# Cursed

### by Pearle

Hermione seeks an elusive cure for the lasting effects of a curse Bellatrix Lestrange managed to hit her with during the Battle of Hogwarts. Her life has been lost to endless bouts of pain and despair that have plagued her these last two years. But her luck may finally be changing. A reference to a Dark potion in an obscure book may hold the key to her cure. But where will she find a Potions master knowledgeable enough to brew it? Written for Warded\_Portal for the SSHG Winter 2007 exchange.

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# The Beginning

Chapter 1 of 6

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Chapter 1 The Beginning

Her teeth clenched, muscles tightening, eyes flashing with an unholy light, she braced herself for the wave of pain she could feel starting. It took more and more pain potion to get her through the days now, her body building up a tolerance to the magical substance. Hermione closed her eyes and drew a ragged breath as the ripple of the pain passed.

A small moan escaped as the witch rolled onto her side, unable to stop herself from trembling as wave after wave of pain washed over her again. While she waited for the pain to recede, the voice started up again.

"Come on, Mudblood, if you won't end Potter's life, the least you can do is end your own."

Hermione watched horrified as she reached for her own wand. The hand at the end of her arm no longer seemed to belong to her.

"That's it, girl. A quick Avada Kedavra and you can finish us off. One less Mudblood in the world."

"No, no," she cried. Her hand shook violently as she tried to control it; anyone watching the display would have thought she was wrestling with an invisible foe.

"NO!" Her scream echoed hoarsely off the walls of her room. Weakly, she flopped back onto the bed, her strength leaving as the worst of the pain drained from her body. Unconsciousness was a welcome escape from the hell her life had become these last two years. Even entranced, her right hand held her left arm in a deathly grip; her wand inches from her outstretched fingers.

The door to her hospital room flew open, Harry reaching the bed a second before a Healer appeared in the doorway.

"Hermione, are you okay? Did it start again? Hermione?"

"Mr Potter, don't touch her! You might further injure Miss Granger. Please step back and let me check her."

Reluctantly, he stepped back and let the Healer tend to his sick friend. The lime green robes contrasted sharply with his friend's pale skin as the Healer scanned the unconscious witch with his wand. Harry turned as Ron came into the room; the two sharing a worried glance before he turned his attentions back toward the bed.

"It happened again?"

Harry winced as the Healer moved Hermione; her limbs flopping like a rag doll. "She's getting worse."

"We have tried every cure known to magic, Mr Potter. This is not a typical response to the Cruciatus Curse. The pain should have subsided within a week, two at the most after it had been cast, not continue unabated two years later." The Healer shook his head; he had never seen anything like it in all his years. The pain continued to ravish the young witch's body at regular intervals two full years after the original curse had been cast. She'd been sinking into a greater depression with each failed attempt at treatment. There were potions to treat her pain, her depression, the weakness of her muscles, but this was all superficial. They had yet to find a cure that would end the nightmare for the young woman. Gently, he tugged a blanket over the witch. "She seems to be resting comfortably now. I don't believe this last round of potions effected any change."

"What does that mean?" Ron watched as Hermione's limbs twitched; he hated watching an episode, as she'd termed them.

"It means they can't help her, mate."

Ron glared at Harry before turning on the Healer. "You have to help her. This is St Mungo's, there's nowhere else to go!"

"Mr Weasley, over the last two years we have contacted Healers from around the globe. No one has been able to come up with a cure. We have tried every combination of potions and spells known to magic. Lestrange had to have cast a second curse when she cast the Cruciatus Curse on Miss Granger. It's the only reasonable explanation."

Wearily, Harry shook his head. "You've seen the Pensieve; there was nothing else."

Hermione stirred, holding her head as a dull ache replaced the pain of the curse. "Harry?"

"I'm here, Hermione. How do you feel?"

"It didn't work, did it?" She could still feel the odd redoubling in her mind, the uneasy sensation that someone else was there. Most of the time she was able to ignore the feeling by sheer will alone, but lately, it had become harder and harder to push it back down and get on with her life. What had started out as a tingling in the back of her mind when she had awakened in St Mungo's after the final battle had developed into, well, another presence, a separate consciousness, a voice only she could hear. Knowing what they would think of her if she'd told them she was hearing voices, she kept the knowledge to herself. But as the pain of the curse passed, her mind would clear only to be submerged again when the next round of pain hit. She found she could limit the pain if she concentrated hard enough, but she was never able to control the voice, only quiet it for a while.

The voice. She was sure she was going mad. She'd thought they would put her in the ward with the Longbottoms, sure that Bellatrix must have cursed her into insanity. It was hard to explain, but she didn't think her mind was manufacturing the voice. It seemed to come from outside herself. It would taunt her, call her Mudblood, shriek obscenities whenever possible. It was obsessed with Harry. So far she'd been able to resist it, but she was growing weary of the battle; she worried what she would do when she could no longer fight it.

She'd been coming to St Mungo's regularly for the last two years, subjecting herself to every known spell and potion they could come up with in the hope of ending the pain

she'd been forced to live with. Their suggestion that she dope her self up with pain potions offered her little release when it took more and more potion to stop the pain and allowed her less and less control of her own life.

And it did nothing to quiet the voice in her head.

At one point she decided the problem might not be caused by magic alone. She'd read an article that stated,"...seventy percent of those diagnosed with schizophrenia heard voices in their head." Perhaps she was suffering from schizophrenia and not some magically induced problem. She saw a Muggle physiatrist who prescribed medication to help her cope, but the medication did nothing to quiet the voice.

Hermione did what she did best; she threw herself into researching the curse. She was grateful she didn't have to work; it would be doubtful she could've held a job. Her parents had died in an accident shortly after her sixth year. The order was never able to prove it had been a result of Death Eaters, but Hermione was convinced Voldemort was responsible for their deaths. Between selling their practice and the double indemnity clause in their life insurance, Hermione would never want for anything again. She found a certain empathy with Harry, the two vowing to be each other's family since they were both orphans.

In between treatments at St Mungo's, Hermione researched the curse. She Portkeyed to Greece when a footnote in a book in the Restricted Section mentioned a rare flower that once grew along side the Temple of Aphrodite on the island of Rhodes. She found many rare and beautiful flowers there, but not the flower she was looking for.

The voice cackled madly, "You think a flower can get rid of me? Silly girl!" and the pain would start again.

#### 

She traveled to Cape Town in Southern Africa, chasing down an inyanga who was rumored to know a cure for the "Devil's Curse." The inuyanga proved to be nothing more than a traditional South African healer dealing in rare herbs and potions made from plants and animals. The inuyanga tried, but in the end, no matter what he gave her, nothing helped.

The voice taunted the healer as he plied his trade, but only Hermione heard." Filthy Mudblood, the Dark Lord will rise again, and then where will your herbs and talsmans get you?"

### 

A book on Dark Magic suggested ingesting a combination of the alloy osmiridium with a type of hard leaves usually found in dry sclerophyll forests to strengthen the power of the curse. She hoped to use this combination to find a way to create the opposite effect, to reduce the power of the curse's after effects. Further research mentioned the abandoned osmiridium mining settlement of Adamsfield located on the island state of Tasmania as being surrounded by dry sclerophyll forsts. Such forests were known to attract the Tasmanian Devil, a rare animal indigidious to the island alone. After traveling to Australia, and then Portkeying to Adamsfield, Hermione found a small hidden magical community on the site of the 'abandoned' settlement. The community had been enchanted to repel Muggles, much like the enchantment that surrounded Hogwarts. And while osmiridium, though rare, could be could be found in the ground there, she was disappointed to learn it held no magical properties.

"Does the itty bitty wittle girl want to play with the cuddly little doggie?And die in the process? Hahaaaa!"

The pain was almost a welcome relief when the voice tried to call one of the Devils to her in the hopes she would be his next meal.

### 

Over the last two years her research had led her to countless locations. She followed countless leads to their inevitable dead end, hoping against hope that the next item, the next ingredient, the next potion would be the cure she hoped for.

She had come to the conclusion that Dark magic had to be responsible for what was happening to her. She had traveled across the continents visiting magical and Muggle libraries alike, looking for the answer. As Harry Potter's best friend, and a hero of the war, she was granted access to dusty stacks of forgotten tomes, some not seeing the light of day for centuries.

She was disappointed this last attempt by the Healers had failed, but she had found an obscure reference to dealing with the curse that referred to a rare book on Dark magic. Conjuring the Darke was rumored to be housed in the ancient section of The Royal Library of Alexandria, located below the modern day library.

Anticipating just this outcome, she had a Portkey scheduled for the morning to take her to Egypt.

# TBS

**A/N:** Yes, I know there is a glaring lack of Severus in this chapter. I am well aware this is the SSHG Exchange; the insufferable man has pointed that out to me himself, but the facts, being what they are, need to be presented before we can proceed. I promise he will firgure prominently in the remaining chapters. This should alay your concerns as well as his.

I realized I never thanked Southern Witch for betaing this story for me. I'm sorry for the delay. My humble thanks and virtual chocolate for your help and endless supply of punctuation (to correct my glaring lack of it...grin). I also realized, I never posted the story here at TPP (which archives all of my work). So, having said all that here is the story in it's entirety, complete in six chapters. Consider it an early Xmas present (or a really late one if you consider it was written last year).

And before you ask (since I will probably get asked multiple times in reviews), Dances With Witches is in the process of being finished. I would rather wait to post the story when I have finished it. Chapter 45 ( Ch45-When A Door Closes and The Window's Locked, Opportunity Can Sneak In Through The Chimney) is written and beta'd. Chapters 46 through 48 are all being written at the same time (interacting action) and mostly done. Chapters 49 and 50 are outlined, and Chapter 51-Finale is already written (and will appear exclusively here at TPP for the first week it's posted as my humble way of saying thank you to NSS for offering me the chance to post here, and thank you to Southern for betaing my work). I hope to have it done before Xmas. This bout of pnemonia last week (and yet another hospital stay with it the story of my life rolls eyes-) did not help to speed things along.

Happy holidays to one and all!

