

Forbidden

by Savageland

Ten years after Harry Potter defeated Voldemort, the Wizarding World seems safe--until two Hogwarts students disappear without a trace in the Forbidden Forest. Strangely linked to this incident is Severus Snape, who died in the Shrieking Shack. Or did he? When Hermione Granger is pulled into the investigation, she discovers the unimaginably dangerous truth.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 1

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Excerpt from an editorial in *The Daily Prophet* for June 1, 1998 ~~

We will never forget that the destruction of He Who Could Not Be Named during the Battle of Hogwarts exacted a terrible price in the loss of many brave and dearly beloved friends. But we must now include in that roll call of the honoured dead a most unlikely hero. Suspected by some as a double agent and devoted disciple of the Dark, Severus Snape apparently sacrificed himself to protect Harry Potter.

Mr Potter has come forward (see "Snape Saved All of Us" on p. 1) with this stunning revelation. Though close-lipped about details as always, Mr Potter has asserted that Professor Snape's actions protected the highest values of the Wizarding World, and that he died serving the Light.

With this exoneration of Professor Snape, it is distressing that the former Potions Master's body remains missing. The Shrieking Shack and all its surroundings...even parts of the Forbidden Forest...have been scoured by Aurors. But after almost a month, there is little likelihood of finding his remains.

It will not be easy to elevate Severus Snape...an enigmatic, difficult, and unlikeable man...to the status of hero. But if Harry Potter can do it, then so must we. For who among us can imagine what may have passed through Snape's tortured mind as he did what he had to do? What must he have felt in his last painful and bloody moments? Only Harry Potter knows, and that is a Secret he seems bound and determined to Keep.

* * *

Hermione dropped the paper with a deep sigh and leaned her elbow on the Weasleys' huge, cluttered kitchen table. Cupping one cheek in her hand, she stared out the window into the garden, where late spring sunlight picked out each brilliant green leaf. She was too tired to move, let alone go outside, though the warmth would have eased her. The month since the Battle had been a blur of picking up pieces, grieving the dead...missing their voices, laughter, wisdom...and sometimes just breathing air

now free of the taint of Darkness. Even the Weasleys, still devastated, were finding comfort in each other, and their care of Hermione during this difficult time made her throat ache with gratitude. But Ron, who up until this point had shown a sensitivity that surpassed all her expectations, was starting to convey a trace of impatience with her lethargy.

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Her mind raced, like Crookshanks chasing his own tail, turning and turning back to the night of the Battle. She tried to stop, to pull her mind away, but her thoughts spiraled toward the Shrieking Shack when she and Harry and Ron had huddled, hidden, as Snape lived through his final moments. Only Harry had seen Snape enveloped and slashed by the Dark Lord's hideous snake, but even Harry's terse description of the scene much later couldn't match the horror she'd felt as she heard the fatal crisis tighten, rise, and reach its brutal end with Voldemort's three cold words: "I regret it." When she finally emerged into the Shack, the blood pooling around Snape seemed strangely unreal. After thrusting the phial at Harry she'd been unable to move, mesmerized and struck dumb by the strangely graceful unspooling of Snape's memories.

Then, like Eurydice, she'd made the mistake of looking back as they left the Shack...just to make sure he really was beyond help...and almost froze with shock. Snape's dead black eyes, fixed and glassy, were looking straight at her, as if reproaching her for leaving him alone . . . or loathing her for cowardice. She'd hesitated, almost gone back. How she wished she had. Hermione kept telling herself she'd done what she could; the morning after the Battle, she'd reminded Ron that they had a duty to bring Professor Snape back, but Ron had said no need. *No one'll touch that git if they can help it.* When at last Harry rounded up some Aurors and led them to the Shrieking Shack, they'd found nothing but gouts of dried blood.

Not long after, the dreams began. In some, she was in the Shrieking Shack, keeping vigil by Snape's corpse. Suddenly Snape's eyes opened, blazing with pain and rage. As she stood frozen, he somehow lurched to his feet and staggered toward her, blood pouring fresh from Nagini's bite, his hands outstretched. "You could have helped me," he whispered, and all she could do was close her eyes and wait for his fingers to close around her neck. She would wake up then, shaking, telling herself Snape's death wasn't her fault, she hadn't been neglectful, she hadn't been cowardly, that it would have been far too dangerous for them to bring Snape's body back the night of the battle.

No over-the-counter potion could dull those dreams.

