

At All Costs

by chivalric

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Just Another Meeting

Chapter 1 of 5

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Note: This story will have five chapters.

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1: Just Another Meeting

Severus Snape was late, as usual. He never hurried on such occasions. Plus, it had been a particularly stressful day, and he hadn't been home before nightfall. No way to grab something to eat before the meeting, but never mind that there would be plenty of food there.

He shook his head in anger plenty of food, but he never stayed hungry after he had arrived. In fact, the meetings went straight to his stomach; he couldn't bring himself to drink more than a few sips of water and knew he would have been throwing up any food consumed in advance or during the meeting. Or too soon afterwards.

Still, at the moment, he was ravenous. He didn't care. It wouldn't last.

Wind ripped at his clothes whilst he silently strode through the dark streets. The Dark Mark upon his arm was pulling him, as if he were a dog on a lead. Thin, annoying rain wet his hair and the black cloak that covered his bony figure. He was cold and miserable. As he always was when on his way to a meeting. But, well, he had chosen this path, and he would see it through. Had to see it through.

Turning a corner, he finally felt a last pang on his arm and saw the Dark Mark on one of the doors, invisible to Muggles and anyone else who didn't wear the very same mark upon his or her skin. Absentmindedly, he touched his wrist: it hurt. As usual.

Entering the door, he could already hear the others. Two, at least. *Avery and Goyle*, Snape thought with a frown. There was laughter and the smell of chicken wings.

A nice evening amongst friends. Lovely. For a moment, he thought of turning, leaving, going home. But that wasn't to happen. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, and if you weren't killed by the 'good boys' for being a Death Eater, you would certainly be killed by your fellow Death Eaters for trying to desert them. They were very eager on tracking down deserters. Especially if it was one of a high position.

And so he appeared at the meetings as often as possible, talked, gossiped, planned the great come back, did his share of the torturing and tried not to be bothered about it too much. Only a couple of weeks ago he had arrived just in time to see an elderly half-blood witch dying on the dining room floor he had killed her without so much as a

second thought. Her screams had driven him mad.

He went upstairs and frowned. There was the light of a wand in use to be seen under the door. Avery and Goyle seemed to be having fun. Well, maybe it would distract his mind for a little while. Shivering, he pushed the door open.

"Ah, Severus, old chum!" the voice of Avery boomed when Snape entered the room. "Good to see you! You didn't make it last time just as well, for we had to face an Aurors' ambush, and Rigoult's been killed. Get in, man; get in; we've got a little surprise for you!" The man smiled broadly, waving the Potions master inside.

Truly, sometimes I forget which side I'm spying on, Snape thought, discarding his travelling cloak on the nearest chair. Still teaching at Hogwarts, his fellow colleagues there believed that he had betrayed the Dark Lord, had helped even to bring him down, whilst Avery and Goyle and the other remaining Death Eaters knew it was just the other way round. That Snape had never stopped supporting them, that now it was his sole task to bring them back to strength.

Despite the fact that he had never stopped attending the meetings, lately it had become harder and harder to do so. All he really wanted to do was to forget.

Not tonight, though.

Avery glanced at him. Snape made him uneasy, an effect the man who had briefly taken the Dark Lord's place and now was second-in-command again had on most people. He gave Snape, who was as usual dressed all in black, a questioning look. "You're not pissed that we already started, Sev, are you?" he asked eagerly and gestured into the corner.

Snape gave a low growl. He hated to be called 'Sev', or 'old chum' or any other sort of nickname. But he ignored it. He was not in the mood for a row, and besides, Avery wasn't worth it. Ignoring the man, he looked round. The table, as he had guessed, was laden with food.

The fire overheated the room, and Snape felt sweat on his forehead. He'd need a shower when he came home, something else he hadn't found the time to do before leaving. Never mind last time he had been covered in blood after the meeting; it probably wouldn't be different this time either, so no harm done.

Snape wiped his slick hair out of his face. Goyle was there, too. How nice. The boy who had once been his student had grown into a fat man and was still as thick as a post. And cruel, as well as eager to torture.

Goyle grinned at Snape, his former teacher, as if to make sure that the man realised that it had been him who had cast the last spell. "Look what I've found," he carefully articulated, for if he didn't, no one could understand him. "There. In the corner."

Very well, then. A brief look, nothing more. The room wasn't lit too brightly, and the walls had some sort of an awfully dark green tapestry that sucked up most of the light that was there in the first place.

Snape could smell the chicken wings. And blood. A pretty distasteful combination. No wonder he had lost some weight in the past months he just couldn't bring himself to eat, remembering those evenings here with his 'friends' even in his dreams.

In the corner of the room, next to the huge table, there was something dark. Crouched to the ground, not moving, but weeping silently. Something human, it appeared to be. Snape sighed. He had never had a knack for torturing, but occasionally he couldn't avoid at least witnessing it. Tonight seemed to be such an occasion.

He stepped closer. A woman, what a surprise. Torturing women seemed to be the best those idiots could do; the witch a few weeks ago had proven that. "Can't you find someone worthy, for a change?" she sneered, half turning round to see both Avery and Goyle hovering beside him, wands in their hands and grinning like mad. *What is going on here?* Snape wondered, taking a second look.

"She's special, she is, Sev, old chum," Avery chuckled. "A special treat for you Goyle found her and thought you might like to overlook her death yourself." Enthusiastically, he pushed the tall man closer to the figure huddled, shaking, in the corner.

"Was at Hogwarts, she was, Professor," Goyle babbled. "Always after me and my gang Crabbe and Malfoy, you know. We..."

"I am not an imbecile, Goyle, I do remember pupils I taught only a few years ago," Snape interrupted. Then he stepped closer, even lowered himself to one knee. There was something familiar in this figure. The hair the stature could it be...?

Then the girl the woman, now moved, stirred, moaned, looked up, right into his eyes. Yes, he remembered her. His heart went a bit colder.

"Miss Granger," he greeted her with a small nod of his head. A thin smile curved his lips. "How pleasant to see you here. Although I take it that you won't participate in the conversation? No? But certainly in the evening's entertainment, be assured. If you are lucky, it won't last that long." His voice was like ice, and he drank in every little detail of her. Her clothes were dirty, her face worn with pain. Tears were streaming down her face; her breath came in harsh sobs. She was obviously in pain, and the sounds she made stirred the small hairs in his neck already. How much he hated that part of his job, and what a pity that he couldn't kill her on the spot his colleagues had gone apeshit the last time he had deprived them of their fun.

Snape stood up and turned to face the two men behind him. He nodded his approval, then went to the table and sat down. Lazily, he put his feet up, displacing a few plates of meat in the process. They shattered on the ground and nearly allowed him to ignore the laughter of the two men.

"Witty, Snapey. I guess she truly appreciated a proper greeting," Goyle managed to get out, still chuckling. "We were just so rude to cause her pain, you know."

"Crucio?" Snape asked idly, pouring himself some water. It had taken them a while to accept his demand of water, given the fact that they could get anything he could possibly dream about supplied. It had needed a certain... persuasion, but now there was a jug of water waiting for him whenever he appeared.

"'Course Crucio," Avery replied, settling opposite of him. "Done quite a bit of screaming, the bitch. Bless the silencing charms." He picked up another wing. Fat dripped on the table; fat dripped off his fingers. Snape nearly choked.

"She stopped screaming and went on begging when I started beating the child, though." Avery was munching now, barely understandable.

"What child?" Snape forced himself to ask in order to make sure he had got the proper meaning of what Avery just had said.

The man just gestured in the corner. "The child, there, the bitch's brat take a look, it's pathetic how she tries to protect it."

So Snape went up again and back into the corner. There was not only the smell of blood in here; even stronger was the smell of fear. The woman she was hardly recognizable now, given the fact that at the time she came of age she had turned into a quite beautiful young witch tried to move away from him. In her arms was a bundle, and it wasn't part of her ripped clothing.

Goyle and Avery were protecting him, each one with a raised wand, in case the woman did something stupid. She clearly was in shock; huge eyes stared at him in horror. Then he pulled back the part of her coat that indeed covered a child. A little girl, approximately four years old. Pretty, dark hair; very pale skin, which was no surprise under the circumstances. She was unconscious, but still alive. *What a mess,* Snape thought. He grew angry. Those two so-called friends of his were truly utterly useless.

"What the hell have you been thinking, to catch not only her but the child as well? How daft can you be did any of you consider that someone might be looking for them? With Weasley and Potter being her best friends? You should have killed the child, leaving it behind to distract them. And you should have killed her as soon as she had given the required information. Whatever that information might be!" He had become loud, something that rarely happened. But their hideouts had been ambushed too often, lately, and too many of them had been killed. Since Potter and Weasley had joined the Aurors, those bastards had become incredibly successful.

Taking only the woman might have just worked, but taking the child as well was too much. He needed to know why they were still alive. What the information was they wanted to get out of her. Must be important.

"Um... didn't think of that, really, Professor," Goyle stuttered.

"You are not capable of thinking, Goyle," Snape replied dryly, regaining control. "So tell me why you didn't kill her, then? A Crucio usually brings them to heel quickly. I am sure you know by now what you wanted to know? Or did she already go insane?"

Gods, it was too hot in here. But when he got back to the table and drained the glass with water, his stomach cramped with pain, and he nearly shattered the glass.

Avery leaned forward; he was eager to please. After all, this man with the pale face, the piercing, black eyes, and the nastiest temper in England had been the Dark Lord's second-in-command, and now was their new leader's most devoted servant again. "But she didn't, see," he started, nervous to the bones. "Tell, I mean. All we wanted to know was who fathered her bastard, so we can go and finish him off, fucking a Mudblood an' all. But she wouldn't say. So we though we wait for you, and you Legilimens her. We'll know, she's dead afterwards, we dump the body and everyone's just great. And hey some fun wouldn't do you any harm!"

"Brilliant plan." Sarcasm was wasted here, but he couldn't help it. He couldn't believe how unbelievably stupid this man was. "Just that I can't use Legilimens on a tortured mind. It would shatter my barriers the pain she has suffered from is too extreme for such a delicate intrusion. So more torture is needed, after all, and you have wasted time by waiting for me. Risking them finding us." He utterly disliked witnessing a torturing, and they both knew this. Nothing he could do about it now, though. He dropped his eyes to a dark stain on the floor. Blood, undoubtedly. Hers, or the child's.

"Besides as you weren't bright enough to kill the child, why didn't you use it in order to make her a bit more... compliant?" Snape continued in a more conversational tone. "Surely she would have surrendered by now. But the brat is barely harmed; I wouldn't have expected that. So?" He was curious there it was an unusual behaviour for the two of them.

Goyle quenched his curiosity. "It's for Macnair, Professor," he offered an explanation. "He's got that thing for kids, you know. Likes them really young. Thought I'd do him a favour and spare her for him." Goyle was nearly dribbling. Snape felt the pain from his stomach spread throughout his body.

The woman in the corner stirred, tried to hide the child, hoping against all odds that someone would come and save at least her daughter. Unfortunately, not one of the Order could possibly know where she was. This house was new; they had only chosen it for their meetings that very night. He himself hadn't known the place; the mark on his arm had led him here. Dolohov had decided to trust no one this time.

