

2:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time

The Apothecary Wizard's Row; San Francisco, California

"Oh my God! You're dead! I saw you die." Hermione's face turned deathly white as she stared at the profile of the man she thought had died and left her alone to face the world without him. Her hand shook as she pointed at the man standing not even ten feet in front of her.

The dark man scowled; he'd been safe here. He should have known it couldn't last forever. The Apothecary had been doing so well, but now he'd have to relocate... again. Maybe an Obliviate was in order? Just this once.

All in all it was getting rather tiresome. Drawing himself to his full height, he turned to confront a ghost from his past, only to be stopped short by the small voice that rang out in the sudden quiet.

"Mum? Are you all right? What's wrong?" The young man turned angrily toward the dark wizard. "Who are you? What have you done to my mum?"

Black eyes bore into matching black; Severus stared at the young boy standing next to Hermione, unable to process what he was seeing.

"Severus?" Hermione seemed frozen to the spot. Here was her deepest desire and her worst nightmare coming true in one fell swoop. "Is it really you?"

"He called you...He's not...I thought you and...He can't be..." Gobsmacked, Severus could only stare at the lad who bore a remarkable likeness to him.

Five Minutes Earlier (August 2009)

The Apothecary Wizard's Row; San Francisco, California

"Master Smith, there's someone here to see you." The young clerk waited respectfully in the open doorway to lab.

"Who is it, Charles?"

"I'm not sure. She said she was a colleague of yours. Has an English accent if that's any help."

An English accent? Why didn't his ghosts stay dead, like they were supposed to? "Very well, I'll be right out."

One Hour Earlier (August 2009)

Wizard's Row; San Francisco, California

"I just want to stop into *The Apothecary* for a minute. I promise I won't stay long, but we're right here. It's not like I'm going to be back this way anytime soon. I'm just curious to meet Master Smith. It would be nice to put a face to the name. We've been corresponding for almost a year. As soon as I say hello, we'll head for the Quintessential Quidditch Quadrant, I promise."

Stephen shook his head. He knew his mum: get her near a potions shop and she could disappear for hours. The only place more dangerous than an apothecary was a bookshop. He might as well setup camp while he waited for her. He liked books, apothecaries, too, but the Quidditch shop here was supposed to really be something special.

"Enough, Stephen, I know you're excited. We'll visit the Quidditch shop soon enough." Hermione smiled fondly at her son. While pleased and proud that he would be starting Hogwarts in less than a month, this trip was a last hurrah for the two of them, some one on one mother-son bonding time. She sighed thinking how lonely the house would seem without him.

The boy was tall for his age, his thick, dark hair barely brushing his shoulders. His skin, normally pale, held a healthy glow from a summer spent outdoors with Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny learning to play Quidditch. He'd found the one thing his mother, seemingly an expert at all things magic, couldn't do: fly. Her skills on a broom left much to be desired.

One Month Earlier (July 2009)

Godric's Hollow; West Country, England

Hermione watched her son fly with an ease she'd never possessed. Stephen's robes billowing out behind him while flying around the backyard during a quick game of Quidditch with Harry and Ginny's children had brought to mind another wizard. Her breath caught in her throat as she quickly dismissed the image of that man, so long ago gone from her life.

"Hermione? Are you all right?" Harry's concerned tone broke through the witch's reverie.

Her smile was shaky as she turned toward him. "I'm fine. You know how much I dislike flying; it's just a bit unnerving to see Stephen swooping around like that."

"The kid's a natural. Obviously, he didn't get his talent from you." Harry's blatant reference to Stephen's parentage went uncommented on as Ginny called them in for lunch.

Two months earlier (May 2009)

Granger Flat; London, England

"Stephen, you'll be leaving for Hogwarts in a few months, what do you think about you and I taking a trip abroad? Spend a few weeks with me in America before you go and leave your old mum?"

"I think that's a brilliant idea! Robert was there last year and said it was one of the best trips he'd ever taken."

"Ah, well, if Robert said it was that good, then I guess we'd better go." Hermione smiled at her son's scowl. Robert had been his 'best' mate for the last six months. Robert's word was law with her son; thankfully, he was a levelheaded young man who seemed to be a fairly good influence on Stephen, as far as she could tell. "Don't roll your eyes at me, dear. They might fall out of your head if you do that too much."

"When can we go? Do you know what cities have wizarding areas? Can we go to New York? Robert said that was really something to see. And California, he thought I would like Wizard's Row. They're supposed to have the biggest Quidditch store in the country, even bigger than Quality Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley."