-Pearle, Chicago 2008

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### 

Chapter Two Travel Always Broadens The Mind

"All right, you go have a lie in while I run to the store." It was a well rehearsed pattern they had fallen into. She was always a bit run down after a session at St Mungo's. Harry would see Hermione back to her flat, stock her fridge, and in a few days, she'd be strong enough to go it on her own again.

"Don't pick up too much. I'm heading for Egypt in the morning."

"Hermione, you're too weak to travel. You've spent the last two years tracking down rumors and not one of them has proved true. Don't you think it's time to stop?"

"And do what?" she asked angrily. "Give up? The Healers haven't been much help. If I don't keep looking, no one will."

"I just..."

"Don't." She held up her hand, cutting her friend off and stopping the argument. "You didn't do anything. If anyone is at fault, it's Lestrange's for hitting me with this curse. Now, go. I want to take a nap."

# 

Morning arrived quickly enough. Hermione held the Portkey tightly in her right hand, her left still weak from the last round of pain she'd suffered. She felt the sharp tug behind her navel that signified Portkey travel and closed her eyes. She stumbled a bit upon landing next to flying, Portkeying had to be her least favorite form of travel.

"Easy there, Miss. Wouldn't want you to fall."

A hand at her shoulder steadied her. Ignoring the dizziness she was feeling, Hermione opened her eyes and took in the Ministry office. The Ministry of Magic in Epygt was as impressive as that of Britain, just on a different scale. "Thank you."

Within minutes she found her way to the entrance of the magical section below the main library. An old witch, magically sorting books, was working behind the main counter.

"Excuse me."

"Eh, what is it?" The hag had yet to look up from her work, books flew back and forth between cases lineing the walls behind the desk. "Speak up, I haven't got all day."

"I'd like to see a copy of Conjuring the Darke by Besyrwan Prosm please."

Two of the books currently careening between the desks wobbled before losing altitude and fell to the floor below. Several other tomes lost height as the witch turned to look at Hermione. She took a step closer, peering suspiciously at the young woman over the top of her spectacles. "You want to see what book?"

Hermione cleared her throat. She really hadn't thought this would be a problem. Conjuring the Darke by Besyrwan Prosm. It was cited as a reference by Master Th..."

"Do you have any idea how dangerous that book is?"

Her face brightened immediately. "Does that mean you have it?"

The witch peered closer. "Who are you? Do have any form of identification?"

Hermione sighed as she reached into her bag, librarians the world over all seemed to be the same. "My Apparition license."

The woman disappeared through a door in the back wall. Hermione could hear raised voices, but couldn't make out the words. It was another minute before an older gentleman, sporting a full walrus-style mustache, appeared in the doorway. He glanced back and forth from Hermione to the license several times, verifying she was indeed the witch in the picture.

"I know it's not a very good likeness. I've been ill for a while, but if you'd like, you can contact the British Ministry of Magic. They can verify who I am." Her face had thinned out since the photo, her hair having lost some of it fullness. Constant pain played havoc with her system.

"You're that Hermione Granger? You're Harry Potter's friend?" he asked, his voice a whisper. The man's eyes widened. She found quite a few people reacted oddly to

Harry's name, almost as if saying his name would bring Voldemort back. "Is there a problem? Is that why you need this book?"

Right, got it she was researching how to get rid of the next Dark Lord. Half smiling, she shook her head. "I was hit with an Unforgivable, the Cruciatus Curse, during the Battle of Hogwarts. Somehow the casting was different. I still have residual problems due to the curse two years later. I found a reference to that book that may help cure me. Please tell me you have the book?"

The man looked at the license, then at Hermione one more time before coming to a decision. He opened the half-door hidden in the counter and motioned Hermione through. "The book is in our 'lock-down section.' I can't allow it to leave the library, but you may view it there, if you like."

The old witch's eyes opened wide. In all her years at the library, no outsider had ever been allowed in the 'lock-down section,' too many old and irreplaceable books, not to mention dangerous tomes, to allow just anyone down there.

Hermione followed the man through the doorway, past his office, and through another door before descending a rickety stairway. "I can't thank you enough, Mr...?"

"Agnitio. Jonas Agnitio." As they reached the bottom of the stairway, he removed his wand. Several spells later, Hermione was standing in a musty vault, the walls lined with old books. He motioned her to a table in the center of the room and proceeded to pull several books from the shelves. "I believe these might have some mention of the curse. I don't know if they can help you or not."

"Mr Agnitio, thank you. You don't know how much this means to me."

Silently, he watched Hermione open the first book. Once again he seemed to come to a decision. Summoning a quill and a piece of parchment from a side table, he wrote down a name and address. "Several years ago my brother met a young British woman, a witch, who was working outside the city on an archeological dig. They fell in love and married. My brother moved back to London and was very happy with Kate for a number of years. But it was not to be; Kate was... Muggle-born. One night a group of Death Eaters raided their home, torturing and killing my brother and his wife. Your Ministry refused to acknowledge the evil that had taken their lives. While it might not have saved my brother's life, I'm grateful to you and Mr Potter, and the others, who did what your government would not." He thrust the parchment toward Hermione. "I don't know if he can help, the man is a bit unsavory, but I do know he traffics in rare and unusual ingredients. In the past he has been able to procure some uncommon potions, always boasting about what he knows and whom he knows. He was able to help my wife when none of the Healers could."

"Thank you, Mr Agnitio, thank you." Hermione jumped up and hugged the man, tears filling her eyes. "I am so sorry for your loss. I don't know what to say. But this..." She held the bit of parchment.

"I hope he can help you. Tell him I sent you. I'll be upstairs if you need me."

Her hand shook as she started taking notes; first thing tomorrow morning she would see the merchant. She was usually blessed with a day or two of relative ease after such an intense bout of pain. She could only hope he had what she was looking for.

#### 

Early the next morning Hermione set out for the address on the parchment. She had found research to suggest that the effect of the curse could be dampened, but nothing concrete. Despite a mild episode of pain, and a bit of taunting by the ever-present psychotic voice that morning, she was in high spirits, tracking the first positive lead in a long time.

The bell on the door jangled as she stepped into the apothecary. The scent of herbs and other ingredients assaulted her senses, transporting her back to Hogwarts and Potions class.

"Can I help you?" A small, dark man of questionable age watched her suspiciously as she approached the counter.

"Are you Omar?"

"What do you want?"

"Mr Agnitio said you might be able to help me. I need a potion to stop the effects of the Cruciatus Curse."

"Wait a week, the pain will be gone by then."

"Not this time. Something was different in the casting of the curse. I still have pain two years later."

The little man's eyes narrowed. "Sorry to hear it. What do you want me to do?"

"Mr Agnitio said you helped his wife." The two stood eyeing each other across the counter. "Please, I've come a long way looking for a cure."

"I can sell you some powerful pain potions if that's what you're asking." Omar didn't move.

"There is a book, Conjuring the Darke by Besyrwan Prosm. It suggests there is a potion that may dampen, if not stop altogether, the effects of the curse."

"There is a Potions master I deal with. I'm not saying he has this potion you need, but if I contact him, it's going to cost you." He had looked Hermione over, top to bottom, and decided he might be able to profit from their transaction if her appearance was any indication. She looked too classy, in his estimation, to be poor.

"I'll pay whatever you want if you can get me the potion."

"I'll owl him tonight. Come back in the morning."

# 

Severus swore under his breath when he heard the owl outside his window. The ruddy bird would just have to wait. Fourteen more stirs counterclockwise followed by six clockwise or the potion would be ruined. Finishing his work, he set the glass rod to the side, lowered the flame under the cauldron, and went to open the window.

He recognized the bird immediately as belonging to Omar. He'd already authorized his solicitor to pay the wizard for his last order; he couldn't imagine what the thief might want now. The only contact Severus ever had with the man was when he sent him purchase orders. Occasionally, he'd have to owl with questions about an ingredient was it picked under the new moon or a waning moon, sliced with a cycle or harvested with a silver knife, questions that could change the properties of the ingredients. Omar had been directed to send all bills and questions to his solicitor. He didn't have time to worry about paperwork. That's what he paid Dempster, Wiggle, & Worth LLP for.

# 

The Prince's Moste Potente Potables

London, England

Master Prince,

A witch was in my shop earlier this evening requesting a rare and Dark potion. I believe the potion she seeks is the Potion of Glador. Since I know you have

been able to fill various requests for me in the past, I hope you will be able to do so now.

The woman claims to still be suffering from the aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse two years after it was cast. I'm sure Dark magic, greater than usual, must have been used when the curse was cast. She is not looking for a pain potion, but something to stop the curse altogether.

You will be paid generously for your talents if you can supply the potion.

I await your response.

Omar

Severus snorted. The fabled Potion of Glador, rumored to reverse the effects of Dark magic. The man might as well be asking for another Philosopher's Stone. He'd seen references to the potion years ago. Flamel might even have had something to do with it, as far as he could recall. Whatever the potion was, it would require Dark magic if it had anything to do with Unforgivables. He wrote a hasty response and sent it on its way with the owl. He'd wasted enough time for one night.

#### 

Hermione's nerves were on edge as she opened the door to The Glass Phial. While Omar didn't instill trust in his customers, she thought he seemed pretty confident yesterday that he could help her. Wearily, she approached the counter as Omar bagged an order for a customer.

"You're all set. Just remember to reinforce the stasis charm when you get home." He nodded to the wizard as he handed him his bundle.

"Thanks. I'll be back next week."

"You have an order for me?"

Omar took in Hermione's appearance; he could see she was worn out. "I have some extra strong Pepperup Potion, should be the thing to pick you right up."

"Omar, the potion for the curse."

"I'm sorry. He said he couldn't help you." Omar gestured to the scroll in his hand. It was a shame Prince couldn't supply the potion; he could have used the extra money to fix up the hovel he was living in.

