

Living Legacy

by sshg316

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.



April 7, 1998

Shell Cottage

She raced along the garden path, the red-haired man following close behind. Her heart was pounding in her ears, the steady rhythm thumping in time with her silent footfalls.

She had to hurry; she could not be late.

The wind whipped her cloak about her legs, and she pulled the hood forward in a vain attempt to protect her face from the cool night air. She hastened her steps; the sooner this was done, the sooner she could return to the cottage and her warm bed.

The path forked, and she stopped, turning to face her companion.

"Wait here."

He looked as if he might protest, but then he nodded. "I'll be waiting."

She gave him a brief smile and then continued on, taking the path to her left, her gait steady and determined.

She did not look back.

When she drew near the cliffs, she stopped, careful to remain just inside the boundaries of the Fidelius Charm. Now that she had reached her destination, she turned around. She could just make out the small cottage in the distance. Drawing her wand, she cast a Disillusionment Charm on the surrounding area to ensure they would not be seen. She knew from experience that any one of the current residents could be up at any given hour.

Pop!

A man appeared a few metres further down the path, his dark-as-night cloak billowing around him like a woollen cloud as he made his way to where she stood. She could not see his face, but she knew it was him.

Her stomach churned, and her body shook. She had weighed and measured every argument, every consideration in order to convince him that she wanted to do this. Now that the moment had come, she wondered if she was doing the right thing.

He stood before her and lowered his hood, his dark eyes gleaming down at her with unspoken gratitude, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She had been right after all.

"Are you ready?" he asked as he reached for her.

She placed her trembling hand in his and offered a nervous smile. "Yes."

His face was impassive, but she knew him well enough to notice the smoothing of the lines about his mouth and brow. He was pleased.

They walked a bit further down the path, moving into the shadows, until he finally stopped near the edge of the cliff. The roar of the waves filled her ears, and she turned her head toward the sound. The view of the sea was breathtaking, but there was no time to consider such trivialities.

"Are you certain you wish to do this?"

She looked up into the face that she had once reviled but now held so dear. She smiled and nodded; she would not turn back now.

"Very well. Let us begin."

He removed his cloak, inclining his head to indicate that she should do the same.

She followed suit, turning away from him as she swallowed down her nervous jitters at being so inadequately clad before a man. Yet she allowed the cloak to slip from her shoulders, and the fabric slithered to the ground, revealing the thin white shift the spell required her to wear. She shivered as the wind picked up, and the salty tang of the sea air filled her nostrils and coated her tongue.

With a steadying breath, she faced him once more, her eyes widening at the sight before her. He stood as though braced for battle, his legs spread, his arms at his sides, and his wand in hand. His pale skin seemed to glow in the moonlight and appeared as pure as the white, loose-fitting garments which fluttered about his thin frame.

His eyes locked on hers, and he beckoned her closer. Unable to look away, she jerked forward as though mesmerised, stopping when she was within arm's reach.

Slowly, as if to allow her the opportunity to flee, he raised his wand.

He cast the spell.

"*Ingravesco*," he intoned as he moved his wand in an intricate pattern. Suddenly, a ribbon of glittering light burst from the length of wood, winding and rippling its way around her once, then twice before doing the same to him.

The incantation left his lips again, louder than before. "*Ingravesco!*"

The spell began pushing them toward one other as the streams of magic tightened their hold. Tighter and tighter, the magic squeezed until she stood so close, the tips of her breasts brushed his ribcage. She gasped at the unexpected jolt of pleasure that shot down her spine.

His breathing was as laboured as her own, but somehow, he gathered enough air to complete the spell.

"*Ingravesco iugo!*"

The magic compelled them even closer, until they stood as if in a lovers' embrace, and she lifted her chin until her eyes met his. The ribbons tightened again in a burst of magic, and she felt the sharp sting of it deep within her. Her eyes remained steadfast on his, and for a moment, the world stopped and fell away, leaving only them and the magic.

In her peripheral vision, she could see the frozen glimmers of light which surrounded them, and a small part of her marvelled at the visual manifestation of such powerful magic. The rest of her was acutely focussed upon the man in front of her, the man she had come to know and to befriend...to love.

Her breathing quickened as the magic pulsed around them yet again, encouraging, prodding, demanding. It wanted something, and she despaired at her lack of knowledge. What did it want? Her eyes pleaded with him...did he know?

He did.

She blinked, and his mouth lowered to hers. Her heart leapt within her chest, and she parted her lips in welcome. The magic pulsed in response and exploded around them in a dizzying array of shimmering light. She had never felt such power as she did in that moment, with magic and passion coursing through her veins. She felt his fingers grip her head, angling it to deepen the kiss, and the magic responded yet again, flaring and twisting about them until the very air was saturated with its raw power. Her hands pressed against his back, pulling him ever closer as her own inherent magic cried out for more.

Unfamiliar sensations flowed over and through her body, and she felt as though they were racing toward a precipice. She knew she would fall if she continued onward, but she did not care. The spell was guiding her now, and she would willingly follow, even to the very end.

Suddenly, she felt a stinging pain at the top of her spine, and then she was there, soaring over the edge and convulsing in wave after wave of magic and pleasure. He was with her, their bodies locked together by the spell and by their kiss.

And then it was done. As quickly as it had begun, it ended.

The spell was complete.

He held her in his embrace, lingering for just a moment, and she thought she heard him murmur her name into her hair. His arms lowered, and he took a step back, his eyes resolutely on the ground.

She felt strangely bereft, and she could sense the echo of her magic calling out to his. They stood in silence for several minutes as their breathing returned to normal, and their magic stabilised.

"Are you well?" he asked stiffly.

She could not help but smile at his familiar return to formality. "I am well."

He nodded sharply and then finally met her gaze again, his eyes softening as he looked upon her.

"Thank you, Hermione."

After a lingering look, he turned on his heel and Disapparated.

She was left alone, the tingle of magic still whispering along her skin.



May 2, 1998

The Shrieking Shack

"Kill."

Hidden in the tunnel, Hermione's eyes closed as the order was given. She wanted to scream, cry out, but she could not. She must be silent. *No. No!*

She watched as Harry peered through the tiny crack in the wall. His breathing had quickened, and he had bitten down on his knuckles until they bled. "Harry!" she breathed as he pointed his wand at the crate and moved it from blocking his way.

She was frozen in place as he pulled himself out of the tunnel and into the room. She didn't want to see, she didn't want to know, and yet she followed.

When she emerged into the room, Harry was kneeling beside him. *Severus!* From where she stood, she could only see him in partial profile as he turned his head toward Harry. He seemed to be trying to speak.

Hermione's ears strained to listen.

Suddenly, he grabbed the front of Harry's robes and pulled him closed.

"Take ... it Take ... it"

A silvery blue substance gushed from his mouth and his ears, even his eyes. Hermione realised what he was expelling...his memories. Thinking quickly, she conjured a flask from thin air, and shoved it into Harry's shaking hands.

She took a step back. She wanted to be in Harry's place, kneeling at Severus' side. She wanted to whisper words of comfort, to tell him goodbye, but she could not. She remained standing behind him, her eyes fixed upon Harry in the effort to contain her agony at watching the man she loved die before her eyes.

When the flask was full to the brim, and Severus looked as though he had no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened.

"Look ... at ... me" he whispered.

He breathed his last breath as he stared into the eyes of Lily Evans, the only woman he had ever loved.

And Hermione felt her heart break into a million pieces.

A/N: Portions of the second scene are taken directly from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 32, pages 656-658.

This story was written for acadia_elle for the Winter SS/HG Exchange. It is complete, and I will post two to three chapters per week. The prompt will be given at the conclusion of the story.

My unending gratitude to my very own golden trio, Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird, my beta readers and Brit picker. I also owe a huge debt to GinnyW for her cheerleading and brainstorming, as well as the lovely banner she created for this story. Thank you so much, all of you!

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter One

June 2, 1998

Hogwarts

There had been no body.

An extensive search of the Shrieking Shack and the Hogwarts grounds had yielded no sign of the remains. The Order had continued looking for several days, even after the Ministry of Magic had declared Severus Snape officially dead. When all efforts had proven fruitless, Harry Potter had conceded that perhaps the body had been stolen or disposed of by Death Eaters.

After all the sacrifices Severus Snape had made over the last two decades, Harry had wanted to provide a proper burial for the wizarding world's greatest unsung hero.

It was not meant to be.

The memorial service took place on a Sunday afternoon on the grounds of Hogwarts. Harry had been adamant that Snape would not have been appreciative of a lot of pomp and circumstance, and so the ceremony was brief, with only Harry offering a short eulogy, and the acting Minister for Magic presenting Headmaster Snape the Order of Merlin, First Class, posthumously.

As the crowd dissipated, the trio remained behind to pay their own respects to the man who had been their teacher and protector. The three friends stood solemnly before the monument dedicated to the bravest man they had ever known. The black marble obelisk stood within eyesight of the tomb of Albus Dumbledore but not so near that one would overshadow the other.

Several minutes passed in silence, until Harry stepped forward and touched the cool stone, his eyes lingering over the words that had been etched into the marble.

In Honour of Severus Snape

Teacher, friend, and hero

"I want you to know that I am fully aware that without you, I wouldn't be standing here today. I just wish...I wish you and I had" Harry swallowed before returning to his place next to Ron. "Thank you, and goodbye ... sir."

Ron shuffled forward, urged by a sniffing Hermione, and mumbled his respects. "Erm ... thanks, Professor. For everything."

Harry slapped his friend on the back in sympathy, and the two young wizards watched stoically as Hermione knelt at the base of the monument. She bowed her head as if in prayer, the fingers of one hand splayed against the marble while the other clutched the grass. After several minutes, she rose to her feet and wiped the dampness from her face. She hesitated for the briefest of moments before kissing her fingers and touching his name.

"Goodbye," she whispered as one final tear coursed its way down her cheek.

Hermione turned and saw the shocked faces of Harry and Ron. To their credit, they said nothing about her unexpected tribute. She looked at them...her two boys...and her heart swelled with gratitude that she still had them; *they* were still here. She only hoped they still would be after she told them what she had done.

"I have something to tell you," Hermione said nervously, her tone suggesting that whatever she wished to discuss was of the utmost importance. "Professor McGonagall said we could use her office."

Harry looked at Ron, hoping for some indication of what was going on, but Ron merely shrugged; whatever Hermione wanted to discuss had not been shared with either of them in advance.

"All right. Let's go." Harry offered an arm to Hermione, while Ron did the same on her other side. Arm in arm, the three friends trudged up the hill to the battle-worn castle.

Hermione sat in the new Headmistress' office, her nerves a jumbled mess. She had never been so frightened in her entire life. Not even when Bellatrix Lestrange had been torturing her in the drawing room of Malfoy Manor had she felt this kind of terror. Would they understand? Would they be angry? Would they abandon her? She needed them now more than ever. She wasn't certain she could do this on her own.

She looked to her left. Harry appeared unusually calm. He sat next to the fireplace, simply watching and waiting for whatever information was to come. Ron, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. His long legs were twitching with nervous energy, and it was driving Hermione insane.

"Stop that, Ronald," she snapped before instantly apologising. "I'm sorry. I'm just a bit anxious."

Ron immediately halted his fidgeting and then glanced at Harry, his eyes wide with confusion. "Yeah. Okay."

Harry leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and reached to clasp Hermione's trembling hands in his. "Why don't you just tell us? Get it over with."

"Because she wanted to wait for me. Isn't that right, Hermione?"

Hermione smiled in relief and stood to embrace the man who had entered the room. "I'm so glad you're here. Thank you for coming."

"Anytime, love."

Completely confused by the turn of events, Ron's eyes shifted from the newcomer to Hermione and back again. "What the bloody hell is going on? And what are *you* doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too, little brother," Bill Weasley said as he released Hermione and took a seat in the makeshift circle of chairs.

Hermione returned to her seat, as well, and took a deep, steadying breath. She straightened her spine and in a clear voice said, "Harry, Ron. I've been keeping a secret from you."

"What kind of secret?" Ron asked before turning to Harry. "D'you know about this?"

Harry shook his head and raised his hands. "Not me. I have no idea what she's talking about. What's going on, Hermione?"

