

Truffles and Strawberries

by chivalric

Snape is in bad shape physically and heavily depressed to boot after nearly having been killed by Nagini. Draco Malfoy, owing his former Potions master a life debt, insists on looking after him.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

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A/N: Many thanks to my two wonderful betas, Dreamy_Dragon and AngelMischa.

Warning: I fiddled a bit with the general flow of events and ignore some deaths described in *DH* to make this story work. Additionally, I've sent Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy to Azkaban. Please forgive me for taking this liberty. I still hope you will find the story enjoyable.

Chapter 1

"Are you awake?"

"No."

"Haha. Very funny. Well, I'm coming in, and I will switch the light on."

The door was pushed open, and a slim figure came into the dark room, carrying a tray with a bowl of soup, a mug of tea, and a treacle tart. It was a young man, and he approached the darkness without hesitation. He had done so several times before the room was always dark, and the man inside never welcomed neither light nor his host's entry.

Draco Malfoy shivered under his clothes. Goose bumps ran up his arms when the door fell shut behind him and whilst his eyes adjusted to the absence of light. The man who inhabited the small room insisted on keeping the windows open all the time, and although it was summer, the weather was unfriendly outside. Nasty, rainy, and cold.

It perfectly resembled the mood inside the room.

"*Lumos*," the young man now muttered and put the tray on a small table next to a big old chair that stood beside the window. A small light emerged from his wand and showed blond hair, a pale, unhappy face, and dark rings under grey eyes. It was clearly a face that hadn't seen the sun for a while. Or a smile.

Thoughtfully, Draco had a quick look around. Yes, his... guest was up. As usual. And yes, the bed had not been slept in again. What a surprise. Of course the curtains were drawn closed, so only the wind found its way in but not the light. Never the light.

The man who sat in the old armchair was nothing more than a shadow in the dark room: black hair, black eyes, black trousers, and black shirt. His face was pale, though.

And he completely ignored the young blond man standing next to him. Actually, he seemed to ignore his entire surroundings. He just sat in the chair that stood so close to the window.

Not that it made much sense, this chair standing there: there was no view to enjoy, and it was only colder there than in the rest of the room.

"Get out," the man's weak voice now murmured, the same voice that had denied being awake. "Get out and leave me alone."

"Not before you have eaten that soup," the younger man said, his worry well disguised by a bored tone in his voice. "You haven't eaten anything for two days. You either pick up that spoon, or I will spellbind you again and feed you. You didn't like it last time, so I leave the choice to you today."

A deep sigh emerged from the man who was sitting in the chair by the darkened window. This sigh said a lot: it spoke of pain and loneliness; it revealed despair and the deepest depression. "I'm not hungry," the man said and turned his head away from the light and the young man standing next to him.

Draco pulled a stool close with his foot and sat down. "You are never hungry, Snape," he stated tiredly. "Since I brought you here and you awoke in my house four weeks ago, you haven't been hungry. But that doesn't mean that I will let you starve to death. You know that." Draco picked up the bowl and the spoon and held it out to his former Potions master until the man in the chair gave in. Draco watched as Snape took them and began to eat, slowly forcing down each little bite.

Long before the bowl was empty, Snape handed it back and stared into nothingness once more. He didn't touch the tea and the tart.

This is getting on my nerves, Draco thought bitterly and went to open the curtains.

"Don't," Snape objected hoarsely. He even made the effort to lean forward so he could get up whenever Draco came too close to the windows and the curtains.

Draco turned to Snape. "You are too weak to stand for more than a moment. And if you jump at me, your wounds will tear open, you will start bleeding again, you will collapse, and I will have to carry you to bed and stitch you up once more. You will scream, I will hate it, and haven't we been there before?"

"Precisely," snapped Snape, barely sounding like himself. "So leave the damn curtains closed and get out." Leaning back into the depths of the chair, he was barely visible in this room full of shadows and the small light that emerged from Draco's wand. Just his hands and his face stark white against his black clothes. Hands too thin for a man his size, and a face too haggard for someone who was supposed to get better after having survived death so narrowly.

Despising the thought of causing Snape more pain than he already suffered from, Draco stepped away from the curtains. "A bit of light wouldn't do you any harm; it might even brighten your mood," he pointed out, but Snape didn't react.

Desperate to get a few more words out of the silent man, who seemed closer to death than to life now than he had been four weeks ago, Draco asked, "Why do you still insist in wearing this shirt, Snape?"

Again, no answer. Well, it wasn't a surprise, really. There were days when Snape didn't open his mouth at all, just as there were days when he didn't seem to sleep. Most days, actually. To Draco, who had been stuck in this house with Snape since he had taken the nearly dead man here, it seemed like an eternity already. Although Snape never asked for company, never got out of his room and managed to look after himself concerning his personal hygiene so that Draco didn't have to do more than bring him some soup every now and then. Still, sometimes the young man wished he wouldn't have found Snape. Or that Snape hadn't been alive.

Draco's eyes fell on Snape's chest, clearly visible beneath the ripped fabric of the torn shirt Snape insisted on wearing. He saw the long, deep, only half-healed wounds cast by Nagini, and it made him shudder despite the fact that he had regularly changed the dressing until only a few days ago. For some reason, the wounds healed badly, but Draco didn't dare to contact a Healer. No one knew they were here; even his direct neighbours considered the house abandoned.

Draco didn't know why Snape insisted on wearing the ripped and torn shirt, but when Snape didn't bother to answer him, Draco turned and picked up another shirt from the table that stood in the corner. It was black, it was Snape's size, it was made out of silk, and it was new. Not crumpled, not often-washed, not fading and certainly not damaged by snake fangs. "Your shirt needs a wash. And you know I can't perform a cleaning charm because it would mess up your wounds even more. Here, put that shirt on until I'm back with yours." But to himself, Draco thought, *If this is a day like all the other days, he will give me that caricature of a shirt and sit here half naked, shivering, and with chattering teeth until I'm back.*

He was right. With painfully slow movements, Snape unbuttoned the few buttons that were left on his shirt, shrugged out of the garment, and dropped it to the floor. As expected, he ignored the new silk shirt Draco held out to him.

"Give it another week or two, and you will have faded away, Snape," Draco said quietly, picking up the shirt.

"Fine with me," Snape whispered, wrapped his arms round his waist, pulled his legs up, and closed his eyes. He seemed deliberate to shut out the small bit of world that was left to him: the room, the dark curtains, and Draco, who was still standing in the doorframe.

Shaking his head sadly, the young man left, taking his wand with him and thus the light he knew was nothing less than a torment for Snape.

Draco went downstairs and slumped on a chair in the small living room. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and thought back to the night he had found Snape.

Draco had managed to escape Harry's grip and was just about to sneak out of Hogwarts looking for his parents when he saw Granger running towards the matron, who was checking on a badly wounded Remus Lupin. He overheard the Mudblood telling Madam Pomfrey that Snape had been attacked by Voldemort's snake, that he was currently lying unconscious on the floor of the Shrieking Shack and that, although she had been able to still the bleeding, he needed help immediately if he weren't to die.

Draco didn't even need to consider his next steps. Hoping his parents were safe and knowing they could usually look after themselves quite well, he turned away from Granger and Pomfrey and ran as fast as he could to the Shrieking Shack to find the man he owed a life debt to.

Everywhere he looked chaos ruled; people were fighting and dying, screaming and cursing, ducking hexes and falling to spells. Draco was aware of the fact that he should participate. He knew as well that his parents, if they were still alive, would be looking for him. But he had to go after Snape.

Having failed to kill Dumbledore the previous year and having lived close to the Dark Lord ever since, Draco had decided a while ago that he wouldn't support the madman with the snake-eyes in the final battle. He had come close to killing Dumbledore, so close, back then. But facing the Headmaster, looking into his eyes and hearing his words had been too much. Draco hadn't been able to do it. He had found out that night that he wasn't a killer and that he didn't want to become one in the near future and so had ignored the order given to him. Snape had killed Dumbledore for him, and Draco would have been killed instantly by the Dark Lord if Snape hadn't reasoned with his master. If Voldemort hadn't listened to his most faithful servant, Draco would have been long dead.

Therefore, finding Snape was mandatory, even if it meant running away from his parents, from safety, from a possible future without fear.

Granger had stated that Snape was unconscious, but the young man expected to find a corpse no one survived an attack by Nagini. Wonder why the beast attacked him? he vaguely wondered whilst rushing on. Draco knew for certain that Snape was Voldemort's most devoted follower but then, the snake was as mad as its master. And it didn't matter anyway. Draco only wanted to get Snape's body and bury him somewhere where no one would ever find the grave and desecrate it. It was the least he could

do.

He hadn't expected to find a barely breathing, badly wounded but nevertheless alive Potions master. That Snape's limp form was lying on the blood-covered floor was bad enough, but Draco nearly passed out when he felt an actual heartbeat in the man's chest.

Snape was ice-cold loss of blood, Draco guessed but the big wounds in his neck and his shoulders were more or less healed. Guess the Mudblood has performed a stitching charm, Draco thought, close to a panic. That's why she wanted Pomfrey to check on him well, I won't allow them to save his life only to take him to Azkaban afterwards, that's certain!

And so he took Snape and Disapparated with him, brought him to the house his parents had given him for his seventeenth birthday. Then Draco went back to Hogwarts, sneaked in unnoticed whilst everybody was in the Great Hall, celebrating Voldemort's final downfall. He took the time to search for his parents in the crowd and was immensely relieved to find them alive, standing in a darker corner, separated from the others and guarded by Hagrid. Both were bound; there was no way Draco could get through to them without getting caught himself. He could see his mother's anxious look, trying to find him amongst the students, and Draco longed to tell her that he was all right. But he couldn't. He wore the Dark Mark, he was a Death Eater, and he would be taken to Azkaban before questions would be asked. His parents would be imprisoned soon. Draco, though, needed to stay free if he wanted to keep Snape alive. And therefore, he turned and ran to the infirmary, sneaked in, and stole the antidote for Nagini's venom. Luckily, after Arthur Weasley had been attacked by the snake, it had become mandatory to keep it on hand.

