

Severus Snape and the Head Girl Curse

by WriterMerrin

Seventeen years ago, the Head Girl took Snape's rejection of her personally and exacted a long-lasting revenge--one that Dumbledore was not above using for his own end.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 6

Seventeen years ago, the Head Girl took Snape's rejection of her personally and exacted a long-lasting revenge--one that Dumbledore was not above using for his own end.

A/N: The idea of this story had begun formulating before *Deathly Hallows* came out, so a few details of the premise may not exactly fit, but we did say that Anything Goes, right!

No, this can't still be happening!

Severus Snape sat up in bed and scowled into the darkness. *Lumos*. The lamp beside his bed flared, lighting the dull, but warm Malfoy cellar. As hiding places went, he'd been in much worse. The Aurors had been spread too thin to keep up surveillance, and after the first couple of searches failed to turn up either him or Draco, the fugitives had deemed it safe to return to the boy's home.

Draco had insisted on staying in his room, though with special wards; but Severus preferred the cellar--well, one of the cellars. It was a much more defensible position and still, after all, part of the Malfoy home. Thus, the small bed was comfortable and made with luxurious linens. It was the least Narcissa could do, really, for the man who had so capably saved her son's life.

So, in between errands for the Dark Lord, Snape had been living in relative comfort on the Malfoy grounds. If not an exciting life, it was one of ease... ease he knew he didn't deserve after what he'd done.

But he refused to let himself be thus distracted. He'd just been following orders. It may have been the hardest thing Dumbledore had ever asked him to do, but it could have been much worse.

And something bad was happening to him right now, as it had every August for the past seventeen years. Except it wasn't August yet. Why was it happening so early this year?

He reflected for a moment on the inevitability of what was happening and decided he'd rather meet his tormenter than let her identity become one more mystery in his life.

He waved his hand toward the lamp, lay back in the darkness, closed his eyes, and dreamt of Hermione Granger.

In Ginny Weasley's bedroom at The Burrow, Hermione Granger had just experienced a very disturbing dream. She'd had no shortage of bad dreams in general over the past few years, but this one was decidedly different.

Hermione had always believed that her dreams were the by-products of her brain and the thoughts and feelings she'd had throughout the day. But had she been thinking of *him*? She thought back over the last eighteen hours. Had anything been different?

Word had leaked to some of the Order members that Harry had a longer trip in mind than a day in Godric's Hollow. As a result, Lupin, Tonks, and McGonagall had come by that day with the intention of persuading Ron and Hermione to put off whatever it was and return to school in September.

The headmistress had pressed the Head Girl's badge into Hermione's hand firmly. "You just keep it for a while. You can always return it the week before school begins if you decide you will be otherwise occupied."

Hermione had to admit that it was one of the toughest arguments anyone had made. She thought she could feel the magic emanating from the badge. Well, she knew that certain privileges came with the badge, and those must be magically tied to the castle somehow.

She had thought much of it during the day, and when she'd gone to sleep, she'd dreamt of walking the halls of Hogwarts wearing her badge. She'd entered the Restricted Section of the library with impunity, even braved the dungeons without fear.

Of course there wouldn't be fear. Snape wouldn't be there in September, not after what he'd done. But Snape was in her dream. He'd swept around a corner and pinned her with that dark gaze. He'd stood so near to her that she could smell parchment and something else she'd never consciously noticed but knew instinctively that if she ever had a chance to inhale that scent in real life, she'd recognize it immediately.

Of course, awake, she knew that was nonsense. If she ever got that close to him now, that intake of breath had better be followed by a 'Protego' because he would certainly hex her. But it had certainly been a realistic dream with heady details. Why would her recollection of him be so clear when the rest of her dream had been so hazy?

She decided to make another go at sleeping. It had been years since she'd let a bad dream deter her from sleep, and this one wasn't really all that bad.

Granger? Well, he'd known it would be her, hadn't he? Hadn't Minerva been saying since the girl was first made Prefect that she would be Head Girl some day?

It was beyond his reasoning that such a troublemaker would be given free reign over the castle, but Dumbledore never could resist plaguing him with lionesses. Oh, yes, Dumbledore had figured it out the second year the curse had activated, and Severus suspected that the Headmaster took perverse glee those years that a Gryffindor had been made Head Girl.

Of course, Dumbledore had denied it and justified his actions very well. "A Slytherin would be harder for you to resist, would she not, Severus?" Such comments he had endured for years, but last year, when the old man had known it would be his last, he had said something even stranger.

"You may wonder why I've never tried very hard to help you lift your curse, Severus." Snape hadn't answered aloud, but thought that he was all in all glad for the absence of matchmaking from the old meddler. "Next year, you may find yourself very alone and glad for an ally."

Well, he supposed that Granger could be that. She was practically a member of the Order, in fact, might be by now as she had been of age for nearly a year. Her inquisitive nature and orderly mind might be of help to him, and of course, she was close to Potter. Whatever events surrounded the end of the Dark Lord, Snape suspected that Granger would be close, and he knew that had to have been part of Dumbledore's plan.

Now he had a way in, a way to contact the Order again, but it wouldn't be easy. He'd always sought to avoid this method of communication, but if he could convince her... Well, the curse would be working in his favor for once.

It was nearly dawn now, not that the cellar had any windows. He had some time before an elf brought his breakfast, and he thought back to his first year as a teacher.

It was the heated end of Voldemort's first reign of terror. The Potters and Longbottoms were in hiding, and Severus Snape was the youngest Potions master in Hogwarts' history, following the disappearance of Horace Slughorn, who protected his own backside above any other obligations.

He found himself in the unenviable position of teaching his former schoolmates, and unaccountably, one of the young ladies, Emily Parkinson, the Head Girl that year, had something of a crush on him. She was a Slytherin and had apparently spent her early years at Hogwarts watching him from across the common room.

When the Dark Lord had fallen, Slytherin house was hit the worst. Most of those sent to Azkaban had been Slytherin alumni, and many current students could claim relation to one or more of the new inmates.

In the next several months, Snape spent a lot of time with his students, seeking to maintain order and balance for children who felt very uncertain of their futures. One such student was Parkinson. Though her immediate family were not connected with the Death Eaters, she had LeStrange relations and took the arrests rather badly.

In that time, she had formed an even stronger attachment to her Head of House and, at the end of the school year, had approached him in his classroom, reminded him that he was no longer her teacher, and rather pointedly offered herself to him.

While he had developed rather protective feelings for her over the months, he didn't think those would ever lead to an attraction, though she was only a few years younger than he and a rather cunning little witch.

She must have had some clue that he would reject her, for when he inevitably did, she removed a small vial from her pocket, doused her badge with it, and waved her wand over it in a complicated motion. Slytherin to the core, she had cast the curse non-verbally so that Severus would have no clue what the curse was. A beam of green light had shot from the badge to Severus' heart. His shield charm had no chance to fully activate before the damage was done, and the girl had sped away, leaving Severus dazed.

After informing the Headmaster of the confrontation, they had viewed the event in a Pensieve to no avail, and he had forgotten about it by that August when the booklists and badges were sent out.

That night, he had dreamed of a black-haired Ravenclaw, and so began what he called the Head Girl's curse.