Her throat suddenly went dry, and the words stuck in her throat. She conjured a glass of water and drank several long swallows.

"Start from the beginning, Hermione," Bill said encouragingly. "It's going to be all right. They'll understand."

Hermione nodded and began again. "Last year, Remus asked me to meet him in the hospital wing before Professor Dumbledore's funeral. He and Bill told me the truth about Professor Snape."

"You knew?" Ron asked, his eyes shifting between Hermione and his brother, his tone incredulous.

Bill nodded. "Just listen, Ronnie."

Bewildered, Ron blinked and turned his attention back to Hermione.

"Yes," she said, more grateful each second that Bill had agreed to be present when she told the boys. "Remus and Bill knew that it was likely we would not be returning to Hogwarts for our seventh year...Professor Dumbledore had left them a message...but they didn't know why or what we were going to be doing. At least, I don't think they did." She turned to face Bill. "Did you?"

"No. We only knew that we were to explain the situation to you...*only* you."

Ron looked at his brother and asked, "How did you get to be in the middle of this?"

Bill shrugged. "I'm a curse-breaker. Apparently, Albus thought at some point you might have need of one. Remus told me about Snape's true loyalties in case something happened to him. We knew the fighting would begin in earnest soon, and it seemed safer for two adults...no offence, Hermione...to know the truth."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Right. So, they told me about Severus ..."

Ron looked to Harry, aghast, and mouthed, "Severus?"

"... and the truth about what happened that night on the Astronomy Tower," Hermione finished loudly, staring pointedly at Ron. He flushed and shifted in his seat.

"Why you?" Harry asked suddenly, his green eyes blazing with intensity.

Hermione had known he would ask that. "I was the most likely to listen."

Harry stared at her as he visibly mulled over her words. Finally, he nodded and said, "Yeah. I can see that."

Relieved that he understood, Hermione continued. "I spent the summer researching Horcruxes. You know that. What you don't know is that much of the research was done at the side of Severus Snape."

"Hush," she admonished, before Ron could interrupt. "Let me finish. Then you can ask all the questions you want."

Ron slouched in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine."

"Thank you," Hermione replied. "At first, it was difficult to work with him. He was in an impossible situation, and the amount of strain he was under was terrible. Voldemort was still breathing down his neck, even after he Well, you know. Severus was horrified by what Dumbledore had forced him to do, and the pain of that act was eating him alive. He was also fully aware that time was of the essence, and he wanted to provide whatever help he could to you, Harry."

Hermione paused, her eyes glazing over with the memories of that summer. "He was so tired of being a spy, of pretending to be someone he was not, of being hated and reviled, but he had no choice; he had to see it through to the end. He was just so ... so tired."

She took a breath and rubbed her hands over her eyes to stem the threat of tears. "He hadn't had a true friend since your mum, Harry, and I am very proud to say that Severus Snape was my friend, and I was his."

She let out a small laugh. "It wasn't always easy...he was still snide and snappish...but he also had a wicked sense of humour, and he was so loyal to those he cared about that it would put a Hufflepuff to shame," she said, her voice cracking under the strain of her emotional upheaval. "He wasn't a nice man, but he was a *good* man, truly good and" She ended on a sob, unable to continue as grief overtook her once more.

"Hermione," Harry murmured gently, "you don't have to convince us of that. We know."

Ron nodded. "Yeah. After what Harry saw in Snape's memories, we know he was on our side."

Hermione sniffed and gave a wan smile. "I'm glad you think so."

Bill offered her a handkerchief, which she received gratefully. After drying her cheeks and delicately blowing her nose, she continued.

"Anyway, I took the portrait of Phineas Nigellus with us so that he could act as a messenger between Severus and me. Sometimes, Severus wanted to know where we were, but other times it was better if he didn't. You already know that Phineas is the one who told Severus and Dumbledore's portrait about our location so that the sword could be brought to us. Well, it was no accident that he overheard us talking. That was me, reporting our location. I would have done it while you were sleeping and I was on watch, but Phineas had gone on an errand for Dumbledore."

Harry was incredulous. "So, you're saying the entire time, you were in contact with the Order?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. Only with Severus, who had minimal contact with the Order...at least as far as I know." She once again turned to Bill for confirmation.

The oldest Weasley son had remained quiet for much of the discussion but had been listening intently. "Remus or I would get occasional reports from him, unsigned notes that would just say, 'all is well.' That's about it. He was busy at the school, trying to protect the students as much as possible without alerting the Carrows, as well as following whatever orders Albus and Voldemort had for him. The only other time I had contact with him was when he asked to visit a certain friend of his," Bill concluded with a wink in Hermione's direction.

Harry and Ron looked at each other before turning their attention back to Hermione. "What?" they asked simultaneously.

Hermione's cheeks flushed pink as she glanced away. "He means that Severus came to Shell Cottage after what happened at Malfoy Manor. He brought potions that were very helpful in my recovery, and ... and"

This was the part she had been truly dreading, the one that could mark the end her friendship with the two young wizards before her.

"Bill arranged for us to meet twice, both times during the middle of the night, near the cliffs but just inside the boundaries of the Fidelius Charm. The first visit was to bring the potions, and the second, was to honour a" She paused and bit her lip, searching for just the right word. "A favour I had asked of him."

"A favour? What kind of favour?" Harry asked.

Hermione clenched her jaw, gathered every bit of courage she possessed, and then met the boys' eyes with a defiant gaze.

"I wanted to have his child."

A/N: My unending gratitude to my very own golden trio, Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird, my beta readers and Brit picker. I also owe a huge debt to GinnyW for her cheerleading and brainstorming, as well as the lovely banner she created for this story. Thank you so much, all of you!

Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Two

The room was silent in the wake of her revelation, and Hermione shifted anxiously in her seat. This lack of reaction was not what she had anticipated, and she was not certain what to say or do next. She simply waited.

Harry appeared pensive, Ron looked utterly perplexed, and Bill ... Bill was visibly shaking with rage.

"What did you say?" he asked tightly, his hands clenching into fists as he struggled to maintain control.

Hermione blinked. She hadn't expected that from Bill. Ron, perhaps, but not Bill. She cleared her throat. "I wanted to have his child."

Ron laughed nervously. "Well, he said no, of course." His tone suggested that there was no possible way that Snape could have agreed to such a thing.

"I..."

Before she could finish, Harry softly interrupted, "Are you pregnant?"

She turned to her dearest friend, her eyes imploring him to understand. "Yes."

Harry's eyes closed as though he was in pain, and Hermione rushed to explain. "But you have to understand that..."

Bill was on his feet in an instant, his anger nearly palpable. "I trusted him with you. Against my better judgement, mind you. And this ... *this* is how he repaid that trust? That miserable, sodding bastard! If he weren't already dead, I'd kill him myself! How could he have done such a..."

Bill's rant was brought to a swift halt when Hermione rushed forward, poking her index finger into his chest.

"Don't you *dare* talk about him like that! He was my friend, and I...I loved him," she said, tilting her chin stubbornly, "the same way I love all of you."

"Must have been a bit more than friends," Ron muttered, sulking now that the initial shock had worn off.

Hermione's gaze snapped to Ron, her hands moving to her hips. "Don't be crude. It didn't happen that way."

"It didn't?"

Hermione returned her attention to Bill. "No. We used a spell."

Bill slowly released a breath, and his fists unclenched. Nodding, he said, "Right. Okay. A spell. That's better than" His cheeks turned as red as his hair, his eyes anywhere but on her.

Hermione blushed as Bill returned to his seat. "That may be true, Bill, but even if the conception had occurred the ... the normal way, it's not any of your business!"

She stood in front of the three men, her expression earnest as she attempted to explain the circumstances that had led her to making such a momentous decision.

"You have to understand. We were friends." She turned to Harry. "The things you saw in his memories, I already knew about, because he told me." She looked around to include the Weasleys in her plea. "Can't you see? Severus sacrificed his life for the wizarding world ... for Lily ... for *you*, Harry. And I'm not just talking about his death, although that would certainly have been enough of a sacrifice. I'm talking about *living*." Her eyes filled with tears. "He existed, but he never truly lived. Never."

Her temples throbbed, and Hermione rubbed her forehead, hoping to stall the impending headache. Suddenly, she felt a wave of exhaustion sweep through her from head to toe, and she sank down into her chair. Her voice was fainter now. "We talked about everything. He was absolutely convinced he was going to die before the war ended. I think it was the reason he opened up to me so completely. He wanted someone to know the real Severus Snape before he" She sniffed and shook her head slightly as if

to clear her mind.

"One afternoon, we were discussing regrets...that's when he told me about your mum, Harry. But he mentioned one other real regret. He was the last in his magical line, and that really bothered him." She stared down at her hands, unconsciously cradling her still-flat tummy. "He regretted that he had never been able to have a family, to leave that kind of legacy. It was just a casual comment. I'm certain he had no idea that I would even remember it, much less want to do something about it." Her chin lifted, and she looked up at them, an odd pride in her face. "But I couldn't stop thinking about it. He'd given so much and yet received so little. It didn't seem fair. Finally, I realised I had to do something ... anything ... to make it right."

"Hermione," Harry breathed. "What did you do?"

"I did what I do best," she replied. "I thought things over, I researched, and then I made a decision."

Ron grimaced. "Yeah. Sounds like you."

Hermione gave him a withering look and a saccharine smile. "Ha ha. Yes. I researched. I researched spells and wizarding law. I made lists of every consideration, of every way this would change my life. I turned it inside out and then back right side again. I considered every angle, every possible circumstance ... and then I took my lists to Severus."

Bill whistled, and three heads turned as one to face him. "I'm sure that went over really well."

Hermione fidgeted, her fingers plucking at a nonexistent bit of lint on her trousers. "Yeah, well. You'd be right about that. It went down like a lead balloon. He was furious that I would even suggest such a thing." Her voice lowered as she mimicked his reaction. "'You silly little girl. I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with such an absurd idea. Now get out.'"

The men all laughed at her spot-on imitation, and even Hermione cracked a small smile.

"I should have known it wouldn't be so easy. Weeks went by, and I made sure I mentioned the idea at least once every time we spoke. I was determined to do this for him. He fought me tooth and nail: I was too young, he was too old, it would ruin my life, what if by some miracle he didn't die"

She sighed as she reviewed the memories. "I finally just wore him down. The more I talked about it, the more the idea intrigued him. It gave him hope that he *could* have his legacy, that it wasn't too late. And who better than me...his friend...to raise his child? Can't you see? He gifted me with his friendship...something so rare that only one other person had ever even had a glimpse of it...and I had to do this for him." One hand absently caressed her stomach. "I had to."

"Okay, fine. So you convinced him he could still be a father." Harry pulled a face and shuddered. "Why did it have to be you? Wasn't there some other way?"

"Don't you think I considered everything? I was the only choice. Who else could have done it? Narcissa? Bellatrix?" Hermione scoffed at the absurdity. "Hardly!"

Ron let out a bark of laughter, startling everyone in the room. "What? It's true," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hermione sighed again. "You know what? It doesn't matter why, anymore. What's done is done. He didn't ask this of me...I asked it of him. I wanted to do this for him. Like it or not, agree with me or not, this child is coming, and I'm going to need your support!"

The room was silent for several minutes, each person lost in his or her own thoughts, until finally Harry stood and spoke.

"I won't pretend that I understand why you did this Hermione. You're too young, and you're not even in a relationship. What about school and your future? This is ... this is a huge thing you've done. But you're my friend, and I love you." He approached her with a resigned smile. "Whatever help you need, you can count on me."

"Oh, Harry." Tears sprang to her eyes, and she rushed to embrace him. "Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you."

"Oi! What about me?" Ron said, shuffling his feet as he stood off to one side. "I'm your friend, too, right?"

Hermione laughed and moved to hug him as well, the tears falling even faster. She knew this was especially hard for Ron, given the feelings she knew he harboured for her.

Bill ushered Harry to a corner, giving the two friends a moment of privacy.

"Wow, Hermione," Ron said into her hair. "You're gonna be a mum."

She laughed. "I know! It's unreal."