Hermione had heard about the wizarding community before. She'd had reason, herself, to correspond with the owner of 'The Apothecary,' the American equivalent of Slug & Jiggers but located in California's wizarding community in a place called Wizard's Row. While researching a potion for St Mungo's, a colleague had mentioned a rare herb he'd come across in a reference book. Further investigation by Hermione had turned up 'The Apothecary' as a possible source for the herb. After her initial correspondence with the owner, a wizard by the unusually vague name of John Smith, had led to her purchasing the rare herb (and its success when added to the potion she'd been working on). Hermione had continued a sporadic communication with the man, quizzing him on various potions and cures. She thought a visit to Wizard's Row was a great idea, finally having a chance to put a face to the name and the man she'd been wondering about for the last year.

The two talked about cities and sights to see long into the night. Between them, they mapped out an impressive list of stops that would take them from one end of the country to the other. Taking a special long distance Portkey, they would start in New York, and Portkey to seven major cities before ending up in California for the last leg of

their journey. It would be a trip that mother and son would remember for years to come.

Three months earlier (February 2009)

Granger Flat; London, England

"Why won't you tell me who he is?"

"Don't take that tone with me, young man."

"Mum..." Stephen's tone held the edge of a whinge, even as his shoulders sagged in defeat. "I just want to know."

"We've been over this before. It's better that you don't know."

"Why? I'll find out some day. You know I will. You can't keep it a secret forever. Why don't you just tell me now?"

"Stephen, who your father was is not important. Focus on who *you* are. That's all that matters."

"But, Mum, I just..."

"Enough! We're not having this conversation again." Angrily, Hermione stormed out of the room, guilt tugging at her heart. She would have liked to share the knowledge of his father with her son, but it wouldn't serve any purpose; why raise questions she wouldn't be able to answer? Better to leave sleeping dogs lie.

Six years earlier (September 2003)

London, England

The Daily Prophet

War Heroine to Return Amid Continued Air of Mystery

It was announced today that war heroine and general witch of mystery, Hermione Granger, will take over as head of the Potions Department for St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The department is responsible for producing the potions and pastes used to treat the hospital's patients.

Madam Granger, absent from England these last five years, is well remembered as the best friend of the Chosen One, Harry Potter, as well as one of the most significant heroes emerging from the Battle of Hogwarts. Granger disappeared five years ago amid rumors that she was carrying Viktor Krum's love child (the two having had a brief fling during Granger's fourth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; see related article in the *Prophet archives* *March 5, 1995: Harry Potter's Secret Heartache*). Both Granger and Krum denied the rumors, Granger refusing to discuss who the father of her unborn child might be.

Granger took refuge in Paris, studying with Potions expert Master Adrien Bière to earn her own Masters title. A son, Stephen S. Granger, was born on November 29, 1998 at the exclusive wizarding facility, The Charlotte Duerre Hospital. The box on the birth certificate naming the father was left blank and is still blank as of the writing of this article.

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Five years earlier (November 1998)

The Charlotte Duerre Hospital; Paris, France

"What are you afraid of? Why won't you tell me who the father is? It's Krum, isn't it? I knew you two were more than friends. How could you do this to me?" Ron's face turned an unbecoming shade of red, clashing drastically with his hair. She and Ron had dated briefly more than two years ago. They'd found they were better off as friends than lovers, yet he still acted more possessive of her than he had a right to be, something they argued about frequently, particularly after her pregnancy became known.

"I didn't do anything to you, Ron. I'm the one who had a child out of wedlock, remember?" She passed a weary hand across her eyes, refusing to meet Harry's worried gaze over Ron's shoulder. Six hours of labor had taken its toll on her body and spirit. All she wanted to do was sleep. She didn't need Ron's accusations; there would be enough time for people to speculate about Stephen's parentage later.

"Hermione..."

"Viktor isn't the father, Ron. We're friends. Does it matter *who* his father is? It should be enough that he's my son," she snapped angrily.

"Hermione, people are going to talk."

Ron turned on his friend. "You know who the father is?" He glanced between his sister and Harry, his eyes widening. "If you cheated on my sister..."

"Don't be an idiot. I'm not the father."

"But you know who he is."

"No, but I know Hermione needs her friends to stand by her, now more than ever."

"But..."

"Shut up, Ron, before I hex you." Ginny smiled at her friend. "We're here for you." She shot an angry look in her brother's direction. "All of us."

A cry from the cot next to Hermione's bed caught everyone's attention.