From what he and Dumbledore could determine, (and none of the other teachers knew about it), Parkinson had altered the magic of the Head Girl's badge somehow. There were at least two components: a lust spell and the dream-sharing. Dumbledore had often said with a twinkle in his eye that he believed the curse would be broken when he found true love. Snape had highly doubted that and doubted even more that the Headmaster would appreciate him falling in love with one of his students. Even the prospect of that had diminished with each passing year, and the age gap between him and the young ladies in question had stretched from a few possibly negligible years to over a decade and now nearly two.

Of course, Dumbledore hadn't said he had to fall in love with the subject of his torture, but in Snape's experience, lust magic was just about the only way he'd have a chance. He supposed he could have tried dragging out the process until the school year had ended and the ethical considerations lifted, but it would take something much

more powerful for someone to tolerate the presence of Severus Snape for that long, to say nothing of him having to tolerate her.

Each year, the Head Girl would, to some degree, develop a crush on Snape. The spell would only be properly broken when the young lady transferred her affections to someone else. Some managed to shake it before school even started, though most years it went on until around Halloween, by which time he and the girl had each made the other quite miserable.

If he hadn't shaken her off by then, he occasionally had to resort to matchmaking to divert the girl's interest. Often the Head Boy was a convenient target; such was the case of Clearwater and Weasley. And every year, the dreams had ceased along with the crush.

But that was only half the battle, because then the final part of the annual curse would initiate. When the young woman's infatuation with him ended, Snape began to feel a pull toward her. It was a crush of embarrassingly adolescent proportions, magically enhanced so that Snape was physically drawn to her as well. Otherwise random rounds of patrolling the hallways would inevitably find him face to face with a snogging couple, and the girl, none the wiser that she'd just survived a curse, would invariably look upon the previous object of her affections with disdain.

As a man fully in control of his faculties, he had always found relief from this last revenge within forty-eight hours, but it was a very Slytherin insult, one that stung.

He'd sincerely hoped that Albus would be wrong and, since he was no longer living in the castle, no longer a teacher, that the curse would somehow be unable to find him. But he was certain now that whatever instructions Albus had left with Minerva, Hermione's possession of the badge was included. The most manipulative wizard of the century would have left nothing to chance.

When the elf arrived with his breakfast tray, Severus picked up his coffee cup and reflected that the Headmaster might just have done a good thing after all. The sooner Potter vanquished the Dark Lord, the sooner he could get on with his life. He wondered if Miss Granger had an aptitude for Occlumency.

Note: I was inspired to dust off the old outline by the following prompt:

49. AU from whatever book: A good ol' fashioned Snape/Hermione bond fic.Not

marriage law (Please! Not that!), more like "based on the position of the planets and

because Beltane begins on a Thursday, these two have to bond or the Dark Lord will prevail." Or something. Creativity in crazy fandom magic, and bastard!Snape or tortured!Snape. Parody or melodrama.

Thanks to **Lady in the Cloak** for beta reading.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 6

Severus enters Hermione's dreams and begins his slow seduction.

The Malfoy cellar had been outfitted with space and materials with which Snape could concoct such potions as were needed by the Death Eaters. No longer able to spy on the Order, he was thus kept useful to the Dark Lord. He filled his days with brewing and his nights with Miss Granger.

These reconnaissance missions were crucial to his personal survival, and he took the task very seriously. Based on observations of her patterns, he adjusted his own sleep schedule when possible to better correspond to her own. Years of accidental intrusions on young women's dreams had taught him to differentiate the texture of his dreams from that of the adolescent female.

Of course, no other adolescent female had dreams like these. Hermione was apparently studying a way to banish the Dark Lord's soul forever. Snape recognized certain items as Horcruxes, such as the ring that had hastened Dumbledore's demise. He paid close attention to things that seemed to have great significance to her, and he noted them all in his well-organized mind, not daring to commit any of this to parchment lest his notes fall into the wrong hands.

There were also other kinds of dreams to be expected. She dreamed of the youngest Weasley boy quite often, and these represented the greatest threat. Living, as she doubtless was, either at The Burrow or Grimmauld Place, she would be in close contact with Weasley, and if she distracted herself with him, the dream-sharing would stop, and Snape's window of opportunity to communicate with her would be cut short.

Though at first Snape simply chose to tune this part out, eventually, he decided to intervene. He had never tried to make himself seem like a romantic hero before, but he knew that a subtle seduction would serve him best. Based on her dream reactions to Weasley, he developed a persona, still mostly Snape-like, but less harsh around the edges.

Finally, the perfect chance to try out the 'dream Snape' arose. Hermione was dreaming of herself in the library at Grimmauld Place. Snape swept in, hands in plain sight so she would see that he was unarmed. He tried something of a smile before making her aware of his presence. "Good day, Miss Granger."

She looked startled, but just as in that first dream, she didn't react by pulling her wand on him. He considered this a good sign.

"Professor Snape?"

"How is your research coming?"

"How did you know about my... Sorry, of course I'm doing research, it's a library isn't it?"

"Indeed." He summoned a chair and sat across from her.

"So, how is it coming?"

"I, um, it's supposed to be secret."

"Don't worry about that. I've been sent to help you." He didn't know if mentioning Dumbledore by name would make things better or worse; so he opted to keep that bit to himself.

"I don't know, sir. Harry seemed pretty adamant that no one find out."

She was still using an honorific. He debated for an instant whether he should play on her respect for him or ease her into a more comfortable relationship. "Oh, you don't have to call me 'sir.' We're both members of the Order, are we not?"

Snape felt some of her defenses raise, and he decided to go for broke. He reached out a hand and stroked her arm. "Hermione, you don't have to be afraid of me. I won't hurt you. I want to tell you the truth. I can help you."

When she pulled her wand from her pocket and pointed it at him, he left her dream faster than Apparation.

That had been a strange interaction. He was unused to the familiar kind of conversation he'd attempted to initiate. He'd left her several clues in the process, and he hoped she'd start to work through them.

Hermione decided it was time to learn Occlumency. The second time she'd dreamed a close encounter with Snape, she had the distinct feeling that it was actually him trying to gain information from her. Of course, he bore little resemblance to the teacher who had made six years of her life as miserable as possible. He was softer somehow, smiling and touching her arm. There was something... alluring about him. She'd certainly never felt anything like that for him before, but now she found herself... fascinated.

That time, she had pulled her wand on him, and he had disappeared from her dream.

The next night, she found herself dreaming of the meadow outside The Burrow. It was a summer day, and a breeze rippled over the pond. She sat on a blanket, and someone was rubbing her shoulders. She leaned back against him, lured by the soothing rhythms of strong male hands. The summer air overwhelmed her senses, so her nose didn't give her a clue who her mystery man was, but she didn't mind. She felt safe and comfortable.

She felt his breath on her neck, and it filled her with warmth. Then, she heard her name. A deep voice rumbled through her, melting her. She didn't understand the words he murmured to her, but she let her eyes drift shut. The voice definitely didn't belong to one of the boys. It was deeper, manifestly more mature and unutterably masculine.

The hands drifted down her bare arms in long, teasing strokes.

"Feeling better, Hermione?"

When he said her name again, she recognized it from the previous night. "Prof."

He lightly touched her lips with two fingers, and whispered again in her ear. "No."

"Snape?"

"Severus."

The sound of that went right down her spine.

"Severus?"

"That's right. But you didn't answer my question."