Hermione recognized the emblem at the top of the parchment: The Prince's Moste Potente Potables. It was a small, elite firm specializing in rare and unusual potions. Ginny had paid the company good Galleons for a potion to help with conception when she and Harry were trying for a child. She suspected it had been some type of fertility treatment, but considering the Weasleys' natural penchant towards fertility and Ginny and Harry's apparent lack of it, Ginny had sworn Hermione to secrecy, so she'd never asked. However, Lily Potter was born almost nine months to the day Ginny started the potion.

"Well, thank you for your help." She'd look the firm up and contact them herself.

The Prince's Moste Potente Potables

London, England

To Whom It May Concern:

A friend referred me to your firm. I believe you may be able to help me. I would like to meet with someone from your research team at your earliest convenience and discuss the problem in person.

Thank you,

Ms H. Granger

Ms H. Granger

London, England

Ms H. Granger:

Thank you for your enquiry, but we are unable to comply with your request at this time.

M. Green, Esq.

Representative for The Prince's Moste Potente Potables

Hermione balled up the parchment and threw it at the wall. They didn't even stop to ask her what her problem was, just no thank you, go away. She would find out where the company was located and give them a piece of her mind.

**TBS** 

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Chapter Three Sometime The Evil You Know Is Better Than The Evil You Don't Know

Hermione looked up at the address on the building, comparing it to the writing on the parchment in her hand.

The Prince's Moste Potente Potables

713 Diagon Alley

London, England

While the address on the building matched that on the paper, the name above the door did not. A large gold plaque, letters two feet high proclaimed:

Dempster, Wiggle, & Worth LLP

This was the address listed on the back of The Prince's products. The label further invited customers to contact the firm with any questions or concerns they may have. All owls were directed to this address.

Unconsciously, Hermione flexed her fingers. Almost a week had passed since her last treatment at St Mungo's. The episodes had started again; her hands trembled slightly, an aftereffect of the pain. Sighing, she pushed open the door and went in.

The middle-aged witch sitting behind the desk could only be described as grey. Her hair was a mix of various shades of charcoal, slate, and silver, liberally sprinkled with streaks of black. Her tailored robes were a deep shade of arsenic, contrasting nicely with the light dove grey of her blouse. Hermione couldn't see her shoes, but would have bet they matched her robes exactly.

"Can I help you?" Three quills danced over three separate pieces of parchment, obviously enchanted to respond to the device in front of the witch.

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Mr Dempster please."

The witch glanced up from her work. "Do you have an appointment Miss...?"

"Granger. Hermione Granger. Um, no, I don't. But if Mr Dempster is not available, perhaps I could speak with Mr Wiggle or Mr Worth."

The woman eyed her up and down. "Regarding?"

"Is one of them available? I've come on a business matter."

She tapped a blue square of parchment next to her before writing on it. Within a minute, an answering statement appeared on the parchment. Hermione thought it must have been enchanted for two-way communication.

"If you will follow me, Mr Dempster will see you now."

She was escorted to a small office off the main corridor. A short, balding man dressed in odd cranberry coloured robes rose to greet her. "Miss Granger? A pleasure to meet you. Please, have a seat." He gestured to the chairs in front of his desk. "Would you like something to drink? Tea, pumpkin juice?"

"No, I'm fine. I appreciate you seeing me, Mr Dempster. I hope you can help me. I'm trying to locate the chief Potions master for The Prince's Moste Potente Potables products."

The little man's face closed, his smile fading abruptly. "I'm sorry you wasted your time. I don't know anything about the company. I can't be of any assistance."

"Mr Dempster, you are aware that your address is listed as the business address for The Prince's Moste Potente Potables? The back of the label directs owls to this location. How is it that you don't know what your firm is doing?"

The wizard rubbed a pudgy hand over his shining pate. "Is there a problem with one of the products?"

"No, I was told he may be able to help me with a medical problem I have. Please, I just want to speak with him for a minute."

"Miss Granger, the master in question does not receive... visitors."

"Then perhaps you could owl him on my behalf."

"Miss Granger..."

"I would hate to have to take up residence in your foyer. I would imagine both The Quibbler and the Daily Prophet would be willing to send reporters when Harry Potter comes by to find out why I'm here."

Dempster barely missed biting his tongue as his jaw snapped shut. "Fine," he ground out. "But if the man rejects your request, I expect you to do the right thing and not contact my offices again."

"Of course," Hermione answered sweetly.

"Where can I reach you when he answers me?"

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"Bloody hell!" The owl at his laboratory window magically slipped through the glass. The creature circled the room once before gliding gracefully to land on the tabletop.

"Off! You think I want your feathers contaminating my work?" Severus pointed to a battered desk behind him. "There." He'd recognized the owl when it slipped through the window, his wards and enchantments set to allow communications from select parties.

Rummaging through the desk drawer for an owl treat, Severus removed the scroll from the owl's outstretched leg. "What does Dempster want now?" he muttered, his scowl deepening as he read the missive.

The Prince's Moste Potente Potables

London, England

Master Snape.

Miss Hermione Granger was in my office today inquiring after the Potions master behind The Prince's Moste Potente Potables products. She requests an audience with you, that is with Master Prince, in the hope that you can help her with a medical problem. She claims a merchant in Egypt believes you are in possession of a potion she needs.

What course of action do you wish me to pursue?

Sincerely,

Mr L. Dempster, Esquire

"Granger." He spat the name out, a headache forming behind his eyes. One third of the golden trio. It must have been Granger Omar had owled him about last week. The nerve of the little chit, enlisting his solicitor to help her. A particularly snide smile gracing his features, he sat down to send a scathing response to his solicitor as to what actions he desired the man to take.

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Hermione stamped her foot, her eyes watering as she read Dempster's letter. Master Prince would be unable to help her. Good luck and drop dead. For all it mattered, the man might well have written the sentiment before cursing her himself.

Harry found her a few hours later; sitting on the sofa, dried tears streaking her face, a second bottle of wine half empty in front of her. "Hermione?"

"It's no good, Harry. I could have had the cure and now it's gone. Gone forever." Her wine glass hung precariously from her fingertips, the wine sluicing around the glass as she waved it for emphasis.

"You had the cure?" He removed the glass from her hand, banishing it and the half empty wine bottle to the kitchen. He'd found her in her cups before, usually after one of her leads had played out.

"Omar made it seem like he had the answer. But would The Prince help me? Oh, no. Thank you for your enquiry, but we are unable to comply with your request at this time. Ha, bollocks to them, I say."

"The Prince? You want Snape's help."

"What? Snape? No, not Snape, why would I want Snape? I want the Potions master behind The Prince's Moste Potente Potables. He's supposed to have a rare potion that can end the curse. Omar said he did." Hermione nodded, and thus it must be true, or so it seemed in her inebriated state.

"Come on, let's get you to bed." Harry sighed as he helped his friend off the couch.

"Harry Potter, you're a married man and married to my best friend, no less. Don't you get fresh with me." Hermione smiled. It was a long-standing joke between the two.

In the end, it was Harry's connections through the Auror department that located the physical address for the laboratories of Prince Industries; it seemed various permits were needed to set up a commercial potions lab in a Muggle area. Bureaucracy insured that the company had been required to register with the Ministry, in triplicate.

# 

"I still don't see why you insisted on coming with me. I could have done this myself."

"Hermione, you don't know who this master is." Looking around the run-down area, Harry shuddered briefly. "He obviously wants to be left alone. I really don't think this is a good idea."

"Don't be ridiculous. Where else would you put a commercial lab other than an industrial area?" Hermione knocked briskly on the door, praying they were in the right place.

What the hell was going on, an unscheduled owl yesterday and now someone knocking at his door? He stormed up the stairway and through the lounge towards the front door, his wand at the ready; he hoped the idiot at his door enjoyed being hexed.

Severus stopped short. The door glowed a warm yellow hue. It meant whoever was on the other side was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, his wards recognizing the magical signature of a fellow Order member. Cautiously, he opened the door.

"Granger? Potter! What are you two doing here?"

"Snape?" Harry stared in disbelief; he'd been right. The Prince was Snape after all.

"Snape?" Hermione screamed, her eyes glowing with a manic light, an odd smile gracing her lips. "You bastard! Did you think you could betray my Lord and live to tell about it? I was right. You lied to Cissy that night to save your greasy soul, you Slytherin bastard. Traitor! Shall I mete out a bit of justice? Cruc..."

"Expelliarmus!" Hermione's wand flew into Harry's outstretched hand. "Hermione, what is wrong with you?" he shouted.

"Potter. At last, I can kill you, too." The witch turned, her hands flexed to claw his eyes out as she launched herself at her best friend.

"Incarcerous!" Severus' spell caught her in mid leap, ropes shooting out of the end of his wand, binding the young woman as she tried to attack Harry. A hasty casting of Petrificus Totalus guaranteed the witch's silence as well as her unwilling cooperation as the two wizards brought her into the house.

Severus directed her to the sofa, her eyes snapping madly as she glared at them. "How long has this been going on?"

Shakily, Harry ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know what's wrong with her. Why would she attack either one of us?"

"How long, Potter?"

"Uhm, she's...she's been having problems with recurring pain since the Battle of Hogwarts. The Healers at St Mungo's think it's some type of echo from the Cruciatus Curse. That's why she came here today. Someone told her about a mythical Potions master that could heal her."

Snape shook his head. Two years. He'd thought she was probably suffering from residual pain after realizing the witch Omar had owled him about was Granger, his solicitor's letter citing the witch's identity, but he never expected her to be like this.

Harry watched Snape as he ran his wand over the still form of his friend. "She's never acted like that before. The Healers have tried different treatments. Nothing's ever worked. You know Hermione, she's read everything she could on the subject, but still nothing."

Severus snorted. Yes, he knew the know-it-all's penchant for research. It was her research that had brought Potter through his search to find and destroy the Dark Lord's Horcruses

"Can you help her?"

Severus locked eyes with the angry witch. "Legilimens," he whispered. He slipped into the vortex that passed for Hermione's mind, silken strands of silvery blue threads floated past him in groups, the most current memories at the front of her mind. Vague images formed a slide show as Severus searched for a clue as to what had precipitated the attack. Her comment about Cissy had given him an idea; he only hoped he was wrong. It took a few minutes, but Severus found what he was looking for. He'd felt the presence the minute he'd entered the witch's mind, just not sure where it had sequestered itself among the memories. Unfortunately, he'd been right in his assumptions. Gently, he withdrew.