So no one would come to rescue her. It might be safe to keep her for another few hours and get out of her what they wanted to know: the name of the child's father and a bit of fun on the way.

Snape turned his head, avoiding looking at his former student even out of the corner of his eye. He remembered her. Annoying girl. Mudblood. Know-it-all. Thief she had burgled his stocks in her second year to brew Polyjuice Potion. Skilled, though, but spoke far too much and had never learned to respect him, although he had gone to great measures to teach her that, if nothing else.

It seems there was no other way out of this; he would have to endure her getting tortured. Therefore, he nodded briskly to Goyle's idea to give the child to Macnair and to keep the woman a bit longer. After all, it was just a simple answer they wanted. Snape wondered why she just didn't spit out the name of her lover, given the fact that he wouldn't protect her from the pain laying ahead of her. Curious things, women.

He sat down and refilled his glass. Playing with the food Avery had put in front of him, he didn't touch it whilst he listened to the other two chatting on about the big plan. Snape ignored the heat and the noise the rain made, spluttering against the windows. He looked away when Avery threw another Cruciatus Curse at the woman so he didn't have to look into her big, pleading eyes. He ignored her shrieks of pain and pretended not to see how she bent over the still unconscious child to protect it from the spell. Hearing Goyle's laughter, he truly believed that he should quit all this and stay at home next time a meeting was set. Stay at home forever.

It turned into a very long evening. They tortured the woman until she lost consciousness, slumped, bleeding, on the already blood-covered floor. The fire had burnt low. She still hadn't told who had fathered her child. Well, maybe Antonin could find out. He had taken the leadership after the Dark Lord's death, and had welcomed Snape as his second-in-command. And he definitely had a certain, long trained skill to get secrets out of even the most unwilling opponents.

"He's bound to arrive any minute now hell, why does he always have to be so late!"

Snape's head snapped up. He had been closing his eyes for a second, just a brief little moment to think about something else, anything else than the situation he was in, but had found that that was impossible. He cast Avery a deathly look for disturbing his moment of attempted peace.

"Hey, mate, sorry didn't see you dozing there," Avery tried to apologise with a half smile, but failed to produce anything else but a scared grin. He clamped his fist tighter round his wand; he hadn't lost touch of it once all evening, and neither had Goyle. Only the silent man in black hadn't even bothered to take his wand out. *We could've killed him at first sight. We could kill him now and he wouldn't stand a chance*, Avery mused, but didn't dare to follow this frightening thought. Instead, he helped himself to another bit of meat.

Goyle hopped around eagerly. He had been in a killing mood all evening and wouldn't be able to keep control for much longer. "Let's finish her off, Prof, shall we," he sniggered, casting a sideways glance at Snape. "Look, let me just break her neck. She won't mind which way she's been killed let me do it. She won't talk; she's hopeless. Please, let me do it!" He threw his wand away; it landed between some chicken bones on the ground. *He's never been massively careful with it*, Snape thought. His expression was bored; he had seen too many dead bodies to care about one more. Or two.

Avery cackled. His eyes sparkled in anticipation of the event after all, a neck broken by hands and not a spell was something special. "Great idea, lad. Let's see you perform a new discipline witchbitch neck breaking!" Eagerly, he heaved himself out of the chair, leaned forward, and put both his hands on the table. For once, his wand lay forgotten between the plates. This was going to be fun!

Goyle crouched forward. The woman whom they thought was unconscious gave a small sound and tried to get up, but didn't make it. *They haven't tortured her long enough to make her insane*, Snape realised.

Downstairs, he could hear faint noises; someone had arrived. But it was time to act. Finally, it was time to act.

He got up, silently and unnoticed by the two men. Without haste, he got his wand out. Goyle was dead first, his hands only inches away from the woman's neck. He didn't even notice that something was about to happen when the killing curse hit him from behind. His arms were outstretched, but would never break anyone's neck anymore.

Avery's eyes goggled out of their sockets. His hands, greasy with fat, searched for his wand, but he couldn't remember where he had put it. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He staggered back, away from the table, and looked round frantically in order to find the intruders. After a moment his eyes focussed on Snape, who towered over him. *When did he get his wand out?* The thought crossed Avery's mind a moment before it struck him that there were no intruders, that it had been Snape who had killed Goyle.

"What why?" he managed, staring at the completely neutral expression on Snape's face.

The cool voice of the former Potions master was bare of emotion. "I dislike torture. I think I mentioned that." Snape took a step. "I would have stopped you hours ago, but you two were clinging on to your wands like children to their teats."

"But we expected you to join us... you could have killed us, easily..."

Snape just chuckled, humourless. "One of you, not both of you. You would have killed either mother or child. Or me. I couldn't take the risk."

Avery wanted to reply somehow. But he was dead before he got the chance. He took the table down when he fell. Glass, cutlery, porcelain, food, and wine bottles rattled the room, if not the house.

Snape moved quickly now. With two long strides he was in the corner and searching for the woman's pulse. It was there, but faint. The child was alive, too, surprisingly enough. He was just about to get up to lock the door when he heard a sound and spun round.

Too late. He had been too slow. He should have locked the door first.

A whispered spell hit his arm, broke it, and disarmed him. He heard the small sound his wand made when it hit the floor and rolled out of his reach.

A man with a long and twisted face stood in the doorway. Finally, Antonin Dolohov had arrived, and the smile on his face was nasty. "Did I disturb you, Severus?" he asked icily, stepping in. He was, quite understandably, furious and determined to learn every detail of what had happened here.

Snape, supporting his broken arm, lazily smiled back. "Unimportant matters, Antonin," he replied. "Just a few minor things I had to attend to."

"Like killing friends and saving that piece of shit there on the floor. I would have thought better of you, after all we went through." Snape had served him well in the time since the war had been over; at least, so he had thought until tonight. But Snape had been a traitor after all, which was an unpleasant surprise but then, the man would be dead in a minute anyway.

Slowly, Dolohov came closer, carefully avoiding stepping into the mess on the floor. Snape didn't move, just watched him. Antonin's twitch had become really bad in the past few years; it certainly wasn't easy to be the leader of a group that lost members every other week either to Aurors or to Azkaban.

"So you are the spy, then?" Dolohov asked. Furious or not, he wasn't stupid.

"Of course I am, Antonin. I am surprised that none of you figured it out sooner."

"You were working with the Ministry? With the Aurors? With Weasley and... Potter?" He spat out the last two names. Spittle was flying.

Snape merely nodded.

"But a few weeks ago the Mudblood you killed her. And the other one, where you cast the Crucio you left, covered in blood how did you do that when now you try to save them?" Antonin didn't get it he always had considered Severus loyal to their cause.

Snape had clenched his teeth at the mentioned incidents; it was true what Antonin had said. How could he?

He could because it had secured his disguise as Death Eater. It had proven to be impossible to avoid killing or torturing completely. So he had chosen his victims carefully. "I couldn't save the first one; I was too late, so I decided to save her at least from the torture. The other one even you must know that not every Muggle-born wizard is innocent," he said slowly. "The man I tortured had killed his family the week before we caught him. I decided that he was worth my... attention. By killing him I found I could get rid of him and save my reputation in one go."

He remembered that night well. A similar house, a similar situation, a victim in pain, but then him doing the cursing, him doing the torturing and finally the killing as well. He had been sick for the rest of the week, had cancelled classes and had refused to eat for three days.

"Clever," Dolohov admitted. "And the ambushes to our hideouts you?"

"Yes."

"Rigoult's death you?"

"Yes."

"Last week, the attack, when you didn't turn up...?"

"I was leading the Aurors to your hideout."

"You don't expect to get out here alive, do you?"

"No. Of course not." Coolly, he looked at Dolohov, untouched by the events of the evening or the moment. At least, so it seemed.

Dolohov swept his wand towards Hermione and her daughter. "What are they to you, that you dropped your mask at last?" he hissed.

Snape turned, slightly, and looked at mother and child. Shaking his head, he said, "They? They mean nothing to me. But she is innocent, and I don't want to see her die." Casual words, maybe dropped with a slight tremble, but this could have been for the broken arm. He turned back to the witch in front of him.

Dolohov said, "What a pity that you failed there, Severus" raised his wand, aimed at the woman on the ground and shouted, *Sectumsempra*.

It really took only a small movement from his side. Not more than a step to the left. The curse, which would have been the certain death for Hermione and the girl, hit Snape squarely in the chest.

Strangely enough, his shirt wasn't affected at all. But his skin and flesh were. He felt the curse rip open several long wounds from shoulders down to his hips. Felt the blood flow instantly, soaking his shirt. *No use washing this one*, he thought distractedly before the pain hit him and forced a low scream out of his lungs. His view became dizzy; blood loss, most likely. Hearing Antonin scream in fury, he figured that he had enraged the man by stepping in the way. He nearly smiled at that fact, but instead his knees buckled, and he slammed hard to the floor.

Suddenly, his head became too heavy for his shoulders; forced to hang it low, his long, sweaty hair was just touching the carpet. He awaited another spell from Dolohov any second, but then realised that he still was shouting. *Daft as every Death Eater I have ever met*. The thought rang in Snape's head, but he treasured the fact that Antonin was so out of his mind, only because of him saving a worthless Mudblood, that for the moment he had obviously forgotten to cast the final killing curse.

Thinking became harder with every breath he took. He vaguely knew that he ought to do something, but couldn't bring his shocked mind to search for a solution. He not only felt weakened, but extremely confused. A *Sectumsempra* spell affected both body and mind; he had made sure of that years ago when he had invented it.

A small movement distracted him from watching the carpet getting soaked with blood. His blood, by the looks of it, as it was dripping from his chest. Something small and white moved into focus. A hand. A tiny little hand.

The girl's hand. Snape slightly lifted his head to find her staring at him. Her eyes were bruised, her cheekbones of a dark blue. She had been beaten. Where her mother's hand had touched her face, it was bloody. Deep, dark eyes, like bitter chocolate, huge in the child's scared face. Slowly, deliberately, she dropped those eyes to her hand.

He followed her look and saw his wand at the tip of her fingers, moving slowly towards him, pushed by those small fingers. Those tiny fingers, white as snow. Two stood at an awkward angle, broken.

Snape looked at her again. She should have died hours ago. Then his fingers sneaked across the floor, grabbed his wand, and he allowed his aching body to drop to the ground. Dolohov, not paying attention and being sure that Snape just had collapsed, was hit by the killing curse in the middle of a sentence and died shouting what a fucking useless bastard Snape was.

Snape wholeheartedly agreed. The pain in his chest became unbearable, but he welcomed it, as it reminded him that it was time to get out of here.

Downstairs, the door went yet again. Someone shouted. Snape stumbled to his feet, didn't make it, but managed to at least keep balance whilst kneeling in front of Hermione, pulling her close. The child was caught between them. *Is it the night? The right night?* he wondered, but then, if it wasn't, if he was wrong, they all wouldn't have much time to grief about it. Direct Apparition to St. Mungo's was out of the question: protection spells. It had to be there, or death would take them.