"Looks like your son wants you, Mum." Ginny picked up the tiny bundle as Hermione sat up in the bed. "Such a head of black hair. He looks just like you."

Hermione stared into the deep brown eyes of her son, tears welling up in her own eyes as she thought of his father and what she had lost. "Don't worry, little one. I'll never leave you," she whispered.

"Uhm, why don't we give you some privacy? Come on, we'll get a cuppa and come back in a bit." Harry herded his wife and friend towards the door. "Can we bring you back anything?"

Her gaze still on her son, Hermione absentmindedly shook her head. "No. But would you stay a minute?"

Harry nodded to Ginny. "Go on. I'll be there in a minute."

"I meant what I said. What difference does it make who his father is? I don't regret having Stephen. He's all I have to remember him now." Tears ran unchecked down her face as she tried to make her friend understand.

"I know." Harry reached out and tentatively stroked the small hand waving in the air, smiling when the baby turned toward him. "I meant what I said, too. No matter what, I intend to stand by you."

Hermione positioned her son at her breast and urged him to eat. "Good, because I want you and Ginny to be Stephen's godparents."

"We'd be honored." Harry watched mother and child silently for a minute.

"Shouldn't you ask Ginny before answering for her?"

"Considering how many of your secrets we know, and we're both still your friend, I'd say it's a foregone conclusion. I'm sure she'll be delighted."

"Thank you, I'm glad that's settled. At least I'll know he'll be taken care of if anything happens to me. Now, go. I'm sure Ron is chaffing at the bit that you're here and he's not. I won't be too surprised to find out that Ginny's hexed him by now."

"I wish you'd come back. I miss not seeing you all the time."

Hermione stroked the soft down covering her son's head. "When the time is right; it's too soon."

Six Months Earlier (May 1998)

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place; London, England

"No? What do you mean no?"

"Gin, I'm thrilled you and Harry are getting married, but having me stand for you just isn't a good idea. Not unless the dress will magically adjust itself as my stomach grows." Hermione sighed heavily. "I'm pregnant."

"You're what?" Ginny's eyes widened in surprise.

"I thought you and Ron were just friends..." Harry looked questioningly at his friend.

Hermione shook her head. "It's not Ron's. Does it matter whose it is? The thing is, by the time of your wedding, I should be showing more than just a little. I really don't think it's a good idea for me to be the first one down the aisle. Might draw too much attention away from you two," she finished lamely.

"It's his. How can that be?"

"Harry..."

"His who?" Ginny's brow knitted in confusion. "Who are you talking about?"

"How far along are you?" When Hermione refused to answer, he grabbed her shoulders. "How far along?"

"Let go of me." Hermione pulled out of his grasp, watching the anger drain out of Harry's face as she stepped away from him.

"Hermione, how far along are you?"

"About two months. The baby is due early to mid-December."

"Is that where you went all those times you disappeared? You went with me to find the Horcruxes, and all that time you were reporting back to him."

"It wasn't like that. We didn't talk about you. I had a few other things on my mind at the time. And you, Harry, were not one of them! You saw the memories; you know what side Severus was loyal to."

"Snape!" Ginny's loud gasp surprised the pair; they'd been so caught up in their argument they had forgotten she was there. "You're pregnant with Snape's baby?"

Hermione sat heavily on the worn sofa next to her. "You remember our sixth year when Dumbledore showed up with his arm half destroyed as a result of trying to defuse the ring? The curse the Peverell ring contained was an insidious one. It grew stronger with time until it completely consumed its victim. Even though he was couldn't reverse the curse, Severus was able to brew a potion that slowed the damage to the Headmaster's body. It was sometime in December of that year, after Harry had overheard Severus talking to Draco about what his plans might be, that Dumbledore approached me.

"I was sworn to secrecy. They didn't think Severus would be called away, but neither one was sure. Dumbledore wanted Severus to teach me how to make the potion in case he was forced to leave before... before Draco could kill him. Severus railed against the Headmaster the entire time he talked to me until finally the whole story came out. Draco's orders from Voldemort to kill Dumbledore, Severus' vow to Narcissa, his vow with Dumbledore. I started meeting with Severus in secret so he could teach me how to brew the potion.

"It's funny; when no one else was around, he was a different person. He was quite cold the first few times I met with him, but one night, when he failed to meet me, I went looking for him. I found him in his private lab, his hands shaking, his face ashen. He'd just returned from a command visit with Voldemort. I managed to get him to take a sedative while I brewed him a pain potion. He started talking to me after that. He still treated me horribly in public, but in private, we became friends of a sort. I wanted to tell you, Harry, but I couldn't. Both Dumbledore and Severus were afraid you might accidentally tell Voldemort that Severus wasn't really on his side if he managed to get into your head. It's the reason they made me take a vow of silence. It really doesn't matter now anyway, does it?"