"Where was Miss Granger hit when Lestrange cursed her?" Surprisingly gentle fingers brushed the hair from Hermione's face as he looked for the curse site.

"Her left shoulder. Why?"

Severus unbuttoned the top three buttons of Hermione's jumper, peeling back the loose cloth as her ran a calloused finger over the curse scar on her shoulder. "Bellatrix was cursing both Miss Granger and Miss Weasley when Molly attacked her?"

"Yeah, well, she was a strong witch. But what does that have to do with why Hermione suddenly went berserk outside?"

Severus turned on the young man. "Think, Potter. Bellatrix was favored by the Dark Lord. She was privy to many of his inner most secrets. It was the reason he entrusted her with Helga Hufflepuff's Cup. He knew she was loyal to him, it was the reason I was instructed to send the Sword of Gryffindor to her Gringotts vault. I believe her soul must have shattered from the force of Molly's curse."

"Shattered?" Harry sat abruptly, his legs barely holding him as realization dawned. "Hermione is a...Horcrux?"

"So it would seem." Severus stood lost in thought. Potter had been the only human Horcrux Severus had ever known. He didn't believe Bellatrix had planned to create a Horcrux, but then neither had the Dark Lord intended for Harry Potter to be one either.

"Why go crazy now?"

"She must have been resisting her all this time, though I imagine the pain and constant contact have been wearing her down. Miss Granger's surprise when she saw me allowed Bellatrix to surge to the forefront." He could see the dark circles under Hermione's eyes. Her face was too thin; a general sense of weariness enveloped the young woman. He had hoped the scar would've held an answer or clue, but it did not appear to have any special characteristics.

"Contact?" Harry watched Hermione, only her eyes moved in her frozen state. The anger and madness that radiated from his friend would give him nightmares for years to come.

Severus nodded. "I could hear an echo of Lestrange's voice when I searched Miss Granger's mind. I would imagine she has been talking to her these last two years."

"How do we help her?"

"Help her?" Severus turned, frowning as he regarded the young wizard. "Do you have another Resurrection Stone on hand? No? I didn't think so. Do you recall what happens when you disarm a Horcrux? You are dealing with Dark magic, Potter."

"We can't leave her like this."

"No, I don't suppose we can." Severus closed his eyes. It seemed the Fates were determined to conspire against him. He'd just gained his life back only to have these two show up on his doorstep. There was nothing he could do. Nothing concrete that he was sure would work. He'd made up his mind to tell Potter they would need to consign the poor witch to a padded room in St Mungo's when he looked up into Lily's eyes. Blast the witch. Even if he'd managed to save her offspring, those eyes reminded him he hadn't saved her. Severus sighed; the young woman didn't deserve this fate. "There may be a potion. I don't know if it will work. It's never been tried on a human."

"Do you have it?"

"It's a rare potion, created with Dark magic. So, of course I have it in stock. I'll just nip back down to my lab and fetch it for you." Severus shook his head, glaring at the young man. "I'd have to brew it. I suppose I can put Miss Granger into a magically induced coma while I tend to the potion. The full moon is only two days off; I will need to have the base ready by then. It will take another seven days after that before the potion will be ready." He stared at the young man before him, his expression softening. "Do you know what Muggle chemotherapy is, Potter?"

Harry started from the sudden change in topic. "Chemotherapy? Yeah, it's treatment for cancer. Why?"

"Chemotherapy does not distinguish between good and bad cells. When given, it attacks all cells that match the cell structure that is to be eliminated."

"Right, that's why some people lose their hair."

"Exactly, well, a Horcrux is similar to a cancer in that it needs to be eliminated from the person or object that is containing it. However, a witch's or wizard's inherent magical structure contains the same magical signature that a Horcrux does. If the process of removing Lestrange from Miss Granger's mind doesn't kill her, it might leave her a Squib for life."

**TBS** 

# Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and...Thistle?

Chapter 4 of 6

Hermione seeks an elusive cure for the lasting effects of a curse Bellatrix Lestrange managed to hit her with during the Battle of Hogwarts. Her life has been lost to endless bouts of pain and despair that have plagued her these last two years. But her luck may finally be changing. A reference to a Dark potion in an obscure book may hold the key to her cure. But where will she find a Potions master knowledgeable enough to brew it? Written for Warded\_Portal for the SSHG Winter 2007 exchange.

Prompt: AU, EWE: Hurt/comfort. Years after the final battle, Hermione struggles daily with the after effects of Bellatrix Lestrange's special brand of Crucio. St. Mungo's advises treating the symptoms, but Hermione wants to live her life. She goes to the oldest center of Wizarding population, Alexandria, Egypt, chasing a rumour: a Potions master with a dual expertise in Legilimency. For some reason, he doesn't want to help her. Without knowing his true identity, Hermione must persuade him she is worth his time. Romance, happy ending please. (Bonuses include: archaeology, magical artifacts, history, dusty libraries, and moments of crazy stupid in love).

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Disclaimer: Not mine. All characters and settings belong to JKR, et al. I promise to return them when I finish playing with them.

Chapter Four Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and...Thistle?

"You'll make the potion?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Did you hear what I said? If the process of removing Lestrange from her mind doesn't kill her, it could rob her of her magic entirely."

"She can't go on like this, Snape."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. Potter should come with a warning, he thought: Approach with caution: Headaches may occur on contact. "The potion alone will not cure Miss Granger. It will merely weaken Bellatrix's attachment to her mind. I will need to go in and remove the soul fragment."

"But you can do that, right?"

Damn Gryffindors. Nothing is ever as black and white as they make it out to be. Albus could have told Potter that." I suppose I could. She may need care after. I don't know how debilitating the potion will be or what long-term side effects Miss Granger will suffer." Providing she lives, he added silently. Severus gazed at the young witch lying on his couch. Her eyes no longer moved franticly; a lone tear slid from the corner of one eye. He would guess the witch had taken back control of her mind; at least he hoped she had. He would not proceed without speaking with her. "Miss Granger, I'm going to allow you to speak. I need you to understand what is involved before I go any further." His voice took on a definite sneer. "And I warn you, Bellatrix, I will know if it's you trying to fool me." Casually, Severus waved his wand.

Hermione tried to blink away her tears. He had released her head, but her body still remained immobile. "Professor?"

"Hermione?" Harry took a step forward only to be stopped by Severus' outstretched hand.

"Miss Granger, can you recite the twelve uses of dragon's blood?" Severus crossed his arms and waited, one brow arched questioningly. While Bellatrix had excelled at wand work, dueling her true strength, she was never that good at potions and would not have bothered to memorize such trivial information. Granger, on the other hand, used to annoyingly regurgitate facts regularly in class. The twelve uses of dragon's blood would have been something she had committed to memory early on in her schooling.

Hermione gave him a weak smile. "The twelve uses of dragon's blood. One, as an ingredient in cleaning products; two, to enhance and add clarity to a Wit-Sharpening potion; three..."

Severus listened as the witch listed the uses without hesitation. He was fairly sure it was Hermione Granger and not Bella he was listening to. "How is Polyjuice Potion made?"

"You must first stew lacewing flies for twenty-one days in a steel cauldron over a low flame. Various ingredients are added during this process. Diced leeches and

powdered bicorn horn are added after the first seven days of brewing. Knotgrass should be added after ten days, but will still create a useful potion if added after day twelve. At seventeen days, you add finely chopped fluxweed picked at the full moon. On day twenty, you add the shredded boomslang skin. When the potion is finished, you will need to add a bit of the person you wish to turn into, such as a piece of their fingernail or a hair."

The Potions master smiled; yes, it was definitely Granger. "And what would happen if you added a hair that was not from a human being?"

Even in her frozen, bound state, Hermione had the grace to blush. "As you well know, the hair of an animal, even something as harmless as a cat, only transforms part of the person. Adding on the base characteristics of the animal to the human form but not allowing for full transformation. Medical attention is required to return the person to normal."

"Miss Granger, I assume you heard what I said to Potter? I can try to remove Lestrange from your mind, but the cost may be dear to you. The best we can hope for is your recovery with your magic intact, but there exists a real possibility that you will lose your magic, if not your life."

"I do understand, Professor. I also know I can't take much more of this. It's not just the episodes of pain; it's her, whispering to me all the time. Whatever happens, it has to be better than this."

"And if you lose your magic?"

"There will still be quite a bit I can do, research, for one. Whatever the outcome, I can't do this anymore. It's becoming harder and harder to stay in control. She's only slipped out twice before, but I'm afraid she seems to be getting stronger. I won't let her have me. Do whatever you have to."

Wearily, Severus nodded. "I need to finish the base before the full moon two nights from now. It will take another seven days after that to complete the potion."

Harry nodded. "That's fine. Hermione can stay with Ginny and me. I'll bring her back when you're ready. Unbind her, and we can go."

"Have you actually listened to the conversation, Potter? She no longer has full control over Lestrange. Care to tell me what will happen if she turns into Bellatrix and decides to kill you and Mrs Potter in the middle of the night?"

While he knew Hermione would never harm him, the scene at Snape's door was still fresh enough to worry him. "So, what do we do until you're ready for her?"

"She will remain here. There are several potions I will need to administer over the week's time to strengthen her body and spirit. I can induce a magical coma with the Draught of Living Death; it should allow her body to recharge itself without her mind's interference. Toddy," he called.

A small elf, dressed in a gaudy tea towel appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Master Snape, sir?"

"See that the back bedroom across from mine is cleaned and aired. Miss Granger will be staying here for a few days."

Harry nodded. "Okay, I'll need to Floo home and pick up a few things. I can be back in an hour."

Severus turned to stare at the young man. "Whatever for?"

"If she's staying, I'm staying. You don't think I'm going to leave Hermione alone here with you?"