He held her for a moment longer, then pulled away before reaching for her hand. His thumb lightly stroked her palm, and his gaze was more serious than she had ever seen. "You loved him, didn't you? That's why you didn't kiss me back ... you know, that day in the hallway. You were in love with him."

"Oh, Ron." Hermione's heart broke for him, but she couldn't lie. He knew her too well. "I'm sorry."

He lowered his head to stare at their hands and shrugged. "It's all right. Well, it's not, but you know what I mean. We already talked about it. You were excited about what I said about the house-elves, and I ... well, I took a chance. Thanks for not saying anything then, by the way. Would've been hard to handle that kind of rejection in the middle of a battle."

Hermione smiled briefly and squeezed his hand. He looked up at her and said, "Maybe if I'd asked you out back in sixth year, things would be different. By the time I got around to it, you'd moved on. I just wish I hadn't been such an idiot and waited so long. You know?"

She nodded sadly. "Yeah, I know."

He nodded as well and then asked, "Did he ... did he love you?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. No, of course not. Don't be ridiculous."

Ron looked sceptical but said nothing.

"Don't look at me like that. You were there. You saw. His last thoughts weren't of me or his child," she said with downcast eyes. "Even then, after everything ... his last thoughts were only of her. Why do you think he wanted Harry to look at him? Because he wanted the last thing he saw on this earth to be Lily's eyes."

Ron brushed away her tears with his thumb. "Hm. Guess the git and I had something in common after all."

Hermione looked up at him quizzically, and Ron's lips quirked into a small smile.

"We were both idiots for not seeing what was right in front of us. He was a fool, Hermione, if he didn't love you."

Hermione felt her eyes fill with tears again. *Stupid hormones.*

"Everything good here?" Harry said as he and Bill moved back to the centre of the room. He was obviously worried about how things had gone between his two best

friends.

Ron rolled his eyes, bringing a smile to Hermione's face. "Sure, mate. Never better."

"I think I'd like to hear more about this spell," Bill said as he moved away from the corner and back to his chair. "You know, how you found it, what exactly it does ... that sort of thing."

"Oh. Okay," Hermione said as they all sat down again. "Well, it took me a while to find it. I knew Severus would never agree to a normal conception" She shot a warning glare at the boys in case they decided to snigger, snort, or make some other rude noise. "So I decided a spell was really the only alternative."

"Where did you find it?" Bill asked, his eyes sharp and intent.

"*Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes*. Are you all right? You seem a bit odd."

Bill's eyes had closed, and a stifled groan escaped his throat. His head dropped in his hands, and then he rubbed his mouth with his palm. "Given the nature of the spell, I assume Snape was the caster. Tell me ... what was the incantation?"

Hermione's brow furrowed. "*Ingravesco iugo*, and yes, Severus cast the spell."

"Oh, *fuck*."

Three pairs of eyes widened in shock, and three mouths dropped open as the oldest Weasley son stood and began pacing the room, muttering to himself and pulling at his scalp.

"Hermione," he said after several minutes, his voice strained, "did you look at all the literature regarding that spell or just what was in *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes*?"

She stared at him. "You mean that's not the only book it's listed in?"

Bill kicked his chair. "Damn it!" He kicked it again before looking at Hermione. "At any point during the ritual, did you kiss him?"

Hermione blushed. "I really don't see how that's any of your business."

"Please, Hermione," Bill said tightly. "It's important."

"Fine. Yes, there was a kiss. But I don't see how that could possibly be important!"

"Damn it, Hermione! Of all times to decide to slack off on the research" He ran his hands through his long red hair before he moved to kneel in front of her, his hands on her shoulders. "Did you feel a sharp pain in your neck, near the top of your spine?"

"Yes. Now would you please tell me what is going on?"

"Bloody hell, Hermione, you don't even know what you did, do you?" Bill began to laugh; it was not a pleasant sound. "You married him!"

Hermione felt her jaw go slack, and she stared at him blankly, unable to form more than a single word. "Married?"

"It's as simple as looking at the incantation," Bill explained. "The first word is the part of the spell that causes conception between the two participants. The second means "binding" or "couple," for Merlin's sake! You sealed the binding with a kiss. For all intents and purposes, it's a marriage and is considered such by the Ministry."

After several tense moments, Hermione said, "I just assumed it had to do with binding the pregnancy to me" She paused and then shook her head. "Even if you're right, it doesn't change anything. I'm still pregnant and on my own. It changes nothing." *Except I'd be a grieving widow, instead of a grieving friend.*

"You don't believe me?" Bill asked. "Fine. I'll prove it. This pain you felt in your neck...did it leave a mark?"

Hermione stared at him; dear gods, she had married Severus Snape. "Yes. I suppose now you want to see it, right?" she asked irritably.

Bill's entire body seemed to freeze, as though he had been petrified. "The mark...it's still there?"

She shrugged. "I think so. It's on the back of my neck, so I can't really see it. I've felt a tingle a few times, though, so I guess it's still..."

Before she could protest, Bill had pulled her out of her chair, spun her around, and lifted her hair. Harry and Ron quickly manoeuvred themselves behind the older wizard so that they, too, could see.

"I don't believe it. It just can't be"

Hermione had enough. "What is the problem?!"

Bill gently lowered her hair and turned her around. His face, which had been red with frustration, was now deathly pale. "Hermione. The mark is still there."

She sighed exasperatedly and crossed her arms under her breasts. "So?"

"Maybe you ought to sit down."

"No, you tell me this instant...what is going on?" she demanded, even as she allowed him to lead her back to her seat. Bill seemed completely out of sorts now, his hands shaking slightly and his posture rigid. It was scaring her, but she did not show it.

"All binding marks work on similar principles," Bill said. "Tell me, what happened to the Dark Mark when Voldemort died?"

"It disappeared." Then, she gasped, one hand moving to cover her mouth, the other gripping the arm of the chair as if her life depended on it. "No. That's not possible"

"It's true, Hermione."

"What's true?" Ron asked, his eyes rapidly moving from person to person. "What's going on?"

Bill sighed. "Snape is alive."

A/N: Canon does not say what happened to the Dark Mark after Voldemort was killed, but for the purposes of this story, we'll say that it disappeared.

DeeMichelle gifted me with art for this story! You can find it in the prologue. Thank you so much, Dee.

My unending gratitude to my very own golden trio, Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird, my beta readers and Brit picker. I also owe a huge debt to GinnyW for her cheerleading and brainstorming, as well as the lovely banner she created for this story. Thank you so much, all of you!

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Three

May 5, 1998

Mousehole, Cornwall

His eyes opened.

Pain such as he had never before experienced ripped through him, and he closed his eyes once more. What was happening? If he were dead, he would feel nothing. He wriggled his fingers, causing spasms of pain to shoot up the nerves from his hand to his spine.

If he could have screamed, he would have done. Why couldn't he?

"Severus? Wake up, love. I have some nice potions for you that will help you feel better."

The woman's voice was familiar, but his mind was foggy. He could not remember. All he knew, his entire world, was the pain. It was like fire, consuming and devouring him.

Cool, slender fingers touched his brow, and she clucked her tongue.

"Oh, dear. You're burning up."

Her soothing touch and gentle tone were calming, and he unconsciously turned his face toward her hand.

"That's right. Everything is fine. Now, open your mouth a bit and ... yes, like that."

He trusted her. He did not know why; he only knew that he did. His lips parted, and his mouth was filled with a bitter liquid, but he could not swallow. He panicked, his eyes opening with terror as he choked on the foul substance, causing waves of pain to wash over him.

The tender touch returned, this time massaging his throat as she helped him to swallow.

"I'm so sorry, Severus. This would be easier with a spell, I know. There. That's better. Yes?"

Yes. It was better. The fire was receding, fading until it was only a warm ember rather than a raging inferno.

His body and mind relaxed, and he found himself drifting back into the darkness.

Then, he heard her. She was humming. He knew that song. He knew *her*. It had been so long since he had seen her...much too long. He slipped back into unconsciousness, soothed by the sound of the familiar lullaby.

Mum.

May 21, 1998

"Severus Snape! What do you think you're doing?" Eileen scolded as she rushed to the bedroom. "I could hear you all the way in the kitchen!" She sagged against the doorframe, one hand clutched to her heart as she caught her breath.

"Damn it!" Severus groaned and hit the carpeted floor with the flat of his hand. The muffled sound was utterly unsatisfying. He was aware he should have waited for her assistance before testing the strength in his legs, but he was tired of displaying his weakness before her. Lying on the floor in a crumpled heap, however, was not exactly what he had intended.

"Let's get you back into bed."

He allowed her to help him, his cheeks flushed with exertion and embarrassment. He could hear the exhaustion in her voice, and he felt a twinge of remorse.

"I apologise," he said, looking at the wall.

Eileen pulled the sheet over his legs and then fluffed a pillow before placing it behind his back. "Yes, I know."

Severus watched as his mother pattered about the room, his keen eyes greedily watching her every movement. By his own choice, he had not seen her since he had joined the Death Eaters. Their estrangement had initially been due to his hatred for his father and thereby anything Muggle. He cringed inwardly as he vividly recalled the day he had stormed from the house in Spinner's End, proudly declaring his loyalty to the Dark Lord and announcing that he would have nothing more to do with either of his parents. Later, when he had turned spy, he had believed his mother would be safer if she had no contact with him. He had attempted to find her when the Dark Lord had disappeared after the attack on the Potters, but to no avail.

Seeing her now, he was as confused about his feelings toward her as he had been when he was a child. They had been very close for a time, and he had shared

everything with her. When he left for Hogwarts, his father's abuse had intensified. By the end of his fifth year, his mother had been akin to an emotional whirling dervish, alternating between cool detachment and loving warmth. Would she blow hot and cold now as well?

He slid another glance in her direction as she pulled a large quilt from the wardrobe, and he noted the changes in her appearance. Her raven hair, so like his own, was streaked with silver, and she seemed taller, somehow. In his mind's eye, he remembered her as painfully thin and stooped. Yet, as he truly looked at her for the first time in the three days he had been fully conscious, he noticed that she appeared stronger, healthier. She stood straight and tall, and the lines on her face, which he remembered as deep, heavy creases, had smoothed and relaxed. Her eyes, which had typically been glazed over with lingering pain, were sharp and clear ... and looking directly at him.

He cleared his throat and glanced away, like a small boy who had been caught nicking a biscuit before dinner. "You look well."

Her thin lips twitched, and she appeared amused. "Thank you. You, on the other hand, have seen better days."

Severus scowled.

His mother merely arched an eyebrow, as if daring him to disagree.

He glared.

Eileen laughed and shook her head, taking a seat on the edge of his bed. "Always so surly. I see I shall have my hands full with you."

She tucked the quilt around him, as she had done when he was a boy, then tilted her head to one side and looked at him with serious eyes.

"I know some of what has happened to you over the last twenty years, and I do not wish to know anything more. The letter that Dumbledore sent with the phoenix that brought you here was explanation enough, and while I cannot say that I condone all of your decisions, I do understand them. And ..." She paused when her voice cracked, then straightened her spine and continued, her tone clear and direct. "I am very proud of you, Severus, for admitting your mistakes and attempting to rectify them."

Severus' face maintained its impassive façade, but internally, he was shocked beyond measure. Before he could ponder her words, she spoke again.

"Who is Hermione?"

Severus stiffened but said nothing.

"You cried out for her many times while you were unconscious," Eileen said gently. "Was she someone special? Your wife, or your daughter, perhaps?"

An inexplicable anger rose within him, and his eyes turned cold and hard. "I will not discuss her. Do not speak of her again."

He turned his face to the wall, resolutely ignoring the guilt he felt when his mother nodded sadly and left the room.

May 27, 1998

Severus was sick of lying in bed all day, of never leaving his room. The room was nice enough; the soft white walls and cream carpeting were light and calming. The glow of the Muggle lamps softly illuminated the room, providing adequate lighting for reading. Granted, he would much rather be reading his favourite potions journals than outdated issues of *Gardener's World* and his mother's favourite novels, but beggars could not be choosers.

The paralysis had abated some over the past week...he was slowly regaining feeling in his legs, but he was still unable to walk unassisted. Severus was not sure why the venom's effects seemed to have impacted his legs so severely. After Nagini's failed attack on Arthur Weasley, her venom had been altered; he was the only person to have survived a bite, since then.