Keeping Snape alive that first night was tricky. First, Draco forced the antidote down Snape's unwilling throat, although that was possible only after he had put some binding spells on the Potions master's fighting body. Strangely enough, Snape seemed to try even harder to get free, but that couldn't be helped. Still, the wounds broke open again and again and the potions master also lost an awful amount of blood, too much to fully replenish it with the Blood-Replenishing Potion Draco had taken from Hogwarts as well.

Against all odds, Snape survived that first night and the following, and when he finally woke up and it became clear that he would actually live, he hid in the dark room, stopped eating and talking unless Draco forced him to, making it clear that he didn't appreciate his former student's effort to keep him alive. By now, Snape had lost a thorough amount of weight, and nothing Draco offered could whet his appetite.

Snape was dying, and Draco didn't know what to do about it. His parents, as expected, were in Azkaban until their trial; otherwise he would have asked his father for advice and for help. Snape's fellow Death Eaters were cast on all four winds no one was left who could take over the burden of looking after Snape; no one there who would take in a colleague in a lousy physical and mental state.

And Draco hadn't even told him that Voldemort had lost. He hadn't dared to, fearing it would kill Snape if he knew that twenty years of spying on Dumbledore had been in vain.

Snape's wounds didn't get better whatever Draco tried to support the healing process. The man had lost his will to live, and only because Draco blackmailed him every other day to eat at least a bit of soup, death hadn't found him yet.

The young man was close to a breakdown. And therefore, for the first time in over a month, he got up from his kitchen chair, left his house, warded and locked it, and got down to the local pub to get royally pissed. He didn't even bother to disguise himself if anyone recognised him, at least this catastrophe would end.

Prompt Inspiring fic:

30. Remember these old fics where Snape was being portrayed as a closet sensualist? Now we know that he never was one but maybe we can get him there. After a near miss with death, Severus is in bad shape physically and heavily depressed to boot. Draco feels the life debt he owes the man requires him to instill some joie de vivre in his former professor. And who better to introduce one to the pleasures of life from fancy cuisine to fine clothing to good wines and better company than a Malfoy? If you absolutely MUST, could be a slash, but I'd prefer a friendship fic. (Malfoy Matchmaker, maybe?)

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 4

Snape is in bad shape physically and heavily depressed to boot after nearly having been killed by Nagini. Draco Malfoy, owing his former Potions master a life debt, insists on looking after him.

Chapter 2

"I will kill him," Draco murmured into his beer. "I will go home, put my hands round his neck, and strangle him. And then I will burn his body. And then I will throw his ashes in the wind." Taking another sip of his drink, the young blond man staggered unsteadily towards the counter and was rewarded with a double whiskey appearing in front of his nose.

"He's already dead, anyway. I would only put an end to his misery. Maybe I should wait until he's asleep. Then I'll go and... and... smash his head in."

"Smash in whose head, Mr Malfoy?"

"Snape's head," Draco slurred, slouched back in his chair once more and being just a bit too drunk to think, but not drunk enough for not realising what he just had said. His head snapped up only to find another former teacher looking down at him with a mixture of concern, disgust, and sorrow.

"Oh fuck," Draco murmured and tried to hide behind his glass. He expected to be arrested any moment, but he was certainly in no condition to run.

"Severus has been dead for more than four weeks, Mr Malfoy," Remus Lupin said, his voice hard. "Do not make fun of him where I can hear it. I warn you; I won't tolerate it."

That heated Draco's temper. "Won't you, werewolf?" he sneered and stood up on swaying legs. "Why not? You despised him, you hated him, you're as glad as all the

others that he's dead!"

Lupin reached out just in time to catch the young man before he fell over his own legs. Usually, he would have put the boy back on his chair and left; for some reason, he didn't do so tonight, being far too surprised to see Draco Malfoy here after he had vanished during the battle. So instead of leaving, Lupin first organised a coffee, then took the seat opposite the blond wizard. Silently, he cast a spell over the cup that would have sobered up even an unconscious drunkard and pushed it towards Draco.

When Draco had taken the first sip, Lupin said, "Whatever you have heard about me hating Severus Snape, it is wrong. I never hated him, not even when we were at school. He never accepted my friendship, but I certainly won't allow you to speak ill of him. Is that clear?"

Draco gave a bitter laugh and drained his coffee. Somehow he didn't care that Lupin, being one of the good guys, could send him to Azkaban within the blink of an eye. His head cleared rapidly, and he didn't like the feeling it reminded him of the responsibility back home.

The sheer thought of going back there made Draco's stomach cramp. And from one heartbeat to the other, he made a decision. "He's not dead," he whispered, not sure if the werewolf would hear him at all he just needed to say it. "He's not dead. Not yet. He's dying, he refuses to eat, he *wants* to die, but he's not yet dead." Draco didn't look up when he said those words.

A silence answered him that weighed tons. Finally, Lupin managed a, "What?" in a strained voice.

Draco buried his head in his arms. "He's in my house. Snape. I found him, I dragged him away from the Shrieking Shack; I saved his life. Well, Granger had done the first half, but I got the antidote. He's alive. Snape's alive. And I can't stand seeing him dwindle away any longer. Please, arrest me. Take me to Azkaban or wherever else. Find someone else to look after him!"

Remus's voice was ice-cold when he stated, "Severus Snape is *dead*, Draco. He died on the floor of the Shrieking Shack due to blood-loss and snake venom. Harry, Ron, and Hermione witnessed it. There is no use in denying it."

Draco's head whipped up and he snarled, "Well, Lupin, I have witnessed him dying for nearly a month, as it happens in my house. He's nothing but skin and bones anymore, the wound doesn't heal and rips open at any given opportunity, he barely sleeps but sits in this damn chair, staring out of a window with closed curtains. He's in lousy condition, nearly too depressed to breathe, and I don't even know why." Anxiously, he scanned the pub to make sure no one overheard their bitter little chat. "Potter might have seen Snape fall, but he hasn't seen him die because he simply didn't!"

Remus opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was nothing he could say to this ridiculous statement.

Draco leaned over the table, knocking over the empty coffee cup. "You don't believe me, werewolf, do you?" he hissed. "Then tell me why didn't you find Snape's body? Why is his grave empty?"

Remus paled and dug his nails in the smooth surface of the table. "You cannot know this," he croaked. "Apart from me and Poppy, no one knows that the Shrieking Shack was empty when we got there to retrieve... him."

"Nothing but pools of blood, you mean," Draco replied, wiping his sweaty hands on his trousers. He really didn't like thinking of blood, neither now nor any other time. He had seen Snape bleeding too often in the past few weeks, had tried to seal the heavy, deep wounds the snake fangs had ripped too regularly to care to think about it ever again.

"You cannot know this!" Remus repeated heatedly and got up. "Tell me why you know we didn't find Severus! We believe Nagini pulled him into the nearby woods and... well. What do you know?" He reached out and grabbed the younger man's collar, ripping him out of his seat.

Draco didn't even bother to fight. Entirely sober now, he just looked calmly into the werewolf's eyes and said, "I already told you. Nagini didn't find him; I did. And now he's in my house, hating me for bringing him there. And guess what by now I'm an expert when it comes to brewing Blood-Replenishing Potion; I'm really good with binding spells because he used to fight badly against me and my sorry attempts to heal his wounds; and, as I have pointed out, he's dying. Wanna come along and see for yourself?"

Gulping heavily, Remus released the boy and staggered back a step. His head was in turmoil, but he managed to get one important question out. "If it is true what you say why didn't you get help? Why didn't you tell anybody?"

Draco sneered. "And let him go to Azkaban? Never! He's saved my life; I owe him. Everyone knows he was Voldemort's second-in-command; I bet the Ministry would love him to be alive simply because then they would be able to kill him properly. If I had told anyone, he would have received a Dementor's kiss by now. But I will protect him, whatever it takes."

Remus closed his eyes, not believing what he just had heard. The boy obviously didn't know anything... "Have you been with Severus all the time since you found him?" he asked, playing along and assuming for the moment that Severus indeed was alive. "Did you listen to the radio? Did you get a newspaper?"

Swiftly, Draco got up and put his jacket on, heading towards the door. "I've been stuck with him ever since that night, Lupin. No news, no paper, haven't even talked to anybody apart from Snape. My parents are in Azkaban, awaiting their trial, and I decided it would be best to go into hiding to prevent the same happening to me. Tonight's the first night I'm out, and see how lucky I am the person I bump into is someone who will tell the Ministry where to find me. Great." With that, he pushed the door open and stepped out into the cool midsummer night.

Remus was after him in just a few, long strides, catching up with the blond wizard in the darkness. Once more he grabbed the young man's shoulders, hard and demanding. "Take me to him," he ordered. "Take me to Severus. And Merlin have mercy on you if he is really dying. Severus was always on our side, has been double-spying on Voldemort for two decades. You would know that if you'd read the paper. He's been given an Order of Merlin, First Class, post mortem two weeks ago. He's a damn war hero we would've never sent him to Azkaban. If we had found him alive, we would have taken him to St. Mungo's to the best Healers available!"

It was Draco's time to blanch and to gulp. "What? But... but... I... I didn't know that!" he stammered.