Severus sighed. "There is nothing you can do for her. The magical coma should stop Bellatrix from advancing on her mind; in any event, she will be unconscious the entire time. I will see that she gets the proper potions and care, but until the potion is complete, there is nothing more to do."

"She's not staying here alone."

"It's okay, Harry. I trust Professor Snape."

"It's no longer 'Professor,' Miss Granger."

Harry stepped closer to the couch, his hand resting on Hermione's unmoving arm. "I'm not leaving you alone here. I just need to pick up a few things and tell Gi..."

"Ooooh, isn't that sweet. Wittle bitty Potty and Snapey playing nice nice with the Mudblood." Hermione's head whipped back and forth as she tried to reach out and bite Harry's hand.

"Petrificus Totalus." Severus had turned just in time to see Hermione trying to bite Harry. Quickly, he recast a Full-Body Bind Spell, breathing a sigh of relief as the possessed witch fell back against the couch cushions. "That is what I was talking about. I shall return momentarily."

Harry tried to still the trembling in his hands. How had he not noticed what was going on with Hermione all this time? While he still questioned where Snape's true loyalties lay, regardless of his actions during the final battle, he had no such doubts in the man's abilities. Still, to leave her here, alone, with him.

The Potions master in question emerged from his basement lab holding a small green bottle. With great care, Severus administered a dose of Living Death to the troubled witch. The effect was almost instantaneous. Her eyes slipped closed; the tense set to her body changed as she relaxed into the couch, her limbs resting bonelessly against the cushions. Even her breathing had evened out to a calm, steady pace.

"Toddy, is Miss Granger's room ready?"

Once again the little elf appeared. "Yes, Master Snape. Shall I take the Miss upstairs?"

"See that she is comfortable. I will need you to monitor her while she is here. There is a series of potions that must be given to her over the next week. I'll draw up a schedule for you to follow."

"Yes, Master Snape."

Harry watched as the elf guided his friend's body up the stairs. "She'll be all right, won't she?"

"I can assure you, no harm will come to her here. I cannot say the same will be true after I try to remove Lestrange. Not that I particularly care, but where is Mr Weasley through all this? I would think that for Miss Granger's sake, he would be shadowing my steps like a lost puppy dog."

"It's not like that. Ron's on the road with the Chudley Cannons. He stops in to see Hermione or me when he's in town. But they're just friends now." Harry hesitated. "Snape, I'd like to bring Ginny here to see Hermione. I know she'll be worried about her."

Severus passed a weary hand across his face. "Fine. Bring whomever you wish. I will reset my wards to recognize you so can visit Miss Granger. Though might I remind you, this is my home and not the Gryffindor common room? Please keep that in mind when you bring the masses through here to visit. You can see yourself out. I need to get started on the base. The Ginseng root must be added two days from now when the moon is at its peak, or I'll have to wait until next month and try to brew the potion again."

"It's not that I'm not grateful for your help. But I know you never liked any of us. So, why are you doing this?"

Severus stopped in the open door and looked into Lily's eyes. "Because maybe this time I can actually make a difference." Without a backward glance, he disappeared

down the stairway.

#### 

With an economy of movement, Severus finished chopping the daisy petals and added them to the bubbling cauldron to his left. The potion changed from a warm goldenrod to a sunny yellow as the petals dissolved. Selecting a glass rod, he counted out twelve clockwise stirs, followed by thirteen anticlockwise turns, and three full figure eights. Tomorrow night the potion would be ready. Potter and Miss Weasley, Mrs Potter, he mentally corrected himself, would be on hand in case something went wrong.

Severus shook his head. Potter. While Granger in her frozen state was tolerable, the young wizard had stopped in daily to check on the witch. Mindful of Severus' comment, he only brought his wife and Weasley to visit the first night. Often, he could hear Potter talking to the young woman, assuring her that everything would be fine.

The Dark man snorted. Everything will be fine? Potter's optimism was more than he could bear. This was not some fairy tale where Granger's fairy godmother would appear and put things to rights. Even magic had its limits.

There was no handsome prince waiting in the wings to place a chaste kiss on the fair maiden's lips to wake her from her enchanted sleep. He was the only prince that would be attending her, and even he could not guarantee what the outcome would be. Happily ever after was the stuff of childhood stories and held no place here.

With a weary sigh he checked the potion's progress. He only hopedboth he and Granger survived the exorcism of Lestrange from her mind tomorrow night.

### 

A stone basin, odd runes and other symbols carved along the edge, sat on the nightstand. An etched ribbon of leaves, their flat broad images mingling with the runes and interspersed with the image of a small flower indicated that the Pensieve may have been designed to contain something more than just memories. A Scottish thistle, its thorns arcing toward the bowl's edges, was etched into the bottom of the receptacle.

Harry studied the stone basin. He'd had previous experience with both Snape's and Dumbledore's Pensieves before, but this one looked different from those.

"Is that a thistle on the bottom?" Ginny watched mesmerized as the swirling liquid, at least she thought it was liquid, formed random patterns across the surface of the bowl.

Severus looked up from the potion phials he'd been lining up on top of the other nightstand. "The thistle represents protection. It is believed that evil will become trapped in the thorns of the flower and stay ensnared there. Do you remember any of the history Binns taught you? It's said that an invading Viking trod upon a magic thistle and alerted the Scottish wizards to his presence. It was fast work to turn the intruders back once they were identified."

His eyes softened as he looked at the 'sleeping' witch in the bed. "I'm sure Miss Granger would tell you, if she could speak, about a group known as The Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle. Their motto loosely translates to 'no one attacks me and gets away with it."

"And the leaves around the edge? The Pensieves that I've seen only had runes on them. They didn't look like this." Harry gestured to the edging of the basin.

"That's because it's not a Pensieve; it's a containment vessel. That's rosemary along the edge. A spell is woven into the leaves to contain the soul I intend to trap within it."

"You're creating a Horcrux?"

"No, Potter, not a Horcrux. If it were a Horcrux, Lestrange could conceivably be brought back from the dead. I intend to permanently seal her soul in the vessel. Once her soul fragment is in the basin, the leaves will come together and seal the top. I have no desire to ever see Bellatrix walk this earth again. I'm quite certain Miss Granger would agree with me."

"What do you want us to do?" Ginny's quiet voice cut through the tension mounting in the small room.

Severus held up a clear cut-glass phial, the liquid inside sparkled bright yellow as though lit with an inner glow. A second phial appeared in his hand; this one showed a deep, rich ruby color in the room's candlelight. "If all goes well, there'll be nothing for you two to do. This potion," he swirled the yellow liquid the color of trapped sunshine, "should weaken Lestrange's hold on her mind. I'm going to draw the fragment forward to the front of her mind and try to draw it into the basin."

"And the other potion?"

"I'd rather not have Lestrange take up residence in my mind. Consider this Occlumency in liquid form. It should block any attempt she tries to cross over into me."

Harry looked at Severus in horror. He remembered entering Snape's mind when he'd tried to teach him Occlumency in his fifth year. "Lestrange could end up possessing you?"

"It's not likely, but there is a possibility. The connection into her mind will open a small gap into mine. Fortunately, Lestrange was not a skilled Legilimens. I have enough ghosts to haunt me without her madness in my head, too."

"Why didn't you mention this before?"

"And what difference would it have made if I had? Would you prefer to pack Miss Granger up and commit her St Mungo's right now? Or would you rather wait until she tries to attack you again? I suggest you focus on the here and now so that we may begin."

Ginny's soft touch to his shoulder stilled his anger. "Forgive my husband, Professor. He can be an idiot at times. Words alone cannot express our gratitude for your help. Just tell me what to do, what I should watch for, and we can get started."

Severus smiled tiredly at the young woman. She was a force to be reckoned with all on her own: strong willed, level headed, and a powerful witch. Potter was lucky to have her, as she would balance his recklessness when all else failed. "I'll remove the hex, but Miss Granger will have to remain bound. I don't know that Lestrange won't try taking over her body again. She may thrash or yell out. My estimation is that the process will be painful as well as physically debilitating. I shall attempt to draw the spirit out much the same as you would a memory. If all goes well, only the soul fragment will be removed."

"And if things... don't go well?" Ginny asked softly.

Severus ran a hand through his hair. "Some memory may be lost. I'm hoping to leave her magic intact. I imagine it will be more of a metaphysical duel, but I hope to sever Lestrange's hold on Miss Granger's magic before removing the fragment from her mind. It's most likely been the source of her continued pain these last two years."

"What should we watch for?"

"See that she doesn't harm herself. If I'm... not conscious when this is through, make damn sure it's Miss Granger you're talking to when she wakes up and not Lestrange. If she stops breathing while I'm still connected to her, separate us, and cast Rennervate. You should still be able to save Miss Granger's life if you act quickly enough." From a side pocket, Severus drew a third phial, the potion inside blacker than midnight. "The fragment should glow red when I drop it into the basin. Pour that potion over it immediately. The leaves will grow over the top and seal the vessel."

Harry smiled lopsidedly at Severus. "Whatever else you may be, Snape, I do trust your abilities. I know you can do this."

# Perception is a State of Mind

Chapter 5 of 6

Hermione seeks an elusive cure for the lasting effects of a curse Bellatrix Lestrange managed to hit her with during the Battle of Hogwarts. Her life has been lost to endless bouts of pain and despair that have plagued her these last two years. But her luck may finally be changing. A reference to a Dark potion in an obscure book may hold the key to her cure. But where will she find a Potions master knowledgeable enough to brew it? Written for Warded\_Portal for the SSHG Winter 2007 exchange.

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Chapter 5 Perception is a State of Mind

Severus sat sideways on the bed facing Hermione's still form. He'd given her the potion while still unconscious; it wouldn't do to make Bellatrix aware of his intentions. Now all he had to do was wake the witch up, remove the soul fragment, get out with both their minds and magic intact, and everyone would live happily ever after. Right.

A wave of his wand, a muttered *Rennervate*, and Hermione woke up. Her eyes skittered back and forth, landing on Snape before flitting to Harry and Ginny. Her gaze returned to the Potions master, fear evident in her eyes.