He suspected what he truly needed was a Healer, but it was impossible to go to St Mungo's. Severus was without a wand and was in no physical condition to Apparate. His mother had used only the most basic magic for almost three decades and was uncomfortable with the thought of attempting Apparition. She did not even have an owl. Even if she had, Severus knew he could not risk attempting to contact anyone in the wizarding world without knowing the outcome of the battle at Hogwarts. According to the local newspaper, all was business as usual in the Muggle world, so he was fairly confident that Potter had been victorious. However, he was not so confident of how he was now viewed by the wizarding world. He assumed they believed him to be dead, but had Lupin and Bill managed to convey his true loyalties? Had Potter revealed the contents of his memories?

Had Hermione and their child survived?

He slashed an angry hand through the air. No. He would not think of her, of them. If she had not survived, it was better that he did not know, and if she was alive

Eileen entered the room, a bowl of hot porridge held in her hands.

"Good morning, Severus. I hope you slept well."

He grunted a reply.

"So, it's to be like that today, is it? I see." Eileen placed breakfast tray over his lap and sat in the chair next to his bed, her expression serious. "You are dangerously thin, Severus. Obviously you have not been eating properly for quite some time. That ends today." She picked up the spoon from the tray. "Now, open up," she said, scooping up a spoonful of porridge and holding in front of his mouth.

Severus' jaw dropped in affronted outrage, and Eileen took advantage, shoving the spoon into his mouth. He sputtered and coughed before swallowing.

He wiped his mouth with a proffered napkin, his eyes narrowing into angry slits when she brought forward yet another spoonful.

"You overstep your bounds, Mother," Severus snarled as he pushed away her hand, causing the spoon to clatter to the floor.

"Do I really?" she replied blandly as she retrieved the utensil. With the regal carriage of a queen, she walked to the wash basin. She washed the spoon and wet a towel before returning to his bedside. Calmly, she cleaned the mess on the floor as Severus watched warily.

When she completed her task, Eileen returned the spoon to his tray and sat down, her hands clasped in her lap as she looked at him directly. "I realise that you are in pain and feeling frustrated with your current limitations. However, I suggest you take a different tone with me, young man, and I would advise you not to touch me in anger again. I may have put up with such things at one point in my life, but I will no longer tolerate abuse to my person in any form. Is that understood?"

Severus blinked and looked away. Ashamed of his display of temper, he sullenly asked, "When did you grow a spine?"

"The day I left your father. Now eat up." She smiled, nodding toward the bowl and spoon.

"I hate porridge," he grumbled as he grabbed the spoon and began to eat.

Eileen's mouth opened then closed. She shook her head and said, "But it used to be your favourite!"

Severus focussed on the bowl in front of him, scooping another disgusting bite into his mouth.

He glanced at her and saw her eyes moving to and fro in intense concentration. Suddenly, her eyes widened, her mouth forming a small circle.

"Oh."

Severus nodded as he concentrated on his food. As a boy, he had learned not to complain about a meal when the result involved his father's fist slamming into his mother's face.

He ate all of the porridge in silence and then placed the spoon on the tray next to the empty bowl.

"He's dead, you know."

Severus turned his head to face her. "Yes, although I was not provided any details."

"The factory closed a year or so after the last time you came to see us, and the company offered him a position with another factory near Manchester. I had already left him by then, and rather than deal with me, he abandoned the house in Spinner's End and moved north. Five years ago, there was an accident at the factory, and he was killed. Since we were never legally divorced, I received a large settlement from the company. I put most of the money into an account in your name, but I used a small portion to start my baking business."

Severus arched a questioning eyebrow, an unconscious imitation of his mother. "A bakery?"

Eileen smiled. "Not exactly. I supply ... unusual baked goods to the local baker. He sells them and takes a small percentage as a fee. Didn't you wonder how I was able to be at your beck and call so easily?" she teased.

He hadn't, actually, but he nodded anyway. "You said you left him."

"Yes."

"Why? Why leave then and not before?" Old hurts and resentments began to resurface, and Severus needed to hear her answer ... he needed to know *why*.

She smiled sadly. "One day, I woke up and thought, 'I've had enough.' I left that very day...the day after I last saw you."

Eileen stood and removed the tray from his lap, her hands trembling slightly. "Perhaps later you can tell me what foods you prefer." She turned to leave, but as she reached the door, Severus could not stop the words from bursting forth.

"Where have you been all this time? I searched for you and found nothing. It was as if you disappeared from the face of the earth. I even spoke with *him*. He said you had left and then told me never to return."

Eileen turned. "I was here, dear boy, waiting for you."

And with that, she swept from the room, leaving Severus alone with his thoughts.

June 3, 1998

"Would you like to read today's *Daily Prophet*?"

Severus went completely still, his fingers tightening on the year-old issue of *The Times Literary Supplement*. "I beg your pardon?"

His mother entered the room, covered from neck to knee in flour, a few streaks of the white powder slashing across one cheek. In her hands, she held the *Daily Prophet*.

"Here, see for yourself. It's today's issue," Eileen said, holding out the wizarding paper.

Slowly, Severus lowered the magazine to the bed.

"Where did you get this?" he asked, staring at the paper as his fingers closed around it.

"Fawkes brought it. Damn bird scared me to death, popping into the kitchen like that. He dropped that on the floor and then disappeared before I could say a word." She leaned against the chair by his bed. "Well? Are you going to read it or stare at it all day?"

Severus ran his fingertips along the edge of the roll of parchment. His heart felt as though it might pound out of his chest, and his stomach roiled.

"Whatever is in there," Eileen said softly, "it won't change by you not knowing. Open it, Severus. Find out what happened to her."

The door clicked, and Severus looked up to find that he was alone. He simply held the parchment for several minutes before he rolled his eyes and quickly opened it, his gaze immediately falling to the photograph in the centre of the front page.

Hermione.

She was kneeling at the base of a black obelisk...Potter and Weasley stood grimly nearby...with her head bowed and one hand flat against the surface of the stone. He watched as she stood and kissed her fingers before touching the memorial. Then the scene restarted.

She was alive.

Relief flooded him, and he watched the photograph for several long minutes, the tips of his fingers hovering over Hermione's form. He wanted to rush to her side, to touch her until he was satisfied that she was well and truly alive. Finally, he tore his eyes away from her image to read the caption.

Harry Potter and friends attend memorial service for Death Eater-turned-spy, Severus Snape. See article, Potter Claims Snape is Hero on page 2.

Potter had done it...and managed to live. He moved to the article, scanning through Rita Skeeter's rather loquacious commentary for information.

Pardoned ... Order of Merlin ... hero ... "bravest man I've ever known."

Severus blinked several times...the room must have been dusty...and then continued to read, until he came upon a listing of those who had been killed during the battle at Hogwarts. The list was not as long as he had feared. Scanning the names, a few stood out in his mind.

Colin Creevey, Nymphadora Tonks Lupin, Remus Lupin, Fred Weasley.

Lupin, the last of the Marauders, was gone. Severus felt no sense of triumph, but only an overwhelming emptiness, as though something was now missing that could never be replaced. An image of Fred and George Weasley pulling a prank in his classroom flashed in his mind, Lupin teasing Molly about her cooking, a pink-haired Tonks tripping over a carpet, Colin Creevey smiling enthusiastically with his camera draped around his neck

Dead. All of them.

An unexpected pain washed over him as he read the list again, filled with the names of former classmates, students and colleagues, and his vision blurred. He turned his head toward the window, the bright morning sun causing him to close his eyes as the *Prophet* slipped from his fingers to the floor.

June 5, 1998

Severus could hear the loud knocking at the front door all the way from his room on the top floor. He looked at the clock; it was rather late in the evening for visitors. Who would be coming to see his mother at this time of night? He turned a sickly green as the thought of a gentleman caller came to mind.

He heard the door open and then his mother's muffled greeting, followed by another voice. He could not make out what was being said, but after a few moments, it seemed as if his mother was pleased to see whoever had come to call.

The sound of the front door closing drifted up the stairwell, and satisfied that all was well, Severus returned to his reading. *The Lady* was most certainly not his typical fare, but at least it kept his mind occupied...somewhat.

He often found his thoughts drifting to Hermione...where was she, what was she doing, how was the child? Stranded as he was at the moment, he felt it best to keep thoughts of her at bay as much as possible, else he would go mad.

A quarter of an hour had passed when he heard a knock at his bedroom door.

His mother rarely encroached up on his privacy at this time of night, and Severus was immediately concerned. "Come in," he said as he placed the magazine on the side table.

The door slowly opened, and there, framed by the dim light in the hall and face hidden in the shadows, stood a much shorter person than he was expecting to see. Before he could demand to know what was going on, the person spoke.

"Hello, Severus," came the nervous greeting.

His eyes widened. He recognised that voice

"Hermione?"

A/N: Mousehole is a lovely village in Cornwall and is pronounced "Mowzell."

Thanks as always to my very own golden trio: Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird. You are amazing!

Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Four

June 5, 1998

Mousehole, Cornwall

"You're sure this is the right place?" Harry asked for the third time in as many minutes.

Hermione gritted her teeth in frustration. "Yes, I'm sure."

Even as she assured Harry, Hermione examined the small, lichen-covered fisherman's cottage with wary eyes. She did not know exactly what sort of house she had expected Severus to be living in, but this was definitely not it. No, she certainly had not imagined that she would find him in a lovely little village, in a most charming little house.

Even in the darkness of night, the small, granite cottage was warm and inviting, with pots of vibrantly-coloured flowers lovingly lined along the front patio and next to the bright blue door. Hermione could hear the sounds of the harbour and smell the salty sea air, and she realised they must be near the bay. The quiet, narrow street was not open to traffic, allowing for a very private, secluded feeling.

Perhaps it was the sort of place he would come to, after all.

She touched her fingers to the binding mark on the back of her neck. Yes, she could feel his magic inside the cottage. Severus was here. Hermione swayed...he really was alive. She had known it intellectually, but to actually *feel* his magic

"All right there, Hermione?" Harry asked as he reached out for her arm to steady her.

She nodded, her mouth so dry she could not speak. She stared at the blue door, working up the courage to knock. It had taken three days of poring over the ancient texts and tomes that Bill had found on magical bindings before they had been able to find detailed information on the *Ingravesco Iugo*. The most exhaustive text had been a basic book of spells from the Middle Ages that Bill had discovered in Fleur's family library. *Livre de formules magiques et potions* by Philippe Durand had been quite helpful; it was there that they had learned how to find Severus.

It was simple, really. Hermione merely had to touch the mark with her fingers and allow her magic to seek his. The book had indicated that if she concentrated, she could reach out for his magical signature and Apparate directly to wherever Severus was located.

It appeared to have worked, although Hermione had been concerned when they had arrived outside of a house with no Severus in sight. Perhaps there were wards on the cottage? Or maybe it only brought her within a certain distance. She would have to research that later

"Hermione?" Harry asked. "Are we going to knock or just stand out here all night?"

Hermione started and then blushed at having been caught woolgathering. As she stared at the blue door, she began to have second thoughts. "You know," she said as she backed away from the house, "maybe we should come back tomorrow. It's terribly late for visiting. I don't know what I was thinking. Let's just go."

"Hermione," Harry interrupted gently. "Stop stalling and knock on the door."

She looked at him, and he smiled, jerking his head toward the door. "Go on."

With a deep breath, she attempted to calm her tumultuous emotions and raging hormones. She wanted to see him, but what if he didn't want to see her?

Then she remembered...this was Severus, her friend. Of course he would want to see her. Wouldn't he?

"I suppose I should just ... knock." Hermione marched up to the door, with Harry in tow, and gave it three sharp raps.

She thought she might faint.

Harry, thankfully, kept a steadying hand on her arm as they waited. After what seemed like hours, but was in reality only a few moments, they heard footsteps as someone approached the door. Hermione's fingers gripped her beaded bag more tightly.

She was definitely going to faint.

The door opened, revealing a tall, dark-haired woman who, judging by her flour-covered apron and hands, had recently been baking. Hermione felt a flicker of recognition but could not recall having ever met the person standing at the door.