Perhaps awake, she'd be able to backtrack the conversation to the point where he had asked her something, but in this surreal place, she would have been hard pressed to speak her own name. "What?"

"Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you. You are very good with your hands." She blushed as she tried to reconcile her memories with this man who may or may not be actually interfering with her dreams. "How did you get here? This is supposed to be safe."

She listened to silence for a few moments, and he grasped her hands in his. "What if I told you I'm not really here?"

"But you are real." It was not a question.

"You mean you don't usually dream of me?" His tone was playful. It was disconcerting.

"How do you know this is a dream?"

"Would I have a beautiful young woman in my lap other than in my dreams?"

"I was rather certain this was my dream to begin with."

"Have you ever heard of dream-sharing?"

"Harry had dreams of Voldemort..."

"No, Hermione, not that kind of dream. This magic is... Could you believe me if I tell you that Dumbledore arranged for you to receive your Head Girl badge early so I could communicate with you?"

At the sound of the deceased Headmaster's name, Hermione tried to pull her hands from his. "You killed him. Why would he..."

"What if I told you that it was part of a contingency plan that he came up with, that I was only following his orders against my wishes, that I would have rather died myself than do what I did, and he believed you would be my ally?"

"So, he did this to me, to us? Does Professor McGonagall know?"

"Now that is a very long story. The short answer is that he did not do this to me, but he used an existing circumstance to bring us together in this way."

"Together? To what extent?"

"That will be entirely up to you."

Hermione fidgeted against his lap until he released her hands, and she turned to face him for the first time during the encounter. Her expression relaxed into a small smile as she examined his face. "I've never seen you this way before."

He was wearing black trousers and a white shirt. His hair looked different in the breeze. She wondered how much control he had over his appearance in this state. "You said this was a sharing? Does that mean I may enter your dreams as well?"

"My dreams are rarely suitable for a young lady."

"How did you know this had happened?"

"I dreamed of you."

"At Hogwarts?"

"Yes, the first time."

"So whose dream was that?"

"You will persist in your questions?"

"You have me at quite a disadvantage."

"In the interest of evening the field as it were, I will tell you that you have more control in this situation than you realize. If you choose to sever this connection, there is nothing I can do to stop you."

"You mean, with Occlumency?"

"Perhaps, but I want you to understand that once done, the connection will be gone forever, and so will your chance to gain information for the Order."

"That's what Dumbledore had in mind?"

"I find that more likely than a romantic liaison for the sake of itself."

"Romantic?"

"I seem to be resolved to spill my secrets to you today. Remember before I tell you that I did not do this to you. Neither did the Headmaster. He merely made use of a curse on me and brought you in on it."

"I understand." She was quite intrigued now.

"In addition to sharing dreams, you are under a mild lust spell."

She gasped and withdrew.

"No, Hermione. I am not trying to take advantage of you. I only hope that since I told you, you will find it within yourself to trust me."

"Is this spell just here, or would it work if we met in person as well?"

"It works differently depending on you, but yes, your current feelings would most likely persist if you met me. But we cannot. To arrange a meeting would mean my life and possibly yours. My actions... at the end of term served to alleviate some doubt in certain minds, but the Dark Lord's favor is fickle. I would not want to give him reason to test my loyalty again."

Hermione relaxed slightly, her expression softening. "How does he--or maybe I don't want to know."

He tucked his left arm around her waist. "Believe me, you don't."

"So, this way I see you, is it because of the spell, or is this simply how you appear in dreams?"

"I've learned to exert my will on my dreams. I choose to appear this way to ease your mind. If we are to spend a lot of time together, I need you to be comfortable with me."

"I can't believe I'm as comfortable as I am now." She became aware of all the places they were touching, from the arm about her waist to her bum on his lap even to her shoulder leaning against his. Their faces were very close. "Are you really like this?"

He didn't answer right away. "You've never seen me in this context before, Hermione. You are no longer my student, nor are you just another fellow Order member. It has been years since I've attempted to court a young lady."

"Is this a courtship? I thought it was only temporary."

"Hermione, I don't think you appreciate what is happening here. Albus has facilitated this opportunity, but we're on our own--just the two of us." The arm around her waist began to move up and down her arm again. "This was designed to be temporary, but we have no idea how long we'll need it to last. I am . . . making an effort. I believe that if we build the bond between us, we can maintain this method of communication as long as we need it."

The scene began to lose cohesiveness. Hermione tried to physically hold Severus, but the summer sounds began to be replaced by those of Ginny opening and closing drawers as she got ready for the day. Hermione let out a small groan of disappointment.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you. Having a nice dream, were you?"

"You have no idea."

"Well, if it was about my brother, I don't want to hear about it."

"You have no idea."

A/N: Severus' dream-outfit is a nod to "Unfinished Business" by Ramos.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 6

A chat with Dumbledore. And Hermione visits a Death Eater's nightmare.

That afternoon, she'd returned to the books she'd borrowed from Grimmauld Place--mostly histories of old families--looking for clues. But she also decided to see if there was a book that covered Legilimency and Occlumency. She replayed what she could remember of the dream-Snape's words. They were slightly clearer than an ordinary dream, but still she didn't know what to make of them. He could be lying or just a figment of some strange obsession she didn't know she had. She wondered if she could use a Pensieve for dreams, but didn't know if it would be worth explaining to Harry why she needed it.

Then she concluded that she was going about it the wrong way. She doubted she'd be able to use any mind-control in her dream, especially not against Snape, who seemed to know much more about this and had many years of experience with Legilimency. She thought it would be much more useful to use magic that was focused on the dreaming itself, to know when she was dreaming and learn to control her environment and even remain asleep if Ginny (or later Harry) made some sound in the middle of the night.

The next night, she dreamed alone. She wasn't surprised, knowing that Death Eaters in general--and Snape in particular--were active at night. She found that she missed his presence and that her dreams had been calmer with him around. Her ordinary dreams flitted from place to place and put her in unusual situations, but his presence seemed to anchor her somewhat. Still, she practiced her lucid dreaming techniques, even clawing her way out of a nightmare involving Death Eaters attacking The Burrow.

The night after that, her dream took her to the Great Hall. Looking around, she saw that all of the professors were at the head table. It registered to her that Dumbledore shouldn't be there, but she kept trying to catch Snape's eye. When the dream Snape refused to acknowledge her at all, she realized that it wasn't really him.

She also decided she needed to talk to Dumbledore to determine the veracity of Snape's assertions regarding the curse. McGonagall was not a regular visitor at The Burrow, being very busy preparing for the autumn term, but Hermione asked Tonks to let her know that she needed to talk to Dumbledore's portrait. No one thought it was a good idea, but McGonagall appeared the following day, stating that the former Headmaster had requested her presence.

With Tonks as escort, Hermione Apparated to the Hogwarts gates and made her way to the Headmistress' office. McGonagall wasn't thrilled about leaving Hermione alone in her office, but the seemingly asleep Dumbledore had previously agreed to the meeting.

Alone with the murmuring portraits, she approached Dumbledore's frame.

"Sir?" When there was no reply, she tried a little louder. "Sir, Professor McGonagall said you were awake. So did Professor Snape."

There was a collective gasp at the name, but Dumbledore gave a leisurely stretch before answering Hermione. "So, you have questions about your bond with Severus."