"I don't understand. He taught you how to brew a potion, so you slept with him? I saw a memory of the way he looked at you in the memories he gave me. I could feel the emotion he felt for you. It was... affection, sort of. I wondered what it meant. Or why he would feel such sadness when he sent you to his office just before he... I get it. You knew he was loyal to the light, even if you let me believe he was a traitor. But later on, that last year, we were on the run most of the time. Were you sneaking off to see him then? Did you two have a good laugh over putting one over on me?"

"You, you, you! The whole world does not revolve around you, Harry Potter. It wasn't until he sent his Patronus to you that I thought to even contact him again. I don't care if you believe me or not. We were... friends until then, or as friendly as Severus could be under the circumstances. Maybe you can't understand it, but I missed him. I knew he was loyal, even if you didn't. I just wanted to see him again. Something changed between us when I snuck out to meet him that first time." Hermione's hand possessively covered her stomach as she thought of the spare few times she'd been with him. "Trust me, we didn't talk about you. We didn't do too much talking at all."

The movement did not go unnoticed. "Did you love him?"

Sadly, Hermione nodded. "As much as he would let me. He kept warning me not to get too attached to him, that he probably wouldn't live past the final battle. We only saw each other a handful of times over those last six months. He never even knew I was pregnant."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm moving to Paris next week. I've accepted an apprenticeship with a French Potions master."

"Does he know... does he know you're pregnant?"

Hermione nodded. "Severus had written a letter of introduction to Master Adrien Bière for me before he... before he died. Last week I received an offer of an apprenticeship with him. I told Master Bière I couldn't accept the position he offered me, that I appreciated his generous offer but I was pregnant, so an apprenticeship was no longer an option. He said I shouldn't let such a little thing like a baby stop me and offered to find me childcare. I need to get away, get out of England. So, I leave for Paris next Tuesday."

"But you will come back for the wedding?" Ginny asked, smiling reassuringly at her friend.

"I'd love to. I just don't want to cause you two any problems."

"What about Ron?"

"Ron. He's going to be livid when he finds out I'm pregnant. I would rather he didn't know this is Severus' child. Actually, I don't want anyone to know who the father is. That's no one's business but my own."

"Come on, Hermione, what are you going to tell the kid when he asks? Don't worry about it, it was just magic?"

"I want you both to swear to me you won't reveal who the baby's father is... no matter what."

'Hermione."

"Swear to me!"

"Or what, you'll Oblivate us? Don't you think there has been enough secrecy to last a lifetime already?"

"We'll swear. Your secret is safe with us. I understand, even if he doesn't." Ginny patted her friend's shoulder reassuringly, all the while glaring at Harry.

"Ginny, thank you. You don't now what that means to me."

Three Months Earlier (March 1998)

West Tremaine; Launceston, Cornwall

"It's getting too dangerous for us to meet like this. The end is coming. I can feel it. Promise me you'll be careful." It had been more than a month since the last time they'd made love and only the fourth time they'd lain together. It was getting harder and harder to sneak away.

"I promise, but what about you?" Hermione nuzzled closer to the dark man, idly tracing the thin line of black hair on his stomach lower to where it met the thick patch of coarse black hair covering his groin.

A quiet groan escaped the wizard as the nimble witch coaxed his cock back to life. "Hermione, have you heard a word I said?"

"The end is coming. I need to be careful. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is getting ready to attack. Got it. If I can't see you for a while, I want to have at least one more memory of the two of us together, for those long nights when I'm left with nothing but my memories to keep me company. I suppose I'll have to find someone else to pleasure me if you won't see me."

The witch shrieked as Severus flipped her over. "Find someone else, will you?" His mouth claimed hers in a bruising kiss, his tongue invading the warm cavern of her mouth. His body molded itself to hers, as he laid in the valley of her thighs, his cock hard, gently separating the slick lips of her sex. Hermione's legs wrapped themselves around him, tugging him into her body. A forward roll of his hips drew his hardened member fully into her body.

"I love you."

Severus stilled for a moment, his gaze burning her. "If only things were different."

"I know. There'll be time for different later." She drew him back down, their kiss all-consuming. Their lovemaking was softer, more bittersweet than their previous couplings.