"May I help you?" the woman asked coolly as she raised an inquisitive brow.

A very familiar inquisitive brow.

Hermione gasped. "You're Eileen Prince!"

The brow lowered, and the woman's sharp gaze flitted between Harry and Hermione. "Who are you?"

Hermione rapidly pulled herself together. "I'm sorry. I'm Hermione Granger, and this is my friend, Harry Potter."

The dark eyes snapped to Hermione. "Hermione?"

And then her whole demeanour changed, her eyes lit from within, and her mouth curved into a wide smile.

"As I live and breathe. Hermione Granger! Oh, where are my manners? Do come in. I'm so delighted to meet you," she said as she ushered them into the small lounge.

Hermione stood in the middle of the room, shifting nervously from foot to foot. It was a lovely room, with a beamed ceiling and cream walls that were lined with several bookshelves, all holding what appeared to be both Muggle and wizarding cookbooks. As she looked about, her eyes were instantly drawn to a large window seat, which was lined with plush pillows, a few books scattered upon the cushion. It was cosy and comfortable, and Hermione instantly felt at home.

"I do apologise. It isn't often that I have visitors. Would either of you care for tea?" Eileen asked.

Hermione turned to face the older woman. "Erm ... no, thank you, Mrs Snape."

"Please, call me Eileen. And it's Prince, not Snape...not for a very long time. I assume you're here to see Severus?"

"He's here?" Harry asked, as though he was finally beginning to realise that it might actually be true that Snape was alive.

Eileen smiled indulgently. "Yes, he's upstairs, probably whinging about my lack of proper reading materials. He's had a bit of trouble with his legs, you see. He mostly stays to his room, but he's improving all the time. I'm sure a Healer could work wonders. Are you all right, my dear?" she asked a suddenly pale Hermione.

Nerves, morning sickness, and Apparition had already taxed her system, but at Eileen's confirmation of Severus' presence in the house, Hermione felt her stomach lurch.

"I...I'm not feeling very well"

And then she promptly vomited on Eileen Prince's antique Persian rug.

A quarter of an hour later, a mortified but clean Hermione stood outside Severus' bedroom door. Eileen had given her a piece of bread to settle her stomach and then shown her to the room before returning downstairs to sit with Harry.

Hermione raised her hand to the door, her fingers lingering on the white-washed wood. The last month had been the worst and best days she had ever known. So many had died, and yet so many had lived. Her parents had returned to England, their memories restored, but they now looked at her with trepidation and a wariness that made Hermione's heart ache. Funerals and weddings had been sprinkled throughout the month of May like pixie dust, one after the other. Hermione had sworn that after the memorial service for Severus, she would take some time to rest; but then had come the shocking revelation of her "marriage" and that Severus was alive

And she was stalling, again.

Before she could change her mind, she lifted her hand and knocked.

"Come in."

Her eyes closed and her breathing quickened as she heard his voice for the first time since that horrible night in the Shrieking Shack. Tears pricked her eyelids. He was here, he was alive. Thanking every deity she could think of, she slowly opened the door, her eyes falling upon his reclining form. She held on tightly to the door knob for support.

"Hello, Severus."

His eyes widened in recognition. "Hermione?"

She entered on shaking legs and stopped in the centre of the room. They stared at each other, the air all but crackling around them as their magic leapt in anticipation of

their reunion.

"Hermione," he breathed, his expression one of stunned amazement.

All thoughts of nervousness fled, and her face lit up in a bright smile. First and foremost, Severus was her friend, and seeing him alive and well after believing him dead was nothing short of a miracle. Unable to stop herself, she rushed to the bed and flung herself at him, her hands clutching him to her as she inhaled his familiar scent. She had obviously caught him off-guard, but he chuckled in her ear and returned her tight embrace. For several long moments, they simply held each other, and Hermione felt at peace for the first time in a very long while.

Finally, Severus leant back ever so slightly. "Let me look at you," he said.

She reluctantly released him and perched on the edge of the bed as she reached for his hand. Tears filled her eyes as his long fingers entwined with hers.

"Don't you ever...ever...scare me like that again, Severus Snape," she scolded, her eyes hungrily taking in his features. He looked better than he had in years...his face had filled out, probably due to regular meals and a lack of stress. The dark circles under his eyes had all but disappeared, and he just seemed ... lighter somehow.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Unless you know of another megalomaniac whose familiar is an oversized, venom-enhanced snake, I believe I can safely assure you that this will never happen again."

"Ha ha," Hermione replied with a light squeeze of his fingers. "You have no idea what it's been like this past month, thinking you were dead," she said, wiping away a stray tear.

He looked at her with serious eyes and murmured, "I have a better idea than one might think."

She gave him a watery grin. "I've missed you."

"And I you, Hermione," he said, the corner of his own mouth twitching into a small, wry smile. His eyes flittered to her midsection. "How is ...?"

"He's fine," Hermione assured him. "I saw the Healer just last week, and everything is going perfectly."

Severus nodded and looked away. "Good."

Hermione grasped his chin in the fingers of her free hand and turned his face to hers. "Listen to me very carefully, Severus. I wanted to do this. Remember? It was all my idea."

"Yes, I remember. But I hadn't planned on surviving," he replied bitterly, jerking his chin from her hand.

"Don't say such things!"

"Hermione..."

"No!" she exclaimed. She was quite familiar with survivor's guilt, but she'd be damned if she would allow him to use that as an excuse to distance himself from her and their son. "If you think for one single, solitary moment that I regret my decision, then let me assure you...I do not. That you survived changes nothing ... except that you will be able to be the father that you so wanted to be. I would change nothing, Severus...nothing at all."

Suddenly she was looking at the shy, awkward teenager that Harry had described from the memories Severus had released as he lay dying.

"You would be ... open to me playing a part in the child's life?" Severus asked, his tone casual as he plucked at a loose string on the quilt draped across his legs.

Hermione stared at him in exasperated confusion. "How can you ask me that? He is as much your son as he is mine. Of course I want you in his life. You're his *father*."

Outwardly, his expression did not change, but Hermione could see his relief as his body visibly relaxed. He suddenly gave a bone-cracking yawn, and she remembered just how late in the evening it was.

"Oh, you must be tired. I'm sorry for coming so late, but once we found you, I just couldn't wait, and..."

"Shh. It's fine," Severus interrupted before yet another yawn. "I'm sure you have a plethora of questions for me, as I do for you, but I'm afraid they will have to wait until morning."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "But I want to know how..."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. You want to know how I survived, and I would like to know what happened after my supposed death, as well as how you found me." He yawned again. "But I'm much too tired for such lengthy explanations."

For a moment, Hermione considered protesting. She needed to discuss their inadvertent marriage with him, but that conversation would take some time, and he did look tired. She sighed. She supposed it could wait another day.

"All right," Hermione muttered. "But you're insane if you think I'm letting you out of my sight for even a moment," she said, standing from her perch on the edge of the mattress and then sliding the overstuffed chair next to the bed just a tad closer. She sat down and tucked her legs underneath her, squirming to find just the right position. When she was comfortable, she smiled and grasped his hand once more.

"I will be right here when you wake up. And don't even think of trying to talk me out of it. I'm not budging, Severus," she said as he opened his mouth to protest.

He must have been too tired to argue with her...which really said something about his exhausted state, as he always wanted to argue with her...because he simply nodded and then shifted until he was lying flat against the mattress.

"Good night, Hermione," he said as his thumb stroked the top of her hand.

"Good night, Severus."

She watched the steady rise and fall of his chest long into the night.

June 6, 1998

Early the next morning, Hermione woke with a start, a loud snort having disturbed her peaceful slumber. She muffled a yelp of pain at the crick in her neck from sleeping in such an awkward position. Looking down, she saw their hands still clasped together, and she marvelled at the contorted positions they both had managed to sleep in so that their link would not be broken.

She smiled and gripped his hand tighter. Being with him again was heavenly, her beleaguered heart finding solace in his presence. The last few days had seemed to last an eternity as they searched for a way to discover Severus' location. Hermione sighed as she realised that she had not truly believed that Severus was alive until she had seen and touched him for herself. Now that she had, she never wanted to let him out of her sight again. Ever.

Unfortunately, her insistent bladder and queasy stomach had other ideas. She needed the loo ... immediately.

With a regretful sigh, she disentangled her hand from his and left the chair. She quickly piled her hair on top of her head, securing in it place with her wand; it was best to get it out of the way before she was in the middle of what she now called her "morning love affair" with the toilet. Her eyes filled with tears at the thought of leaving Severus for even a few minutes, and she cursed her hormones for making her so emotional. After giving Severus a lingering glance, she rushed from the room to find the bathroom.

In her haste, she did not notice the dark eyes open and then narrow into angry slits as he watched her retreating form.

"Surely the magical community should have developed some sort of potion or spell to deal with morning sickness by now," Hermione grumbled, removing her wand and allowing her hair to tumble down her back as she descended the stairs to the ground floor. Spending the first five minutes of every morning clinging to a toilet was not the greatest way to start the day.

She sighed as she reached the lounge; Harry had obviously slept on the sofa judging by the pillow and blankets littered about the floor next to the piece of furniture, but the room itself was empty. She peeked into the dining room but found it vacant, as well.

Returning to the lounge, she quietly called, "Harry?"

"In here," came the muffled reply.

Hermione followed the sound of his voice, turning the corner into the light and airy kitchen.

At the table sat a grinning Harry Potter, his cheeks filled with food. A glass of milk and a plate loaded with cauldron cakes, pumpkin pasties, and various kinds of Cornish pasties had been set before him, which he had obviously been eating with gusto.

Hermione blinked. She was used to seeing Ron in such a fashion, but not Harry. Her lips twitched with the effort to contain her amusement.

Eileen was standing at the counter, rolling out dough on a marble slab. "Good morning, Hermione," she said. "Why don't you take a seat at the table, and I'll get you some breakfast."

Hermione's stomach protested the thought of food. "Oh, that's all right. I don't want to be any trouble," she said, with an admonishing glance at Harry.

"Nonsense," Eileen said, her hand waving away Hermione's protestation. "It's no trouble at all. Harry here is having pasties, but I can make something else if you'd like."

"Um ... do you happen to have any dry crackers or maybe some bread? I'm still not feeling well," she explained, hoping Eileen would not question her further; she did not know how much Severus had told his mother about their unique situation.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Let me get you some bread. I just baked a loaf this morning."

While Eileen washed her hands and prepared Hermione's breakfast, Hermione sat at the table next to Harry.

"How did it go?" Harry whispered. "What did he say when you told him you were married?"

"I didn't exactly have a chance to tell him," Hermione said under her breath.

Harry groaned and then shuddered. "I don't want to know what two of you were doing instead of talking."

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed before lowering her voice. "For goodness sake! He doesn't think of me like that, and you, of all people, should know that," she whispered harshly in an attempt to hide the pain of her words. "He hugged me, I cried all over him, and then he fell asleep. That's *all*."

Harry raised his hands in mock surrender. "All right! No need to get all prudish," he said, his eyes filled with mirth.

"Prudish?" Hermione narrowed her eyes and playfully punched him in the arm. "I am *not* prudish!"

"Here is your bread, dear. Would you like some jam?" Eileen asked, her dark eyes taking in the interaction between the two friends as she placed the plate on the table.

"Oh, no. Thank you," Hermione replied with a grateful smile. "This is perfect."

"Well, I'll just finish up my baking, then. I'm running a bit behind today, and I need to get these pasties down to the bakery before seven-thirty. Muggles seem to adore pumpkin pasties and cauldron cakes. They're quite popular at the bakery, and Mr Smythe will never forgive me if I'm late for my morning delivery," Eileen said as she bustled about the kitchen.

"Would you like some help?" Hermione asked before biting into the soft slice of freshly baked bread.

Eileen smiled over her shoulder. "That would be lovely. I doubt Severus will be up for at least another hour or two, so you and I can chat. Why don't you eat your bread, and then I'll put you to work."

Harry was summarily dismissed by the two witches and sent to St Mungo's to fetch a Healer for Severus. As soon as he Disapparated, Eileen smiled at Hermione fondly.

"I've always wanted a granddaughter, you know," Eileen said, handing Hermione a rolling pin.