The door behind him flew open the moment he Disapparated with the woman in his arms and the girl safely clutched close to her mother.

Birthday Party

Chapter 2 of 5

The night continues - Snape just managed to get away from his fellow Death Eaters, but where did he end up?

2: Birthday Party

"Happy birthday, Harry!"

"Cheers, mate, and may you live forever!"

"Gimme a kiss, love, before you drink this, will you?" The last sentence came from Ginny and caused laughter in the kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Everyone knew that Ginny disliked Firewhiskey, but of course they couldn't celebrate Harry's birthday with milk.

Family and friends had gathered around the big table in the kitchen; it was the cosiest place in the house, and they had spent a wonderful evening together. Harry smiled widely at everyone: Molly and Arthur Weasley, his wife Ginny, and Ron, of course, his oldest and best friend. Tonks had had to stay at home as Teddy had the flu, but had sent Lupin as a substitute. Only one was missing, really. Well, one and a half.

"Where is she, then?" Ron asked at the very moment Harry thought of Hermione.

Harry turned to him thoughtfully and looked him up and down. "Possibly avoiding you, Weasley," he mocked, and Ron laughed. It was an old joke, now. He and Hermione had been together, briefly, at their last year at school, after it had become clear that the year was to be repeated by everyone. It hadn't worked out between them, though, and after a few weeks they mutually had decided to drop the romance part and go back to their former, fabulous friendship. It had worked perfectly.

"She usually isn't late," Ron now said, slightly worried. The meal, delicious as it had been, had been less fun without her and her daughter, Sasha.

Harry nodded; he had followed his friends thought easily. "Don't worry, Ron. I've left the shields down so she can Apparate right to the front door whenever she's done with whatever she's doing tonight."

Getting up, Harry went to kiss Ginny and was just about to go upstairs and check on their sleeping son when the ear-splittingly, loud crack of a badly performed Apparition spell made everyone jump. Molly Weasley dropped the bowl she had just planned to take to the sink; Ginny gave a small cry and Harry and Remus had their wands out instantly. *Damn!* Harry thought, but wasn't really worried. Just someone who was impolitely enough Apparating directly into his kitchen; just someone who was quite obviously in a hurry. *This someone had better be able to explain what the fuss is all about.*

But Harry forgot his wand and his thoughts only a second later and froze at the sight in front of him. So did everyone else. Arthur Weasley slumped heavily into the next chair, and his wife grabbed hold of the table. Ron didn't believe his eyes, nor did Remus. They just stared in disbelief. After all, this was a birthday party. Harry had expected some more guests, not... this.

A man stood swaying in the middle of the kitchen. A tall man, dressed in black, his face white as freshly fallen snow, and it was certainly no one who had been invited.

Snape.

The man's harsh attempts to get some air in his lungs rang through the silent room. Sweat had plastered Snape's hair to his skull; it stuck to his face and covered the pain in his eyes. In his arms he held a lifeless figure tightly pressed to his chest. A woman, deathly pale and with curly brown hair. Hermione. And... and... Sasha?

Silence rang like church bells as Harry and his friends and his family tried to understand why Snape was standing in the kitchen with Hermione in his arms and Sasha as well, why he was swaying, why he looked so utterly, completely awful, and where the small drops of blood came from that appeared out of nowhere on the clean, light planks of the floor. Certainly not out of the wounds in Hermione's face? Certainly that was nothing but a bad joke?

It was an endless moment, but then Snape took a step forward, staggered, and finally fell. He had to let go of both the woman and the child, but managed to rather let his bundle slip gently to the floor than dropping it. "Please," he rasped. "Help them."

That broke the silence. They sprang into action, not wasting time by asking useless questions. Hermione was lifted up, and Ginny gently took Sasha in her arms. "They're alive," she murmured only seconds later she was a mediwitch at St. Mungo's and knew what to do with torture victims. And tortured they had been, that much was obvious. Ginny ordered Harry and Ron to get her supplies, told her mother to set up some beds and managed to tend to both Hermione and Sasha in the next twenty minutes without losing either life.

Snape, after having delivered his burden, got hesitantly back to his feet, left the kitchen and found a chair in the living room where it was quiet and where no one would bother him. He didn't seem to notice the turmoil outside the room. He sat in the darkness, glad for a moment of peace. Only Molly once peeped in, casting him a nasty look for not offering his help after all, he was skilled enough with healing potions. Apart from that the others left him alone, simply because they had forgotten that he was there at all.

Only when it was certain that Hermione and Sasha would live and would be fine in a few days, Harry remembered Snape and considered that maybe he should try to get some information out of the man. Seeing him nowhere in the kitchen, Harry finally found him, eyes closed, in the dimly lit living room in front of the burnt down fireplace. "Having a nap, Severus?" he asked acidly. *How the hell he can sleep when Hermione... when they are in such a bad condition?* But then he saw that Snape wasn't sleeping, but staring with heavy lids into flames that weren't there.

Harry pulled a chair closer to Snape and sat down. "We could have used your help, you know," he said, a hint of accusation in his voice. "You are good with healing potions, you..."

Snape slowly lifted his head. In his eyes was a look so full of horror that it shocked Harry to the bones. "Gods, Severus, what happened?" Harry exclaimed, jumping off his chair. "Look, can you tell me... right, wait, I think I get you something to drink first." Harry realised with a sudden feeling of fear that Snape seemed unfocused, absentminded, in a dreamlike condition that was totally atypical for him. *Something is wrong here.* Harry thought. *I just need to find out what it is.* He rushed back into the kitchen, filled a glass with Firewhiskey, went back to Snape and held it out to the silent figure.

No response. No movement.

Harry hesitated. It was hard for him to speak to Snape even under the best conditions. His dislike of his former teacher had mostly subsided, but still Harry didn't feel comfortable around him and possibly never would. But Snape was their spy, with immense skills in getting the Aurors to the right place at the right time; in the past years, he had helped to bring most of the remaining Death Eaters down. Only the inner circle with Dolohov as leader had survived so far. Snape had dedicated his life to this task and simultaneously had kept his colleagues in the Order at bay, had never befriended any of them with maybe the exception of Remus Lupin.

Harry didn't really want to be here, trying to talk to a man who seemed to have looked into the face of the devil himself, but then, who else should do it? It was his house, after all, and Snape therefore his guest. *It's past midnight, and this must have happened at a meeting he must know something about it* He needed Snape to talk; maybe the Firewhiskey would loosen his tongue. Harry reached out and gently touched Snape's shoulder in order to get his attention.

Snape flinched, moved, and swept Harry's hand away.

"Severus, tell me..." Harry started, than stared at his hand. A drop hit the floor.

Damning his thoughtlessness for not having lit the candles when coming in, Harry took a closer look and only now saw that Snape's shirt was sticking to his haggard body. The fabric seemed to be wet, soaked even. For a moment, Harry wondered why Snape's hair was dry when his shirt was wet; then his brains caught up and he muttered, "*Lumos*".

Obviously, it wasn't rain that had soaked Snape's shirt; it was blood, and neither Harry nor anyone else had realised it as Snape, as always, was wearing black. *He's wounded*, Harry thought in disbelief. *Why didn't he say so?*

Then a horrible thought crossed his mind. *He knows exactly what has happened he must have been there, he must have witnessed it, and he doesn't want to talk about it and all this is his fault, somehow this is his fault, and that's why he tries to hide in here!* Harry knew it there and then, knew that Snape could have prevented Hermione's and Sasha's injuries, and the hate he felt for the shaking man in front of him hit him like a hammer. *Hermione, she always avoids being in the same room with him whenever they attend at meetings together she knows he's a monster!*

Harry's voice was quiet when he stated, "That's not Hermione's blood on you, is it. Why didn't you tell us you are injured? What are you not telling us?"

From the moment he had Disapparated from the hideout, had arrived at Harry's place and found it was indeed the right night, the night of Harry's party, the night when Ginny would be most definitely home, the night when the barriers would be down to allow direct Apparition from that moment on the world had gone quiet for Severus Snape. The sounds had become muffled, everything had gone slightly blurry, and straight thinking had turned into something other people did. He was in pain, but didn't care, grateful that no one tried to ask him stupid questions. Somehow, had found a quiet place to sit down and just had wrapped both his arms round his waist, carefully supporting the broken bone.

He was cold, so bloody cold. Maybe, if he closed his eyes for a little while, he would remember why he was here, and where 'here' actually was. Why on earth he felt so awful?

Then the smell of Firewhiskey intruded his peace, shook him, revolted him. *Why people always try to shove that stuff down my throat?* he wondered. *Don't they know it makes me even more sick than I already am?*

Someone was touching him. He pushed away the hand.

Words dropped in his mind. They had a meaning. Potter's question had it been Potter? troubled him. What blood? Looking down his chest he saw himself still breathing and suddenly, viciously felt his life pouring out of the slashes on his chest. He realised only then that, if no one took care of him, he would die.

Impossible. He couldn't die.

Snape lifted his head and looked at Harry. "Not her blood", he rasped, angry. "Mine. Do something about it!" The room around him began to loose structure; Potter's head was buoying somewhere near the ceiling. Odd was he ill, that he felt so close to death?

Harry dropped the glass in his hand and reached out to grab Snape's shoulders. The feeling of the wet fabric under his steady hands filled his stomach with uneasiness, but Harry didn't dare to let go, as otherwise Snape would have hit the floor.

Light-headed; tired; annoyed; scared: a mixture of different feelings plus a sudden weakness washed over Snape, and as the last bit of strength left him, he went limp like a rag doll. He nearly dropped off the chair, but someone caught him. If they whoever they were would only leave him alone! But no, of course not: now someone for some peculiar reason ripped his shirt open, and someone gasped. Himself? Someone else? Someone picked him up, lifted him like a child, and carried him through endless rooms to a table dreadful was the pain, and dreadful was the embarrassment. Blood coloured the floor, running from Snape's thin wrists and leaving dark red pools on the floor with every step Remus took, safely taking his friend back into the kitchen where it was warmer and where there was enough space for treatment.

Snape's head, too heavy for his aching neck, slumped helplessly over someone's arms. Darkness was all around him, interrupted by muttered words and piercing candle light. Then he was put down, gently, caring. Snape didn't want gentleness, but feeling the hard, wooden surface of the kitchen table beneath him he welcomed the smooth texture that slightly pulled him away from unconsciousness. Maybe he should get up; maybe his injuries weren't that bad at all.

"Ginny!" Harry screamed, rubbing his bloody hands off on his trousers. "Ginny, get down here, quick!" Snape mustn't die. A dead man couldn't answer questions.

Remus held his struggling friend down, shocked at the state Severus was in. With one hand he hindered Snape to get off the table, with the other he unceremoniously ripped off the black shirt. The sight of the deep slashes, the soft sound of the blood dropping to the floor made him sick to the bones. "Why you didn't say anything, you blasted idiot!" he shouted, and then Ginny came running downstairs and stopped dead at the sight of yet another patient.