"He wasn't lying, was he." It wasn't a question, but an expression of wonder.

"Without knowing exactly what he told you, I cannot answer that. However, I can tell you that he has experienced the dream-sharing every summer since he began teaching."

Hermione nodded. "He said you had agreed to your own... death."

"It had to be. Many things were set into motion, and there was one inevitable conclusion."

"Harry misses you very much."

"Severus can be an invaluable resource. He will do all he can to help"

Hermione grew upset that Dumbledore was ignoring her statement about Harry. "How much does he know? Harry seemed very sure that no one aside from Ron and myself know about the... Horcruxes."

"The more who know, the greater the chance of betrayal, but Severus knows. With your bond, he will be in the unique position to help you even if you cannot communicate in any of the normal ways."

"Will it be dangerous for him? I've been reading up on Occlumency and lucid dreaming."

"The additional study will benefit you, but there is one very important thing you must keep in mind. It is for this reason that I allowed you to come here. You must maintain the bond. Keep your heart focused on him, for if you allow others to gain a foothold in your heart over him, you will lose the connection, and it can never be re-formed."

"He didn't explain how the bond is broken."

"The bond is broken when your heart is given to another."

"Ron," Hermione breathed.

Dumbledore didn't speak for a moment while he considered the young woman before him. "What is the nature, if I may ask, of your relationship with Mr. Weasley?"

"I lo--" she began, but started again. "I have thought myself in love with him all year last year. When I thought he was dying... But I don't feel that anymore. Severus said I was under a lust spell."

"Indeed, but it is only a mild one. It will not be enough to maintain the bond if you choose young Weasley. You said you love him. Does he feel the same?"

"Sometimes I think so, but he's never said. I don't know. I've always--I mean since fourth year--dreamed we would get married some day. I'm not sure I want to give up my dream."

"You don't have to give it up all together. Young men and women often have several relationships before deciding whom to settle down with. Mr. Weasley has already experienced a brief relationship, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, but I don't want to hurt him."

"Perhaps there is a diplomatic solution. You are both planning to follow Harry wherever his quest takes him?"

"Yes."

"Then if Mr. Weasley approaches you, you can honestly tell him that it is not the right time. A clever young witch like yourself will know what to say. Molly or Minerva can advise you if you wish. When this is over and Tom is defeated will be the time to decide whom to give your heart to, not in this tense time of battle."

"You really do think of everything, don't you."

"My years have given me wisdom and insight. Give Severus an honest chance, and he may surprise you."

Two nights had passed since he had been last able to connect with Hermione in her dreams. As used as he was to seeing the Dark Lord's capricious evil, the horror of Charity pleading with him to no avail drove him to use Dreamless Sleep when he was finally able to return to his temporary quarters.

When he found his way into her dream, he was unsurprised to be in the Hogwarts Library. Searching the stacks, he found her things abandoned on a table. Stopping to listen, he heard her voice calling, "Severus, Severus!"

He followed the sound of her voice until he turned a corner and saw her rounding a shelf. She quickened her steps, covering the space between them in a moment and clutching him to herself the next.

"I'm so relieved!" she said into his robe.

His first instinct was to push her away, but he forced himself to relax and return the embrace. He would never win her trust and affection if he rejected her physical presence. "Were you worried about me... Hermione?"

She leaned back to meet his eyes. "I know that you are used to it, and you are naturally someone who is awake at night, but the second night I began to sincerely hope it was just a case of bad timing."

"Bad timing, indeed. It takes a bit of effort to meet you like this some days, and--though your company is charming--I may not be able to come more than twice a week."

"I'll miss you."

"That's the last spell talking."

His words seemed to have an instant effect on Hermione, who released him, causing him to release her.

"When do I have permission to worry, then?"

"Two weeks. No less."

Hermione sighed. "After so long, you will have to make it up to me."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Something has happened to you."

"I spoke with Dumbledore." He flinched at the name, but again forced himself to appear unperturbed during her pause. "He told me some things... I know the point of all this is so you can help us, but I want you to know that I'm here for you, too."

"As unlikely as I find that, I appreciate the sentiment."

The night before the planned attack on Harry's home, he purposefully stayed up until the early morning hours and slept the morning away. Had anyone inquired, he would have told them that he wanted to be as rested as possible for the evening's activities, but truly he just wanted to avoid Hermione.

Already, it was growing difficult to hide things from her--not that she was any good at ferreting out his secrets, but because he hated betraying the trust of the one person who gave it so freely. What was possibly more disconcerting was that he was a bit worried for the girl. He suspected that she would be one of the decoys, and he feared she would be captured or killed. He sincerely hoped that the plan would work and the Death Eaters would be thrown off by the sight of all of those Potters.

When he did fall asleep, he dreamed of Hermione pleading for him to save her from the giant snake.

Hermione stormed through the dreamscape on a mission.

The murderer! How could he!

She was consumed with the idea that so far he had always had the upper hand in this arrangement, and she was determined to meet him on his turf this time.

It took an interminable amount of time for her to realize that the mist around her was thickening, the dark deepening, the cold chilling. Had she finally done it? Was this Snape's dream?

If her nightmares were of Death Eaters, she wondered what a Death Eater's nightmare looked like. Probably Mad-Eye Moody. She allowed herself a morose chuckle at the thought of Moody haunting the dreams of those who had caused his death.

But how had they known to be there on this night? Someone must have told them, and the most obvious choice of spy was the one who had been meeting with her. But she hadn't told him. In fact, neither of them had even brought it up. She worried again that Snape was using this dream-sharing to gain access to her mind, and she flailed against the mist at the thought that she really should have asked Dumbledore that.

Dumbledore... Could he have...

She snapped herself back to awareness of her surroundings. "Constant Vigilance," she whispered under her breath, wondering if she could conjure a dream form of the old Auror.

But she didn't have time to try before robed figures on brooms began zipping by overhead. Spells flashed as the shadows above her fought to the death. Then, out of the melee, a single figure circled around and, before she could react, swooped down and pulled her up onto his broomstick.

"I told you it's dangerous here!"

Overwhelmed with relief, Hermione forgot for a moment how angry she was with him. "Thank you!"

"Can you find your way back?" While Hermione had been breathing sighs of relief, some had followed them, and Snape was casting Shield Charms while encouraging the broom to go faster.

"I don't know. I think my dreams tonight look a lot like this, too."

"Then make yourself useful!"

Hermione twisted to add her Shield to his and sent a Disarming Charm behind them. "What do you usually do with a nightmare?"

"I would--" he said, pausing to wordlessly cast another spell, "wake myself up, but I'd rather not take that option if you can *help me*!"

Hermione scanned the landscape for anything resembling safety, but finding nothing, she recast the Protego before grasping the broom handle and willing herself forward.

Checking behind them, she gasped at the sight of Mad-Eye Moody bearing down on them.

"Snape, you traitor! I saw you capture that student. Set her down, and I'll go easier on you."

Before they had time to react, a dark figure streaked toward them without a broom.

"Snape! You have betrayed me! Give me that Mudblood!"

Voldemort's voice chilled her to the bone. Behind her, Snape leaned forward to urge their broom onward.

In the way of dreams, they found that they had circled back and were in the midst of battle again. Death Eaters sent streaks of green light toward adult Order members, who each had the same passenger: Hermione.