He may not have told her he loved her, but the fact that his Patronus had changed to a silvery otter the last time he'd contacted her was proof enough of his feelings for her. There would be time later on for undying declarations of love.

It was the last time she was to see him alive. Both left knowing their lives would never be the same. Neither knew they had created another life that day, perhaps if they had, things might have turned out differently.

Three Months Earlier (December 1997)

The Forbidden Forest; Scotland, United Kingdom

Severus followed the silvery otter until it seemed to vanish in the middle of the clearing. He cast a series of complicated locator charms, none of which registered the existence of another human being. He'd been prepared to light into the witch, lecturing her on the dangers of contacting him. If he were being honest with himself, something that was a bit of a rarity these days, he would've had to admit he missed the witch more than he could say. They'd formed a true friendship during the time he'd taught her to brew the strengthening potion for Dumbledore.

There'd been a hint that something much deeper than friendship could be developing between them. It was a rare feeling he refused to acknowledge. He had serious doubts he would survive past the end of the war anyway, so why cause Hermione more hardship than was absolutely necessary? It had been difficult enough to send the sword to Potter without checking to see that the witch was all right. And now her Patronus shows up at Hogwarts calling to him to follow it? Didn't she know the danger she was putting them both in?

Severus stood in the clearing, his wand at the ready. His body tensed as he waited for signs of life. The Patronus was Hermione's, he was sure of that, but he was unable to locate her, regardless of what spell he cast. The sound of her softly calling his name a few feet in front of him took the Slytherin Headmaster completely by surprise, as did her head suddenly floating in mid air.

"Severus, over here. Quickly." Her right hand, followed by her arm, appeared, waving him over."

"What in the bloody hell?"

Hermione dropped the wards on the opening of the tent flap as he reached her. Grabbing his arm, she pulled him inside. A quick flick of her wand reactivated the spells she'd placed on the tent. The whole process had taken less than a minute.

Impulsively, she hugged him, feeling him stiffen before reluctantly returning her greeting. "I'm so glad to see you."

Severus pulled back, glaring at the witch. "What are you doing here?" he hissed. "Don't you know you could get us both killed if we're caught?"

"You couldn't find me. Do you really think they can? No one can see, hear, or touch us. My wards won't let them."

"What spell did you cast? I couldn't find the ward. I've never seen an invisible ward before." He had to admit he was impressed. The ward she'd cast had rendered the tent they were sitting in silent and invisible to the human eye, almost as if she had taken them out of time.

"You helped Harry. Thank you. He found the sword." Now that she'd gotten over the initial excitement of seeing him, she was a bit worried she'd pressed her luck when she'd hugged him. They'd only ever been friends. The hug was definitely stepping over the unwritten rules of friendship as Severus Snape had established them.

"I told you I would do what I could." His eyes softened as he regarded her. "I'm glad to see that you're all right, too. I need to get back before someone notices I'm gone."

"Severus, could I ask just one small favor before you leave?"

Silently, he nodded yes. "What do you need?"

Hermione wet her lips, her courage rapidly disappearing. "Would you kiss me before you go?"

"Hermione." He watched her tongue dart past perfect white teeth, as it slipped wetly along her lip. His cock hardened at the thought of tasting the witch, of feeling her pressed against him, her breasts flattened against his chest, the hard nub of her nipples pressed to him as he held her in his embrace.

Roughly, he pulled her to him, his fingers sliding through the mass of curls at the nape of her neck, his other arm wound around her body, drawing her tightly against him. The kiss burned his soul as she opened her mouth to his probing tongue, her body molding itself to his. The sound of her moaning, her fingers digging into the flesh of his back, sent a fresh wave of lust pulsating through his body.

They sunk to the floor of the tent, Hermione pulling him backward with her until they were lying on some sort of inflated mattress. She yanked roughly at his shirt, dragging the ends upward as she ran her hands along his body.

"Hermione, not like this." His voice was rough with lust, his control slipping as her hands tugged at his trousers.

"Where then? You want to risk a trip back to the castle, back to your quarters? Out here no one can find us. No one can hear us. Let yourself go."

His gut clenched as she ground herself up into his erection, the little witch relentlessly teasing him as she rolled her hips to and fro. "Fine, you win." He bit down on the cloth over her breast, drawing her nipple into his mouth, the cloth of her shirt and bra softening the sting of his teeth as he alternately sucked and licked at the hard nub. With little patience, Hermione grabbed the edges of her shirt and pulled it over her head. Her bra quickly followed, leaving Severus face to face with the hardened bud he'd been sucking on. Not one to miss out on an opportunity, once more he drew the tight nub into the heat of his mouth, his cock twitching in response to the deep groan that escaped the witch.