"Good gods," she murmured. Her kitchen had turned into a slaughterhouse whilst she had been upstairs, and on her dining table laid the victim. "Hand me the bottle, Harry," she ordered, snipping her fingers impatiently. She wanted to sedate Severus as quickly as possible. One look in Severus's face confirmed that he indeed was still conscious his eyes followed her very movement. "Drink this," she urged, slipping her hand under his neck, but he snarled, ripped his head free and gripped her wrist

instead. She saw only then that his other arm was broken. How came that he hadn't said so? How on earth could he lay still? The pain must be immense how he could be so unnaturally calm?

Snape stared at the women bending over him. *Ginny. Mediwitch.* She would make sure that he lived. But to his conditions. "No sedative," he murmured, barely able to hold her wrist between his shaking fingers, barely able to focus on her. But he lay still; if he didn't, she wouldn't listen to him.

"Look, Severus, I need to take care of you, and it will hurt," Ginny said gently and wiped his hair out of his face.

"Fine for me," he murmured, his arm dropping back on the table. He knew that he had a reason for wanting, needing to suffer. But he kept forgetting what this reason was.

Ginny, who had learned long ago not to argue with patients gave in, knowing that he'd be unconscious in a moment anyway.

But she was wrong. He didn't lose consciousness. With every bit of his will he fought to stay awake.

Ginny worked fast. Her hands were flying, and her voice quickly got hoarse from the complicated, sung incantations that were always used for these sorts of slash-injuries. The Dark Arts had invented lots of similar spells that caused deep and severely bleeding wounds; St. Mungos had developed an incantation that worked for all of them.

It was not an easy task, and when she finally was done with Snape, she was shaking. She'd never had to treat a patient who was so determined to witness every healing spell, and she had never healed someone who, for reason she couldn't understand, didn't flee the pain, but welcomed it instead.

But she stopped the bleeding and mended his broken arm. She was able to ignore the stare of those deep, black eyes and the harsh screams. Finally, she was able to seal the deep slashes. She heard Severus gasping for breath and felt him fighting against Remus's strong hands and the binding spells that held him down, and she saw Remus wincing at his friend's screams with every spell she put on her patient. She wouldn't sleep well for a while after tonight. *Why?* she thought. *Why is he doing this?*

And then, before she was really satisfied with her work, Snape through gritted teeth bit out the command to leave him alone: he refused further treatment and demanded in a barely audible voice to be unbound. Slowly, he fought himself into a sitting position, pulled the blood-stained table cloth round his shoulders and made clear simply by looking at them with hate in his eyes that he wouldn't allow anyone to get near him again.

For several minutes he was able to do nothing but breath and prevent himself to fall off the table. Occasionally, he shook his head as if to clear it after a severe hangover. He seemed to be searching for words; then, finally and with every pair of eyes upon him, he started to talk.

He told them about this meeting and some of the others. In detail he told them about the witch he had killed a few weeks ago and the wizard he had tortured, but didn't tell them the reason why he had done so. Without so much as a flinch he explained that tonight he hadn't tried to save the woman and the child from torture in order to save his own life. He clearly remembered telling Avery that he hadn't acted earlier because one of them might have killed him. "The child was to be for Macnair," he said, in a strangely surprised voice. "I didn't know that he likes them so young."

"You mean... what you're saying is... you *witnessed* them torturing her? You saw it? They did that and you sat in the same room, the... the whole evening? You were there, doing nothing, whilst... whilst..." Ron stammered, disbelieving and shocked.

"Yes."

"I knew it!" Harry said bitterly, with ice in his voice and shaking with rage. "When I found you in the living room, just sitting there, I knew it. I understand you didn't really like it; but any of us would have rather died than allowing her to get hurt!"

"She obviously wasn't important enough for me to act sooner," Snape pointed out, quite calmly and ignorant to the reaction his cruel words caused.

"You could have..." Ron started, but didn't finish the sentence. His urge to beat the man on the table unconscious nearly overwhelmed him, despite the fact that it would mean to hit a defenceless man.

"There. Was. Nothing. I. Could do. Nothing! Be glad I got them out alive at all." Slightly amused, Snape saw that Potter was only an inch away from casting a killing curse. *Might be not a bad idea, to get killed now.* But then, he couldn't just die. Not after all he had done tonight. It wouldn't be fair.

Still, it was obvious that he had to get out of the house. Slipping off the table, Snape underestimated his weakness and nearly fell. He scowled at Remus who hesitantly stepped in to support him. Ignoring Lupin, Snape found his balance without help and turned round to Harry.

You won't make it much longer - you already look like a ghost, Snape Harry thought. "You should stay... rest..." he started, but heard how false his voice sounded. He wanted the man to go as quickly as possible.

"A shirt, Potter," Snape demanded hoarsely. "I consider it best if I leave now."

A few minutes later, the door closed behind him. They didn't bother to hold him back.

"Will he be... you know, will he manage?" Molly Weasley asked awkwardly, and Ginny nodded.

"It's not ideal, but he seemed fine enough," she said slowly. "Although he is nothing but skin and bone, he should survive that easily he's been through worse, and his will to live is strong. And his own healing potions are better than mine he will go home and take them, I assume. But maybe I will have a look at him tomorrow." She wasn't happy about the situation, but neither could she stand the thought of Snape being under her roof, being so near to Hermione and Sasha. That he had saved them in the end in her opinion didn't outbalance at all what Snape had allowed to happen to them beforehand.

Truths

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione wakes up and tells her friends what happened at the Death Eaters' house.

Many, many thanks to my beta pipedreamer for putting some extra effort to this chapter. And sorry for the delay I've been skiing *g*

3: Truths

Sunrise found them all in the kitchen. Harry's birthday seemed a lifetime away. Ginny had just told them that Sasha was fast asleep, but that Hermione might wake up soon.

"She will tell us if it's true," Molly Weasley said. She was tired. Otherwise she would have thought again before speaking the words.

Ron's reply was full of hate. "He's told us himself, mum. What's there to doubt?" He was bitter he was godfather to Sasha and had gone green when he had seen the child's broken fingers. Only Harry's hand on his shoulder had held him back when Snape had told them so carelessly about Macnair's little secret; otherwise, he would have crushed Snape's worthless skull there and then. "He's a bastard, mum. Face it. All of you, face it!"

A small sound from the door caused Ginny to get up and have a look outside. "Hermione!" she exclaimed and reached out to support her friend, who leaned white-faced against the wall. "You should not have got up; it's too early. Ah well, come into the kitchen. I'll make you something to eat!"

Hermione shook her head and couldn't stop her face revealing her disgust at the thought of food, but allowed Ginny to help her to the kitchen where she sat heavily on one of the chairs. Slowly, she put her hands on the table. "Some tea?" she asked, her voice tired and strained.

"Of course!" Ron jumped up and poured a cup for his friend. She was so pale, and he so much wanted to take her in his arms and hug her and protect her and to make her forget the awful memories of last night. But knowing that she wouldn't want that, he just placed the cup in front of her and watched her pressing her trembling finger to the warmth.

Harry sat next beside her and gently stroked her shoulders. "It's good to see you awake, Hermione," he said carefully. "Is Sasha still asleep?"

Hermione nodded she had checked on her daughter and had held her hand for more than 20 minutes. She took a sip from her tea. The sweet and hot liquid ran down her rough throat and eased the pain caused from many hours of screaming. "Where's Severus?" she croaked.

Molly and Arthur shared an uneasy look, and so did Remus and Harry. "He... brought you here, then left," Harry offered, keeping his voice as neutral as possible. He didn't want to think of last night and definitely didn't want to mention Snape more often than possible. He saw her frowning naturally, she was scared at the thought that he still might be somewhere in the house.

"He... left?" she asked. "Just like that? I would have expected..."

Remus interrupted her. "Can you tell us what has happened?" he asked, wanting to know if she remembered anything of the past night. If not, it might be better for her she would at least be able to sleep peacefully; if yes, she could confirm Severus's version of the events.

She looked at him. "Didn't Severus tell you what... what has happened? I... that's nothing I really want to talk about right now." Desperately she stared into her tea, but couldn't stop a tear running down her face.

Ron wordlessly handed her a tissue. "You don't have to say anything, but... it would be helpful if you could tell us how you came to be there...?"

Impatiently, she wiped the tears off her face. "It's alright," she whispered. "We survived. Sasha is alive, relatively unharmed, and that's all that counts." Another sip. Then she faced Harry, as it had been always very easy to talk to him. "It was so stupid; we had been inside the house tidying up all day, and Sasha was restless and wanted to play, and so I decided to walk here rather than Apparate. The evening was so nice and warm and then... I... I bumped into Goyle only round the corner from here. I didn't recognise him he's so fat! He... he stunned me, took us to the new hideout Severus had been trying to locate but couldn't, and I knew they would... they would torture us. And then kill us."

Harry just took her hands in his and forced himself to listen.

She wrapped her hands round his, and Harry nearly winced at the strength of her grip. Word for word she worked her way through her memories. "They didn't kill us, obviously not. Avery was there, and Goyle, and it was so hot, and it stank of food, and they beat us and cast a Cruciatus Curse on me, but... weren't as cruel as I had expected. I was able to knock Sasha unconscious, so she wasn't really aware of what was happening. And holding her in my arms when they tortured me, I could at least feel her breathing."

Molly Weasley sobbed at her words. Arthur took his wife into his arms and held her close.

"You don't have to go on," Remus said quietly. He had placed both of his hands on the large table where hours ago Severus had been lying and still couldn't believe last night's events or anything Hermione was saying. That she was so calm, that she just could tell them in detail about her torture was unbelievable.

"No, Remus," Hermione said, her voice already stronger. "I want to tell you what happened. You need to know." She got up and stared at her feet. That she wanted to tell them didn't mean that it was easy for her. "Avery and Goyle they seemed to be waiting for someone. They were waiting for Severus." She laughed bitterly. "I was meant to be a surprise for him and I was, a terrible surprise, as he thought me here, with you, safe. When he found us there..." She didn't finish that sentence. She had been tremendously relieved at his arrival, but the look in his eyes when he had recognized her had been horrific enough to cause her nightmares for the rest of her life.

"We know what he has done," Ron said briskly. "He's told us what he's done. He's told us everything."

A small smile lit Hermione's face; he'd been here, he'd told them. That was good. "He was there with us for hours," she said hesitantly. "At first, he didn't even recognise me; and when he saw that Sasha was in my arms he nearly... I had to move away from him otherwise he might have... it was impossible for him to have touched her!" She had to close her eyes for a moment when the memory overwhelmed her. "He talked and drank his water and waited and pretended he didn't care... I can't even imagine how hard that must have been for him."

Harry couldn't believe that she was defending him and growled. "You don't have to excuse his actions. He said, and I quote here, 'She obviously wasn't important enough for me to act sooner'. I nearly knocked him out when he said it."

Hermione raised her head that seemed to be too heavy for her neck and looked at him, frowning. "I don't... I don't understand," she stammered, confused. "Why he would say something like that? He would never... and why do you think I thought he told you everything?"