Lupin just pushed him on. "Take me to him, Draco. Now."

Draco's house was not far away from the pub. They only needed a few minutes to get there, Lupin walking close to the young man beside him. Draco had his head down, presumably deep in thought. When he put the key into the keyhole, muttering a spell whilst doing so, he said hesitantly, "I've never told him. I thought it would be for the best, with him not really recovering."

"Told him what?" Lupin asked, stepping into the dark hall and closing the door behind him.

Draco ran a weary hand over his tired face. "I never told Snape that Voldemort is dead. I assumed it wouldn't do him any good, knowing that his master had been killed by Potter. I thought Snape had been loyal to Voldemort until the end." He looked at Remus Lupin, eyes wide and uncertain. "But he wasn't, was he. How could I know he wasn't how could I know..."

"Good gods, boy," Remus whispered, dread building up inside him like a bushfire. "Severus really thinks Harry lost? That all his effort had been in vain? Draco, Voldemort himself gave Nagini the order to kill Snape!"

Another riddle solved. "I. Did. Not. Know!" Draco shouted. "I didn't know that he had us all fooled! He killed Dumbledore! I thought... I really, truly thought not telling him would be for the best!"

"Where is he, Draco?" Lupin interrupted, and Draco just pointed upstairs.

"Second door to the right," he said. "You can't miss it when you go inside, it will be pitch black. He despises light."

Not really listening to the last words, the werewolf took the staircase quickly, found the requested door, and didn't hesitate before opening it.

Draco was right. The room was dark. But then, it was night, and maybe Severus was asleep. "*Lumos*," Remus murmured, and light flooded the small room.

Sideboard, armchair, bed, a small table. The bed was empty, so was the armchair. Just a cold, deserted room. No Severus. *Of course not*, Remus thought. *He's dead, and the boy is mad*. But then he saw the second door, leading to the bathroom. There was no light in there either.

Taking a look wouldn't do any harm, Remus decided. If he didn't check, Draco would tell him that Snape was having a shower, or was hiding behind the sink, or had flown out of the window... Harder than necessary, the werewolf pushed this second door open, expecting to find nothing else but another empty room.

He found an empty room, empty apart from a shower, a sink, and a toilet. His wandlight cast eerie shadows over the tiles, and a shiver gripped him it was even colder in here than in the bedroom. The window was open; wind blew its cold breath into the house. Small, heavy drops slowly and regularly hit the tub. The half-closed shower curtain danced slightly in the chilly breeze. The room smelled of water and soap and faintly of the wet grass outside.

Remus felt a faint pain in his heart when he realised that, for a few minutes, he had truly believed he would find Severus Snape in this sad little house, in this horrible, cold, dark, room that reeked of loneliness and despair. He had hoped with all his might that the Potions master was still alive, that they had buried an empty coffin not because its owner had been dragged away and feasted upon by a giant snake, but because he was actually not dead.

Of course this hope had been foolish. Remus turned and left the bathroom.

Then he heard it. Being near the door already, the werewolf heard that strange little sound that made the small hairs in his neck stand up and sent a shiver down his spine.

This sound... he knew it. Every human being knew that sound, as every human being at one time or another made that sound.

The sound of chattering teeth.

Remus whirled round and rushed back into the bathroom, pulling back the shower curtain hard enough to rip it off its hooks. Throwing it into the corner, he sunk to his knees to be at eye level with the man who sat at the bottom of the tub, fully dressed but soaking wet, obviously freezing, obviously only half conscious at best and shaking violently. His teeth were indeed chattering badly. His knees were drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped round his legs. His head was bent low; long black hair hung as a dripping curtain down to his shins. Remus couldn't actually see the man's face, but it was still clear who it was.

Severus. Wearing only a shirt and trousers. Sitting on the bottom of a shower in an ice-cold bathroom. Shaking and shivering and wet. Barefoot. His pale, naked feet made him look even more vulnerable than his beaten position.

Very slowly, very carefully, Remus put his wand on the ground and placed his hand lightly on the man's wrist.

"Severus," Remus whispered, not trusting his own voice. The boy had been right; the Potions master was alive, but in an awful condition. Taking a cold shower in the middle of the night, fully clothed, was nothing a sane or healthy man would do.

Then the werewolf became aware of the heat under his hand. *Why heat?* he thought and placed his other hand on Severus's shoulder. Under the cold, clammy fabric of the shirt he felt burning skin. *He's freezing; there can't be heat*.

But there was. And Remus knew why as well. *He's injured; he's developed a fever, and that's why he got under the shower to fight it*.

Severus was injured, yes, and very ill. But definitely neither insane nor with as strong a death wish as Draco might have assumed.

Remus tried to pull his former colleague out of the tub. "Severus," he urged. "Come on, let me help you, let..."

That was the moment when Snape lifted his head and stared right through Remus Lupin. His black eyes were huge and incomprehensible in his ghostly white face. It was clear that he didn't recognise Remus he was elsewhere, far too gone to recognise even his own name, radiating heat as if he had been sitting too close to a blazing fire and not spending an hour or more under cold water.

"I won't go back," Snape whispered, barely audible, but determined. And he tried to get away from Remus's gentle hands.

"Severus, you need to get out of the shower!" Remus insisted and hardened his grip.

Snape, though, began to fight against those hands. "I cannot go back! It will kill me it's killing me, and I will not go back!" Under the harsh words, there was so much despair in Snape's voice, such a heavy, pleading subnote that Remus found it suddenly hard to breathe. Something was scaring the life out of Snape a terrifying thought.

"Go back where, Severus?" Remus asked as soothing as possible. "The only place you must go to is to bed. You are ill; you need care."

Obviously, Snape hadn't heard him. His whole body shook with cold and fever, and his fingers dug holes in his own flesh. "Go back to the Dark Lord. Go back to spying. Can't do it. Won't do it. It's breaking me to... even... to think about it." His black eyes were blazing with fever, fear, and the will to get away from Remus. With one violent push Snape slipped backwards to the farthest corner of the shower tub, trying to get up at the same time but slipping on the wet ground.

Remus leapt forward and just managed to steady him. He was now half in the shower himself, one leg inside and with the other kneeling on the rim. "Oh, Merlin," he breathed. "Severus, you don't have to go back. Voldemort..." But in mid-sentence, the werewolf felt how the tormented body in front of him suddenly got slack and sagged sideways, all muscles limp. Fastening his arms round Snape's chest, Remus was just able to catch the unconscious man before he hit the ground, picked him up, and finally managed to get Snape out of the tub and the bathroom. The werewolf left a wet trail on the floor whilst crossing the small distance to the bed.

"Draco!" Remus called, carrying the sickly light body easily in his arms. "Draco, get up here immediately!"

Apparently, the boy had been waiting outside the door as he reacted to the call in no time. "Hell!" he swore when he saw the sight before him. "Damn, I shouldn't have left him alone, I should have stayed in the house, I..."

"Get the covers off the bed," Remus snapped, and when Draco had done so, the werewolf carefully put Snape on the cream coloured silk sheets. They got soaked instantly, not only with water but with blood as well. "Found him in the shower," Remus told the young wizard, Accio'd his wand and had Snape's wet clothes removed with a quick flick. There was no use in drying them he needed to know where the blood originated, and the shirt was nothing more than rags anyway.

Snape was lying stretched out on the bed, his limbs shivering even in his unconscious state. He tossed his head; he didn't lie still.

Disbelieving, the werewolf's eyes wandered over the deathly pale flesh, the sunken stomach, the ladder of ribs clearly discernible in the dim light. The joints stood out, each bone was visible, even the ones in the thighs and upper arms. *No wonder he's so light*, Remus thought. *There's barely anything left of him!*

"Told you he wouldn't eat," Draco said defiantly.

Blood was slowly, but steadily running down the Potions master's chest and his neck, out of a nasty looking wound Draco had seen far too often and Remus hadn't seen at all until now. Sharply, the werewolf sucked his breath in at the sight of it, then covered the naked body up to the waist with a sheet. "Dressings," he demanded, and Draco just handed them over, sinking on the chair that usually was occupied by Snape.

"Should have stayed in," he murmured again and watched as Remus placed a bandage on Snape's injured shoulder, lightly adding pressure as the man on the bed, even though he was unconscious, continued to toss and turn. "You will need binding spells," Draco sighed. "He always fights, and they keep him still at least long enough until the wound is closed again."

Remus didn't listen, just pressed the bandage to Snape's shoulder, watching in horror how fast it got soaked with blood. "Get Poppy," he told Draco over his shoulder. "I'll take care of him, and you will go and get Poppy Pomfrey here, no matter what you have to do to find her. He needs treatment, professional treatment, and he needs it soon. Go. Hurry."

"But..." Draco began, then stopped, staring at Snape and Lupin for a very long moment. This was out of his hands now, for the good or for the bad. And Lupin was obviously not here to kill Snape, but to help him. So Draco turned on his heel and left the room without looking back.

Remus barely heard him leave. Severus had begun to move even more restlessly in the past minutes, and Remus saw no other way to keep him still but performing a binding spell as Draco had suggested.

With a low, desperate moan, Severus fought even harder. It ripped Remus's heart to pieces to hear that sound, to hear the fear in it and the pain. Unfortunately, he couldn't do anything else but strengthen the spell each tossing of the head, each movement of this far too thin body tore the wound open even wider. *Blood-Replenishing Potion*, Remus thought, and as the boy had mentioned it earlier on, he gave it a try and Accio'd a phial, hoping Draco had built up a stock.

Draco had indeed, and Remus had the phial in his hands only a moment later. He uncorked the phial and put it carefully between Severus's ashen lips.