It was short work for the remainder of their clothing to be spelled off, soft warm flesh rubbed against soft flesh, creating a sensory overload for the two of them. He settled into the vee of her thighs, the musky smell of their arousal almost too much to bear in the closed confines of the tent.

"Severus, please."

"Please what?" He continued to tease the witch, his cock sliding up and down along her aroused slit.

"I need to feel you. I want you deep inside me, please."

Without warning he thrust forward, stopping suddenly when he felt the fleshy barrier of her maidenhead give way. Horrified, he pulled back to look at the witch. "Hermione, you're a virgin? Why didn't you tell me?"

Hermione grimaced as she felt his cock pulsating inside her. "Fine, I'm a virgin. Well, technically, I don't think that's true anymore. Please, Severus, don't stop."

The dark man shook his head. When had anyone trusted him such a treasured gift before? He caught her lips in a searing kiss, determined to make it as enjoyable for her as he could. His deep, steady thrusting brought the witch to a fevered pitch. He slipped a hand between their bodies to play with her clit, pleased when he felt the first tremors of her climax as her sex tightened around him. Severus gave himself over to the sensations he was feeling, his thrusts becoming erratic as he reached his own release; grunting quietly, he emptied himself into the trembling witch, his cock pumping in and out a few more times as he rode the aftershocks of his orgasm.

"Oh my God."

Wearily, he moved to the side before giving in to gravity and dropping heavily onto the mattress next to Hermione. "Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?"

"Because you would have gone all noble on me. I wanted you to make love to me; I wanted you to be the one to take my virginity. I wanted you," she said quietly.

Severus shook his head in disbelief. "Why?"

"Why? Because I have feelings for you, and I think you have them for me."

"I do care for you, but the war. It's not safe. I can't..."

Hermione raised her fingers to his lips. "I know. Right now I'll take what I can get. Tomorrow can take care of itself."

They made love again before Severus returned to the castle.

Ten Months Earlier (February 1997)

Potions Lab; Hogwarts Castle, Scotland

"Professor?"

"What are you doing here, Granger? Get out." Severus' hand shook as he added the yellow petals to the boiling cauldron.

Hermione could see the ragged edges where the Potions master had ripped the flower apart. She quickly catalogued the ingredients lying haphazardly on the bench before accessing the shaking man standing in front of her.

"Sit down before you hurt yourself further, Professor." Hermione picked up a knife from the sideboard. "Is that Chamomile tea?"

Severus' tone was dangerous as he hissed at the witch. "Granger."

"You can give me detention later. I assume you were trying to brew a pain-reducing potion? It won't be too effective if you mangle the ingredients before you add them to the cauldron. Let me help you."

Severus watched as she cut the daisy roots into even segments. He had to admit the witch was good. It was a shame she wasn't a Slytherin; he could have helped her become a Potions master. As it was, with the current climate, he couldn't be seen helping a Gryffindor, let alone Potter's best friend.

"Was it Crucio?"

Hermione's quiet tone cut through the wizard's musings. Severus winced as he shifted in his seat. "The Dark Lord felt I lacked the proper 'respect' tonight."

Thoughts of Neville's parents languishing in St Mungo's flashed before her eyes as the witch stared at him with growing horror.

Severus sighed. "Do not fret, Miss Granger. I have been cursed worse than this before, though I would appreciate it if you could speed things up."

"Of course, sir."

Something changed between the two that night. No longer just teacher and student, the pair found a begrudging respect for one another, one that would eventually lead them into uncharted territory.

Three Months Earlier (December 1996)

The Office of Headmaster Dumbledore; Hogwarts Castle, Scotland

"It's no use, my mind is made up. You will teach her how to brew the potion."

"And when she goes running back to her little friends with this secret? The Dark Lord will have a field day casting curses on me. I'll be lucky to survive the meeting, let alone keep my promises to you." Severus angrily paced in front of the ornate desk, glaring at the Granger girl as she watched him.

"I promise I won't tell Harry, Professor. I wouldn't want to endanger your life or his."

Severus sneered at the innocent tone of her voice. "I wouldn't want to endanger your life or his," he said mockingly. "And what about when they cast Crucio on you, Miss Granger? Do you think you'll be able to hold your tongue then?"

The young witch sat straighter in the chair, her gaze locked with his. "Yes, sir, I'm sure I will, but if you're that worried, I would be willing to take a vow of silence. That should put your fears to rest."