Closest to them, Lupin was inexplicably casting a Patronus at a Death Eater while the hooded figure aimed at Lupin's passenger.

"Hermione!" Snape shouted in her ear while pulling her to his chest, though she was not the target. "*Sectumsempra*!" He severed the Death Eater's arm, but the spell also sliced through Lupin's broomstick, causing him and his passenger to fall, screaming, to the ground.

"Hermiiiiioneeee!"

She didn't know if he realized that he was holding her so tightly that her ribs hurt and she could barely breathe, but she knew that she had to do something. Gathering up all of the magical energy she could in this dream-state, she Apparated them both to The Burrow's backyard.

Falling in an inelegant heap on the grass, she disentangled herself from the broom and collapsed atop Snape, who had loosened his hold on her slightly.

"You could have been killed," he admonished through labored breaths.

"It was only a nightmare." Her thumb rubbed his upper arm.

"No, earlier, I didn't know which of them was you." He tilted his head to see her face while one hand reached for her ear. "Someone lost an ear."

"It was George."

"I was afraid it was you."

Hermione sat up, having regained her righteous indignation. "So you felt bad that you might have hurt me, but not Harry or any of the Weasleys? You didn't feel bad enough to not tell Voldemort--it was you, wasn't it?"

Unlike the last time they'd sat on the grass at The Burrow together, Snape looked awkward as he tried to right himself. "Dumbledore's orders. According to him, it was better for Voldemort to get accurate, though incomplete, information from me. I told him that the night had changed, but he didn't know about the decoys."

"So, you didn't mean to hurt George?"

"No! I was trying to save Lupin's life, but the spell missed."

When Hermione didn't answer, he inched himself closer to her. "Before you go into battle again, I'll teach you the incantation that I use to heal someone injured by that spell."

"Will it be soon?"

"It might be. I don't think we have time tonight, but next time. And I want you to have everything you need with you at all times from now on."

"I've been packing a charmed bag."

"Good. Finish packing soon--tomorrow if you can. Never be without it."

This time, the silence was comforting. "Thank you," Hermione murmured, moving to rest her head on his shoulder. She felt peace for the first time in days as he moved to encircle her in his arms.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 6

A dance at a wedding, and a surprise visit.

For the next few days, Severus had time for little else but the Dark Lord's plans for finally asserting his control over wizarding Britain. The moments he spent with Hermione

in her dreams were brief but calming. He helped her decide what potions she needed to bring with her, which she could brew in adverse conditions, and what ingredients she might find in the forest.

He felt oddly reluctant to teach her how to heal his Sectumsempra; he'd never taught that to anyone else. No one was even supposed to know he'd invented the spell, much less the magic that can repair the damage. He didn't want to fill their last few moments of peace with the reality that he'd invented a spell he felt was much more terrible than an Unforgivable because it could be used to kill accidentally.

He didn't want to be responsible for the further decline of her innocence. Wasn't what was sure to be ahead for her bad enough? Sometimes, even in daylight, he recalled that, though Defense hadn't been her best subject, her abilities out of the classroom had proven formidable, and he couldn't help but respect her. He reluctantly had to admit to himself that the old man had given him something good, after all.

The night before the planned attack on the Ministry, Severus excused himself for bed in the very early morning hours with the intention of reminding Hermione again of the importance of having everything she needed with her at *all* times.

Finding her dream was easy. The now-familiar sunlit backyard of The Burrow was decked out in wedding finery, as was Hermione, and his breath caught when he saw her dancing closely with Weasley.

She seemed enthralled as she smiled up into the young man's eyes. A flare of jealousy settled into thoughtful observation. There was a certain rightness in the scene. In a few years, it would be those two having a beautiful wedding. Having vanquished evil for their time, her memories of a relationship with her former Potions master would be relegated to the insubstantial dreams which comprised it.

He wouldn't be around to interfere; he felt sure of that.

Remembering the importance of the message he was to deliver, he drew nearer, the rest of the crowd fading behind fairy mist as he swept toward her to cut in.

Tapping Weasley on the shoulder, he relished the exercise of control that made the young man simply fade away. He clasped Hermione's hands. "May I have this dance?"

Her answer was a breathy, "Oh, Severus," as the vision in lilac stepped into his arms, beginning to move in step with him. The music was of no discernable tune, but that didn't prevent them from keeping perfect time with each other.

"Just the beat of my heart," she murmured--a sentiment that would have made Severus scowl and scorn were he not busy being on his best behavior.

With only the sense of shared rhythm to guide them, there wasn't an easy way to tell when the dance should end. Severus' reluctance to let her go surprised him, but how long had it been since such a beatific smile was caused by or directed at him? His savoring of her smile was cut short only when she decided to work her hands around him and rest her head on his chest. This, he would savor, too.

Even under the influence of the lust spell, past co-victims would sometimes approach him and attempt to grab and snog, but even had he allowed it, none had had the inclination to... snuggle with him. He allowed his arms to embrace her. He needed her to feel safe with him; it was vital that she have these associations in her heart when her world began to fall apart. He needed her to turn to him, not the boys, to maintain the bond through the months ahead.

He spent the next few moments reviewing his plan of what to say to her. He didn't want to give too much away. He sincerely hoped she would enjoy the real wedding tomorrow, and she couldn't do that if she spent the whole day waiting for the apocalypse. No, he'd have to carefully navigate the minefield of Hermione's intellect, attempting to avoid tipping her off. If she were nervous, it would spread among the wedding-goers, and that could be disastrous. Albus had been pleased that Voldemort had chosen the day of the Weasley wedding for his attack. At least the core leadership of the Order would be safely away from the Ministry during the of Death Eaters' first wave.

This was one more thing he wanted her to have, one last day of happy memories before her life would be in more danger than ever.

With reluctance that was only partially for show, he gently disengaged himself from her, taking her hand and leading her to a table. The mist had cleared, leaving only the two of them in the warm sun again.

"Have you finished packing?" he asked her, looking down into her eyes, still a bit dazed.

She looked as though she was about to say something else, but she shook herself and pulled a beaded bag from her shoulder. "Yes, I have everything right here."

His eyebrows rose. He didn't think her wand would fit safely in such a tiny thing. "You're going on a quest with a make-up case?"

She surprised him by slapping him with it, and it hurt more than the fragile thing should have. "No, I told you I'd been working with some charms. See." She opened the handbag to reveal her wand and a tube of lipstick. "Oh, now this is a nightmare." She shut it again, and he took it from her loose grip.

"What do you mean?" He opened it with the same result.

"In real life, this little bag has everything in it. Undetectable Extension Charm, plus a couple of more to keep it light... mostly. It still has a bit more heft to it than it should. Sorry about hitting you."

"At least there shan't be a bruise." He handed it back to her.

"Yes, well anyway, I've had all of my things in it for days, and I'll be adding the boys' bags and things in the morning."

"Not a bad bit of magic--and logic. Hidden in plain sight."

"Exactly." She hesitated before continuing. "We're leaving the day after the wedding. No one else knows that. I hope it's okay that I told you."

"I've been keeping secrets for years; yours are quite safe with me."

"Thank you, Severus." Again, she embraced him. "Any last words of advice in case I don't bump into you before then?"