Snape coughed and spat out the contents only a few drops made it down his throat, but Remus hoped it would do for the moment. But then Snape redoubled his effort to break the binding spell. Although he couldn't move an inch, his muscles were trembling with the attempt to get up, get away from whatever he was fearing, and the bandages were already soaked with fresh blood once more. There was no use to try a simple stitching spell it wouldn't work anymore. Not on that wounds.

"Damn shit," Remus muttered and placed both hands on Severus's naked, haggard chest, hoping he could calm him and let him know that he wasn't alone.

Surprisingly enough, that seemed to soothe the fighting man. Snape took a deep, shuddering breath and lay still for a moment, really still, and seemed to relax a bit as well.

Thoughtfully, Remus sat down on the bedside, having a closer look at the man he had known to be dead for a month. He felt the fast, unsteady beat of the heart under his palm, he felt the heat the fever caused, he saw Snape's eyes move under the closed lids.

Then Remus observed that the wound Nagini had ripped in neck and shoulder wasn't the first one Snape had received. Along his ribs he could see faint scars, thin, long scars, dozens and dozens of them.

Frowning, Remus carefully turned Snape round halfway so as to be able to have a look at his back.

More of those thin scars. The whole back was covered with them, and maybe, in daylight, they wouldn't be that visible even; but here, with the small light from a wand that brought more shadow than actual brightness, they were there.

Remus ran a fingertip over one of the scars. They looked... they looked... Hmmmm. Actually, they resembled wounds a whip would cast.

A memory popped up, and Remus remembered what Albus had told him about three years ago when he had been a teacher at Hogwarts. That Voldemort possessed a whip, a magical whip he liked to use on his enemies as well as on his followers. A cursed whip that caused unbearable pain, burned like fire even hours after the torture, and caused horrible hallucinations on top of it.

Albus hadn't told him that Severus had been a victim of the whip, and more than once, by the looks of his back.

Sick to the bones by the cruelty those scars proved, Remus continued to trace the faint lines. "What have we done to you," he murmured, sadness and grief in every word. "How badly you had to suffer for our cause. And I didn't even know about it. None of us did."

Then he felt Severus's muscles tighten, felt him start fighting again and hastily snatched his hand away. He could only hope that his touch hadn't triggered a nightmare, and gently he let Severus's beaten body slip back onto the cool sheets.

Tossing and turning. If Severus went on like that, he would lose too much blood. He wouldn't survive the night.

Draco had been gone for maybe fifteen minutes; he'd need at least two hours to find the matron, and it was vital to calm Severus down. So Remus clamped his hands over the man's upper arms it had worked before, touching him. "Come on, Severus, behave yourself," he half pleaded, half scolded. "If Poppy finds a fresh corpse in my care, she'll know I fucked this up completely, and then she'll rip my head off. You don't want that, do you? You certainly would rather rip my head off yourself. So please, relax!"

Maybe it was exhaustion, or maybe it was a coincidence, but much more likely it was a miracle: Snape's attempts to free himself from his ties weakened, and a moment later, he lay still again.

Having been unaware of the strength it had cost him to hold down a body that was much lighter than it should be, Remus wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and leaned back against the footrest of the bed.

As soon as his hands had lost contact to Snape's skin, the Potions master picked up his fight again, even harder than before. Not knowing what else to do, Remus cast another binding spell.

"No!" Snape rasped. "Don't! Not again, please not... not again!"

Remus paled, but finally had an idea what was wrong here. *Binding spells make him panic*, he concluded. *Physical contact calms him. I need to remove the spells.*

Suddenly, the werewolf figured that there was only one way to keep his patient calm. As gently as possible, he pulled Severus's torso up, lifting the spells at the same moment, and ignoring the painful gasp, he slipped behind the unconscious man. One leg on each side of the bony body, the werewolf then wrapped his fingers over each of the Potions master's thin wrists, crossed his arms over Severus's chest and thus had him in a quite effective grip that allowed Snape to move his head, his hips and his legs, but kept the upper body and especially the shoulders still.

If you survive this night and if you ever find out I cradled you like a child in order to calm you down, a ripped off head will be most certainly my smallest problem. Remus mused. But a faint smile was curving his lips he already felt the struggling man surrender to the close body contact, to the safety the gentle grip, so different from binding spells, promised.

After another few long moments, Snape's head came to rest against the werewolf's shoulder. And when Remus began to talk, to tell the man in his arms the most useless rubbish he could imagine about Tonks, about his son Teddy, about the weather outside and the dinner he had eaten the previous night Remus heard Severus drawing a deep, shuddering breath and sinking deeper into unconsciousness. No more fighting. No more tossing.

"Thank Merlin," Remus murmured. "Now all I need is for Poppy to be found and dragged back here before he dies."

A/N: With her agreement, I borrowed the whip from Lariope, who borrowed it from shellsnapeluver.

Lariope describes the whip and its doings more detailed in her story "Second Life." Shellsnapeluver's story is called "Love is a fire."

Many, many thanks to both of them for letting me use it.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

Snape is in bad shape physically and heavily depressed to boot after nearly having been killed by Nagini. Draco Malfoy, owing his former Potions master a life debt, insists on looking after him.

Chapter 3

Poppy Pomfrey, matron and mistress of Hogwarts infirmary, was having a nice little chat with her niece in her niece's kitchen when Draco Malfoy stormed in, grabbed the dumbstruck woman by the arms, and Disapparated with her without further notice. It was late, it was cool outside, she didn't have her shawl, and she disliked the sensation of being kidnapped profoundly.

Shouting, hitting, even drawing a wand was very obviously useless, as the young man just dragged her on towards a house, a door, then into a hall and finally upstairs, ignoring her protests entirely.

"You're needed, woman," Draco hissed and pushed the door to Snape's room open with his shoulder, pulling Madam Pomfrey after him. "Get in here, stop yowling, and do your job."

With those harsh words, he released her, and Poppy Pomfrey was finally able to make sure all her arms and legs had made it into that dim-lit room and that her head hadn't been left behind, either. With dignity, she straightened out her dress and pushed her foot deeper into the slipper she had nearly lost during the rash journey. Then she adjusted her glasses and took a look round.

"Remus," she greeted the man who sat on the bed. "Are you injured? Why are you here? How did you find Draco? I thought's he's on the run! Honestly, a few answers would be nice!" Then she took a step and saw that the werewolf, settled against the bed's headboard, held someone in his arms. Someone male.

Now that was unusual. Madam Pomfrey had been sure Remus Lupin was straight. But then... why would Draco drag her here if no one was in danger? She took a step and tried to figure out what was going on.

Then she smelled blood.

A tiny shiver run down the matron's spine and thus told her that things here were dire. "Truly, Draco, the light in here is a catastrophe," she complained, casting another Lumos. "How am I supposed to see a thing if there's barely light?"

Remus, not moving, said quietly, "Poppy, if you..."

More light brought more details, and Madam Pomfrey wasn't interested in Remus any longer. With one experienced look, she had taken in the tableau, had seen that the werewolf was maybe a little tired, but otherwise fine, but that the other man, the man with the pale skin, the clearly unconscious and wounded man, was not in a good condition at all.

"What happened here?" she demanded to know and stepped close to the bed. "Who is this anyway, and... he looks familiar."

Another step.

"Oh. My. Gods," the matron said and rushed round the bed to examine the unconscious man's face more closely. It had been half covered by long, black, distinctly damp hair, but Poppy Pomfrey would recognise this man anywhere and under whatever circumstances nevertheless. She had looked after him and had healed his various injuries far too often in the past two decades to ever forget as much as the look of his limp hand upon the bedcover, not to speak about his face.

She reacted remarkably coolly. "Ah, Severus," she said and sat on the bed, feeling the Potions master's pulse on his exposed throat. "I should have known that it would take more than a stupid snake to kill you. And I should have been more suspicious when we didn't find your body." Absently, she waved her wand, and a big bag appeared by her side. Rummaging in it, not ever taking her eyes of Snape, she brought out a phial.

"How long has he been unconscious?" she asked, taking Snape's bony wrist in hers. A moment later, she had used her wand to inject him with the phial's content. "Blood-Replenishing Potion," she explained. "He certainly needs it, by the looks of him."

Draco came next to the bed. "I left here three hours ago; bit more than that, I'd say," he answered, and Remus just nodded.

"I hope you didn't try to use binding spells on him," the matron grumbled, checking on Snape's life signs with a complicated spell. "He's highly objective to binding spells, quite understandably, given his past experience." Enquiringly, she looked at Remus who cringed under her glare.

"Tried it," the werewolf confessed. "Didn't work. He fought, and I couldn't still the bleeding. So I decided to... well, just hold him down. Sort of."

Nodding briskly, Madam Pomfrey let a second potion seep into Snape's body, quickly followed by a half-sung charm that finally closed the wounds on neck and shoulder. "Ever since You-Know-Who tested that cursed whip on him, used it repeatedly as Severus always failed to deliver Harry to him, it became nearly impossible to hold him down with binding spells. I understand that You-Know-Who used them to keep his victims in position. Severus connects them with pain and danger; Albus and I always calmed him with physical strength. It was the only thing that worked. Although," she said with half a sad smile, "we never actually thought of getting into bed with him."

"Don't you dare and ever let him know about it, Poppy," Remus answered and grinned, more than glad that the matron was here and knew what to do. Then his eyes snapped to the boy who still stood in the doorway and now staggered into the room.

Draco sunk on the chair next to the window. He had paled at the matron's words. "Shit," he whispered. "I... I didn't know that. I didn't know what else to do but spellbind him... Something else I *fucking* didn't know! No wonder those wounds wouldn't heal, he tore them open whilst trying to break the spell and... Hell. Sorry. Really, I'm..." He shot out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Madam Pomfrey looked after him with sympathy, but of course had to take care of Snape first.