Remus laid his hand on her shoulder. "He did, Hermione. He told us that you were the victims, you and Sasha. He told us he hadn't acted earlier because he hadn't wanted to risk his own life. He confessed that he had watched you getting tortured." Gently, the werewolf brushed her cheek with his fingers. "A day ago I would have sworn it was beyond him to watch someone he knows maybe not likes, but *knows* being tortured." His voice was hard when he said that. "Obviously, I was wrong. Merlin knows what has happened to him; maybe we have asked too much of him in these past years. But that he put his own life above yours and that of your daughter... I cannot understand it. After all he's told us... all the dreadful things he has done... This divided-loyalties game must have completely twisted him. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that he even enjoyed the sight of the both of you getting tortured. Your hate for him must be tremendous."

Hermione had gone pale at his words. "What are you talking about?" she whispered. "You got that all wrong! He saved us! He got us out of there, alive, both of us..."

"You have avoided him ever since you've left school, never as much as looked at him when you were here for the meetings, so you don't need to speak up for him now," Molly Weasley said quietly. "Merlin knows why he saved you in the end, but that he did nothing to help you beforehand... Please do not waste a thought about him. He isn't worth it."

Harry and Ron both took a step forward as Hermione seemed close to fainting on the spot. She was swaying slightly; then she took a deep breath. "Isn't he, now?" she

muttered. Steadying herself, she carefully took a few feet away from her friends. Every movement thundered right to her head, but she didn't halt until she had the kitchen door at her back.

She faced them, one after the other. Her huge brown eyes were filled with emotions too complex to describe. There was fear and pain, obviously. There was rage and hate, naturally. And there was something else. Something that chilled the air. Something that was more terrible than the fact that she had been tortured.

Harry thought he knew what that something else was: the fact that Snape had been there and couldn't have been bothered to save their lives.

Hermione studied the kitchen floor for a little while, then she looked up to face Remus. "Did I get that right, you couldn't watch someone getting tortured? Not even someone you don't know?" There was steel in her voice.

Remus refused to feel accused why she should accuse him, anyway? and shot her an angry look instead. "No, Hermione, I couldn't. Under no circumstances. I would always try to save this ... someone's... life immediately."

"At all costs?"

"Yes. I think so," he answered. Of course he would.

Hermione turned to Molly and Arthur. She looked so young and helpless. On her jeans and on her blouse were bloodstains Arthur was disgusted at the thought that it must be Snape's blood as well as hers.

There was a tiny smile on Hermione's lips when she asked Ginny's parents, "What if this ... someone ... would be someone you know, not closely, but from a few years past, let's say a former neighbour, the baker, a distant friend of the children? Would you try to save this someone?"

She even didn't wait for their reply, but turned again to face Harry and Ron. Although still smiling, the look in her face was nothing less than murderous.

Harry and Ron both took a step back. *She's insane, they've broken her, Snape has broken her*, Harry thought, horrified that he hadn't been there to help her. *I'll kill that bastard!*

She looked at Harry as if she had heard his thoughts. Crossing her arms on her chest, Hermione said, "Imagine now that this someone... this...supposed victim was someone you knew well. A former student, maybe. Someone you might have once had an affair with. Or even someone you really cared for. Imagine, Harry, that you were unfortunate enough to watch someone you really like getting tortured. Imagine it was me, or Sasha. No! Imagine this someone at the wrong end of the wand was someone you loved. Your wife, for example! And your child you love beyond measure!"

"Hermione," Harry whispered, and a cold, icy hand grabbed hold of his heart.

She took a step and stood only inches away from Harry. Her face bore a hard, even cruel, look. "You would try to save them, Harry, I know. But could you? Would you be able to save them even if it meant holding back on some stupid heroic urge to act immediately in order to get them out alive? Would you have been able to do what Severus did for me and Sasha last night? He couldn't do anything, for hours, but he had to stay and watch in order to find the one moment when it would be safe to act. It was killing him, Harry, ripped him to pieces to witness every single curse they cast on us because he loves us!"

She had shouted the last words, had screamed them at Ron and Harry, at everyone there in the kitchen.

A glass shattered on the floor.

Suddenly, Molly Weasley swooned. Realising what Hermione had just said, the small hairs on Remus's neck stood up, and he bared his teeth. Her last words were indicating something simply and utterly impossible. They gave the events of last night the most horrible twist.

"Snape ...?" Ron whispered in horror.

"Severus is my husband and Sasha's father. Which is the reason why we always avoided being in the same room together we feared that a look, a gesture, a smile would betray us."

So simple an answer, but Hermione started to shiver, thinking about him, knowing how much it had cost him to sit and talk and watch their pain, supposedly unimpressed, in order to get them out alive.

Harry stared at her wide-eyed and tried to understand what she had just said. Then he remembered how much he had hated Snape only a moment ago and that he had hoped the Potions master wouldn't survive the night. "Why did you never tell us?" he asked into the silence that had followed her revelation.

"We had to keep our marriage a secret," she answered calmly. "Had the Death Eaters as much as suspected that he was married to a Mudblood, was married to me out of all people, we both would have been dead years ago."

Remus needed several attempts to get out the question that had worried him all night. "Why on earth did he wait that long to get you out?"

Hermione didn't even look at him. "In that house, in that horrible room they always had their damn wands out! From the first moment on, always, every second. One wrong movement, and at least one of us wouldn't have survived the night. And at the first opportunity, he killed Avery and Goyle."

"We didn't know that," Ginny whispered and wondered if Hermione would be able to forgive them for thinking so badly of Snape.

Remus's words rang in Hermione's ears once more, and she had to sit down before she would fall. "Where is he?" she asked, longing to see him. "Why isn't he here?"

Ginny wanted to tell her that they had more or less thrown him out, but couldn't bring herself to open her mouth.

Harry got up, slowly. "He told us... what Severus told us... he said he didn't care. He said he didn't get you out... in order to save his own life?" He was shaking, and he felt sick.

"Well, it's a lie and I guess he was not really himself when he told you that," Hermione snapped. "At least one spell hit him, and he was barely able to stand right before he Disapparated with us, so don't hold him responsible for his words."

Ginny whispered, "But we did. We were blinded enough by fear for your lives and with rage at his words that we didn't consider that he might have told us nonsense." Folding her hands behind her neck, she squeezed her eyes shut in despair.

Hermione looked at her mercilessly. "How come that a little girl can look behind his mask, but not you, who knew him for so many years? When Dolohov disarmed Severus I really feared that it would be the end, but Sasha found her father's wand and was able to push it back to him. He killed Dolohov and we escaped."

"Dolohov's dead?" Remus asked in disbelief. This had been one of their most important targets ever since the man had taken on leadership over the remaining Death Eaters to kill him. "He didn't... Severus didn't mention it!"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "It seems he didn't mention a lot of important things; so I am a bit at a loss why you couldn't be bothered to ask a few more questions!"

Harry buried his head in his hands and wished he were elsewhere, anywhere but in his own kitchen where he had so thoroughly fucked things up. "When he said that he

put his own life above yours we believed him guilty of letting you down," he murmured. "He wanted to leave and we... we let him go." He couldn't face Hermione or any of the others.

"He would have never left here without a very good reason to do so," Hermione said without the slightest hint of doubt. "So I wonder what you said to him that he considered it safer to leave than to wait until I woke up." Getting up, Hermione walked over to Harry. "Tell me what happened," she demanded.

"Isn't it obvious?" Arthur Weasley asked sadly, well aware of how badly he had misjudged Snape. "After what he told us I suppose he saw in our faces that we didn't want him to stay."

She couldn't believe what she heard; she couldn't believe that, after all those years he had served the Order, they still thought the worst of him. "I would have thought better of you," she whispered. Then she turned to Remus, raised her hand and slapped the werewolf hard across the face. More surprised than hurt he staggered, lost his balance and fell into the wall behind him. His nose was bleeding. "And you really believed he enjoyed what happened last night, Remus?" she whispered. "Think again, and keep Tonks and Teddy in your mind before you answer!"

Ginny's brain started to work again when Hermione told them the missing parts of last night's events. She nearly got knocked down when she dared to grab her friend's shoulders, as Hermione whirled round, hand raised and ferocious, but Ginny didn't budge.

"Hermione," she pressed, not letting go of the outraged woman. "I know we have failed him, have wronged him, but you have to understand that what you say doesn't match Severus's version at all. I can only assume that his mad behaviour was caused by the spell that hit him. Which one was it? Do you know that?"

Hermione frowned. She had been barely conscious in the minutes before Severus had managed to get them out. She stared at Ginny and raided her vague memories.

"I think... Dolohov," she finally said. "Severus had just killed Avery and Goyle, and I remember! Dolohov had cast a spell, aiming at me. Severus stepped between us, blocking it."

Ginny just closed her eyes for a moment. "Sectumsempra. It must have been. Oh Merlin, that damn spell out of all possible slash spells!"

Hermione paled. "What?" she whispered. "But then... he's injured! He must have been half dead when he arrived here and you... you let him go?!"

"He was alright when he left," Ron murmured, but Hermione didn't even hear him.

Ginny barely got the words out. "Only that specific spell would explain why he told us those half-truths... and his state of mind and... Gods, I haven't thought of that one! It's so rare; it's not even commonly known! It must have been Sectumsempra... and I have severely misjudged his condition! I truly believed all he needed was a few hours rest and some potions. But a victim of that spell is lost in hallucinations that's why he didn't want a sedative! He thinks he's guilty; what he told us he thinks he failed to save you! He isn't at all aware of his condition, and he won't take any potions or rest or... I have to find him!" She turned, heading for her med kit and picking up a phial from the table, only to be held back by Hermione's cold voice.

"Do you truly believe he would allow you to get anywhere near him?"

Ginny stopped dead in her track. Hermione was right he wouldn't, ever, not under the circumstances. "The spell that is, the effect on the mind weakens after a few hours..." she started, but Hermione cut her off by snatching the phial out of her hand.

"I'll leave Sasha with you, but only because I have no other choice. Look after her. Tell her..." Hermione took a deep breath and steadied her voice. "Tell her that we will pick her up soon. Tell her I'm getting her father back home." She walked out of the door without another word. Moments later, it silently closed behind her.

"Fuck," Ron cursed and started heavily on the Firewhiskey. It was nine o'clock in the morning.

Sectumsempra

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione finds Severus, but will she be able to save him?

4: Sectumsempra

He wasn't in their house. Of course not.

So he would be at Hogwarts, down in the dungeons.

Hermione wasn't really stable on her feet she felt quite terrible, not only because of the previous night but because she had left her daughter behind and because she feared the worst for Severus. Had she known he had been that seriously injured, she would have stormed out of Harry's house the minute she had woken up; instead, she had wasted time by explaining and telling and revealing the truth to people she had called friends, but who hadn't it found necessary to take care of one of theirs. Severus had been serving the Order's cause for years, and still they hadn't even thought of the possibility that there might be more to his story than he had told. Although he had never failed them, they had believed the worst of him, and at the moment Hermione wasn't sure if she could ever forgive them.

Right now, though, this was unimportant.

Staggering towards Hogwarts, she was determined to find Severus. She *would* find him he had saved her and Sasha, and now it was her turn to save him. "Damn spell," Hermione whispered. "You should have never invented it." But he had; and now it was killing him.