Hermione returned the smile but was inwardly puzzled. If Severus had told his mother about the pregnancy, surely he would have told her that the baby was a boy.

The two women worked well together, rolling and cutting and assembling the batches of pasties as they chatted. Finally, all that was left was the baking.

"So, tell me about your mother," Eileen said as she placed the first batch of pumpkin pasties into the oven.

Hermione was confused by the question. "Um ... what would you like to know?"

Eileen leaned against the counter, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Anything and everything! Severus has told me nothing!"

Hermione blinked at the strange answer. Why would Eileen expect Severus to talk about her mother? "Well, she's a dentist."

Eileen stared at Hermione in astonishment. "She's a *Muggle*?"

"Yes," Hermione replied shortly.

"I mean no offence, dear. I'm just surprised," Eileen explained, leaning forward to pat Hermione's hand. "What else can you tell me about her?"

"I'm really not sure what you want to know," Hermione reiterated. "She's a lot like me, I suppose. We both like to read a lot and learn new things. We're both stubborn and determined." Hermione glanced at the other woman's expectant face and sighed. "Her favourite colour is blue, and she likes to go dancing with my father on the weekends."

Eileen goggled at the young witch. "He takes her dancing? Your father takes her ... dancing?"

"Yes," Hermione said impatiently. It was as if her parents were undergoing some sort of test, and it was making her feel terribly uncomfortable. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Eileen shook her head. "No, no. It's just so different from what I expected. Severus has always hated dancing."

Hermione tilted her head, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What does Severus have to do with my dad taking my mum out dancing?"

Eileen paled, and one arm reached out to the counter to steady herself. "You mean he's not ... you're not ... but he called out your ... and then you slept Oh, dear. I think I need to sit down."

Alarmed, Hermione rushed forward to help her mother-in-law into a chair. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Eileen sat at the table and waved a dismissive hand as Hermione sat in the adjacent chair. "I'm fine. I just need a moment. I know so little about Severus' life, and I assumed" Her gaze turned severe as she looked at Hermione. "Just who are you to my son?"

That certainly answered the question of whether or not Severus had spoken of her to his mother. *But then why would he?* a little voice asked. Hermione felt the familiar ache in her heart but pushed it away.

"I'm his friend, and a former student."

Eileen nodded as she rubbed a weary hand over face. "Please, tell me you're over seventeen."

Hermione's jaw dropped slightly, but she quickly recovered. "I'm almost nineteen."

"Thank Merlin for that," Eileen muttered.

"Oh, no," Hermione rushed to say, her cheeks pink, "it's not like that." *Not exactly.*

"No? Just how is it then?" Eileen asked stiffly.

"It's ... complicated," Hermione said. "I think perhaps Severus should be the one to explain things to you."

Eileen gaze was penetrating, her dark eyes seeming to attempt to see right through her. "My son cares a great deal for you. How do you feel about him?"

Hermione's eyes filled with tears, and once again, she cursed her out-of-control hormones. "I care for him a great deal, as well."

The older witch stared at Hermione for a moment, before standing. "Good. Well, these pasties aren't going to finish themselves. Let's get this done and down to the bakery before Severus wakes up."

Hermione shook her head as she walked up the stairs with Severus' breakfast tray. "What a strange conversation," she said under her breath.

Luckily, the two witches had got on rather well after the odd misunderstanding, both sharing a love of books. Hermione had been delighted to find that Eileen was knowledgeable of both Muggle and wizarding literature, something that was difficult to find in the magical world. Eileen also possessed the same dry wit that Hermione so adored in Severus, and her laughter had rung throughout the tiny kitchen.

Reaching the top floor bedroom, Hermione transferred the tray to one hand and quickly knocked on the door. The anticipation of seeing Severus again caused her to tingle from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"Enter."

She opened the door and walked into the room, her cheerful smile faltering at the imposing figure glowering at her from the bed. Severus had propped himself against the headboard, his arms folded across his chest and his face twisted into a scowl. She had not seen him this agitated since he had been her professor.

"Is something the matter?"

"Tell me," Severus said coldly, "just when did you plan on sharing with me the happy news?"

Hermione had just about had her fill of confusing conversations for one morning. Wearily, she placed the tray over his lap and sank into the chair next to his bed. "What happy news?"

Severus sneered. "Why, about your marriage, of course."

A/N: Just a note to the non-British readers ... pasties are quite different from pastries. A traditional Cornish pasty is a pastry-like semi-circular shell, filled with savoury ingredients, such as diced meat, potatoes, and onion. There are other kinds of pasties, as well, including sweet pasties such as apple and figgy, and even banana and chocolate.

My profound thanks to Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird for all their help.

Chapter Five

Chapter 6 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed,

lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Five

Hermione stood motionless, the word "marriage" ringing in her ears as the blood drained from her face. She gasped.

He knew.

"Oh, yes," Severus said dispassionately, his expression unreadable. "I saw the binding mark when you left this morning. The ancient rune *gebo*, is it not? How apropos."

Hermione uttered a curse under her breath, her posture deflating as she seemed to fold into herself. She looked at him with sad eyes. "I knew I should have told you last night. I'm so sorry, Severus."

"It's true, then," he said, his words cold and clipped.

Hermione gave a short nod, and then watched with growing dismay as Severus' detached façade transformed into cold rage.

She was shaking now, and she lowered her head, unable to watch as his regard for her disintegrated before her very eyes. Hot tears trailed down her cheeks at his reaction to discovering their binding. A small part of her had dared to hope that the news of their marriage would be met with elation...well, at least pleased acceptance...and perhaps even a declaration of love. She had allowed herself to dream of raising their son together, of days filled with research and learning, and nights filled with passion ... a lifetime of love.

But it would never be.

All the heartache she had felt since watching Severus "die" as he begged to see Lily Potter's eyes seemed to expand and multiply, magnifying until the pain was a palpable throb in her chest. He loved Lily; he would always love Lily.

He would never love her.

She was a fool for ever thinking he could. At best, he considered her to be his friend and nothing more. At worst, she was a silly little know-it-all, a schoolgirl with a crush on her older, enigmatic professor.

Hermione could not stay in the room a moment longer. She stood, preparing to flee his presence, when he spoke.

"Who is he?" Severus whispered harshly.

Her gaze snapped to his. What was he on about? "I beg your pardon?"

"Who is he?" he demanded, his entire body trembling in apparent rage. "I believe I have the right to know!"

Hermione stared at him blankly as she attempted to decipher his words. Quickly, she thought through all that he had said in the past few minutes, gasping in outraged incredulity as she realised what he was thinking. Even as her indignation at his ludicrous assumption swelled within her, so did a spark of hope. If Severus was angry, then perhaps there was a possibility that he felt more for her than he had previously revealed.

For now, however, Severus Snape had something to learn about Hermione Granger. She straightened her spine, and her lips pursed in an unconscious imitation of Minerva McGonagall after being told the house-elves were out of catnip.

"Perhaps you need to tell me exactly what it is you *think* you know," Hermione said, carefully enunciating each word.

Severus had just opened his mouth to give her what was sure to be a scathing reply, when there was a knock at his door.

"Hermione?" Harry said from the hall. "I've brought Healer Attewell. She can begin the examination whenever Professor Snape is ready."

Severus' scowl darkened, and she could almost feel the waves of anger radiating off him. "Potter? You married *Potter*?"

That was the hair that broke the Kneazle's back. Hermione leaned forward until her nose practically touched his. "No," she snarled. "I married *you*!"

She stood slowly, her eyes never disconnecting from his, and then she spun on her heel and walked to the door. As she turned the knob, she glared at him over her shoulder and said, "Choke on *that*!"

Hermione stormed into the hallway, pushing past a gobsmacked Harry, an embarrassed Healer Attewell, and a shocked Eileen before stomping down the stairs and heading toward the kitchen.

"Hermione!" Harry called, racing after her.

She stopped in the lounge. "I'm fine, Harry. I just need a few moments to myself."

Harry looked at her, his brow knitted in concern; but then he nodded. "Yeah, all right. I'll just ... hang out here then."

Hermione gave him a grateful, if brief, smile, and entered the kitchen, her ire with her so-called husband returning full force.

"How could he be so stupid?" she muttered angrily as she opened cabinet after cabinet searching for the drinking glasses. Finding them, she pulled one out and filled it with water before throwing herself into a chair at the kitchen table. "I can't believe he would think such a thing. Doesn't he know me at all?"

"I don't know about Severus, but I certainly don't."

Startled, Hermione nearly knocked over her glass. "Oh!"

Eileen's smile fell just short of her eyes. "I didn't mean to frighten you." She sat in the chair next to Hermione. "I think perhaps we need to have a discussion."

Hermione sighed. "I take it you heard, then."

"I did," Eileen said coldly, "and I do not appreciate being misled. You said this morning that you and my son were friends, and now I hear that you are his wife." The older woman folded her hands across her chest, her disdainful expression eerily similar to that of her son. "I would like to know how it came to be that my thirty-eight-year-old son married his eighteen-year-old former student."

"We *are* friends. The marriage was ... unintentional, and as you heard, even Severus didn't know until a few moments ago." Hermione sighed and nervously sipped her water. "It's a very long story."

Eileen gave nonchalant shrug. "I have time."

Hermione pondered how much to tell the other woman, who essentially was still a stranger. On the other hand, this was Severus' mother. Perhaps, she could tell her the vital information and leave it at that.

"All right," Hermione said. "As I said before, Severus was my professor at Hogwarts. Last summer he aided me in some research for the war. We became friends after a time, very good friends."

Hermione breathed deeply, turning her head to stare out of the kitchen window. "He was convinced that he would not survive the war, and he regretted that the Prince magical line would end with him."

Eileen's jaw dropped in shock. "Are you saying that you're ...?"

Hermione nodded, and her lower lip began to quiver before she suddenly spilled out the truth in a torrent of words. "Yes, I'm pregnant, and I love him, but he doesn't love me, he loves Lily, and I accidentally married him with that stupid spell, and all because I didn't take the time to research it properly, and it's all my fault, and now he's going to hate me, and I'm going to have to raise this child alone, and even though I planned for that contingency, I just don't think I can do it if I know he's out there alive!"

She concluded the verbal regurgitation with a wail and then dropped her head into her hands as she began to sob ... again.

Hermione could hear Eileen moving about the kitchen as she cried, and after a few minutes, she felt a cool cloth being pressed into her hands.

"Hormones?" Eileen asked kindly.

Hermione hiccupped and cleansed her face with the cloth. "Yes. Sorry for falling apart like that. It seems to be happening more and more often."

With a laugh, Eileen returned to her seat. "Ah, yes. I remember it well. It will ease up in a few weeks, if you're anything like I was. Now that we've got that out of the way, perhaps you can start from the beginning."

Hermione gave her mother-in-law a watery smile. "Well, it really began a year ago"

"And wiggle the fingers of your right hand ... good. And now the left ... very good."

"I married you!"

"Now the toes on your right foot. A bit painful? Hmm Try the toes on your left foot. No pain on that side? All right. Let's see ..."

"I married you!"

"Please stand. Thank you. Now, take five steps forward. Ah. I see that's still a bit of a struggle. Nothing to worry about, however. A nerve regenerator and a muscle strengthener should help immensely."

"I married you!"

"Please sit on the edge of the bed. I'd like to take a quick look at your neck. Mmm. Yes. The phoenix did a remarkable job; not even the most minimal scarring."

"I married you!"

"Now, for a quick scan with the wand ... excellent. I've finished the physical examination. I'm going to prepare the necessary potions and put together some general instructions, including a few exercises to help strengthen your legs. Without a sample of the venom, I'm at a loss as to why it affected your legs so severely. Also, I am slightly concerned with the condition of your right leg ... even after treatment, you may have a bit of a limp, but it's nothing that would be too much of a hindrance to normal activity."

"I married you!"

"Do you have any questions, Mr Snape?"

The healer's question broke Severus of his reverie. "No, I have no questions. Thank you, Healer."

"I believe it is I who should be thanking you, sir. If not for you and the others who so bravely fought, You-Know-Who might have very well won, and then where would the wizarding world be?"

