle, untwists the cap, and hands it to him. The water is sweet and clean and wonderful, but he hasn't seen or touched plastic in years, and it's strange to drink from anything that isn't glass, pewter, or the gold of the Dark Lord's table. Disorienting. Confusing. Did he truly spend his childhood in the Muggle world?

"The Carrows are dead," she says, as if she thinks he will care.

"So I assumed," he replies, breathing raggedly after drinking so much at once. The bottle is almost empty. He wonders if there is more. "No great loss. I'm surprised they lived as long as they did."

She does not reply immediately, only watches him finish the water with a solemn expression. He is almost ready to snap at her for staring when she finally speaks. "Severus, there's something I need to know."

"I assumed that is why I am still alive." Of course there is something she needs to know. The remnants of the Order have captured and killed half a dozen Death Eaters in the past two years, and each death has brought several powerful blows to the Dark Lord's regime, hence the new charms embedded in their Dark Marks. When they had left him in this dark cell, in agony and coughing up blood, he had assumed he was intended for the same fate and hoped that the others would find him quickly. But now, knowing Hermione, his imminent death will certainly be less so. Incapable of murder, this one, which is how she had ended up in his hands in the first place.

Severus coughs again. There is some pain, but nothing overwhelming, and most importantly, no blood. "Well, spit it out."

She gets up, paces to the far wall where she leans, watching him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. Her face is more deeply shadowed now, and Severus does not like being unable to see the thoughts flittering across her face. "Tell me why you took me that day."

Oh, lovely. This. Severus leans his head against the wall, staring up at the barely visible angles of the ceiling and walls. He does not know how to reply, because he doesn't know why he demanded her for himself. She had been standing there on the battlefield with Dolohov's wand at her throat and blood trickling slowly from a wound on her temple, and Severus had simply walked over and claimed her. Maybe it had been a moment of weak sentimentality because for almost a year before that last, decisive battle, he'd been fucking her in back alleys, in public restrooms, in seedy hotel rooms, after feeding her questionable intelligence intended to weaken the Order. Sometimes, he thinks he took her because he was a glutton for punishment, other times because she was a trophy of his triumph over the Potters, and yet others because he loved her.

The last only occurs to him when he is drunk. He tries to be sober as often as possible.

"Well?"

He shrugs. "Does it matter? It kept you alive."

"It does matter. To me. Now answer the question."

"Bloody hell, Granger." He's angry now. He doesn't want to discuss it, and what bloody good will it do them anyway? The past is the past, and he would like it to stay that way. "Why does it matter?"

She looks away, up into the shadows hovering near the ceiling. "It matters because I once thought I loved you."

Idiot girl, wearing her heart on her sleeve. She had obviously learned nothing from her time with him.

Severus sneers. "I always told you that you were a foolish girl."

Her eyes flicker back to him. "You're right. I was a fool." Her voice is full of disappointment and accusation. "I thought you were still loyal, even though Harry was dead and all hope was gone. I played concubine for almost two years, waiting for you to do something, anything. I just knew you had some kind of plan to cripple the Death Eaters, but you did nothing but kneel like a slave and kiss Voldemort's robes."

"What was I supposed to do? All those years at war, all my hard work, and Potter died anyway."

"You could have fought."

"I would have died, just like you will when they catch you."

She shrugs. "For some of us, there are worse things than death."

"There are," he assures her. "I've seen them first hand. In fact, the Dark Lord has a few of them saved for you, especially after your attacks in Reading, and not even I will be able to protect you from them."

She looks away again. "I wouldn't ask you to."

There is a heavy silence and then Severus says, "You should have stayed, Hermione."

She barks out a humorless laugh, far more jaded than any sound he's ever heard from her. "And wear the red concubine's robes for the rest of my life? No, thank you."

"Yes, but you would have lived."

"As your property and broodmare with no legal rights to my own children. Sorry if that isn't the life I envisioned for myself."

"And living hand-to-mouth is?"

"At least no one owns me." She pulls away from the wall and kneels next to him again, so close that he would only need to lean forward to kiss her. "Now answer the question, Severus. Why did you take me that day?"

Severus sighs. She isn't going to let this go; she had always worried at everything like a dog with a bone. "I took you because I wanted to. It was an impulse, no more, no less."

"That's what I thought." She shifts closer. Severus can see the hope and need in her eyes, asking him, no, begging him to justify the time she had spent in his bed. Triumph sings in his blood, triumph and pride and possessiveness. "But what about afterwards? Did you ever love me at all?"

Of course he loved her. He would have fought tooth and nail to protect her had she stayed, but she had to disappear from his house with little more than the clothes on her back. But the heat of his Dark Mark is intensifying with every passing moment, and when they find him and it will be soon, within a couple of hours at the latest these pathetic survivors of the Order will die, Hermione included. There will be nothing he can do to protect her, so it's best to be rid of her. He has worked too hard to cover up his temporary betrayal of the Dark Lord to have it ruined for a few moments of frivolous sentimentality. Love only makes a man weak, and he is in no position to have a weakness.

Best to have this done with then.

He raises his hand and twists a lock of her hair around his finger. It is a gentle gesture, an old gesture, one of the few signs of affection he had ever given her. Her eyes soften as hope blooms within her. "If you are looking for some way to rationalize the time you spent with me, you're wasting your time. You were merely a toy and a diversion." He tugs on that lock of hair. Hard. She jerks away, her mouth turned down in an aggrieved frown. "I never loved you, Granger. Whatever possessed you to think I could?"

They stare at one another in silence; she nods.

"I see," she says. She reaches for the lantern to blow out the flame, and in its warm light, he sees her face harden in a way he would never have expected, as if she's taken the heart on her sleeve and tossed it away rather than tucking it back into her chest where it belongs.

Darkness settles around him again and Severus frowns. What just happened here?

The sound of her Muggle trainers on the stone tells him she is moving towards the door. He hears the jingle of keys and the creak of the door, and light spills over him again. In the doorway she pauses, a silhouette framed by the brightness of the world outside of his cell.

"Thank you for not making me a liar," she says ominously and shuts the door behind her, leaving him in total darkness. Severus pretends he doesn't feel the snarl of anxiety coiling in his chest.

He hears their voices outside of the door again.

"Well?" says Weasley. She sounds doubtful and frightened and worried.

"Do what we did with the others."

"Herm-own-ninny, do you mean...?"

There is a pause, a heavy pause gravid with every miscalculation Severus has ever made, then Hermione speaks.

"Yes," she says. "Execute him."