Snape guessed he was dying, but didn't care what was death to him after last night? He had found yet another quiet place, unable to recall how he got there, feeling awful in general and immensely guilty at the same time. The knowledge of what he had done, of his unforgivable actions, was omnipresent; it whispered into his ears, stabbed his heart, tormented his soul.

He had recognised the way to his private rooms in the dungeons only because he had lived there most of his adult life and would have found it under any circumstances.

That it was dark and cold down there didn't bother him; he just stumbled in, slumped in his armchair and was glad that he didn't have to walk or stand anymore.

The idea that he should take some potions to support the healing process Ginny had initiated had been wiped out of his mind completely; that he was burning with fever and shaking from exhaustion, that he wasn't even thinking clearly, was something he was completely unaware of. Sitting in his rooms down in the dungeons, he just listened to his own laboured breathing and his pounding heart. He listened to the pain that sang in his body and embraced every single note.

Sectumsempra, as Snape could have told anyone who would have asked, was an awful spell, not only designed to slash the victim, but to severely confuse it as well. How proud he had been when he had invented it as a teenager, how proud that he had managed to add both aspects, body and mind, to the curse. It messed up the mind, caused hallucinations, ripped reality into little pieces. Snape knew that, of course. Or had known it before the spell had hit him. It worked fast, this spell of his. Too fast to remember much after one got hit.

Ginny hadn't known which spell had hit Snape and therefore had just used the common counter spell to heal the wounds, not the specific one Snape had created. She hadn't known that there was a mental component as well.

Even now, hours later, he could only think of one thing: of his wife and daughter, lying bleeding on the floor, and that he had done nothing to help them.

He tried not to hear Hermione's screams, but couldn't block them out.

He tried not to see Sasha's bruised face and her small, white hand with the broken fingers, but couldn't block those pictures either. *thought I loved them*, he wondered. *But you don't watch someone you love getting tortured, so obviously I didn't care.*

He saw himself, back in the house with Avery and Goyle, talking and waiting. He smelled the food again and his stomach cramped in protest at the memory. Wrapping his arms round his waist he pulled his legs up and lowered his head onto his bony knees.

Hermione was screaming; she flinched away at his sight; her eyes were big with fear when he had knelt in front of her. She had been scared of him; there was no other explanation for her reaction. Possibly he had been angry; possibly he had decided to teach her a lesson for not trusting him and had left them as toys for Avery and Goyle.

He had waited for ages, hadn't got his wife and daughter out of there as soon as he had realised who the victims of the evening were. Why hadn't he protected them?

Ah yes, now he remembered because he couldn't be bothered. Because they hadn't been worth it. He had said so, to Potter, so it must be true. He had abandoned his family and this was his punishment. *Quite fair, actually*, he thought and raised his pounding head, staring at the walls without seeing them. His ashen cheeks were wet from tears; he didn't notice that he was crying, though.

Gods, what a worthless bastard he was. Maybe he had even enjoyed the evening he was a Death Eater after all, wasn't he, and Death Eaters lived for torture.

He tried to forget that he hadn't helped them, but couldn't. Their beaten faces haunted him, and the screams he heard in his mind made him wish he were dead.

Minutes ticked by, followed by eternities. Snape sat in his chair and stared into the darkness, unaware of the fact that the spell that had slashed his flesh had torn his mind to pieces as well. If he had been able to tell Ginny which spell had really caused his wounds, she would have been able to reverse it. But by then, when he had reached Grimmauld Place, it had been far too late for him to give any useful information. Sectumsempra had already claimed Snape's mind and ever since held its victim tightly in its cruel arms. And so his thoughts went in circles and didn't make sense at all. He was caught in a nightmare of guilt and pain and considered it only just that he suffered for something he hadn't done.

Getting inside Hogwarts was easy when one was married to the school's Potions master: he had long ago shown Hermione how to get in and out unnoticed, as otherwise they wouldn't have seen each other half as often as they needed to. He wasn't a man who could be home for dinner every evening, and her job as a bookbinder demanded various journeys. She would usually sneak in after their daughter was safely asleep, knowing she could be back in a few minutes if the little girl woke up. "Praise be to long-distant, magical baby-phones," she once had joked and had taken pleasure in finding the most complicated ways into Hogwarts.

This morning, Hermione naturally used the easiest and fastest way in. It was the summer break, and no students would be around to see her or question her presence; she could neglect the need not to be seen. And even Filch would be home, visiting his sister. So Hermione just had to escape Peeves and his nasty little tricks and limericks, as he would only slow her down. On the other hand, she would have hexed the poltergeist into oblivion had he dared to get in her way.

She hastened down the empty corridors, ran downstairs on unsteady legs, found the dungeons and Severus's private rooms. Hogwarts, she knew, was in many ways more home to him than their house at Spinner's End where they spent the few weeks during summer together when he was not at school and she didn't have to tame books. She wasn't surprised that he had come here he always had been able to find his way back to Hogwarts even in the dark times when Voldemort had found it amusing to torture his followers no matter how devoted they seemed.

The wards around his rooms recognised her and she pushed open the heavy door. Entering the dark room quietly and carefully, Hermione saw her husband sitting in his armchair in front of the cold fireplace. Immensely relieved that he was at least alive, she quietly slipped in, knelt down slowly beside his chair, and looked into his face.

Grey skin; closed eyes; beads of sweat on his forehead. His breathing was too fast and too uneven, she could feel the heat of his skin without touching him, and that he hadn't heard her coming in was scaring her as much as the obvious signs of his illness.

She whispered his name. And he just opened his eyes and turned towards her, frowned at her cowering figure as if surprised to see her. Well, he was surprised he had supposed she would be at Potter's house where no further harm could befall her, harm he had brought upon her in the first place. Why would she be here if... Of course. She was here to tell him how much she hated him.

Waving his fingers unsteadily, he lit some candles with the movement. His eyes showed slight concern towards her, but no more than that. If she hadn't already known better, she would have said that nothing was out of the ordinary. Maybe that he felt a bit unwell, but nothing that couldn't be helped with a few hours sleep. *No wonder Ginny didn't even consider making him stay*, she thought wearily. But she just said, "I'm glad I found you."

"I must admit, I didn't expect you to come after me," he remarked coolly. "You are pale, you are shaking, you are clearly in no condition to wander through dark corridors only to tell me how much you despise me." Slightly amused, he considered the possibility that she had brought Potter and Weasley in case he would try to cast a Cruciatus Curse at her. Hadn't he done something similar not only too long ago? That he hadn't held the wand didn't count he hadn't stopped it.

Whatever her reasons, it was still very wrong that she had come. "You shouldn't be here," he concluded calmly. "You could have sent Remus to make sure I don't escape your revenge. You should be at home with..." He hesitated and couldn't say the name. "Be with your daughter," he finished. "Or... did she die?" The thought that his daughter might be dead only occurred to him the moment he said it. So far, it was the most dreadful thought that had jumped at him. He began to shiver, from fever, from self-hate, and mostly in fear of her reply.

Hermione didn't know how to react that he just sat there and expected her to be filled with hate and disgust pained her beyond belief. He didn't even know... "Sasha's fine," she said firmly. "She's fast asleep in Harry's house like I was until about an hour ago. Ginny healed her bruises and the broken fingers. I will pick her up later when I'm done with you." There was a growl in her voice, and it surprised her as well as her words, but then she realised that she was getting angry, massively angry, with him. "How dare you leave me behind?" she nearly shouted, holding back her anger only in the last moment. "How dare you hide here you are dying, don't you realise that? You should have stayed in Harry's house with us; they wouldn't have slaughtered you!"

It seemed as if he hadn't heard her; at least, he didn't say anything to answer her accusations. But the knuckles of his hands stood out when he fastened his grip around the armrests. "Sasha's alive." Her words seeped into his mind, echoed in his soul, and chased away his biggest fear.

"I want you to come home with me," Hermione said sternly and more calmly, and reached out to touch his hand. He was radiating heat; to stabilise his condition he needed Ginny's potion more than anything else. But Hermione didn't dare to force him. Merlin knew what he would do if pushed too hard. If she got her wand out now, he might even think she was here to fight him. Especially because she had just shouted at him.

"Come home with you? What for?" he asked mildly. "Finish me off, here and now. I won't hinder you. Merlin knows I have earned it."

Her jaw clenched at his words. "You are not yourself, Severus, and it's because of this spell. Do you remember at all that you got hit with Sectumsempra? It has messed with your memory and with your mind, you don't know what's real and what's not, and I want you to come home. This has to end here. You need medicine; you need a bed; you need to rest and to heal." She phrased her words carefully despite her anger and fear; she didn't want to say something wrong and felt like a hunter chasing his prey.

"Go home without me," he growled. "And don't mock me by saying you want to help me; I know you don't. I know what I have done." He couldn't go back home ever again, he was certain of it.

"I don't mock you, and it's not home when you aren't there," she snapped.

"Don't be pathetic!" he hissed, scowling at her for that ridiculous statement. "I did not save you; I failed you. I want you to go. Now." He turned his head away from her so he didn't have to look into her accusing eyes. He remembered kneeling down in front of her; he remembered that he had been close to passing out when he had realised who she was. And then he had got up and had made a joke. She would never forgive him for that.

"No, you don't want me to go!" That damn spell. She could hear in every word he said the influence that Sectumsempra had on him. "I don't know why you think I came, but certainly not to 'finish you off'. I'm only here because I love you, because you need help, and because you will die if you continue to fight me!"

He flinched. If she insisted on arguing with him, he would lose simply because he was too weak to talk. But he had to make her understand why she had to leave him. "Go back to your friends," he managed. "They'll look after you. They'll make sure that you will be fine. They'll protect you... better... than I can. Than I did."

Damn you, Severus, why do you have to be so immensely stubborn even when half dead? she thought in despair. "At least they'd try," she said aloud, having decided out of a sudden impulse to change tactics.

His head snapped up. Self-accusation was in every word when he said, "I should have done better. I should have rather died than... than..."

Unexpectedly, the spell loosened its grip for a brief moment and Snape couldn't finish the sentence. Nausea washed over him. *What exactly did I do?* he wondered. *Have I or have I not failed her?*

Hadn't he saved her? Hadn't that been the point, saving her no matter how cruel it was to wait for a safe moment? No matter that it had torn him apart?

Fever and blood loss, pain and fatigue. He couldn't tell the difference between reality and nightmare, but he nearly choked at the guilt that threatened to strangle him.

Suddenly, memories dropped into his mind, awful memories, and he got lost in them. The screams in his head became louder and he buried his face in his hands. He shuddered at the intensity of those memories.

Hermione got up and reined in her urge to touch him, to embrace him, to comfort him. She didn't know how he would react. If he pushed her away now, she might not get another chance.

He looked up at her, right into the eyes of his wife. *If I have failed her, he wondered, why is she here?*

It had been hours since Dolohov had cursed him, and even the worst spells lose their power eventually. More memories flashed through Snape's brain: the most brilliant one was the picture of his daughter, pushing his wand towards him.