"Now then," Healer Attewell said briskly, returning to the business at hand, "I will be downstairs should you have need of me. Otherwise, I shall return with the potions and instructions within the hour."

She bustled out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Severus remained seated on the edge of his bed, his mind spinning in confused turmoil. One moment, Hermione had been married to some unknown, and no doubt dastardly, wizard, and then said wizard had turned out to be Potter. Before Severus had been able to vent his outrage that she would have Potter raise *his* son, she was telling him that she had married *him*, not Potter, and then she had left in a huff.

What the bloody hell was going on?

"I'll tell you what the bloody hell is going on," his mother said as she entered the room.

Severus blinked. Had he said that aloud?

"You have a pregnant wife who is sitting downstairs at my kitchen table crying her eyes out because she believes you hate her."

It was all he could do to keep from throwing himself from the bed and crawling to Hermione on hands and knees if necessary. He needed to speak to her, to hear her explanation and offer his own; but first, he apparently had to deal with his mother.

"This is none of your business, Mum."

Eileen closed the door and then sat in the chair next to his bed, her expression serious. "You're right. It isn't. However, it seems to me that you have learned nothing in the last twenty-odd years. You're still making stupid, rash, impulsive decisions. When it comes to women, Severus, you are a dunderhead."

"Mum ..." Severus warned, his temper flaring at his mother's words.

But Eileen would not be silenced. "I will have my say, and you *will* listen. I won't even pretend to understand what you could have possibly been thinking when you impregnated that young woman, knowing the chances of your survival were so slim. Just the thought that you would leave her alone with no help, no means of support...what would she have done? Did you think about that for a single moment?"

"Of course, I did! Do not presume that you know anything about either me or Hermione. That girl is as tenacious as a Gringotts goblin. She laid out every possible circumstance and her response to each. I merely acquiesced to her wishes." His excuse fell flat, even to his own ears. He could have refused her, and indeed, he had done on several occasions. Yet he had eventually been persuaded by her exuberance and optimism, as well as the promise that his magic would continue after his death. In addition, the thought of having a child with Hermione had been a temptation he simply could not deny.

Eileen nodded. "Yes, I am well aware that the arrangement was her idea; she just told me. What I cannot fathom is how you...a grown wizard...could have agreed to it. However," she said, cutting him off before he could speak, "that is neither here nor there. You now have a wife and a child on the way. You have to make this right!"

"And just what is 'right?' I'm married to the girl...a circumstance I assume you know more about than I do, at the moment," he added with a trace of bitterness. "What more do you want from me?"

Eileen stood and towered over him. "I want nothing of you, Severus! But Hermione does!" she declared, her finger pointed toward the closed door. "That 'girl' cares for you a great deal...surely you've noticed!"

"Yes." Severus sighed, his rigid posture relaxing as he fell into the once familiar pattern of his relationship with his mother.

"She believes herself to be in love with you."

"Yes." Of course, she did. Hermione would never have asked to have his child had she not believed that she loved him.

Eileen eyed him shrewdly, her head tilted to the side. "And you, how do you feel about her?"

"Mother, I..."

"Do not 'Mother' me! Answer the question!"

"I love her!" he bellowed, and then he dropped his head into his hands. "Merlin, help me. I love her."

Eileen rolled her eyes. "Stop being so melodramatic, Severus. You love your wife and the mother of your son. This is a *good* thing. Stop acting like it's the end of the world."

Severus lifted his head to glare at her. "A good thing? Forgive me for saying so, Mother, but in my experience 'love' has been anything but 'a good thing.'"

He saw the confusion on his mother's face and raised a hand as she opened her mouth to speak.

"It is my turn to speak. Let me explain."

Eileen returned to the chair and waited expectantly as Severus gathered his thoughts.

"My earliest memories are of Tobias screaming at you, of the physical abuse you suffered at his hands. When I was a young child, I asked you why he hit you and why you allowed it. Do you remember what you said to me?"

Tears filled his mother's eyes, and Severus could see that, yes, she did remember. "You said, 'It's all right. He loves me, and I love him.' I knew then that if that was love, I wanted nothing to do with it ... until I met Lily Evans."

His memories of Lily seemed more distant, now that he had "given" them to Potter, and he was able to see the events in a more objective light. "I loved Lily from the moment I saw her, and for almost twenty years after her death, I mourned her. My decision to spy, my dedication to the Light, every painful, excruciating moment of the last two decades was done both as a memorial to her and to redeem myself in her eyes."

"That is not love, Severus. That is obsession."

Severus nodded. "Perhaps it was. It was only after Hermione's friendship came to be so dear that I found my thoughts of Lily becoming fewer and further between. I began to feel foolish for sacrificing so much of my life for the memory of a woman who had never truly returned my affection."

"As well you should," Eileen said curtly. "Lily Evans was never the paragon of virtue you believed her to be."

He glared but grudgingly agreed and then continued. "What I feel for Hermione is in many ways similar to what I felt for Lily. I think of her often. I feel possessive and ... jealous. And yet, it is different as well. With Lily, it was as though I had to prove myself worthy of her; but Hermione accepts me for who I am, who I was, and who I will be. I feel no need to hide when I am with her. It is ... remarkable."

Severus gave a brief huff of laughter. "She has this amazing capacity to care, to show compassion to even the lowliest of creatures. She is unbelievably intelligent and fiercely loyal to her friends. And yet, unlike with Lily, I do not see her through rose-coloured glasses. She is bossy and irritating. She is rash and at times, impulsive. Her temper matches my own if she is riled up enough, and sometimes, I must confess, I bait her purposefully, just to see her eyes blaze with fire."

Eileen smiled softly. "You do love her."

Severus nodded, his expression bleak.

His mother huffed in exasperation. "What is the problem, then? She loves you, and you love her. You're married with a child on the way. Why so glum?"

"I have ... doubts," Severus replied haltingly. "Hermione is young. It is possible she is confusing infatuation with love." He rubbed his throbbing temples with his fingers, then dropped his hands to his lap. "What if she wakes up one day and realises that she doesn't love me, she only thought she did?"

Eileen reached out and clasped his clenched fist. "Oh, Severus..."

The door to the room flung open, startling both mother and son. Harry Potter stood in the doorway, his face white as a sheet and his eyes filled with terror.

Severus was enraged at the invasion of his privacy, but upon seeing Potter's face, his anger quickly gave way to alarm. "What's happened? Where is Hermione?"

"It's the baby," the young wizard said, his voice trembling with emotion. "Hermione's bleeding."

A/N: *Don't kill me! I won't leave you hanging for too long, as I know this is a terrible cliffhanger. I will post again very soon.*

Thanks as always to my very own golden trio: Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird. You are amazing!

Chapter Six

Chapter 7 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Six

Severus desperately wanted to pace, but his damned leg would not cooperate, so he was, instead, sitting on the edge of his bed. Nervous energy had built within his chest, and he had no way to expend it. With nothing else to do, he reverted to a childhood habit, anxiously biting the edge of his right thumb as he waited for word from the Healer.

"Thank Merlin, Healer Attewell was still here," Eileen said, her voice fraught with tension. She glanced at Severus and then gently guided his thumb from his mouth, just as she had done when he was small boy. "I'm sure everything is fine. Women sometimes have a bit of spotting in early pregnancy."

He eyed her sceptically and ran a weary hand across his face before checking the clock for the hundredth time. "What is taking so long?" he asked, nibbling on his thumb once more.

Eileen grasped his hand, removing the digit from between his teeth. "It's only been a few minutes. Gnawing your thumb off is not going to help."

Severus was too worried to think of a suitable retort, so he settled for a glare and returned to biting his thumb with a renewed ferocity.

Eileen huffed and turned her eyes heavenward in exasperation before settling her gaze on her son. "Always so surly. You'd best hope your son takes after his mum," she said pointedly.

"If I still have a son," Severus whispered and then immediately berated himself for even thinking such a thought. He felt helpless and completely at a loss for what he should be doing or feeling. He only knew that Hermione was across the hall in his mother's bedroom, scared and perhaps in pain, and he was stuck in his blasted room because of his bloody leg. He needed to see her, to reassure himself that she was all right, that their child was all right.

He felt guilty that he had not been there for her, angry that Potter had been, and *thermore* guilty for being angry...at least she had not been alone. Then there was the guilt that his last words to her had been in anger and accusation. Had he exacerbated the situation? Could this be his fault?

His gnawing intensified.

Eileen once again removed his thumb from his mouth and took his face in her hands, forcing his anguished eyes to hers. "Listen to me, Severus. You are not to blame in any way. You did nothing to cause this. Do you understand me? Now stop this right now. We don't know anything yet, and you're already assuming the worst."

There was a knock at the open door, and Potter hesitantly entered the room, hovering in front of the doorway, his hands thrust in his pockets. "Can I wait with you?"

Severus was about to kick the boy out of his room when Eileen answered, "Of course. Come in. We'll all wait together."

A quarter of an hour passed in near silence as they awaited word from the Healer. Severus thought he was going to go out of his mind with worry.

Then finally, Healer Attewell walked into the room, causing all but Severus to immediately stand to attention.

"How is she?" Severus asked. "How is the child?"

"Both are just fine, Mr Snape," Healer Attewell replied kindly. "Mrs Snape has a urinary tract infection...quite common during pregnancy...which caused some slight bleeding. I've given her a potion for the infection, and I've spoken with her about increasing her water intake and eating foods that are rich in vitamin C. That should help prevent another infection from occurring."

"Thank Merlin," Eileen breathed as she sat next to Severus on the bed and took his hand.

"However," the Healer continued, drawing everyone's attention, "I am concerned about her blood pressure. She is much too stressed. She needs to rest and relax. Mrs Snape appears to be the type of person who thrives on pressure, am I correct?"

Potter snorted. "Yeah. That's Hermione, all right."

Severus glared at the boy until he blushed and looked away.

"I thought as much, and because of that, I'm placing her on partial bed rest for the next two weeks, meaning no strenuous activity...either physical or magical. There will be no Apparition, not even side-along, no travelling by Floo or Portkey. She needs to rest." The Healer looked at all over them from over the tops of her horn-rimmed glasses. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, of course," Severus replied. He would tie her to the bloody bed if necessary.

"Excellent. I leave her in good hands, then," Healer Attewell said with a wink. "Now, then, I've left the potions for you, Mr Snape, and the instructions for your rehabilitation downstairs on the kitchen table. Also, I believe you will find these to be helpful until your strength returns." She pulled something from the pocket of her robes and then waved her wand. A pair of crutches appeared.

Severus all but leapt from the bed to reach them. Under normal circumstances, he might have been appalled that he would need such things, but at that moment, he saw them as the only way to get to Hermione. He grabbed at the crutches like a lifeline, and then quickly made his way out of the room, completely oblivious to the fact that he was dressed only his grey nightshirt.

Lucky for the other three people in the room, he also missed the three knowing smirks and three sets of eyes that followed his hasty departure.

Severus flung open the door and entered the room as quickly as the crutches would allow. Hermione was sitting in his mother's bed, several pillows propping her up against the headboard. She looked so small and fragile, her hair a wild jumble and her pale face streaked with tears. She looked at him with such sad eyes; Severus was certain he felt his heart crack.

He made his way to the side of the bed. "Budge over."

Hermione sniffed and wiped her cheeks, then slid to the other side of the bed. Severus sat, laying his newly acquired crutches on the floor before slipping into the bed next to her, his back against the headboard.

"Come," he said as he extended his arm to the side.

Hermione's face crumpled, and then she was clinging to him, sobbing into his neck as her fingers clutched the front of his nightshirt. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, his other hand cradling her head.

"Shh," Severus soothed. "It's all right."

Hermione took a shaky breath and choked out, "I was so frightened."

"I know."

Severus continued to hold her as she cried; they had much to discuss, but he recognised her need to release the fear she had experienced. He waited patiently until, at last, her sobs subsided. They continued to sit in silence for a few minutes longer, both seeking comfort from the other's presence.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione whispered as her fingers fiddled with the button closure of his nightshirt.

"You did nothing to cause this, Hermione."

"Not this," she explained. "The marriage...it's my fault. I didn't thoroughly research the spell, and now you're stuck with me. I'm sorry."