"Excellent. You see, Severus, I told you she could be trusted."

"Another vow, old man? Don't you think she's too young to enslave like that?"

Hermione wondered at the bitterness in the Potion master's tone. "Enslave?"

"Not an unbreakable vow, just a vow of secrecy, regarding you and the potion only."

Severus nodded; he would not allow the Headmaster to use the girl. It was bad enough she'd bound herself to Potter. She didn't need to be tricked into service for Dumbledore. It was enough he would never be free; he refused to see the witch suffer his fate, too.

Epilogue The Real Beginning

Present Day (August 2009)

2:06 p.m. Pacific Standard Time

The Apothecary Wizard's Row; San Francisco, California

"Mum? What's going on?"

"You're dead, I saw you die." Hermione's voice had trailed off to a whisper.

"Obviously you were mistaken." Grabbing Hermione's arm, the man led her around the counter towards his office. He stopped to glare at the boy. "Well, don't just stand there. Move it, boy. I'd rather not announce my business to the world at large, if you don't mind."

Hastily, Stephen rounded the counter, following his mother into the office. A wave of Severus' hand sent the door slamming shut, cutting off the view of the counter and the customers that had been watching them.

"Here, drink this." Severus handed Hermione a calming draught, then sat back and watched her while waiting for the potion to take effect.

"Mum?" Stephen glanced between his mother and the dark man, not sure what was going on.

"You're alive."

Severus sighed. "I believe we've already established that fact."

Hermione wrung her hands, the draught having only the barest of effects. "You bastard, all these years you let me believe you were dead. All this time you were here without a care in the world."

"Obviously, you're more upset than I'd thought. Let me get something else to calm your nerves, and then we can talk. It seems there are a few things we need to discuss." Severus rose quickly from his chair, his eye on the distraught witch in front of him. His reflexes still quick, he caught Hermione as she launched herself at him.

"I hate you. Why did you disappear? Why didn't you take me with you? You knew I loved you." Helpless with rage, she batted at his chest before breaking down, sobbing. Tears soaked the front of Severus' coat as he held her. "Why, Severus, why? I thought you loved me."

"Hermione, I did love you. I still do. But you would have been ostracized. It wasn't the life I wanted for you. I thought you and Weasley..." He looked into the dark eyes of his son. "Well, this obviously can't be his son. Krum's then?" he asked hesitantly, not sure he really wanted to know that she could replace him that easily.

"Not his, yours. Ron and I are friends. We always have been. There's never been anyone but you. Stephen, you wanted to meet your father. Well, here he is."

"My son? Hermione, are you sure?" The two men stared at one another, shock and confusion evident on both their faces.

"Of course I'm sure."

"How... how did this happen?"

"It happened the usual way" Hermione rolled her eyes before catching sight of her son. "Stephen, are you all right? You don't look well. I know this is a lot to handle. I'm not doing a great job of it myself."

"You called him Severus, but I thought you said his name was John Smith. Which is it?"

Severus sighed; it was going to be a long afternoon. "John Smith is the name I've been using the last eleven years. My given name is Snape, Severus Snape."

"Severus Snape, the war hero? You're my father? He's my father? The man you refused to tell me about is Severus Snape?"

"War hero?"

"After Harry defeated Voldemort, he petitioned the Wizengamot to have you declared a national hero. They even awarded you an Order of Merlin, First Class. There's a statue of you at Hogwarts and everything." Hermione fell silent as she watched him, her emotions raging around her.

"Potter," he said with a dark chuckle. "Rather hard to believe."

"Now what?"

"I don't know."

"I can't go back to believing you're dead."

"No, I don't suppose you can."

"I see." Abruptly, Hermione turned away from him. "Say goodbye to your father, Stephen. I think it's time we should be going. Perhaps, if we're very lucky, we'll see him again in another eleven years or so."

"Hermione."

"Isn't this what you want? I can't force you to want us. I won't do that to my son. We've gotten along fine without you up to now. Come on, Stephen, the Quintessential Quidditch Quadrant is just up the block. I promised you I would only be a minute, and it's been longer than that already. Good day, Master Smith, it was a pleasure meeting you." Hermione's back stiffened. "Master Smith? You answered my letters. You knew it was me. Why?" Hermione sank bonelessly into the chair next to the desk.