"Pro ?'

Before she could finish the word, Severus raised his wand to her temple and cast the Legilimency Spell. Once again he was pulled into the witch's mind. It seemed the potion had taken hold. He could feel Bellatrix's presence, the edges of her being more concise than before.

Where are you, Bellatrix? Don't you want to come out and play with me?he projected into the swirling void.

I never liked you to begin with, Snape. What makes you think I want to see you now?

Her mad cackle sent a chill through his own mind. You don't belong here, Bella. It's time to find a new home.

What's the matter, Snapey, afraid I might hurt your little Mudblood?

He could feel Hermione shudder as the two moved through the chasm of her mind, taunting one another. He moved passed swirling memories, spying a wizard in lime green robes, before probing further into the mist. He caught a glimpse of himself standing at his lectern as another memory moved past him. More and more images seemed to be moving around him. He suspected Lestrange was trying to deter him with Hermione's thoughts and emotions.

I grow weary of your childish games. Come on, Bellatrix. Where are you hiding A flash of light came racing toward him out of the darkness. He'd barely had time to raise his mental defenses as he deflected the imagined hex she sent towards him. He could make out a faint red glow ahead of him, the edges more defined than when he'd first seen if

"Harry, look." Ginny gestured to Severus' still form. While Hermione had moaned weakly, her body jumping sporadically every few minutes as she tensed her limbs, Snape had remained perfectly still until now. His lips curved up into a feral grin as he moved through Hermione's mind he'd found Lestrange.

Reciting an ancient spell used to exorcise evil spirits, several of the words long ago lost to today's languages, he bound Lestrange's soul to his spirit and began pulling the resisting Bella forward. She seemed determined to possess the witch, latching onto images and memories as he pulled her to the forefront of Hermione's mind by his sheer will alone.

Hermione shifted in agony as Bellatrix fought back. The witch was helpless to stop the constant deluge of pain racing through her body. Tears streamed from her eyes, her

voice hoarse from crying out as the torment continued.

It's time to join your master in hell, Bella. Slowly he pulled back; a thin, red thread seeped from Hermione's temple following Severus' wand as he withdrew from her mind. As soon as he'd broken free, he destroyed the connection he'd formed with Lestrange and cast the thread into the basin. Harry had been waiting. As the fragment sank to the bottom, he poured the potion across the top. The vessel glowed from within, the leaves closing to form a seamless closure, the fragment encased for all eternity.

Severus lurched back, his head pounding from the strain of performing the ritual. He reached for a phial on the nightstand and quickly downed it, the pain receding as his headache responded to the potion. He turned a cautious eye as he watched the witch in front of him and waited for her to speak.

"Hermione? Snape, what's wrong with her?"

"I suspect she's a bit overwhelmed at the moment. I would think my little romp through her mind might echo the effects of a concussion on some level. Miss Granger," he called softly, "can you hear me? Do you know where you are?"

"Harry?" Hermione looked lost as she looked around the room. Her eyes widened in surprise as she spied Snape.

"Don't try to talk. Just rest for a minute." Hermione's eyes slipped closed as Ginny brought a cool flannel to her forehead.

"Her magic? Is she all right? The fragment was red, like you said. But I thought I saw a white thread or two tangled up with it."

"Lestrange tried to do as much damage as she could. I'm afraid she may have destroyed some of her memories. It's too soon for me to go back in and check her mind. Her health was questionable before this. She'll need time to recover. It will take a few weeks before we'll know the extent of the damage."

"And her magic?" Harry asked, wondering just what would happen to his friend if her magic didn't return.

"That, too, will take time."

"And until then?"

Severus gestured to the phials he had lined up on the nightstand. "I've devised a series of potions to help with her recovery. Her nerves and muscles are weak from the constant pain. Rest will be her greatest ally." Hermione's hand on his arm startled the dark man.

"She's gone. I can't feel her anymore. Oh, God, Professor, how can I ever thank you?" Her tears started anew, the young woman finally free of the terror that she'd lived with the past two years.

Severus watched Hermione's eyes as he called out to his house-elf. "Toddy."

The little elf popped in next to the nightstand. "Yes, Master Snape, sir?"

"Miss Granger will be starting on the second round of potions. Refer to the schedule I gave you for doses and times. Perhaps some light tea and toast might be in order, then rest."

"Professor, I can't stay here. I've imposed on you long enough."

"I told you, Miss Granger, I am no longer your professor. You'll need several potions that must be prepared on a daily basis. I still have other potions and my private research that needs tending to. I don't fancy chasing you down all over Great Britain to see that you've taken your medication at the proper times. I'm just thankful I managed to rid you of Lestrange's spirit and not kill you in the process. Let's see how thankful you are when we find out the extent of damage she caused as a result of my interference."

Hermione smiled softly. "I'd miss my magic, but if I never cast another spell again, I would still thank you. She's gone. I don't know how I'll ever repay your kindness. You have no idea what the last two years have been like."

The gruff man rose awkwardly from the bed. "Rest, get well, leave my home. That will be thanks enough. Now if you'll excuse me..." and even though the wizard had been clad in a button down shirt and trousers, he swept out of the room as if he were dressed in full Potions master regalia, an imaginary robe majestically billowing out behind

# 

She couldn't believe how weak she was. Her legs still felt wobbly, and after her last disastrous attempt, she'd had Severus berating her for not calling for assistance when the floor rose up to meet her, she didn't dare try to stand on her own again, at least not until she felt stronger. Really, her dignity had suffered more than her bum had.

They'd moved awkwardly from 'Miss Granger' and 'Professor' to first names when he'd blown up the third time she used the honorific title he now seemed to despise. He was no longer her professor, he reminded her tersely, hadn't been since before the war ended. By tack agreement they hadn't discussed the events leading up to his leaving Hogwarts or the circumstances surrounding the final battle. It was almost a relief to leave those topics behind and move on.

It was slow going, but she dutifully took the potions that were doled out to her. Madam Pomfrey had come the second day, pronounced her recovery a miracle, and given her a list of exercise to do along with her potions schedule.

The days quickly fell into a predictable pattern. She'd wake to find that a light breakfast, kept fresh under a warming charm, waiting for her. The room had been charmed to fulfill a number of requests, a self-cleaning wash basin and other toiletries would come on command. She could almost forget she was unable to do magic for the moment, as the objects whisked back and forth between her and the dresser. But the sudden silence when she looked around the room would remind her that she was alone in her own mind once again. That it was just Hermione that held control, and with that thought, nothing else mattered. Periodically Severus would find her listening to the silence, an odd smile on her face. He, of all people, might have understood her relief, having felt the madness when he'd first probed her mind.

Once refreshed, she'd call for Toddy, who had taken a liking to the witch and was more than happy to Apparate her downstairs. Dressed in warm pajamas and a silk dressing gown to ward off chills, she would make herself comfortable on the lounge sofa, a stack of back issues from various potions, charms, and other wizarding publications at her side. Ginny had stopped by every day for the first week, joining her for a light lunch and proving what a stern taskmaster she could be as she helped her work through her exercises. She was more than ready for an afternoon nap when her friend left. But it was the evenings she had come to cherish.

Severus would join her for dinner, their conversation covering a variety of topics, usually centering on whatever article Hermione had read that day. He would help her to the lounge before settling himself into one of the side chairs in front of the fire, the two reading in companionable silence until, invariably, she would fall asleep. She assumed it was Toddy who magicked her back to her room and bed, not knowing that it was Severus who'd taken to carrying her up the stairs after the third night.

He watched as she stretched her head from side to side, the muscles in her neck still weak and sore. One of his books balanced precariously on one knee as she raised a hand to her shoulder and started to rub it.

"Budge up."

"What? Severus, you startled me."

"Move forward. Your neck is still bothering you?"

"Just a bit." Warm capable hands massaged and soothed her sore muscles as he worked from the center of her back out toward her shoulders. She shifted forward, her knees coming up so she could cross her arms and lean forward to rest her head on them. "Oh, please, don't stop. That feels heavenly." A small moan of pleasure escaped the witch as his hands glided across her back.

The sound of that moan had more of an effect on Severus than he cared to admit. Images of bare, oiled skin, his hands following the sensual curve of her body, rose unbidden in his mind. It did not help that he'd run across the memory of her with Krum when he'd looked into her mind that morning. He'd only meant to check for damages resulting from the exorcism, nothing more. She'd noticed her memory of the final battle was... sketchy. She could no longer recall being hit by Lestrange, only the events leading up to the actual curse. Waking up in St Mungo's was clearer than the final battle. It was one of several memories Severus assumed Lestrange had damaged when he pulled her from Hermione's mind.

But somehow the image of her and Krum together, had jumped into his path. He swallowed thickly, his mouth going dry as he tried to erase the sight of Hermione coupling with the Quidditch star from his own mind. It didn't help that the young man looked like a younger version of himself; it would have been too easy to imagine it was he under the witch, sampling the pleasures of her body, her back arched, eyes closed, her hair a wild halo as she reached her peak. He'd watched as her hand traced a sensual pattern from her neck to her breast, Krum's hands wrapped around her hips as she rode the wizard. Severus shook his head, trying to clear it of the images that threatened his sanity; it wouldn't do to dwell on thoughts of the witch as being anything more than a temporary thorn in his side.

It had only been a few days. He suspected it might take weeks before Granger was fully recovered. It would probably take that long before they'd know how much of her magic, if any, had survived. She would be a guest in his home for as long as it took to get her back on her feet and out of there so he could return to his life and his solitude.

Gently, he worked the muscles along her spine, the tight knots easing as he rubbed firm circles in an ever-widening pattern along her back. His hands splayed wide, thumbs soothing away the witch's aches and pains. A frown creased his brow when he realized she hadn't made a sound in the last few minutes. "Hermione?" he called softly. He chuckled quietly when he realized she'd fallen asleep, her head resting on her crossed arms. He scooped her up, one arm under her knees, the other around her shoulders and drew her to him.