"I think you owe me an explanation, Remus," the matron stated, snatched a wet cloth out of thin air, and gently began to remove the dried blood from the Potions master's chest. "You have all the time you need. I must beg you to stay with Severus in this position for another few hours, at least until I can be sure those wounds are truly getting better."

Reluctantly, Remus nodded. "I didn't dare to seal them or give him anything," he said. "I didn't want to do anything wrong. He spat the Blood-Replenishing Potion out and..."

Poppy pulled the sheet up to Snape's chest and now sat herself in the chair Draco had abandoned. "That was a wise decision, Remus," she reassured him. "The venom of that horrible snake... anyone who gets bitten needs special treatment. It affects the healing process, and it makes the victim sick for weeks after the bite. We had that problem with Arthur Weasley as well. He simply couldn't keep anything down until one of the healers found a potion that eased the symptoms. That Severus is still alive is a miracle, as Draco of course couldn't know which healing potions and spells to apply. I will talk to the boy later. He still did a remarkable job, given the circumstances. You tell me why you are here and how it is possible that Severus is here as well."

And so Remus Lupin told the matron what he knew.

It took nearly three days before Madam Pomfrey finally declared that Snape would live and recover. During this time, either she, Remus, or Draco looked after the by then sleeping and healing Potions master, not leaving him alone for as much as a minute. Madam Pomfrey found the time to talk to Draco, and after she was done with him, he held his head high again and the guilty look had left his eyes.

"You saved his life, Mr Malfoy," she told him. "Without your care, he would have been dead for over a month. No one blames you for your actions; on the contrary, we are grateful."

"I nearly killed him because... well. You know why. Because I didn't know what to do, because I didn't dare to ask anyone, because I thought it was for the best," Draco said and didn't look into the matron's eyes. The knowledge that he could have taken Snape to St. Mungo's where professional Healers would have taken care of him haunted him right into his dreams.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and patted the boy's head as she had patted the heads of countless youths in times of confusion. "You did what you could and what you thought right at the time. And as soon as your actions become common knowledge, you will be a hero; it should help your parents' trial tremendously."

Draco didn't answer that, but went to his own room and thought things over for a while, listening to the small sounds the others made in his house. Slowly, he became aware how badly the situation had worked on his nerves, how devastated he'd been and how scared that Snape would die right under his hands. That Lupin and Madam Pomfrey had taken the responsibility out of his hands, that Snape himself was actually getting better day by day, did a lot to brighten his mood. Draco even let his neighbours know that he was back in his house, which was necessary anyway because the matron and the werewolf kept coming and going in broad daylight.

When Madam Pomfrey complained that there was nothing edible in the house but mouldy toast, Draco began to do the shopping again, searched out his parents' grocers and bargained with them to give him the best pieces, just as his father had. And he ordered his parents' house-elves to do the washing, cooking, and cleaning. He was having proper meals again, swearing an oath that he would never touch soup again in his entire life. Sooner than expected, the signs of abandonment were gone from the rooms. Light filled the house, voices, footsteps, the scents of breakfast, lunch and dinner. And sometimes even a smile.

Meanwhile Remus, being a married man and a father, had informed his wife that he had urgent business to attend to, but didn't tell Tonks anything more. He went home every now and then to take his boy to bed and assure his wife everything would turn out fine in the end.

Madam Pomfrey owed her niece that she would be back soon, but didn't tell her when. She regularly visited Diagon Alley to fill up her empty bag with medical and potion supplies.

That Severus Snape was still alive was kept a secret. Draco, Remus and Poppy agreed it would be for the best if they waited until their patient was up and about before they unleashed the machinery that would certainly begin to work as soon as rumours would spread that Hogwarts' Potions master, triple spy, former Death Eater, killer of Dumbledore, and main agent of Voldemort's defeat was still alive. Draco and Remus, with the sincere support of Madam Pomfrey, wanted to give Snape a chance to get up to date first so that the life outside that was waiting for him wouldn't crush him.

Snape woke mid-day on a Tuesday afternoon, and Remus was there and watched him.

First, Snape stretched himself, still mostly asleep. Then he turned, lying now on his back only to push the duvet away that covered him.

A moment later he took the duvet and pulled it up to his chest once more; maybe he was aware of the fact that, beneath it, he was still naked. Remus couldn't suppress a smile at that involuntary motion.

A few deeper breaths, fluttering eyelids; then, suddenly, Snape opened his eyes, stared at the ceiling, and finally locked his gaze with the werewolf sitting next to the bed.

Remus leaned forward, trying to find something sensible to say. "Hi," was what he finally came up with.

"You are dead," Snape croaked and ran a weary hand over his face.

"So are you," Remus observed calmly, expecting the man to jump out of bed any moment or to do something equally stupid.

Snape frowned and thought that over. Then he shook his head. "I'm not. You are. I saw you fall. You are dead. Greyback killed you."

Remus smiled. "For someone who got attacked by a giant snake and takes ice-cold showers in the middle of the night, your memory is exceptionally good. You are right. I fought with Greyback, and I fell. But I didn't stay down, and I didn't die. As should be obvious because I'm talking to you. And besides. You fell as well but didn't stay down either. I think we are even here."

Snape tried to push himself up a bit, failed, and accepted the help of his old enemy. A few moments later, he leaned against the cushions propped behind his back and stared wordlessly at the werewolf. Finally, he came to a conclusion. "I'm mad," he stated. "I've been half-mad for weeks, and now I've just gone completely nuts."

Remus couldn't help chuckling. "Nice reasoning," he said. "But wrong nevertheless. You've been half-mad because of the snake venom, because you were ill, and because of some... invalid information Draco provided you with. Actually, you are a lot better now than a few days ago." Then he unbuttoned his shirt and showed Snape the long, deep scars Greyback had cast right before Remus had managed to finally kill the werewolf. "I'm not dead, you're not mad, and really, this is a quite strange conversation, Severus."

Snape, though, didn't seem to appreciate his opponent's words. A thought had struck him and by the looks in his haggard face, it was an awful thought. "If I'm not mad and not dead either, it means that I'm recovering," he whispered. "That is... bad news indeed."

Having no idea how to break the news, Remus stayed silent for too long. He could see the dread building up in Snape's face, he could nearly see the conclusions he made if he was recovering, he would have to face the Dark Lord soon. But still he didn't know how to say what he wanted to say.

Neither Snape nor Lupin heard Draco coming in. The young man stared at Snape's clenched jaw, his balled fists, his knitted eyebrows, he looked at the werewolf and waited for him to say what needed to be said and finally figured out that Remus didn't know how to put it.

"Voldemort's dead," Draco said, loud and clear. "I didn't tell you because I thought you'd be devastated to hear it and that it would kill you. I didn't know you were on Dumbledore's side all the time. I'm sorry. Really, very sorry."

"What?" Snape whispered, his face suddenly even paler than only a moment before. He tried to swallow, his hands began to tremble, and he drew up his shoulders, clearly trying with all his might to control the rush of emotions washing through him.

"Voldemort is dead. So is Nagini," Draco replied.

Remus watched Snape closely. "Severus, Harry won, thanks to the memories you gave him that night. Your times as spy are over. You don't have to go back to him. There aren't even that many Death Eaters left most are dead or in Azkaban. It's over. You are free of this task, this... burden. Finally and forever."

"That... is..." Snape began, but couldn't finish whatever he had wanted to say.

"It's over. You are safe. Voldemort is dead," Draco whispered and was quite horrified to see tears running down the Potions master's pallid face. "Please. I'm so sorry not having told you that before, as soon as you've woken up!"

For a moment, Snape stared at the boy. Then, with a sudden move, he jerked his body round and buried his face in the pillow. And Remus just got up, took Draco's arm and pushed him out. They left the room and the werewolf closed the door behind him so the man inside could deal with reality unobserved.

Two hours later, Remus knocked once, then entered the room, this time carrying a tray. He sincerely hoped that this time had been enough for Severus to think things through and to accept that his life would now take a much different turn than he had anticipated before Draco had told him the truth.

Snape sat in the bed. For the first time in a month, the curtains were open. Faint sunlight streamed in through the window, painted patterns on the wooden floor, warming the small room distinctively. When Remus came in, Snape looked up, spearing the werewolf with a gaze that was surprisingly similar to the stare he had used on his students. Before Remus could open his mouth, Snape asked, "Is it true?"

Remus put the tray down and nodded.

"Tell me. Everything."

Thoughtfully, Remus took the roll that lay on the tray, broke it, and handed one half to Snape. It was such a harmless and unimportant gesture that Snape automatically reached out and took the warm piece of bread. "Surely Draco didn't bake that," he growled. "He had enough problems ruining a simple soup, not to talk about proper cooking."

Grinning, Remus answered, "The house-elves are back. And I will tell you everything as soon as you start eating."

Without hesitation, Snape began to devour half his roll, and Remus told him about the night Voldemort had died. That Harry had died as well, but only temporarily; that the Elder Wand had backfired on its so-called master (Snape gave an approving snort to that detail); that Neville Longbottom had killed Nagini (a brisk nod); and that Voldemort's body had burst into dust when Harry had cast his ever famous *Expelliarmus* on him.

Silence filled the room after Remus had spoken the last sentence, and Snape swallowed the last bite of his roll. Then he accepted the mug Remus offered and took a thoughtful sip. "What about me?" he finally asked, this time not looking at Remus. "I guess you considered me dead?"

"We buried you," the werewolf replied. "Apart from Poppy and me, no one knew that we didn't find your body in the Shrieking Shack, so no one knew we buried an empty coffin. We found you a nice spot at the graveyard, and we... just buried you."