In growing desperation Hermione visited Madam Pomfrey, who took one look at her haunted eyes and arranged an appointment with a healer at St. Mungo's. "You're not the only one who's needed it," she'd said gently. "Not after such a trauma." Still, Hermione told no one...not Harry, not even Ron...that she Apparated to St. Mungo's every other day, where a silver-haired healer named Trickett subjected her to a gentle, utterly merciless treatment of Pensieveing, Analyzing, and Compartmentalizing.

Then came a new dream: so bizarre Hermione couldn't bring herself to mention it, couldn't bear the thought of exposing it in the Pensieve. But nothing much got past Healer Trickett. At length, groping for the words, Hermione found herself describing the damp, stony space, the dark air thick with brooding horror . . . and the body stretched out on a slab. Snape's body, she knew. But nearby stood a cloaked figure, and for some reason that terrified Hermione far more than the corpse.

"Did you recognize the figure?" said Trickett.

Hermione shook her head.

"Was it a Death Eater? Or a Dementor?" Trickett kept her voice even, matter-of-fact.

"No!" Hermione almost flung the word. "I don't know." But she remembered every moment of what came next: the figure raising both hands; a sickly greenish glow that flared, faded, flared; the light crawling over and around Snape's body like a living thing. She could only watch, frozen, as Snape convulsed again and again, his face a rictus of agony. Then the cloaked figure somehow sensed her. It whirled toward Hermione, a bolt of green lightning erupting from an outstretched hand, and Hermione reached for a wand that wasn't there. She'd awoken with a muffled scream and spent the rest of the night sitting up, hands clasped around her knees, her bedside lamp ablaze until well after sunrise.

"Monsters," said Trickett, her sharp gaze compassionate, "must be named and put in their proper place. So we have more work to do. But meantime, I'll prescribe a potion of my own to help you get some rest."

For several days Hermione had no dreams she could remember. But last night the potion had failed. She'd dreamt of standing amongst a grove of slender trees, each of them pulsing with a vivid glow: red, blue, green, violet, gold. They were beautiful, yet something about them struck her as sad. Wrong. She heard a soft sound and turned to see Snape. He stood a few feet away, wearing a calf-length black coat. Hermione saw no sign of Nagini's wound as he walked toward her, yet his expression was tight with agony. She closed her eyes, terrified to face him even as a deep, strange yearning shook her to the core. She heard Snape whisper, "Help me. She has taken my soul." Then warm fingers cupped her face; warm breath stirred her hair. She tilted her face up, her mouth opening to his . . . and then awoken with her arms wrapped around herself, her face streaked with tears.

That was the worst dream of all...not because it terrified her, but because it left her with a sadness, a yearning for something she couldn't name or even understand.

The door slammed open, startling Hermione out of her thoughts. The kitchen filled with Weasleys: Molly and Arthur and Ron, back from Diagon Alley, loaded with enough supplies to feed a troupe of Aurors. As Arthur tenderly helped Molly off with her coat and gave her arm a squeeze, Hermione started to get up.

"Can I help you put anything away?"

"Absolutely not, dear," said Molly a bit too briskly. "Relax! I'll make tea." She waved her wand. As the kettle began to sing, shopping bags disgorged an assortment of vegetables, bread, and sausages. Wheeling into the pantry like clumsy birds, the items tried to jockey for space on already stuffed shelves. A bunch of carrots skirmishing with a cabbage brought a quick, faint smile to Hermione's lips.

At that moment, Ron caught her eye and his face lit up. Moving behind her, he laid a protective hand on each of her shoulders. The gesture felt heavy and paternal, like that of a Victorian father. She resisted the urge to squirm away.

"You all right?" he said softly.

He was such a good friend, though she didn't deserve it. Her eyes filled with tears. "Yes," she whispered.

Ron kissed the top of her head. "We'll be fine, you and me, yeah? I promise."

She nodded. Looking down at her tightly interlocked fingers, she forced herself to relax them, one by one.

Note:

I gratefully acknowledge that J.K. Rowling owns all the main characters and the Harry Potterverse. I also want to acknowledge "ianthe_waiting" for a prompt (in the LiveJournal SS-HG Gift Exchange in 2010) that inspired this story...long as it took to write it! Finally, warmest thanks to my RL writing group "The Red Notebook Society" for serving as beta-readers. Any canon errors that may have slipped in are wholly my responsibility.