Instinctively, she turned and burrowed into the warmth of his body, a small sigh of contentment escaped as her hand came up to rest on his chest. "Mm, nice," she mumbled, the comforting smell of herbs and other ingredients that clung to his clothing enveloping her.

Toddy appeared suddenly next to the open stairway. "Should Toddy take Miss from you, Master Snape?"

"No, Toddy, I'll see to Miss Granger."

Toddy watched his master carry the sleeping witch up the stairs, a small smile tugging at the corner of the elf's mouth. Maybe Miss Granger would not be the only human who was healing in the house.

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Three weeks seemed to pass in the blink of an eye with each day's progress more encouraging than that of the day before. She was stronger now, her legs no longer resembling those of a newborn calf.

And her magic was coming back.

She didn't want to admit how upset she'd been at the thought of losing it, knowing that by all rights she should have been dead or at the very least the newest resident of the Janus Thickey Ward at St Mungo's. But now that it was starting to come back, she allowed herself to admit her fears before moving on.

She started slow and considered it a major breakthrough the first time she was able to levitate her brush before working her way through a list of rudimentary spells, her excitement growing with each success. It had taken time, but she'd worked her way back up to more difficult charms and actions; practicing every day as her strength returned.

She looked up, her smile dazzling when she saw Severus in the doorway. "Watch. Accio brush." The brush crossed the room, its path wobbly as it flew into her open hand.

"Very good. How do you feel?"

"Honestly? Tired, but exhilarated at the same time! This means I didn't lose my magic."

"I should think at this rate you'll make a full recovery in no time." He moved to her bedside, his hand gentle as he raised her face, the calloused pads of his finger rubbing lightly against her skin.

His gaze was intense as he checked her eyes, watching the pupils as they dilated. He hesitated to enter her mind again, having no desire to encounter memories that would only serve to torment him further. As far as he could see, it would serve no purpose. It seemed the memories that had been torn from her mind centered on Lestrange and the final battle. Perhaps there were a few that may not have been as strong as before, but nothing that affected the witch's intelligence or abilities. Now it was a simple matter of healing, of allowing her body to repair itself.

"I think we should add a modified Invigoration Draught. It will give you added energy and may help to solidify your magic sooner. Perhaps if I started with a pomegranate base, or combined it with the Strengthening Solution..."

"Can I help you? If you recall, I used to be pretty good at potions. I could prepare some of the basic ingredients."

Severus stepped back and eyed Hermione's hopeful expression. Allowing her to work alongside him was wrong on so many levels. "I would have to have some type of recommendation from your previous Potions master before I could allow you access to my laboratory."

"And if I can't reach him?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Ah, then I'm afraid I can't grant your request."

"I see."

"Hermione, I'd rather you didn't wear yourself out."

"What if I promise to limit myself? I'll only help for an hour. Two at the most, then come right up here and take a nap. I promise."

He was becoming too comfortable around the witch. He had no right to invite her in when he should have been distancing himself even further from her. It was a mistake; one he knew could only end badly, definitely not a good idea to let her into his lab. "Fine, but if you get tired, I expect you to tell me."

"Thank you!" Impulsively, she hugged him.

He stiffened at the sudden contact, pulling back as if burned, all the while silently berating himself for his lapse in judgment.

"Uhm. sorry."

"Very well. Follow me."

Once in the lab, a room magically enhanced to encompass his growing business, he directed her to a side table and the stool in front of it. Gathering several ingredients he needed, he gave her careful instructions as to their preparation and left her to the task. Begrudgingly, he answered her questions, explained the potions that were in various stages of completion, and maintained his distance.

This, too, became part of her daily routine.

She no longer needed constant exercise, choosing to spend her afternoons in the lab with Severus instead. Ginny had given her a funny look when Hermione had mentioned the change in her schedule during their weekly lunch date one afternoon, asking her what was going between her and Snape, not really accepting her friend's mumbled explanation either.

It was a few days later when Harry showed up to question her himself.

TRS

# **Someday My Prince Will Come**

Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione seeks an elusive cure for the lasting effects of a curse Bellatrix Lestrange managed to hit her with during the Battle of Hogwarts. Her life has been lost to endless bouts of pain and despair that have plagued her these last two years. But her luck may finally be changing. A reference to a Dark potion in an obscure book may hold the key to her cure. But where will she find a Potions master knowledgeable enough to brew it? Written for Warded\_Portal for the SSHG Winter 2007 exchange.

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Chapter 6 Someday My Prince Will Come

Severus had gone to London on business, leaving her alone in the house. Hermione had taken the opportunity to curl up on the sofa and lose herself in a Muggle novel she'd found interspersed among the magical texts. Not expecting anyone, the sudden knock at the door startled her.

Toddy appeared, his hand posed to open the door. "Toddy will see to the visitor, Miss. Master Snape says you is to rest until he returns."

Hermione smiled at the little elf, chuckling quietly when she remembered how Severus had threatened to throw her out if she mentioned S.P.E.W. to him. The door opened to reveal a slightly disheveled Harry Potter standing on the doorstep.

"Harry, come in. Toddy, would you get us a cuppa and maybe a few chocolate biscuits if there are any left?" The elf disappeared into the kitchen only to reappear a few minutes later with an elaborate tea service.

Harry settled into the side chair by the fire, grinning boyishly at Hermione. "Sorry I haven't been by in the last few days, but you look great. How are you feeling?"

"I feel great. My magic is back to normal, and I'm sleeping through the night again."

"Great. So, how about we pack up your things and you come and stay with Ginny and me for a while. We both miss you and everyone's been asking after you. Where's Snape? He can give me a list of the potions you still need to take and we can get out of here."

"Thanks, but really, I'm in no hurry to leave."

"Hermione, you've been here almost six weeks. Don't you think that's long enough? Snape can't be pleased with having you here."

"I was unconscious for the first ten days, Harry."

"Still, this is... Snape we're talking about." Harry smiled sheepishly, hoping to defuse the thunderclouds he could see gathering in her eyes.

"You just can't let it go, can you? He saved my life. No, more than that, he saved my sanity."

"I know and I'm grateful for what he did for you. But don't you think that could be the reason you're not thinking too clearly. He hasn't... done anything to you, has he? I just... Hermione, be reasonable; he's Snape." He knew he was whinging. He couldn't help it. It was... Snape for God's sake. What was there to think about?

"I don't believe you." The young witch's glare cut daggers through him. "After saving my life, after everything he's done, how can you doubt him... still?"

"I know he was on our side. I was there. I saw him fighting. Without him I never would've been able to finish off Voldemort. I know that. I know he switched sides. You don't have to remind me again." Harry held his hand up to forestall her argument. He'd had years of Hermione telling him that he should respect Snape, years of listening to her try to change his mind about the wizard. "I know you respect him. But he started out as a Death Eater. Doesn't that tell you something about the man to begin with?"

"And no one ever changes, right?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

Hermione studied her friend; he shifted uncomfortably under her gaze. "What about Dumbledore?"

Harry swallowed thickly. "What about him?"

"Was he good, Harry? Did he follow whatever rules you have set down to be a hero? 'Cause I have to tell you, I have a hell of a lot more respect for Severus than I do for Dumbledore. Yes, I know he was a Death Eater. It wasn't the wisest thing to do. And believe me, no matter how many years he's spent trying to atone for that horror, I don't think he will ever be able to forgive himself, so I really don't think he needs you to be judge and jury for him.

"At what point in his life do think he was really given a fair shake? When your father hung him from the tree? When Sirius led him to the Shrieking Shack? How about when Malfoy turned him to the Dark? Or when the Headmaster took him in so he could have a spy in the enemy's camp and used him mercilessly for more than twenty years? He's been used and put upon by more people than either of us will ever know. And still, despite everything that's happened to him, he was willing to give his life because he believed it was the right thing to do. It takes courage to admit you've made a mistake, Harry, especially one of that magnitude. And while I always thought he was a brave man, I think it must have taken tremendous courage not only to admit he was wrong but also to switch sides, to spy on Voldemort, knowing he was signing his own death warrant and doing it anyway because he believed it was the right thing to do. Kowtowing to that monster, playing the part of the dutiful minion, walking the knife's edge for so many years, not expecting to see past the last battle, but risking his life anyway, day after day after day while everyone around him continued to doubt and malign him.

"You want to know what a hero looks like; you want to meet someone truly exceptional? Hang around. Severus will be back shortly." Hermione rose and walked to the stairs. "If you'll excuse me, I'm a bit tired. I think I'll lie down for a while. Tell Ginny I'll Floo her next week."

"Hermione...'

"Goodbye, Harry."

She held herself in check as she moved woodenly up the stairs and down the hall. Her emotions remained closed off until she heard the outside door close behind him.

She didn't want to leave. She was happy here, but the truth was she didn't really belong here. She and Severus had become... friends of a sort. And while she had come to value his friendship, she was starting to feel a growing attraction for the man. There had been times she'd caught him watching her, causing her to think that maybe he felt something for her, too, but was too afraid to broach the subject, fearful of upsetting the delicate balance they had established. Frustration and anger overwhelmed her, and she cried into her pillow until sleep claimed her.

It was where Severus found her when he returned an hour later.

"Hermione?" Severus sat on the side of the bed. Tenderly, he brushed aside the mass of hair that shadowed the witch's face. He could see she'd been crying. "Are you all right? What's the matter?"

"Harry was here." She turned to look up at him, her expression woeful. "He said he missed me and wanted me to stay with him and Ginny for a while."

"I see.'

"Do you?"

It was too tempting. She was too tempting. His dreams had been peppered with erotic images of Hermione in various stages of undress for the last few weeks. He'd awoken more than once to find himself hard with need, and on more than one occasion, he'd brought himself to completion thinking of her.

He watched as she chewed on her bottom lip, imagining how she would taste. He was fairly certain she would welcome his attentions. But he'd lived long enough to know nothing would come of it. He was not the type of man women looked for in a partner, and he had no desire to set himself up for failure.

Hastily, he rose from the bed and moved across the room, distancing himself from Hermione. "And your answer was?" His voice was husky with emotion as he watched her move off the bed and walk towards him.