"For some reason I doubt that many tears were shed," the Potions master said dryly, but unable to cover a hint of bitterness in his still slightly hoarse voice.

Waving his wand with a swift move, Remus commanded a pile of newspapers to appear. He placed them on the bedside table, then he fished for a small phial in his shirt pocket. It contained silvery mist memories. "You are quite mistaken there, Severus," the werewolf objected. "Your death has ripped holes in people's hearts. After Harry revealed the truth about you, verified by Albus's testament... You cannot imagine what happened afterwards. Everyone who knew you walked around like the undead. We knew we had wronged you badly, we knew there was no way to let you know how sorry we were as not even a portrait showed up in the headmaster's office well, of course not as you weren't dead and... Let's say that many of us were... heartbroken."

"Sure," Snape snapped.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me. Hence the newspapers you were freed of all charges and given the Order of Merlin First Class right before the burial. I suppose you want to read it for yourself. And hence the memories. They are mine showing events from the past few weeks. I guess, as soon as you're able to stand without support, I will allow you to get up and have a look into them."

Snape managed to appear dangerous although he was as white as paper and didn't weigh much more than a skeleton. "You will allow *me*?" he hissed, and for a brief second, Remus believed Severus would strangle him right on the spot.

Then he laughed. "I'm delighted to see that your spirits are back, old friend," Remus said, pure joy showing in his face. "Maybe Draco and I will manage to annoy you badly enough for you to get healthy quicker than Poppy assumes."

That last statement seemed to prick Snape's curiosity. "Poppy knows I'm here?" he asked, but then reasoned, "Well, obviously she knows, otherwise I believe I would have died of that fever. Who else knows?"

Remus poured him another cup of tea. "Don't worry, Severus. No one apart from us knows yet that you proved to be exceptionally hard to kill. We'll give you another couple of days to recover before you have to face... well, everyone, actually."

"How generous of you, wolf," Snape grumbled and reached for one of the newspapers.

Chapter 4

This story ends with a nice meal in Draco's kitchen.

Chapter 4

Two more days and Snape was back on his feet, complaining bitterly about his weakness and the necessity of leaning on Draco's shoulder if he wanted to walk for more than a few steps. Draco, on the other hand, didn't mind at all to get snapped at by Snape he had missed the sarcasm and the pointed remarks, had feared the depressive mood Snape had been in and was massively glad that those times seemed to be over for good.

"Had you eaten more than a bit of soup in the past weeks, you wouldn't be in such a lousy state," Draco pointed out and held out once more a shirt for the Potions master to put it on. It was black, it was new, and Snape took it without objection.

In fact, Snape admired the silken quality of the fabric, but would have rather choked on the words before saying so. He couldn't even remember anymore why he had insisted on wearing his old, ripped and torn shirt. *It's in the past*, he thought, and immense relief washed through him, leaving him nearly breathless. *It's over, once and for all!*

Then he put on the shirt and closed the buttons. "Had you offered me decent food, I might have eaten it," he growled. But he knew as Poppy had explained to him that he couldn't have eaten whatever food Draco might have offered him, and he knew that Draco was aware of that fact as well. They were just nagging each other, and they both enjoyed it; there even was a thin smile showing on Snape's lips.

"I thought I was on the run, so I couldn't summon our house-elves," the young, blond wizard said. "Had I known you to be a gourmet, I would have learned to cook ages ago just in case I would be burdened with you one day."

"Would have been sensible," Snape grumbled. "Learning how to cook, that is. It comes in handy, now and then. In case you have guests; or in case you want to eat something that's actually edible."

They had reached the bed, and Snape stared at it for a moment he had no intention to lay down again, but he knew he needed a rest. Turning to the chair by the window, he suddenly drilled his long fingers in Draco's shoulder, causing the young man to look up at him in confusion.

"What?"

"Thank you," Snape said simply. "For saving my life not once, but twice. If you hadn't brought me here, Nagini's venom would have killed me, and if you hadn't told that damn werewolf about my whereabouts, I would not have survived either. You even dragged Poppy here. So... Thank you, Draco. I did not expect this loyalty from you, but I'm nevertheless grateful."

Shuffling his feet uncomfortably, Draco desperately tried to find the right words to say. "Not loyalty," he finally managed. "I just thought it'd be a shame to... to... erm..."

"To let such a nice person like me die on the Shrieking Shack's dirty floor," Snape continued dryly.

Draco waited until Snape was safely sitting in his chair, freshly showered and shaved and dressed in a clean, whole garment. "As long as you don't think I like you." He grinned and laughed when Snape scowled at him in his most dreadful manner. Then brought the Pensieve and placed it on the small table next to the chair. "Are you certain you want this?" Draco asked, but by the look on Snape's face, the man was very certain indeed. So Draco pulled out his wand, placed Remus's memories into the empty basin and quietly left the room.

For a moment, the Potions master looked after the boy, somewhat amused that he indeed had taken a liking to Lucius's son and fully aware of the fact that the feeling was mutual. Being in a surprisingly good mood, he took a deep breath and lowered his face until he touched the surface of the memories. A heartbeat later, he was getting pulled in, into a past he didn't know a thing about yet.

Remus, shaking with pain and grief, staring at the pools of blood in an empty Shrieking Shack, Poppy by his side. She was supporting him as well as leaning on him, her hand pressed on her mouth, her eyes dashing to every corner of the small room. They were obviously looking for something.

Not something. Someone. They are looking for me, *Snape realised.*

Swirling colours. The next memory.

~oo0oo~

Potter. The boy Snape had hated at first sight, but whose life he had saved whatever the cost, sat on the top stairs outside Hogwarts' huge gates and watched the sunset. Behind him stood Lupin, next to him was the youngest Weasley boy, his red hair ruffled, bearing deep shadows under his eyes. Hesitantly, he put an arm round his friend's shoulders. "We really should go home, Harry," he said. "It's been a week my mum is awaiting us. Let's go. There won't be a portrait for Snape. It's useless to wait any longer."

"I need to talk to him," Harry answered. He sounded empty, hollow, and lost. "There must be a portrait. There must! He's been Hogwarts Headmaster for nearly a year. He's entitled to a portrait."

"Harry," Lupin cast in, looking nearly as pained as the boy. "Severus became Headmaster due to blackmailing, threats, and fear. That is the reason why there is no portrait and why there won't be one. It makes no sense to wait any longer."

The black-haired boy buried his face in his hands. His shoulders slumped. "I need to tell him how sorry I am," he murmured stubbornly. "I have wronged him, I called him a coward, I... I... I will not leave here before I have talked to him!"

Swirling again.

~oo0oo~

Minerva McGonagall, furious and close to attacking Fudge. "You can't do that!" she said grimly. "You cannot deny him the truth!"

"He's dead, Professor," Fudge said, addressing her as well as Remus. "He was a Death Eater, he served You-Know-Who, he killed Dumbledore it would be a lot better if the world continued to believe him guilty. And we would have another dead Death Eater, proving that the Ministry did a splendid job hunting them down."

Minerva had her wand out in the blink of an eye and pointed it steadily at Fudge. "Severus Snape was misjudged all his life," she hissed. "I myself failed to believe in him, although Albus made it absolutely clear that he trusted him entirely. I will have to live with that knowledge, but I will now allow you to bury the truth."

"I think Rita Skeeter would be quite interested to get the details of this little conversation," Remus chipped in casually.

Fudge pulled a face. "You wouldn't dare," he said.

"Your decision, Fudge," Minerva replied, stowing her wand away. "You grant her an interview, telling her the truth about Severus Snape, or we will do it. And you better do it fast. I'm not known to be a patient woman."

Swirling.

~oo0oo~

The girl, the insufferable know-it-all, sat at a desk and stared out of the window. When the door opened, she didn't turn round, just lowered her head a bit. "I'd prefer to be left alone, Remus," she said, and Snape heard a surprisingly hard and self-accusing subnote in her voice.

"Come downstairs and have dinner with us, Hermione," Remus said and placed a hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged it off. "I'm not hungry."

Remus sat on the bed beside her. (They must be at Grimmauld Place, Snape guessed.) "You haven't eaten much lately," he pointed out gently. "You'll fall ill if you continue like that."

She's too thin, Snape observed. And she looks unhappy.

"So what?" Hermione snapped, but sounded nearly bored. "I get ill what difference will it make?"

She's depressed, Snape realised with a shock. What on earth happened to her that she's in such a black mood?

"It will make a difference to your friends," Remus answered. "We are worried about you. Since... since the night Voldemort died you are..."

"Since the night I let Professor Snape die," Hermione pointed out sternly, self-loathing in her voice.

Remus sighed. "You couldn't have done anything."

"I could have stayed with him! I could have summoned someone to take care of him. It was unnecessary, thoughtless, and cruel to leave him behind, still breathing but dying, without either coming back immediately with the antidote or fetching someone, anyone, to look after him!"

"Hermione," Remus said tiredly. "You and Ron destroyed a Horcrux; you helped Harry to defeat Voldemort. You told Poppy..."

"I was too slow. I am responsible for Professor Snape's death," she said firmly. "I could have saved his life, but all I did was perform a useless spell that stopped the bleeding. Ron could have destroyed the Horcrux on his own; he nearly did so, anyway. If I had stayed with Professor Snape, if I..." She took a deep breath and leaned her head against the cool window. "Get out, Remus," she whispered. "Get out and leave me alone."

~oo0oo~

When the pictures tumbled upside down again and were replaced once more by that swirling sensation, Snape was presented with the last memory.

His funeral.