The look of confusion in his face deepened, then subsided slightly. It occurred to him that maybe things weren't as they seemed to him. That maybe he had had reasons for his unforgivable decisions.

Something she had said struck him. "Sectumsempra?" he asked hoarsely. "Are you sure? Because this spell needs immediate treatment or it fucks you up completely."

"Does it, really?" Hermione replied wearily. "Well, it was that spell, and you are in a lousy condition, and you will tell me now what you *think* you have done so I can tell you what really happened." Suppressing the hope she felt wasn't easy when she saw emotions fighting in his face: guilt, doubt and fear, mainly, but also the faint knowledge that he might have overcome some major obstacle.

Snape studied the worried face of his wife and came to a conclusion: there was with absolute certainty no hate in her eyes. "I was unable to save you," he said, frowning. "I was there, I remember it. You... screamed, and I didn't stop them... If I had blocked the Cruciatus Curse, if I had acted sooner... But I told Potter that... you weren't worth it."

With immense will she ordered her voice not to tremble. "You are talking a lot of old rubbish, Severus."

Putting both hands onto the armrests of his chair, she towered over him; he had no other choice but to lean back and look up at her. Her fingers lightly touched his hand. Small comfort.

"Rubbish, Severus," she insisted. "And if you weren't in such an awful state, you would know it. If it hadn't been for this dreadful spell of yours, you would know." She pushed his long dark hair out of his worn face. "We are only alive because you got us out of there, because you stayed calm and because you knew exactly what to do and when to do it. Everyone can die, love. It's pretty easy. It doesn't require any skill. You just need to be stupid enough to do the wrong thing at the wrong time. Like lose control. Panic. Act before it is safe to act. Ask Harry, he can tell you a few things about it."

Very gently she touched his cheek. His eyes widened as the spell now rapidly continued to lose its power and he was, bit by bit, able to really recall the events of last night.

Unfortunately, the fresh, new memories were no better than the older ones. "You were scared of me," he bit out, but pressed his face to her hand, not really believing that she was actually soothing him. "You flinched away, and there was fear in your eyes."

She swallowed hard. "Because you were so close to touching Sasha, and Goyle was waving his wand right behind your back, and I feared if I allowed you to touch her you wouldn't be able to hold up your mask." Tears ran down her cheeks when she said it. This small movement had been one of the hardest she had ever had to make. "You saved us, both of us, and yourself as well. No one else could have done that. You protected us from Dolohov; the Sectumsempra spell hit you instead of us, and as a result you weren't even able anymore to tell Ginny what was wrong with you."

He tried hard to remember - it still wasn't easy. "I... weren't I? I mean... I haven't told them? Really not? How stupid of me."

Hermione was barely able to stand upright anymore, but she had to give her husband a wide, happy smile. "Really not," she confirmed. "And yes, how very stupid. You told them nonsense. Quite convincing nonsense, though. You left, you came here. You are wounded, ill, and out of your mind, in case you haven't noticed. But Sasha and I, we need you. Alive. And your daughter will ask for you as soon as she wakes up. So let me help you!" She let her hand slide down to his neck and refused to break connection with his troubled eyes.

He stared at her. Then, suddenly, he loosened his grip around the armrest and took a deep breath. Out of nowhere came another memory: he clearly remembered now carrying Hermione and Sasha in his arms, disappearing with them, taking them to Potter's house, to safety. "You are not here to blame me for what I have done, are you?"

he asked, his voice just a little bit dubious. "You... do you hate me?"

"Maybe next time, if you ever dare to run away from me," Hermione growled.

A small, hesitant smile sneaked onto his lips. Blinking his eyes, Severus ran a weary hand over his face as if to try to rub off the last of the spell. Like missing pieces of a jigsaw, the last remaining memories of last night fell into place and revealed the whole picture. His voice was unsteady when he asked, "Sasha... she really... is she alright?"

Closing her eyes momentarily with relief, Hermione only nodded, not trusting her voice.

He relaxed a bit more, and like a wave of ice-water, relief washed over him, overwhelmed him, calmed his hammering, frightened heart. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so very sorry."

"What for?" she asked carefully.

"For being stupid, of course. For not staying with you. For having forced you to come after me."

Bending lower, Hermione carefully embraced him and bushed her husband's forehead with her lips. "I have found you," she said. "That's all that counts."

"What a lousy, awful, catastrophic night," Severus murmured, his eyes dropping closed. "Please, let's never have a night like that again." Leaning his head against his wife's shoulder, he took a deep breath.

Carefully, Hermione took the opportunity and finally dared to open the buttons of his shirt. He didn't resist, couldn't have hindered her anyway his arms felt like jelly. "Dear Merlin, Severus," she breathed a moment later, shocked at the sight of the only half-healed wounds. "Even considering the spell how could you have been so stupid as to leave Harry's house like that?"

"I guess... It seemed a wise move at the time," he said weakly. "Potter was about to kill me. Or something like that... I think." Somehow, he was quite unsure about it. The events of the past hours were now appearing in a different light entirely, not only concerning his own actions, but mostly those of the others as well. After all, they had only believed what he had told them.

"You imagined that," she answered, feeling light-headed and ridiculously happy given the fact that they both were barely able to keep their eyes open. "They might have thought about it, and I can't really blame them you told them barely more than lies but they wouldn't have harmed you. Goodness, I wonder how you managed to talk me into marriage you're not even able to look after yourself properly!"

"It was your parents' idea," he murmured, his head now resting heavily against the back of his chair.

She felt him drifting into unconsciousness and finally dared to get the phial out he wouldn't fight her anymore. Carefully, she dipped her wand into the liquid and then pressed its tip into his wrist. His skin darkened momentarily when the potion seeped into his body.

"It works best when it's consumed, but well, can't have everything, and I don't want you to throw up Ginny's precious medicine," she grumbled.

He chuckled faintly at her words. "One of these days I will teach you respect," he murmured, his voice already slurry from the sedative Ginny had mixed into the healing potion. He reached out and made sure by touching Hermione's cheek that she was still there, right in front of him. Made sure he hadn't lost her.

Silently laughing at that old joke between them, she knew she only had to get him to bed now. "Can you get up?" she asked, and he obeyed. She helped him get out of the chair, wrapped her arm around his waist and led him to his bedroom, fearing his legs would give way any moment. But he made it, and slumped heavily on his bed. Only moments later she slipped beside him, pulled the cover over both of them and was asleep before her head had properly hit the pillow. Her arms were wrapped around his waist, her head was pressed against his back, and even in her sleep she could hear the slow, steady pounding of his heart.

Epilogue

Chapter 5 of 5

Christmas at Number twelve, Grimmauld Place. An unexpected visitor arrives.

Epilogue

Glasses clinked. The occasional laughter filled the air together with a sweet fragrance of cinnamon and melted sugar; Christmas Cookies were waiting to be eaten. This time they had used the dining room because only there was enough space for the big Christmas tree. Plus, the kitchen bore somewhat difficult memories.

It was Christmas at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was a tradition that family and friends met there and celebrated, and it had always been a happy occasion.

Tonight, the mood was a little tense. They talked, they laughed, they debated and celebrated. They had had a quite nice evening.

Ginny and her mum were just setting up the table for dinner; Arthur Weasley had been recruited to get the wine; the goose was waiting to be served, but somehow, neither Ron nor Harry felt like eating.

Every now and then, Harry would look at the big clock in the corner. It was getting late. And she hadn't come.

"You really thought so, mate?" Ron quietly asked his friend.

Harry looked at him, then finally shook his head. "Not really. Not..." He faltered. Things had changed after the events on his birthday. They hadn't seen Hermione again after she had picked up Sasha, wordless. They hadn't heard a single word ever since. They knew, of course, that Snape had gone back to school, pretending to be nothing but a teacher, but he had refused contact and had ignored their owls.

He hadn't appeared at any Order meetings. And because there weren't any Death Eaters left worth mentioning, there hadn't been any of their meetings he could have attended, either.

Macnair had been found dead about two weeks after Harry's birthday. Neither Harry nor anyone else doubted for a second who had killed him.

Hermione and Sasha remained gone.

Harry drained his glass, looked at it thoughtfully, then cast a sideways glance at Ron. His friend looked as unhappy as Harry felt.

The doorbell rang. That would be Bill, Harry guessed, getting up.

But Teddy had been faster. He was already at the door, ripping it open to hopefully interesting new visitors. When he saw whom it was, he beamed he hadn't seen them in a while. "Daddy, it's your friend," the boy yelled, galloping back into the dining room.

Remus didn't look up. There was only one friend he would like to see, and this one was highly unlikely to appear at a Christmas party. Or anywhere else where Remus was.

It seemed that the werewolf's hair was greyer than five months ago. Maybe he seemed a bit more tired as well.

Footsteps in the hall; then the door to the dining room opened. Someone stood there silently, waiting to be acknowledged.

Harry saw her first and nearly dropped his glass; Ron's jaw fell open, and both men didn't move an inch, fearing that the woman would turn and run if they did.

Remus, who had been sitting with his back to the dining room door, saw the thunderstruck faces of Ron and Harry and turned in his seat. Then he paled, feeling a sense of déjà-vu.

Hermione stood in the doorway. Only tonight, she looked wonderful. She was wearing a long, dark green, velvet dress that literally caressed her slender figure. Her skin shimmered in a golden brown that made clear she had been in the sun for the past two or three weeks. Her usually wild and unruly hair was pinned into a soft knot at the back of her head, revealing tiny emerald stones in her earlobes.

Had she been fragile, weak, and furious the last time they had seen her, she now looked not only strong and self-conscious, but slightly amused as well. A wicked flicker danced in her eyes as she looked at Harry and Ron, and that was definitely something they had not been expecting.

She crossed her arms and looked at her two best friends. "Sorry that I'm late," she said casually. "But I couldn't decide whether to bring a present or an axe."

Harry clearly didn't know what to do with that statement and looked at Ron, who was equally speechless. "Erm... an axe to behead us?" Harry finally asked hesitantly after the silence had stretched a bit too long. She couldn't be joking, could she?

"Disembowelling," she corrected him and took another step, standing now right in front of them. "Or chop you to pieces I haven't decided yet. But it would have made such a mess, so I thought I'd leave the axe at home. For now." With a swift move she reached out and grabbed each man's collar, pulling them closer. "You owe Severus an apology," she said sweetly. "And let me warn you apologizing to my husband is not an easy thing to do."

Ron reacted first. He ripped his head free from Hermione's grip, grabbed his friend round the waist and lifted her up. "I'll polish his boots if it makes you happy," he said with a wide grin and kissed her cheek. "I'll go down on my knees, I'll hug him, I'll kiss him Merlin, if I ever see him again, he'll be drowning in my apologies!"

Harry brushed Hermione's shoulder. "Gods, Hermione, we are so sorry for everything that has happened, and that we... that we didn't..." Ron let her down, and she turned to him.

"I know," she said simply. "It took me a while, which is the reason why I haven't been in touch, but I know that you are sorry. And it's alright. He didn't leave you much choice."

Both men positively beamed at her.