Severus shook his head; he had been waiting for her to make the connection. He knew corresponding with her had been dangerous, but he couldn't resist the chance to have her in his life, even if it was only a letter she sent to a relative stranger every now and then. He never dreamed she would cross an ocean and stop in to visit him, well, visit Smith. "Because I missed you. When your first letter appeared I panicked. I couldn't figure out what you were playing at. Then I realized that fate must have been mucking with my life again. You were only contacting a merchant about a product, but for me it brought back all that I had lost, the witch I gave up. I knew I shouldn't have answered your second letter, but the chance to have you in my life again, even at a distance, was just too much."

"What happened? How did you make it out of the Shrieking Shack? You were dead, I saw you."

"No, what you saw was the effects of the Draught of the Living Death when it's been tainted by Nagini's venom."

"And we left you there," she said with renewed horror. "Oh, Severus..."

"You didn't know. You thought I was dead, just as you were supposed to. Potter was supposed to believe I was dead. He never would have trusted my memories under any other circumstances. When it was all over, Lucius came looking for me. He owed me a life debt for saving Draco. I spent the next fourteen months recovering at Malfoy Chateau in France. By the time I was well again, too much time had passed. Lucius told me you had disappeared, the last anyone had seen of you was at Potter's wedding, almost a year before. I decided to come to America and start over."

Hermione burst out laughing.

"Care to let me in on the joke? I believe I could use a good laugh right about now."

"Oh, Severus, we certainly have mucked things up. I moved to France to study with Master Adrien Bière. Stephen was born at The Charlotte Duerre Hospital in Paris."

Severus roared with laughter. "Malfoy Chateau is only thirty miles outside of Paris. All that time that I thought you were forgetting me and getting on with your life, you were just a thought away." His gaze turned somber. "I was proud of you when I first saw your signature on your letter, you know. There aren't many female Potions masters, and none with your talent."

Severus glanced at his son, not surprised at the anger in the glare currently directed at him. "Why don't I walk with you to the Quadrant? Perhaps you two will join me for dinner and we can talk further?"

"You want to go with us to the Quintessential Quidditch Quadrant?" Stephen eyed Severus suspiciously. Father or not, he didn't trust him to treat his mum fairly if the past was anything to go on.

"I can talk with your mother while you look around. I know the owner. I might even be able to persuade him into giving you a deal on a broom if you see one you like."

"Can you fly?"

Severus nodded. "I used to referee some of the Quidditch matches at Hogwarts. If I remember right, your mother is fairly adverse to flying." He didn't want to anger Hermione by putting her down, but he was desperate to establish some kind of rapport with the boy.

Stephen nodded in agreement. "Mum hates flying. Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny taught me to fly. Can we go to the Quintessential Quidditch Quadrant, Mum?"

Hermione smiled at her son. "The Quintessential Quidditch Quadrant it is."

"Uncle Harry?"

Hermione shrugged. "He knew about us. You gave him a few memories that didn't... fit with the others."

"I see. Well, what about dinner? Will you join me?" Severus asked hopefully.

Hermione eyed her son before turning back to him. "The Quadrant and dinner. Let's see how convincing you can be. Maybe I won't hex you into tomorrow."

"How long are you staying in San Francisco?"

"Until the 30th, Stephen is due to start Hogwarts on the first. But I might be convinced to return for an extended visit if the conditions were favorable."

Severus pulled the office door shut, locking and warding it after them. "Charles, I leave it to you to close tonight. I have other plans this evening." One week, he had one week to convince Hermione to come back to him. While he didn't believe for a minute she would forgive him entirely, he thought he just might be able to remind her why she had loved him in the first place. He hoped it would be enough to sway her heart; his son was another matter. But there would be time to think of the boy later. If he could win Hermione back, he thought his son might follow or at least give him a chance to get to know him.

"Shall we? The store is up this way." He offered his arm to Hermione, whistling as they walked along.

"You whistle?" she asked in surprise.

"I do a lot of things. You need only to remember." The blush that colored her cheeks pleased him; maybe he wouldn't need the full week after all.

-Fini-

A/N: The idea for this odd fic comes from the Seinfeld episode, "The Apology." The story runs backwards from the start of the episode when the group is attending a wedding in India, back to the beginning (or the very last scene of the episode) when the invitation to the wedding arrives in the mail, stuttering back randomly every few minutes as events are presented in reverse order.

In keeping true to form, I suppose the epilogue should have come at the beginning, but I don't think it would have made for as satisfying a reading as tacking it onto the end did.

A grateful thank you to my wonderful and talented beta, Southern_Witch_69 for her help and corrections. The mistakes, however, are all mine.

Pearle