Snape staggered back when he saw the masses of people standing around a six foot deep hole in the ground and a black coffin that as only he, Remus, and Poppy knew contained nothing but a few bags of sand. If someone had asked him beforehand, he would have sworn that no more than a fistful of people, including one or two of his Slytherin students, would bother to turn up at his grave; he certainly hadn't expected the whole school to attend his burial, each of his colleagues, the combined forces of the Ministry, and even many people he hadn't seen before in his life.

He hadn't expected tears either. Tears and sorrow, grief and an ocean of handkerchiefs.

He would have never believed Potter looking so forlorn at his grave, Remus allowing tears to run down his face, Granger swaying under the influence of a bit too much alcohol.

"Your death has ripped holes in people's hearts, old friend," he heard the werewolf's whisper in his mind, and then Snape felt himself getting pushed out of the Pensieve as the final memory ended.

Gasping for breath, the Potions master found himself sitting in front of the window, feeling as if someone had knocked the air out of his lungs. The memory of memories danced in his head, snippets, bits and pieces, pictures that hadn't been there a moment ago.

He opened his mouth to make a snarky remark to the empty room simply to comfort himself, but couldn't. That Remus had been right, that he had told the truth, was nothing less but disturbing, and even now Snape for himself had seen the impact his death had caused, he still couldn't fully believe it.

It seemed not everyone hated him.

A moment ago, he would have considered it impossible that anyone, one single person, would have grieved for him. And now he had to face the fact that there wasn't only one, but plenty of them.

Arse. He wasn't good in dealing with people at all, not to speak of dealing with people who actually would be happy to see him alive.

People people who knew him, people he had threatened and insulted and mistreated, people like Potter, Granger, Lupin, and McGonagall grieved because they believed he had been buried in that coffin. They considered his death a loss and wished they could have saved him.

Oh, blast. How on earth should he deal with that?

Rubbing his hands across his upper arms as if he were cold he had to admit that he was truly uncomfortable at the prospect of leaving this house. It was safe; it was like a shell, and he could hide behind its walls.

Only a coward would hide, though. And he wasn't a coward. Never had been, never would be.

Slowly, Snape got up and looked out of the window. What was a safe haven for him at the moment would become a prison if he allowed it.

No way. He had been imprisoned long enough, had been forced to do and endure things too cruel to describe. There were people out there who were devastated by his death, and that was unacceptable. Time to face facts another few days, and he would let them know he was still alive.

Well, he would have to be able to stand on his feet for longer than a minute before doing so. He was still weak as a kitten.

Best go and grab something to eat, Snape thought, still quite surprised that his appetite had decided to come back after all.

Carefully, he put a supporting hand towards the wall and slowly made his way outside the room, downstairs, and towards the kitchen. He was hungry, and maybe he could persuade the house-elves to make him a sandwich before dinner.

But the kitchen was occupied by Draco, Remus, and Poppy. And about half a dozen elves, stowing away the shopping Draco had done. There were bags with salad on the table, a fair amount of wine bottles, a small basket with eggs and another one with pasta, at least ten bars of chocolate, cream, fresh bread, tomatoes, red and yellow peppers, spring onions, parmesan and something Snape's nose discarded as impossible.

"Good you came downstairs, Severus," Poppy greeted him. "Sit and rest. We were just discussing dinner." She sat at the laden table, a wide smile on her face as she saw Snape on his feet with something close to greed in his face when he saw the shopping.

Snape didn't even hear her; instead of doing as she wished, he went to the table in the middle of the kitchen. "Where did you find them, Draco?" he asked and put one hand on the smooth wooden surface to steady himself whilst the other sorted through the goods.

"Hmmm?" Draco frowned and prevented a house-elf from vanishing the last bottle of red wine from the crate. He took it, opened it, and poured four glasses full of dark liquid.

"The mushrooms. Where did you get them it's a bit early for truffles, so tell me who sold them to you!" Impatiently, Snape shoved away a cucumber and a carton full of ripe strawberries. "I can smell them, I... ah!"

In a small paper bag, hidden behind the basket with the vegetables, Snape finally found what he'd been looking for. Unceremoniously, he tore the bag open and let its content carefully roll onto the table.

"Charcoal?" Lupin asked, eyeing the round, unevenly shaped, ugly little things suspiciously.

"Truffles!" Snape corrected him, then picked one of the mushrooms up and held it between his long, sensitive fingers as if it were a diamond. Gently, he ran his fingertips over the velvety surface; tenderly, he brushed off a bit of earth that clung to it. Finally, he cupped the truffle that indeed looked like charcoal in his hands, brought it to his face, closed his eyes and inhaled the delicate, unique fragrance.

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in disbelief.

"Quite the sensualist, Snape?" Draco remarked dryly after a stunned moment of silence, which caused Madam Pomfrey to giggle like a little girl. Snape falling for food and wine she wouldn't have believed it only a few days ago, but here stood the proof, sniffing mushrooms with sheer delight in his face.

Snape, though, ignored the comment entirely. Dreamily, he placed the truffle back with its siblings, scanned the goods on the table once more, then absent-mindedly took a sip from his wine-glass. "May I use your kitchen, Draco?"

"What for? To blow it up?"

A small smile quirked the Potions master's lips. "I could do that, if it pleased you, but actually I would prefer to cook in it," he answered sarcastically. "If you can rein in your house-elves so they leave me alone for a while."

"You can cook?" That came simultaneously out of three different mouths.

Snape was close to rolling his eyes, but prevented it in the last moment. "Yes, I can cook. I'm a bachelor, and I don't have house-elves to serve me during the summer vacation. So I learned to prepare my own food. It's not much different from potion making."

Remus laughed. "Well, unlike with your potions, you certainly won't be able to kill us with those mushrooms whatever you plan to do with them," he pointed out and watched Severus gathering the truffles, the cream, the pasta, and a few other items to take them with him to the workbench. He observed as well that Severus's movements were less forced, that he walked without steadying himself, and that he barely protected his injured shoulder anymore. "Take it easy, old friend," he said, reminding the Potions master that it had been less than a week since his near death.

"Don't call me that," Snape hissed automatically whilst already chopping spring onions.

"Take it easy, git," Remus replied smoothly.

Snape whipped round, knife in hand, looking every bit the dangerous Death Eater he, not too long ago, had been. Narrowing his eyes, he took in the werewolf's lazy grin, his relaxed posture, holding his glass in his hand. There was mischief in Lupin's eyes, not a threat. No wand was to be seen.

Remus met Snape's gaze squarely and saluted him cheerfully with the wine. "Your choice, Severus. I call you what you wish me to call you."

Silence whispered through the kitchen. Then Snape grumbled, "The former, then," and continued with his chopping business, pretending not to see the happy grin on the werewolf's face.

Dinner was nearly ready, the sauce simmering to perfection, when Draco suddenly said, "I hope you made enough for five, Snape?"

Snape, momentarily distracted by the task of washing strawberries and melting chocolate at the same time, just raised an eyebrow. Lupin, though, was more curious.

"Did you invite someone? Didn't we agree to wait for Severus to come back to life for another few days?"

Ruefully, Draco uncorked another bottle of wine, a white one this time to go with the mushrooms. "Well, I had no intention of doing so, but then I bumped into Granger, and she looked so massively miserable that I just... All right, I sort of invited her. She's not herself since you've died, Snape; she's lost at least a stone and looks deader than you did a week ago. I took pity on her, but don't blame me. I thought another face than that of the werewolf might cheer you up a bit. Well, a bit more."

"Highly unlikely," Snape said and placed the bowl with the pasta onto the table. Then he took a swig from the white wine. "Nice one. Rare. Fruity. Perfect for the truffles." He seemed to recall the last few minutes. "Granger? Hermione Granger?"

"That's the one. Potter's friend. Babble-mouth. Your student. Ex-student. Hope you can bear the sight of her, but really, the rings under her eyes were dark enough to look faked. She can't have slept much in the last few weeks, and I thought she should know. She won't eat much, believe me. I doubt she remembers how to eat at all."

For the first time in nearly an hour, Snape took a seat. His hand sneaked unnoticed up to his neck and gently began to knead the aching muscles under the new skin. "She was devastated," he murmured, and only Remus knew what he was talking about the memory he had given his friend.

"She accused herself. She couldn't let go; she felt guilty," Snape continued, then nodded briskly. "You did well to invite her. But if she doesn't arrive soon, she will be late

for dinner."

Conveniently, the doorbell chose to ring at that precise moment. A house-elf rushed to open the door, and the four people in the kitchen heard footsteps, the sounds of a jacket being taken off, a faint, "Thank you." Then the kitchen door opened, and Hermione walked in, her wild hair covering half her face.

She was thin and pale; she was shivering ever so slightly, as if the mild breeze outside had chilled her to the bones. Her body language spoke openly of her discomfort at being there, at Draco Malfoy's place, but it told equally openly of her determination to finish whatever had brought her here in the first place, which very obviously wasn't the prospect of having dinner.

With an impatient gesture, she wiped her hair out of her face. Her eyes widened when she saw Remus and Poppy clearly she hadn't expected them to be here. Neither had she expected dinner as her mouth fell open when she saw the pots and bowls on the table, the dozens of candles, the wine bottles. "Draco, you said you've got a wild..." she began, anger making her voice sound flat.

Then she half-turned and saw Snape, standing only a few feet away from her, drying his hands on a kitchen towel.

The shock at seeing him, a man she believed dead, hit her hard. First, she dropped her bag as her fingers went limp and the handle just escaped her grip. Then she tried to say something, but her mouth and her tongue obviously didn't obey her command. Her hands began to shake, then her shoulders, finally her whole body. The blood left her already pale face she was close to fainting when she staggered back, ready to fall onto the floor.