"Does it matter?"

All reason fled as she closed the distance between them. He pulled her to him, his mouth seeking hers, his kiss demanding. Her response was immediate, her body molding to his as fire spread through her veins. Abruptly, he pushed her away. "This is madness. You can't mean it. I assume this is the result of one too many potions in your blood." He rubbed an errant hand across his face. "I can't do this." He turned and escaped the room.

"Severus?" Her voice followed him down the hallway and into the lounge. He could hear the confusion in her tone. A moment later, she entered.

Severus cleared his throat. "Miss Granger..."

"We're back to that, are we?" Defensively, she crossed her arms in front of her.

"Yes, we're back to that. Perhaps Potter is right? Don't you think it's about time you left? You finished the last round of potions two days ago. Your magic has returned en force. Your memories, well, I can't imagine you'll really miss the memory of Bellatrix hexing you. Your friends miss you. So..." He left the question hanging in the air between them.

Hermione studied the dour man through lowered lashes. They seemed to be walking a fine line around each other the last few days. It seemed it all came down to now. "What about you? Will you miss me?"

Severus' face closed. He bowed grandly. "Of course, my dear. I shall miss your sparkling wit, our witty repartee. Your presence fills the house with such light. I shall know only darkness when you leave. Ah, but my heart shall wither and die without you near." His simpering words had the desired effect on the witch, anger flashing in her eyes.

"I sincerely doubt you have a heart. I'll be gone within the hour, Mr Snape." She turned and started back up the stairs, stopping suddenly halfway up to turn and look at him

again. "Why did you kiss me?"

She thought he wouldn't respond, silence her only answer.

"Because I could," he said quietly.

Sadly, she nodded. "I see."

He watched her climb the remaining stairs. It was better this way. She was young, headstrong; her life lay before her, the possibilities endless. He didn't want her to stay out of misplaced gratitude. Truth be told, he would miss her. Miss the sound of her voice. Her intelligence. The house would be cast back into shadow once she was gone, but he had no intention of telling the witch that. He disappeared into his lab, not willing to watch her leave. His wards alerted him to the event anyway.

He looked around the empty room, she was gone, and that was that.

But it really wasn't the end. Once you've seen something, you could never unsee it.

And he saw her everywhere.

Years before the house had fallen into a state of disrepair, a fact that had never bothered him until he found himself with a life he hadn't planned for after the final battle. He'd taken what savings he'd had, repaired and furnished the house to his liking, and gone about setting up The Prince's Moste Potente Potables. He took quiet refuge in his laboratory; his days were spent brewing rare and exotic potions that brought top dollar, earning him a comfortable living, and his nights were his to do as he pleased, either furthering his own research or simply enjoying a good book. It was a somewhat Spartan life, but it had suited him after so many years on the edge.

He could return to his solitary existence, but the next time he cut potion ingredients from the back garden, he would see her bending over a plant she didn't recognize. Hear the wonder in Hermione's voice as she asked endless questions about their uses and properties before laughingly apologizing for babbling on. The kitchen would echo with the sound of her voice as he recalled the meals they'd shared, her eyes sparkling with intelligence as they dissected the latest article the witch had cited. His lab had been the last bastion, and now he would have the memory of her sitting at the table preparing ingredients and bottling potions.

She was everywhere he turned, and he'd sent her away.

Sighing dramatically, he pulled a number twelve cauldron from below his workbench and set about preparing his ingredients. A glance at the desk in the corner showed a number of orders waiting to be filled. He'd spent too many hours caring for the witch. Time to get on with it.

He pushed all thoughts of Hermione out of his mind and lost himself in the process of brewing.

He'd lost track of the time, but it was dark outside the lab window when he looked up. He would have continued working until he dropped from sheer exhaustion, he supposed, if his wards hadn't alerted him to her presence.

He found her in the kitchen. Unbelievably, she was setting the table. Was that a Muggle pizza box open on the counter? Severus leaned against the doorframe and silently watched Hermione as she worked.

"I wasn't sure what type of pizza you'd like. Actually, I'm not sure if you even like pizza, but I did notice you like mushrooms, so the pizza is half mushroom and the other half today's special. I brought a nice burgundy with me that you can open, or is there something else you'd rather have?"

Severus didn't move. "What are you doing here?"

"You have to eat dinner. Come, have a seat." Nervously, she gestured to the chair next to her.

"Hermione...'

"I think we should talk, but it can wait until later."

"There is nothing to talk about." Nevertheless, he pushed off the doorframe and grabbed the bottle of wine. Lost in his stupor, he'd forgotten to stop for lunch. As the aroma of fresh garlic bread and pizza taunted his sensitive nose, his stomach chose to remind him his body needed sustenance.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief as she cast a chilling charm on the two wineglasses she had set out. It was a bold move, showing up uninvited, or sheer stupidity, depending on how one looked at it. She couldn't be sure he still wouldn't hex her or throw her out or both, but at least he hadn't turned and walked away from her. That had to count for something.

"I still haven't finished Nester's article in this month's *Potion's Gazette*, but did you know he's speaking at a symposium in London next month? Maybe we can get tickets? It might be interesting to see if he's progressed with his theory." From somewhere she had produced a tossed green salad that she proceeded to serve to the two of them.

He sat back in his seat and watched the witch. "Why are you here?"

"What does it look like? We both have to eat." The smile disappeared from her face as she slumped dejectedly in her chair. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"What is it you want?"

"I want to be here... with you." Her voice was barely audible in the quiet of the room.

"You have a home, friends, and a life. Go live it. I didn't save your life to have you bury yourself here with me."

"Then why did you save me? I know that kiss meant something to you; I could feel it. Don't I mean something to you?"

He could see the hope shining in her eyes. "What's on the other half of that pizza?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"A little bit of everything. Sausage, ham, green and red peppers..."

He listened with half an ear, marveling that the object of his earlier ruminations was sitting and having dinner with him by choice. He had done the right thing, his actions noble and selfless in their execution. Was he to blame if she couldn't take no for an answer?

They talked about Nester's theory, the symposium (yes, he did know about it; he'd turned down their invitation to lecture on Dark potions), and a host of other topics that crossed their minds, all the while ignoring the elephant in the room.

Dinner finished, the two cast a series of simple cleaning charms, leaving the kitchen spotless once more. Severus turned from the counter and regarded the witch standing in front of him.

"Are you going to send me away?"

"I should." Casually, he reached out to her, a half smile gracing his lips as she moved but a breath away from him. She was wearing a Muggle top, her arms bare, the slightest trace of lace above the line of buttons that ran down the front. Slowly, he stroked her arm, his fingers skimming lightly against the soft skin. He watched with barely

contained amusement as goosebumps rose in the wake of his touch, a line forming from her shoulder to wrist.

Looking into her eyes, he could see the want and desire she felt. His own desire spiraling out of control as his eyes glittered with barely contained lust. The hell with it! He no longer cared what her reasons were for being there. He'd tried to do the right thing, he'd really tried, but it seemed she wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

Roughly, he pulled her against him, one hand sliding to the small of her back, pressing her into his growing arousal, the other softly stroking her cheek as she nuzzled the palm of his hand. He could feel her body molding to his, her arms sliding around his neck as she reached up to meet his lips.

With the barest of touches, he brushed his lips across hers before claiming her mouth in a searing kiss. His tongue plundered her mouth; his hands roamed her body as he delighted in the feel of her pressed against him.

He moved to open the top button of her shirt, his fingers brushing tantalizingly against her breast. Breathlessly, she pulled back to allow him access. His eyes darkened further as he took in her kiss-swollen lips, her eyes glazed over with lust. He could feel the heat from her hands as she rested them flat against his chest.

"Take me to bed, Severus. Make love to me."

Scooping her up into his arms, he carried her up the stairs.

"I do mean something to you."

He shouldered his bedroom door open and dumped the annoying witch onto his bed. "Damn it, yes, you do. Happy now?" he growled.

A smile lit her face. "Yes, very happy." She rose up on her knees and quickly pulled off her blouse. The black lace bra she wore cut low across her full breasts. She released the front clasp, allowing her breasts to spill forth. The scrap of lace sailed through the air and joined her shirt on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Hermione." A strangled moan escaped as the object of his desire bared herself for him. He captured her lips as he struggled to remove his boots and socks before joining her on the bed. "Are you sure?"

"You talk too much, do you know that?"

His laughed at the irony of her comment, amazed at the turn of events. Pinning her to the bed, he claimed her lips once more and lost himself in the woman lying beneath him.

Thoroughly sated, he lay back and caught his breath. He was inordinately pleased when Hermione nuzzled into his side, throwing one leg possessively over him.

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

Though his eyes were closed, she could tell by his breathing he wasn't asleep. "What happens now?"

A quiet chortle escaped. "I appreciate the compliment, but really, even I need more than five minutes to recover. Sleep. We can have another go when we wake up." He tightened his grip on the witch, his hand coming to rest on her hip.

Hermione smiled. "That's not what I meant. I mean what do we do now or tomorrow?"

The dark man watched her through hooded eyes. His voice was quiet, but carried in the stillroom. "What do you want to happen?"

Chewing on her lip, she stalled for time, weighing her answers as to which one he might agree to. "I want to stay here. With you."

"So stay."

"That's it?"

"I'm sure we can come to some sort of an agreement."

"An agreement?" she asked, frowning.

"I would expect you to give up your room across the hall."

"And where would I sleep?" she grinned, playing along.

The look he gave her would have burned varnish off wood.

"So, I'd move in here? I suppose you would expect me to continue making love to you on a regular basis?"

"Perhaps we should draw up a contract so you'll know just what your duties are?"

Her expression turned serious. "Do you really want me here?"

Gryffindors! Or should he just curse women in general? Tenderly, he cupped the side of her face, looking deep into her eyes. He closed the distance between them, the last word spoken against her lips. "I never want you to leave," he whispered before deepening the kiss.

It seemed he didn't need as much time to recover as he thought he did.

~Fini~

Pearle 2007