Severus shivered. He knew she was as ready as she could be, and he couldn't very well tell her that it was the image of her dancing with Weasley that made him the most uneasy about the events that would inevitably unfold when the morning came and the varied plans of Molly Weasley and his dark master would both come to fruition.

"Just, remember that--no matter what--I'm still following Dumbledore's orders. And hold on to your wand."

Hermione shifted on the cushions and snuggled into the sleeping bag, then reached an arm out for Ron. Without opening her eyes, she felt around for his hand, but when she found nothing, fear gripped her, causing her to sit up and stare into the shadowy darkness and Snape's smirking face.

"What? How? Ron! Harry!"

"Hush, don't wake them."

"But, how did you--"

He lightly gripped her shoulders to still her. "Calm yourself. If you are thrashing about in your sleep, one of them will wake you, and the opportunity will be wasted."

"So you're not--"

"I'm not really here... but I assume by your reactions that you are."

"Yes, it's so odd to fall asleep somewhere and wake up, but not really wake up."

He released her. "Even the most ordered mind is prone to odd dreams. I'm glad you've decided to hide out here, though. I've convinced the Dark Lord that I am unable to penetrate the protective charms and such surrounding the old Black home."

"But you can?"

"It would be unwise for me to attempt again."

"But you have?"

"Apparently you haven't made a thorough investigation of the house yet."

"Oh... it is safe, though?"

"Yes. Though they are aware of the Secret Kept home, no other Death Eater can see it. You must be very careful when you attempt to leave."

"Okay." Hermione took a few deep breaths and brought up the lights in the room. "You knew, then."

"Yes. I assume you had time to put everything in that clever little bag of yours."

"Yes. I would have anyway, but I appreciate your reminding me. I was angry and afraid. It's good that you found me resting, or I might have tried to hex you. I'm so confused. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Think it over a minute."

"Oh, I've been thinking it over. I know that you have to be very careful, but it's frustrating to know that you are keeping things from me, like Dumbledore used to with Harry."

"Believe me, I'm still taking orders from Dumbledore, and sometimes the more you know, the worse it is."

"Spoken like a teacher. Well, all three of us are of age now, and we have no idea what we'll be up against. If you can remember to treat me like an adult instead of your student, I would very much appreciate it."

His look softened slightly as he moved to touch her face. "It will be very easy from now on to think of you as an adult."

Thanks to my busy beta, **Lady in the Cloak** for helping me keep my ducks in a row.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 6

Hogwarts gets a new Head Girl, and Severus begins to treat Hermione as an adult.

A/N: This is the chapter that inspired the whole story. I hope you all like it!

Determined not to waste any time, Hermione had focused her dreams on the practical issues of the plan to infiltrate the Ministry, especially those that she would be consulting with Severus on.

Of course, she couldn't focus her dreams every night, but she still had managed to mentally prepare her brewing space in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place a few times before Severus met her there again.

Despite the fact that she'd been waiting for him, his deep voice startled her. "Miss Granger, what are you brewing?"

She looked up but didn't stop stirring. "It's supposed to be Polyjuice."

"Something you successfully brewed five years ago."

"Not this one. This is a longer-lasting formula, or it should be. I can never tell for sure that I'm recalling the recipe correctly in my dreams."

"Why here?"

"Well, I don't exactly have my own fully stocked laboratory. I brought a lot of things in my bag, but not the workspace."

"But there is a potions space in this house."

"There is? Where?"

"In the basement."

"Isn't this the basement?"

"This room is little more than half the size of the house above it. Even without the ability to make big spaces in smaller spaces..." He paused for Hermione to fill in the rest.

She turned a circle, resting her eyes on the side of the room dominated by the stairs. "The dining room is above us, but there is nothing below the sitting room, or is there?"

"Very good." He strode to a shelving unit and waved his wand. "*Alohomora*."

The unit swung toward him, revealing a locked door. Making sure she was watching, he carefully pronounced the incantations that undid the charms on the door. "The charms in the real house are exactly the same. They are one-way, so you can leave without knowing them, but you couldn't get back in."

Hermione nodded, nearly breathless with anticipation. Instead of waving her ahead of him, he lit his wand and led her through the doorway. Bringing the lights up, he gestured grandly around the small room. "Welcome, Hermione. The only other living witch with access to this room is Molly Weasley."

"How many living wizards have access?"

"Just myself. Though, of course, I won't be availing myself of it for the foreseeable future."

"Dabbling in Divination, Severus?"

"Hardly. Now, would you like to continue with your tour?"

"By all means." Hermione made a small nod.

The room looked very much like the kitchen, with sinks and counters of similar construction. Besides the convenience of stocked shelves, the other obvious appeal of this room was the ability to leave something brewing without having to share stovetop space with supper. With Kreacher preparing all of the meals, Hermione had often wished she had a place she didn't have to share with the elf. Though the situation had significantly improved of late, Hermione and Kreacher weren't destined to become best mates any time soon.

Looking longingly at the set of cauldrons, Hermione asked, "Do you think we have time?"

"Not tonight, but see if you can repeat the recipe for the improved Polyjuice."

Hermione recited the instructions, watching Severus' face for the subtle nods that indicated she was still on the right track. When she was done, he gave a firmer nod. "I'm sure you will be pleased to know that you can recall the recipe in your sleep."

"Well, that is something."

The evening of the thirty-first of August, Severus Flooded from Malfoy Manor to the Headmaster's office, secure in the feeling of a job well done.

The Head Boy and Girl had received their badges that afternoon, and he had dosed them with a dream-sharing potion of his own. He had little doubt that Miss Parkinson, having much more sense than her second-cousin had shown, would be sneaking into her fiancé's chambers for their last night away from Hogwarts. He speculated for a moment the degree of scandal he could cause among the portraits in his office if he as much as suggested that the Head Boy and Girl be allowed to share a suite this year. With all that was at stake this year, he didn't know if it would be better for Draco to have less to worry about or if it would just make the boy complacent.

No matter, he had worries of his own for the night. Seventeen-year-olds were generally thought too young to form their lifelong attachments unguided. His years as a teacher suggested that was the case. He hoped with much more intensity than his temperament usually allowed that this year would be the exception. Not that the young couple's relationship had been unguided. Their parents had encouraged the match as far back as their fourth year. Severus thought that was definitely a point in their favor. He had no real idea what would happen when he fell into REM sleep that night, but he hoped that with Parkinson's dreams otherwise occupied, nothing would disturb the bond he was forming with Hermione.

Sliding into bed, Severus lowered the lights and began to breathe deeply as he focused on an image of the smile he hoped very much to see very soon.

When he became aware of his surroundings, he was sitting at the head table in the Great Hall. The view from the Headmaster's chair would take some getting used to, but he thought he would assume the role and all it entailed in the morning with his typical assumed ease.

Hermione's eyes met his immediately. He tried not to flinch as he remembered that she would not be there tomorrow. Tomorrow she would read the paper and discover that, even had she planned to return to Hogwarts, she could not. It angered him that some of the brightest Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs would not be returning just because of their heritage and the power-mad ways of those charged with their education.

He smirked. There was no one to hide the expression from here. No one except... He scanned the Slytherin table until he saw Pansy's eyes darting between him and Draco, who she was bent close to. There was something tangible about their presence. Apparently, the potion had pulled Pansy's partner with her.