Snape reacted quickly. As if he had foreseen her reaction, he took a step himself, reached out, and caught Hermione's upper arms right before her legs gave way. Swiftly, he steadied her, held her at arms length and growled, "Draco! Didn't you tell her about me?"

"Of course I didn't! What do you think I should have said hey, Granger, come round tonight, have dinner with me, and by the way, Snape's still alive? She would have killed me on the spot, thinking I was mocking her!"

"I can't believe you didn't tell her at least..."

"Professor," Hermione whispered, stepped forward, and wrapped her arms round Snape's waist, hugging him so tightly it hurt. She was strong, not only for a girl of her height, but for a girl who hadn't eaten and slept enough in the past weeks, who had spent too much time crying and worrying and daydreaming what could have happened if only...

In addition to her hug, Hermione rested her head to Snape's shoulder and took a deep, shuddering breath. Then she began to cry.

Helplessly, Snape watched the bushy brown head nestle into his chest, felt the grip of those thin arms, felt the warmth that emerged the girl's body and the tears that wet his shirt. He could smell a faint fragrance of orange either her shampoo or the soap she had used and it mixed with the scents that wavered in the kitchen: the gently simmering sauce, the cream-laced chocolate melting on the hearth, the strawberries, and the wine. It was overwhelming, that mixture of scents, but even more so was the feeling of this young woman that clung to him as if she were drowning.

He knew exactly how she felt as he had been taken by similar emotions only a few days ago when Draco had told him so carelessly that the Dark Lord was dead. Something inside him had broken back then, something horrible and frightening, something that had held his mind in a dark, powerful grip and had prevented him from thinking straight. When Draco had so easily dropped the news that he wouldn't have to go back spying, that Potter had defeated Voldemort, he had cried himself, unable to stop the tears. Snape knew only too well how Hermione felt and was glad for her as he knew from experience that she would feel much better as soon as the tears had ceased to flow.

Knowing all that, Snape wrapped his arms around the girl he, until now, had only known as an ever babbling, always alert, impossibly brilliant know-it-all. He hugged her tightly, held her close, didn't even think of pushing her away. Accepting her hug, her emotions, her relief, he just embraced her as long as she needed it and wasn't too surprised at being presented with the sensation of how good it felt to hold her and comfort her.

Minutes passed, and no one in the kitchen said a word. Draco stood and stirred the chocolate so it wouldn't burn, Remus Lupin placed a fifth plate on the table and got another chair, Poppy Pomfrey poured another glass of wine. They didn't look once at the tall man and the crying girl.

Finally, Hermione sniffled once more, freed herself from her former professor's arms and rushed out of the kitchen.

"Bathroom first door to the right," Draco called after her, and to Snape he said, "Really, there wasn't a way I could have told her. She wouldn't have believed me, so I just said I had a book I couldn't rein in. She is playing with the thought of becoming a bookbinder, I heard, and I reckoned it worth a try. Didn't know she'd react like that. I mean... you always were nasty to her."

Instead of scolding the boy, Snape stirred the sauce one last time, poured it into a saucier, and placed it on the table as well. As if nothing had happened, he filled his own plate and the plates of the others, added sauce, and began to eat, apparently unaware that one place was still empty.

When Hermione sneaked back in, standing in the doorway like a forgotten umbrella, he didn't even turn to her, but simply ordered her to sit down instead.

"I..." she began, but Snape interrupted her.

"First, you will eat with us. Then you will have dessert. You will drink the wine Draco has poured for you. Afterwards, I will answer your questions. Is that clear?"

A tiny, nearly invisible smile crossed her lips as if his harsh tone had wiped away the last doubts she might have harboured about this man's identity. "Yes, Professor," she said, took spoon and fork, and began to eat.

When the pasta had vanished into their hungry stomachs, Draco served the strawberries and the melted chocolate, picking one and dipping it into the sweet, rich liquid with a happy grin on his face. "This snake venom must have added some decadence to your system, Snape," he managed whilst munching. "Strawberries and chocolate that's definitely something I wouldn't have expected from you."

Snape lazily licked a drop of chocolate from his little finger. "It was you who did the shopping, Draco. I just used what you bought."

Remus stole two strawberries at once and pulled the bowl with the melted chocolate closer. "To add chilli flakes was still pretty unusual." One bite, and both strawberries were gone plus a generous amount of the dip.

Hermione leaned back in her chair. She hadn't said much during the meal, but had emptied her plate to the last bit of sauce. Now, holding a tiny strawberry in her hand and after having taken a small sip of wine, she said briskly, "I apologise for sobbing into your shirt, Professor, but would you tell me how... how you are alive again? Please?" She was barely able to look at the man opposite of her, but there was a hint of steel in her quietly asked question.

Offering a fruit to Poppy, Snape wiped his hands off on a napkin. "I have never been dead, Miss Granger," he said. "Nearly, but not completely. You saved my life, along with Mr Malfoy you stopped the bleeding in my shoulder and neck, he gave me the antidote to the snake venom. Combined forces, one could say."

Being reminded of that night obviously distressed her, but she pressed, "Then... why did no one know? Where have you been, what happened in the last five weeks when everyone thought you dead and buried? I was at your funeral we all were and why the hell didn't you let us know you are alive!" The last words she shouted at Snape, clearly furious at the thought that she had suffered and grieved for no reason at all.

Remus placed a calming hand on Hermione's arm. "He didn't do it on purpose," he soothed her. "Draco didn't know that Severus was Albus's man all along, so he hid him. And Severus himself was in an awful condition until a few days ago."

But calming down Hermione when she was in a mood to scold wasn't an easy thing. Staring angrily at Snape, she continued, "As you are obviously not dead, will you at least hinder that... that... *woman* to taking over Hogwarts, or will you continue to hide in Draco's house?"

Poppy Pomfrey nearly slipped off her chair. "Don't tell me... It can't be true! Fudge wouldn't do that! He wouldn't dare!"

"He *did* dare," Hermione snapped. "It was on the news just before I came here. Umbridge is Hogwarts' new Headmistress. Again. Obviously, I won't go back to school for my seventh year."

"Nor will anyone else," Remus said gloomily. "What a shame. I hoped Minerva would take on the job."

"Umbridge?" Snape cast in casually. "In my school? In her dreams and only over my dead body."

Now that statement left everyone speechless for a few moments. Snape took the opportunity, snatched up the nearly empty chocolate bowl, and used his index finger to reach the last drops.

After an eternity when everyone watched the Potions master licking chocolate off his fingers, Poppy said weakly, "If you go to Fudge and claim the job for yourself, you might even be successful."

"I don't have to claim this job, Poppy," Snape corrected her. "I am Hogwarts' Headmaster. I never stepped down and have no intention of doing so now. Remus, why wasn't Minerva nominated?"

"She was, but declined. She said she was happy to step in at the time, but wouldn't do it for good. She told me as well she'd quit if Umbridge got the job again. Didn't impress Fudge, though."

Hermione, in the meantime, had rummaged a bit in her bag that was lying at her feet. When she had found what she had been looking for, she emerged again from under the table. Without a word, she placed a wand on the table right before Snape. "I guess this might come in handy if you plan to threaten Minister Fudge," she said.

Thirteen and a half inches, black, with no trace of blood, it lay there on the kitchen table. Snape's wand, looking quite innocent and not at all as if it had been missed dearly ever since its owner had first opened his eyes in Draco's house. Snape, though, looked positively delighted.

"I found it in the Shrieking Shack; it had rolled into a crack in the floor, and I nearly missed it when I first came back there to look for you," Hermione explained, her eyes never leaving her Potions master's face. "I cleaned it; I hope you don't mind."

"Several hundred points for Gryffindor as soon as we are both back at school," Snape said and took his wand, stowing it away in the same instant. Then he flashed a quick smile over the table that left Hermione blushing. It was rare that Snape smiled. It was even rarer that he smiled at a student. Never, so far, had he smiled at her.

For Snape, her thoughts were written clearly on her face. *I could get used to this smile*, her eyes said, and she smiled back at him. "Thank you, sir," she murmured.

"Any plans for tomorrow, wolf?" Snape now asked with a raised eyebrow. "Because I plan to corner Fudge, and I think it wouldn't be a bad idea if you came along to hold me back in case he provokes me into killing him. Umbridge the sheer thought is revolting. So will you accompany me?"

"Sure," Remus agreed. "Wouldn't want to miss Fudge's face when you storm into his office. And afterwards, we can talk about my teaching abilities."

"Good gods, Snape, don't allow him back at Hogwarts," Draco pleaded and opened the third bottle of the evening. "He's still a werewolf he's too dangerous for us poor children."

With a perfect snort, Snape accepted the tiny glass of Calvados Draco handed him, admiring the velvety fragrance and the deep amber colour. He took a sip and sighed contentedly. "Werewolves, stray students, war heroes, traitors, former Death Eaters, even impossible little know-it-alls," another little smile went into Hermione's direction, "everyone is welcome at my school. Sorry, Draco, but you will have to cope with Remus being a teacher at Hogwarts again. Can't teach Potions and Defence against the Dark Arts and ruling a school all at once."

Draco grinned maliciously. "Well, certainly none of those you mentioned can compare with *your* horrible reputation, Snape."

Stunned into silence at the remark, Snape stared at the boy for a moment. Then, he began to laugh, wholeheartedly and accompanied by his friends after only the smallest shocked silence at the fact that Hogwarts' former and future Headmaster was not only able to laugh, but in the mood to accept a joke on his behalf.

There is a sequel to this story called "Scampi and Cherry Cream". Thanks to everyone who read and reviewed this little fic.