"In a moment you will tell me it was all his fault." There was a definite hint of anger in the werewolf's voice when he addressed Hermione. "We failed him... I failed him, and you just come here and say it's alright?"

On Hermione's face was a stern expression when she glared at Remus. "What exactly are you accusing me of?" she challenged and came closer. "Do you say I can not forgive you for... everything?"

Remus stood up and shared an unsure look with his wife. "I didn't... that's not what I meant," he said. Tonks nudged him on. But before Remus could say anything else or do more than simply get up from his chair Hermione had taken a few more steps. Truly believing that she would knock him out for good this time, the werewolf didn't even raise his arms in prevention.

Hermione grinned and hugged him tightly. Remus was so surprised that for several seconds he forgot to hug her back.

"When I say it's alright, you can believe it really is alright," she whispered in his ear; he could hear the smile in her voice. And he grabbed her and hugged her hard enough to make her wince. Remus had feared he would never see her again they all had and that she was here was the best Christmas present he could have received.

"Good evening," a cool voice came from the shadows behind her. Remus's head shot up, he loosened his embrace, stared bewildered into the dark corridor. His heart skipped a beat he knew that voice. *Impossible*, he thought.

A tall man stepped out of the shadows of the hall. He was lean, but not haggard anymore. His movements were swift, his face calm. His skin was still pale, but of course there was no sign of illness left, not even a hint of the pain and torment he had gone through five months ago. Tonight, his long black hair for once wasn't covering his face, but was loosely caught into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. Dressed all in black as usual, he looked, in his own way, as stunning as his wife. Like hers, his pitch black eyes bore a visible glance of amusement.

Ron turned white as paper, remembering that he had promised this man an apology. More than one, in fact, and a hug and a kiss as well. Gulping, he moved back a bit, just in case Snape had heard him.

Harry, though, vanished into the kitchen, grabbed his wife's arm and pulled her wordlessly into the living room. Followed by her parents, she staggered after him and then stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Hermione and Severus.

Next beside Snape a little girl stood, safely holding his hand.

"Good gods," whispered Molly Weasley, staring in turn at father and child.

Several jaws dropped audibly. Several gasps indicated that everyone was really very surprised not just to see Snape, but Sasha as well. Ginny, especially, had been certain that Hermione would never bring her daughter into the Potter household again.

"I think you remember my husband," Hermione said lightly, ignoring entirely the shocked silence Severus's and Sasha's appearance had caused. "As he left here a bit... hastily last time, I thought I'd bring him along. For a chat. For a few open words maybe."

Harry opened his mouth, but nothing but a croak came out. Apart from that, the room was silent.

Sasha's eyes, though, were as swift and piercing as her father's. "Daddy," the girl's small voice piped. "Why's everyone staring at you? Have you been naughty?" She was looking confused up into her father's face.

Severus tried to ignore the nervous giggles her words had caused, then looked down and smiled at his daughter. "Possibly," he answered. "Although it is much more likely I scare the life out of them."

For a moment, the little girl frowned, then decided that her dad had made a joke he wasn't scary at all, as she knew. So Sasha, happy that nothing was wrong, smiled back. It was a remarkable sight, not only because Severus Snape was known as the least smiliest man in the world, but also because the two of them suddenly looked so very much alike.

How come I never realised it? Harry and Ron thought simultaneously, staring at the man and the child. *It's crazy, really, that none of us ever noticed how alike they are before!*

But then, Hermione hadn't taken the girl along very often, had shielded her from curious eyes, and of course no one had ever seen father and daughter standing beside each other before. Plus, she was Hermione's child as well; she almost had her father's eyes and definitely his ink black hair, but had inherited her mother's features, her freckles, her heart-shaped face.

And luckily her nose, thought Arthur Weasley, a sheepish smile creeping on his lips. He took his wife's hand in his and made a mental note to sit down with Snape for a nice, long talk sometime later tonight.

Then Remus stepped past Hermione, practically shoving her aside with the movement. He had gone white, as he hadn't expected to see this man tonight or whenever. Otherwise, he would have worked out a proper apology for nearly letting a friend die and accusing him of having enjoyed his wife and child being tortured at the same moment. In the past months, he had thought often to simply go and corner Severus, to force him accepting his apology, but had not found the guts to do so. As Severus had ignored his owls, Remus had guessed it safer to stay away, assuming his friend to be most likely in a murderous mood. Now, though, looking at the familiar sneer in the man's face, the werewolf wasn't certain anymore if it had been really a good idea. Certainly, apologies didn't come easier with time passing.

Snape's eyes were as terrifying as ever when he stared at the werewolf. Remus couldn't stand it and, therefore, went down to one knee instead to be at level with the girl. "Your daddy was naughty indeed, Sasha," he said earnestly. "He didn't call round for several months, he refused contact, and we were worried about him. Do you think you could tell him off? 'Cause I'm a bit scared of him."

Sasha looked at the werewolf, then giggled. "I can slap his botty a bit, if you like," she offered, which caused a snigger from Ron's direction.

Remus, getting up, nodded in earnest agreement. "Slapping his botty would definitely be a most proper way to show him he has misbehaved," he said and cast a sideways glance at the man in question.

As expected, Severus regarded him with a scowl.

Remus swallowed. "I am sorry. We all are, but..." he began, but Severus cut him off with an impatient wave of his hand. Scooping his daughter into his arms, he took a few steps and placed the girl on one of the chairs.

No one dared to breathe, expecting an explosion.

Severus turned and looked at the man in front of him. He could see how uneasy Remus was, obviously expecting at least a killing curse at any moment. Dangerously, he narrowed his eyes as he remembered the argument he had had with Hermione a few days ago.

"No, I won't go to their Christmas party!" Hermione shouted those words at Severus, who sat lazily in his armchair in front of the fireplace at their house. He had come home the previous day to spend the holidays at home. And to discuss a few things with his wife.

He didn't even bother to look up from the parchment in his hands. "Of course you will go," he stated. Comfortably, he stretched out his long legs towards the flames. "They're practically begging you to come, and I know you miss them. So you will go."

She crossed her arms, came close to him, and said sternly, "You are right; I miss them. We have ignored their owls since the summer, and I even went to Spain with Sasha to avoid bumping into Ginny or Ron somewhere in Diagon Alley whilst buying Christmas presents. But I'm still furious with them. I can't go, and you know why."

Yes, of course he knew. After they had woken up in his private rooms at Hogwarts, she had taken him home, had picked up their daughter, and then she had told him how outraged she had been at her friends, how horribly disappointed she was, and that she had even slapped the werewolf for his infuriating statement.

Severus finally looked up at his wife and tossed away the Christmas invitation. "This happened months ago, and you repeatedly seem to forget that they have actually saved both of our lives, and Sasha's as well. I have absolutely no reason to blame them for anything they have done, and I really think it is time you put aside your anger. After what I had told Remus all of them their conclusions were only logical; they couldn't possibly know that they should have knocked me out and put me to bed instead of letting me go." Reaching out, he took Hermione's hand in his. More gently, he continued, "Actually, if any of them had told me a similar story, I doubt I would have stayed that calm. I quite possibly would have done worse than simply making a few well aimed guesses and then just shoving the bastard out of the house."

"You would have stunned anyone who would have told you something as horrible as that, and then you would have locked him up in a nicely warded room for a few precisely worded questions," she snapped.

"Yes, but I'm intelligent," he replied dryly.

"You have never betrayed them; you worked for them most of your life; you guided their attacks. Without you, they would have been blind; we maybe would have even lost the war. They should have trusted you!" she shouted, but left her hand in his. "And what you have told them was tainted by the spell; you were talking nothing but rubbish. You know that!"

Gently, he pulled her hand to his mouth and placed a kiss at her palm. "But they didn't know it," he calmed her. "Hermione. If I am willing to forget what has happened, why you can't? Wouldn't you have reacted the same way if you hadn't known all the facts? If you didn't know me better than anyone else does?"

She pondered on that for a while and sat on his lap whilst doing so. Finally, she had to admit that he was well known to be a cold-hearted bastard. He had worked on this image for most of his adult life, so actually she shouldn't have been surprised that everyone had simply believed that he had lived up to it. "Still they owe you an apology," she grumbled, and he kissed her simply because she always found a way to make him smile.

Hermione fished for the parchment. Severus was right she did miss her friends and wanted to see them, talk to them, be with them. She was sick of not being able to just pop round and say hello, but she wouldn't go to Harry's party on her own. "Join me, then," she demanded. "They will never guess you will accompany me, and I can't wait to see their faces when they see you standing in the doorway."

"Remus will be there," Severus said quietly. As much as she missed the dunderheads, he missed the werewolf's company, but hadn't yet dared to seek out a confrontation. He had ignored his friend's owls only because he had no idea how to deal with the situation no one had ever felt guilty towards him. He didn't know how to react or what to do, so he had put the problem aside by refusing to read any of Remus's letters in the past months.

Hermione brushed his cheeks with her lips. "I know you've wanted to talk to him for weeks. I won't go to Harry's party on my own, but if you and Sasha are insisting, I will come along."

And after a bit more pondering, he agreed. After all, there was no reason to keep their marriage a secret anymore. He would never ever attend another Death Eater meeting, even if there had been enough left of them to hold a meeting in the first place. And he decided that he simply didn't have enough friends to allow the one that mattered most to get away.

Therefore, Snape now took a step towards Remus. Remus moved back, expecting to get hexed at the very least. But Severus wasn't there to do anything else but to enjoy a meal amongst friends. Remus just didn't know that yet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape saw his wife hugging Ginny. She looked happy. Good.

Remus looked at his friend and considered that things couldn't get worse. *I should have done that months ago*, he thought and said aloud, "Severus, I apologise that I have accused you of..."

"You called me a stupid idiot, if I recall correctly," Severus interrupted him calmly.

Remus eyes widened. "I assumed... I said you..."

"I suppose, at the time it was a perfectly correct statement, wolf."

Remus stared at him. He recalled that night in detail dreamed about it more often than he cared to even tell his wife and remembered that indeed he had called Severus stupid before... the rest.

Severus didn't stop staring at him, and Remus frowned: was he... had Severus just accepted an apology he hadn't actually given?

"How long are you going to look like an imbecile, gaping at me open-mouthed?" Severus growled, and Remus realised that, if he allowed it, nothing else would ever needed to be said about that night five months ago.

Remus just growled back. "You were not only stupid, but behaved like a complete idiot. You were bleeding all over the floor, but too damn stubborn to ask if someone could take a look at you. The carpet needed to be dumped!"

"I do apologise," Snape replied dryly and smiled. Not one of the thin, nasty smiles reserved for his students, but a genuine smile; a smile for a friend. And Remus, caught totally off-guard, could do nothing but to smile back.

It became a truly remarkable evening. The first of many to follow.

Author's Note: There are two sequels to this story: "Sasha" and "Of fathers and their children", both posted here at the Poetess.

Additionally, I want to say thanks to everyone who has left or will leave a review: each one is highly treasured, each makes me smile and reminds me why I love writing this stuff so much. I sincerely hope you are satisfied with this ending.