This boded well. Every year, the curse had lifted when the girl had found some boy to cling to. Pansy and Draco already had a bond that went deeper than school crushes and arranged marriages; they had been in war together, and Severus knew that being on the winning side could be as harrowing as the losing. Voldemort had the upper hand now, but it had not always been so, and if Albus was right, it would not last very much longer.

He was about to motion for Hermione to follow him out the side entrance when Draco and Pansy made their own exit. His plan was working.

A few moments later, Hermione had joined him in an anteroom.

"So, what are we doing here? Reminiscing about old times?"

Severus hesitated before dissembling. "Will not the feast go on tomorrow? Why not meet here today since we won't then?"

"I don't know about the feast or not. I'm not returning; you know that. I don't know about anyone else."

"I don't suppose reminiscing would get us anywhere anyway. We don't exactly share many happy memories."

"We didn't before, but we do now." Hermione saved him from responding by walking toward the lit fireplace. "This room is actually kind of romantic in this light."

He was glad she'd noticed. For all his skills at espionage, he wasn't sure he'd excel at seduction. Moving into her peripheral vision, he gestured toward a table set with tea for two. He was sure that tea wasn't the most romantic choice, but alcohol seemed overkill for whatever suggestive value it had in this unreality.

He seated her, purposefully brushing against her twice. Calculating, he could do. He had a purpose; he could focus on that.

For the first time in weeks, he didn't let the conversation stray to her plans or even the related potions. He made himself ask questions about her family, her childhood. The conversation was not as tedious as he'd expected, and he was surprised when the scene changed. It was something they were quite used to, since the dreaming brain has a short attention span. It served as a reminder, though, that their time was not long.

Looking around, he recognized the corridor below the stairs to the Astronomy Tower. Could it be? If this night was a microcosm of the typical run of the curse, then Pansy had already broken her side of the enchantment, and he would be drawn to her and her lover.

Disillusioning himself and Hermione, he offered her his arm. "Care to disturb a trysting couple, Miss Granger?" he asked with what was to be a flirtatious tone.

Apparently, it had its desired effect, because she didn't correct his usage of her surname and she did take his arm.

Arriving at the top of the tower, he slowly opened the door and glanced around. He didn't see anything unusual, but distinct sounds were floating on the evening breeze. Squeezing Hermione's hand, he closed the door and lifted the charm. "It appears someone has beaten us to it. Perhaps another venue?"

Before she could answer, he'd brought them to the corridor outside the Headmaster's office. But she wasn't deterred long. "That wasn't much of a disturbance."

"No, but that wasn't truly my intention. Had the area been vacant, perhaps we might have lingered to gaze at the stars. As it was occupied..." He lightly grasped her arms, distracting her with his thumbs. When she seemed ready to ask another question, he moved a thumb to her lips and made a nearly silent hushing sound.

Hermione was still mesmerized by him. The enchantment on her was still intact. Her eyes fell closed, and she leaned into his touch.

"Good," he whispered. He carefully brought his lips to her forehead, and she gasped, then sighed, then stepped into his embrace.

His thoughts echoed his pronouncement. It was still good. A Muggle would say he'd dodged a bullet, and he had no desire to ruin the moment by explaining it to her. He could almost feel her trust by the way she relaxed against him. She'd been asking him to return that trust, and he wanted her to pass this test.

"Hermione," his voice was gentle, "I want to show you something else."

"We're rather far from the dungeons."

"Well, my quarters aren't in the dungeons anymore."

She looked up at him with guileless eyes. "So you are teaching again this year. But not Defense? It's still cursed, isn't it?"

"Not Defense. In fact, I'm not going to do much teaching at all."

"Severus, what do you mean?"

He almost wanted to shake her. The Lust Spell had clouded her brain. "Come, my dear, think!"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting you to..." She blushed.

"Let me put it this way." He stepped back until their only contact was one small hand in his, then faced the gargoyle. "You've been asking me to treat you as an adult, to share some of my secrets with you. Well, this is your first test. If I tell you everything, you'll have to pretend in front of the others tomorrow. Can you do it?"

Her eyes were sharp, and she tightened her grip on his hand. "Yes."

"That's my girl." Without another word, he strode to the gargoyle, who let him enter. When they were in his office with the door closed behind them she peered about in wonder.

"You're the new Headmaster?"

"It is what both of my masters require of me."

"Oh, Severus!" She clung to him again. "I mean, congratulations, of course, but he's really in charge now, really."

He didn't answer aloud, but when he put his arms around her this time, he allowed himself to derive some comfort.

*A million thanks to my beta, **Lady in the Cloak!***

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione learns something about healing and something about her own heart.

Severus wasn't surprised to find Hermione in her new favorite place. She'd told him that she rarely actually used the lab for fear of Ron and Harry finding out about it, but it seemed that she spent a lot of time there in her dreams.

Instead of potions ingredients, she was surrounded by sheaves of paper, and she was mumbling to herself, occasionally checking the papers.

"You do realize that the papers only contain what is already in your memory, making it a waste of effort to refer to them for verification?"

"Yes, Severus, I know I'm dreaming, but I am worried about tomorrow." She turned to him. "It's the day."

He let barely a beat go by before asking, "Your foray into the Ministry?"

She nodded.

"It's as good a time as any. You are ready." His years of experience kept him from choking on the lie. He'd hoped to have a few more weeks to help her, but they'd made up their minds, and discouraging her now wouldn't make the situation any better.

She reached for his arm. "Thanks. Any last-minute advice?"

"We can spar if you think you'll need it, but I sincerely hope you'll be able to think your way around the Ministry and not let it come to dueling."

"The plan is hardly foolproof, but with the improved Polyjuice, there aren't as many risks as there would be otherwise."

"I concur." He carefully removed his arm from her grasp. "So, tell me of your performance. It seems you took the initiative to bring another into your plans."

"Oh yes--Phineas Nigellus! I thought that he might help us communicate. We won't have to wait for our dreams to coincide. I mean, even with the adjustments you say you've made, I think the sharing spell must also help to coordinate our REM sleep, because it is unlikely that we can maintain the connection as long as we do each night otherwise. I think the long periods of deep sleep are helping physically, too."

Allowing his face to show approval of her ideas, he returned to the topic. "And is our secret safe?"

"Absolutely! I acted incredulous and horrified." She lowered her voice. "I even swore a little."

"And they didn't find this out of character?"

"Not at all. Ron thinks everything I say is a bit mental when I'm really pass-- I mean, when I get excited about something. I mean, they appreciate the leaps in logic, but they don't understand the thrill of the 'aha!' moment. He teased me about it but approved."

"Headmaster Black thinks I'm similarly irrational for asking him to keep an ear open for news of three teenagers not at the school, other than the fact that the three of you are unrepentant troublemakers."

"Severus!"

"Perhaps I'm teasing just a little, but I'm going to break him of the habit of disparaging your heritage. You are a brilliant witch in your own right, and I'll not listen to his aspersions of you."

"So, will he agree to help us--you--or will I just need to drop hints and hope he decides to pass them on?"

"He is under orders to pass on pertinent information. I'd rather not explain the particulars to him, compulsion to serve the current headmaster or not."

"I'll need all of the Slytherin techniques you've been teaching me." Her eyes sparkled at the insinuation.

