

# 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.

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).

## The Beginning

*Chapter 1 of 6*

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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 psychiatrist 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.

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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 inyanga proved to be nothing more than a traditional South African healer dealing in rare herbs and potions made from plants and animals. The inyanga 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 talismans get you?*"

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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 forests. Such forests were known to attract the Tasmanian Devil, a rare animal indigigenous 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 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.

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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 figure 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

## Travel Always Broadens The Mind













"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 owed 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 Horcruxes.

"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 Lestrage 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 Lestrage'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."



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 Lestrage 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 Lestrage. 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 Lestrage. 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







"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 Lestrage, 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 Lestrage 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 Lestrage 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."





"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