"Indeed. Now, though I don't think you will need it, we should take this opportunity to review the healing spells. There are Death Eaters at the Ministry."

He read nervousness in Hermione's nod as she spelled away the papers and sent the tables to the side. He removed a rock from his pocket and transfigured it to a rough facsimile of her pet, Crookshanks. Through trial and error, they'd determined that her familiar provided the necessary emotional connection without the negative side effects of watching him cast a deadly curse on one of her friends.

Setting the creature on the ground, he waited until it started toward Hermione before aiming his wand. "*Sectumsempra!*"

Hermione cried out as the slice caused the cat to fall to the ground. She ran to his side, kneeling in the realistic blood provided by her own fearfully vivid imagination. Severus' heart clenched at the tearful waver in her voice as she moved her wand carefully over the wound and began the healing chant. As difficult as it was for him to cause her this nightmare, he knew it could save someone's life. He only wished he had a way of letting her find the spell in the real world so she'd have an excuse to teach it to her friends. It troubled him that the only one she couldn't save this way was herself.

In moments that passed in their strange dreamy way, the bleeding was stopped, the blood cleaned away, and the facsimile was nestled in her lap, looking a bit more Kneazlish than it had originally.

Wanting to provide positive reinforcement of the lesson, he joined her on the area rug that now covered the floor and drew her to his chest with one arm. Exhausted, she rested against him as he murmured reassurances of how pleased he was with her.

How differently he had pictured their relationship earlier that summer. It was supposed to be her providing information for him. He was supposed to be the one on the run in harm's way. He wasn't supposed to be safe within a fortress while a young woman put herself in danger.

"Be safe, Hermione," he whispered as he rested his cheek against the top of her head. "Return to me here tomorrow night."

She was bound to a chair in the center of the courtroom, dark, spectral cats roaming, chilling the air every time they came near. Umbridge paced like one of the cats: back and fourth, just out of reach. Someone was begging for mercy, but Hermione came to realize that it wasn't her, for no sound could come from her mouth. Searching frantically, she discovered the identity of her advocate. Ron, dressed in blue robes, holding a crying baby, was pleading for her.

"Of course she's a witch! Even the baby has already shown signs of magic. The baby has Weasley, Prewett, Black, Malfoy, Rosier, Potter, and Gryffindor blood! Shouldn't the son of so many pure lines have a mother?"

Her heart clenched. No one was going to take her away from her family! She tried to remember how she'd gotten there, what kind of spell they'd used to silence her. She couldn't fathom why she didn't remember unless she'd been stunned. Knowing it would be useless, she tried a nonverbal *Relashio* to no avail.

"Whose wand is this?" Umbridge asked, twirling Hermione's wand in her chubby fingers.

"It's mine! I bought it from Ollivander. Why don't you find him to tell you?" Aha! At least now she had her voice.

"You must not tell lies, Miss."

"It's Mrs. Weasley!" she demanded, not sure why that didn't seem quite right, but clinging to it nevertheless.

"A Muggle can't be named Weasley."

"She's not a Muggle!" Ron yelled. "She's a witch, and her name is Hermione Weasley. She's my Hermione, and I won't let you kill her!"

Hermione thrashed against the bonds as the circling cats came closer and closer. Ron cried her name over and over, but the sound was becoming muffled as the chill began to overcome her.

"Good-bye, Muggle. Your blood traitor can't save you now! You'll never have a pureblood name."

Suddenly, a brilliant stag burst into the room, banishing the cats.

"Harry!" she called, the warmth from the Patronus filling her with hope.

But the answering shout was unexpectedly deep. "No, not Weasley, not Potter. Snape!"

Umbridge and Ron both disappeared, and Snape Apparated her to their safe place, the potions laboratory where a sofa and a fireplace awaited them.

Snuggled on Severus' lap, she sobbed as the realization filled her that it was only a dream. She cried her relief, clinging to black robes as her mind struggled to regain her grasp of reality.

"You must have had quite the ordeal today." Severus' voice was low and soothing as his arms securely held her to him.

"I did. The Ministry is doing such horrible things. Why didn't you warn me?"

"It has all been in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Yes, but the sight of the statue, and they really are killing Muggle-borns!"

"I did not want to distract you from your task. The sooner you have accomplished what you've set out to do, the sooner the Ministry will be back in rational hands and it will all be over."

Hermione sat up to face him. "Why are people letting this happen?"

"They are afraid, Hermione. Fear brings out the worst in people."

"I was so afraid today. Yaxley grabbed me as we Apparated out, and I accidentally took him to Grimmauld Place."

"Yes. I have to admit that it took all of my dissembling skills to not show my fear that something had happened when I heard the news that Potter had been spotted at the Ministry."

"All three of us are safe."

"You also rescued some Muggle-borns?"

"We couldn't leave them! Do you know if they made it?"

"They did. The Dark Lord's displeasure at Yaxley was assuaged by his new ability to enter your former hiding place."

She thought about asking about Kreacher, but thought that Severus would have told her if anything had happened to the elf. Something else was tickling her brain anyway. "That isn't really your Patronus, is it?"

"No, Potter was about to rescue you, but I stepped in."

"So, I've still never seen your Patronus."

"There's no need. I'll never be able to communicate with it; if there was a real emergency, sending Phineas would be much more expedient anyway."

"I suppose so. Just add it to the list of secrets, I guess." Hermione rested her head against his chest again. Sighing, she sifted through the dream images and tried to sort out her feelings. "I don't think Ron's my type."

Snape shifted beneath her. "What brought that on?"

"Oh, I don't know how much of all that you heard, but I thought I was married to Ron. He was all impassioned pleas, and there was a crying baby. But today at the Ministry he kept on slowing us down, and he wouldn't eat the mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"They were all I could find to eat, but he didn't like them, the ungrateful prat."

"So, where are you now?"

Hermione was suspicious of the change in topic, but answered, "In a tent. Harry wants to go to Godric's Hollow right away."

Severus decisively moved her off his lap and onto the sofa beside him to look into her eyes. "No."

"Why not?"

"The Dark Lord has had traps set at near the old Potter house for several weeks, but the physical presence of guards is bound to be increased now that he assumes--correctly--that you don't have a safe house anymore."

"Well, what should I tell Harry?"

"Whatever you do, delay him as long as possible. The longer you wait, the fewer Death Eaters will be assigned the task. They dislike waiting, and the Dark Lord hates to waste resources. Nevertheless, you must maintain 'constant vigilance' in that area."

"Speaking of Moody, Harry recovered his eye from Umbridge."

"Ah, the finer points that don't get relayed to me from the usual channels."

"Well, compared to rescuing Muggle-borns and stealing a Horcrux from Umbridge's neck, it was a small thing."

"And you're positive it is the correct locket?"

"Definitely, the thing exudes evil. I've no doubt that something dark lives within it." She shivered. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For treating me like an adult. But we still don't know what to do with the locket. We can't seem to open it."

"I will inform Albus of your progress. Any information he gives me I will pass on to you. You have done well today; you lived up to your training." He kept Hermione still with his hands on her shoulders as he reached down to place a gentle kiss on her cheek. Pulling back to look into her eyes, he said, "I've never said this to you, but I am quite proud of you, Hermione."

Thanks to **Lady in the Cloak** for catching what I miss.

Next chapter: *Snape marks Hermione's birthday with a milestone of his own.*