Severus twined his fingers in her hair. "Are you feeling up to discussing this now?" he asked.

Hermione nodded.

"Good. Tell me how the marriage occurred."

Hermione attempted to move her head to look at him, but Severus held firm; if he was going to get through this conversation without turning into a lovesick puddle of gelatinous goo, he could not look at her.

She snuggled her cheek against his shoulder. "According to the information we've found...Bill and I...it was the second part of the incantation...*iugo*, meaning 'to bind together, connect, couple.' I assumed it was part of the conception, binding the pregnancy to me. I was correct but only partially."

"Partially?" Severus asked, his eyes closing as he enjoyed the feel of her in his arms.

"Yes. The incantation does bind the pregnancy to the female participant, but Durand said in *Livre de formules magiques et potions* that when you ... when we ..."

"When I kissed you." He didn't need to see her face to know she was blushing. If that night had felt as intense to her as it had to him, "kiss" was a vast understatement.

"Yes. That's what bound me to you," she concluded.

"What?" Severus released her, pulling back so that he could see her face. "What do you mean, you're bound to me? I thought this was the equivalent of a marriage?"

"It is," Hermione affirmed. "As far as the Ministry is concerned, we are legally and magically married. As far as the binding itself is concerned, you were the caster, and therefore, I am bound to you, but you are not bound to me."

"But the rune ... it means gift"

Hermione agreed but added, "It can also indicate balance. The 'gift' is a symbol of the oath or binding, similar to a wedding ring. The spell is an archaic one and was often used in arranged marriages to ensure the immediate conception of an heir."

Severus snorted. "I take it *Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charms* neglected to mention the spell's use as a marriage ceremony."

She blushed and nodded. "Anyway, Durand explained how balance was created by the ritual. Both the caster and the recipient give and receive a gift. The caster receives an heir and the loyalty of the recipient, while the recipient receives a child and the protection of the caster."

Severus was horrified. What had they done? He had wanted a child, yes, but not a servant! Memories of his Death Eater initiation flooded him; Voldemort had also promised protection in exchange for loyalty.

"So now I am to be your very own Dark Lord, is that it?" He attempted to leave the bed, but Hermione grabbed his arm. "Release me."

"No," she said. "Listen to me. It's nothing like that. This binding may be similar in principle to the one Voldemort used for the Dark Mark, but it's actually very different. There is no compulsion on my part; you cannot use the mark to hurt me, nor can you summon me. There are only two documented magical properties to this mark. If I place my fingers on it and concentrate on your magic, I can Apparate directly to you...that's how we found you. Also, if you were to touch the mark, I would find it ... highly pleasurable." She blushed.

Severus was just able to keep himself from groaning at the images that immediately came to mind with her last statement. He struggled to rein in his tumultuous emotions. "Those are the only *documented* properties. It does not mean there are not others."

"I suppose," Hermione replied warily. "But does it matter? I trust you not to harm me."

"We must find a way to undo this." Severus felt his jaw clench in frustration. He loved her, and he wanted her as his wife, but not like this. Not with such an imbalance of power in the relationship.

"Durand was very specific; the binding is unbreakable," Hermione whispered, her head bowed. "I am truly sorry, Severus. I know you don't want to be married to me."

"Hermione," Severus said, and he cupped her face with one hand and tilted her chin until her gaze met his. "It is not a matter of what I want. I've done you a grave disservice. Not only are you pregnant with my child, but I've inadvertently taken away your ability to marry whatever man your heart desires."

Her face was etched with pain, and she turned her head toward the wall. "But I did, Severus. I did marry the man my heart desires, the man I love ... but his heart does not desire me."

Severus had never felt so many simultaneous emotions. He was overwhelmed...she loved him. This was the moment, he realised. He could choose to ignore or ridicule her statement and protect himself from potential heartbreak, or he could acknowledge her declaration and risk everything. Was it worth the risk? Was *she* worth the risk? The answer was a resounding *yes*.

"What makes you say that?" he asked softly.

Her eyes snapped to his; he had never seen her in such turmoil. Her breath caught as she whispered, "Please don't."

His thumb lightly stroked her cheek. "Don't what? Don't tell you that I find the idea of marriage to you to be far from repugnant? Don't tell you what my heart desires? Don't tell you that..."

"Stop it!" Hermione cried, her body trembling from head to toe. "You've always been honest with me...please don't lie to me now. Not about this."

His brow knit in confusion. "Why do you believe I'm lying to you?"

"I was there that night at the Shrieking Shack," she said brokenly, her breath coming in sharp gasps. "I know that your last memories were of Harry's mother, and I saw you beg Harry to look at you so that the last thing you would see would be *her* eyes! You love *her*! So please don't patronise me or cheapen what I feel for you by claiming that you feel something for me that I know you do not!"

Severus became alarmed at her agitated state. "Hermione, calm down. The child"

She immediately calmed; her eyes closed as she deepened her breathing.

"That's right," Severus said, his voice low and soothing, "just like that. Good."

He waited a few minutes, holding her close and stroking her back, hoping it would help her to relax. Then, quietly and gently, Severus told her his version of what had occurred that night in the Shrieking Shack.

May 2, 1998

The Shrieking Shack

"Kill."

The fangs punctured his neck, sharp and quick, and Severus could feel the venom seeping into his bloodstream. A scream was wrenched from his throat, the terrible sound echoing throughout the room as he tried in vain to remove the snake's enchanted cage from his head and shoulders. He failed, and his knees buckled, sending him crashing to the floor.

"I regret it," said Voldemort coldly.

Pain wracked through his body as the starry sphere that held the snake was removed, and he fell onto his side. He could feel the fast flow of warm blood as it poured from the wounds, and he frantically pressed his fingers to his neck, desperate to keep the blood from seeping from his body. He knew it was a futile effort.

He was dying.

Random memories surfaced, unbidden, to the forefront of his mind, flooding him with images of his past.

His mother and father fighting as he covered his ears, his first day of teaching at Hogwarts, his robes on fire at a Quidditch match, scowling at an Order meeting, bowing before Voldemort, Dumbledore pleading with him to kill him

And then came the memories of *her*, memories so precious that he had hidden them in the darkest recesses of his mind, for fear that they would be snatched by the madman he had called Master.

Hermione's open and exuberant face as they began their research, her laughter filling his ears after he made an attempt at humour, hearing her speak his given name for the first time, her pushing a copy of Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes at him and demanding that he read it, her standing before him with her hands on her hips and her chin tilted in determination, standing along the edge of a cliff with the magic swirling about him in a viscous cloud as he kissed her

Breathing was becoming more difficult as his throat filled with blood and clogged his airway. He was grateful that his last thoughts on earth would be of her, of their friendship, and of the legacy she had so willingly provided him: a child. Their child.

He felt a fleeting pang of regret...regret that he allowed her to talk him into such an idiotic idea, that he was leaving them alone, that he would never see his son's face...but then it was gone, swallowed by the overwhelming sense of pride and comfort he felt in knowing that his line, his *magic*, would continue after he was gone.

Severus refused to give a moment's thought to the idea that she and their child might not survive the battle that was being waged on the other side of the creaking walls. *They will live.*

A shadow crossed his line of sight, and he found himself looking into the emerald green eyes of Harry Potter.

More memories began to fill his head, and he balked at sight of Lily Evans. At one time, Severus would have been eager for her face to be the last he gazed upon before meeting his end. Now, it seemed horribly, terribly wrong. That privilege belonged to Hermione and their child.

He grabbed Potter's robes and pulled him close.

He struggled to speak, the blood choking him and spilling into his lungs.

"Take ... it Take ... it"

Severus pushed with all his might, purging himself of the unwanted memories...*out, out, out*...until there was nothing left but Hermione.

Hermione?

She was there, passing something to Potter, and Severus knew he could die in peace if he could just lay eyes on her once more.

He fought to move, to turn his head so he could see her, but the paralytic agent in Nagini's venom had begun to take effect. He felt nothing from his waist to his toes, and the numbness was steadily moving upward.

It was torture, to have her so close and yet so far.

His grip on Potter's robes loosened as the paralysis reached his hands. A brief flash of movement caught his eye, and he instantly focussed upon it. His eyes widened.

"Look ... at ... me ..." he whispered.

Potter complied, and Severus felt his magic thrum in satisfaction.

For there, reflected in the small, round lenses of Potter's glasses, was Hermione.

Yes. Yes.

The numbness reached his face, and his eyes remained fixed upon Hermione's reflection. He knew they believed him to be already dead. He was familiar with how Nagini's venom had been altered, designed to cause intense agony as the victim drowned in his own blood, completely unable to move.

He caught a glimpse of Hermione as she paused to look at him before rushing from the room. How he wished he could have spared her the memory of watching him die, and yet he was grateful that he had been able to see her one last time.

He was alone for only a matter of seconds before he saw a flash of red out of the corner of one eye and heard that which he had never thought to hear again: phoenix song.

Fawkes had come.

Severus had no time to ponder the phoenix's unexpected appearance before the creature was hunched over his head, crying its healing tears into the wounds on his neck.

And then, the bird grabbed hold, and in a brilliant flash of light, they were gone.

When he had completed his tale, Hermione's cheeks were damp once again. One corner of his mouth lifted into a small smile as he wiped away her tears, and then he cradled her head between his hands as he gazed at her intently.

"I believe I would like to give this marriage business a try."

Her answering smile was blinding, and then she flung her arms about his neck and laughed. "I love you."

A/N: Portions of the Shrieking Shack scene are taken directly from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 32, pages 656-658.

We're nearing the end, but first a bit of fluff. Two more chapters, and then JKR's epilogue from a different perspective. ;)

My thanks, as always, to the fabulous Subversa, DeeMichelle, and LettyBird for the beta reading and Brit picking.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 8 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

A/N: Let the fluff begin ...

Chapter Seven

August 5, 1998

Chelsea, London

Hermione stood in the centre of the sitting room of her new home, her hands resting on her hips. The spacious two-bedroom flat had been terribly expensive, but Severus had insisted that he could well afford the price. It was certainly large enough for the two...soon to be three...of them, and by Transfiguring a sofa into a bed, they could even entertain the occasional overnight guest. The flat was in a small wizarding building, and there were several other families with young children in residence. It was perfect.

Hermione grinned in satisfaction as Severus, Harry, Ginny, and Ron placed the various pieces of furniture to her specifications. After rejecting several different arrangements, she finally voiced her approval.

"It looks fabulous!"

"About time," Ron muttered before collapsing onto one of the two new cream-coloured sofas and propping his feet on the black coffee table.

"Kindly remove your filthy shoes from my furniture," Severus said blandly. A wave of his wand and a nonverbal spell pushed Ron's feet from the table.

Ron flushed and grumbled under his breath but wisely kept his feet on the floor.

"Oh, it looks lovely," Eileen said as she walked into the room from the kitchen. "And just in time, too. Dinner is ready."

Soon, they were all seated around the table Severus had temporarily enlarged. Hermione smiled as her husband sat next to her, leaning his new walking stick against the wall behind him and then draping his arm across the back of her chair. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her temple, then raised an eyebrow as if daring anyone to comment.

No one said a word.

Hermione ravenously ate the trout fillet with caper sauce that Eileen had prepared. Her morning sickness had all but disappeared, and her appetite had returned with a vengeance. She smiled gratefully at Eileen for making a dish with capers...Hermione could not get enough of the salty little buds...and then she speared another piece of the tender fish from the serving plate.

"Hungry?" Severus murmured, his lips twitching in amusement.

Laughing, Hermione replied, "Always."

The small, lopsided smile she so adored made a brief appearance, and then he returned to his meal.

Hermione smiled around her fork as she looked about the table. She was grateful for each and every person present. Her parents had not reacted well to the news of their only child's marriage and impending motherhood. They had been wary of her since the return of their memories, and this provided them with the excuse to sever contact as they struggled to come to terms with all that had happened. Hermione had known it would be difficult for her parents to accept, but she had not anticipated being cut out of their lives, no matter how temporary they claimed it to be. Severus and the group gathered around the table had quickly stepped in to become Hermione's support system...her family. Even with the current situation with her parents, Hermione could not remember a time when she had felt so content.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the boys volunteered to do the washing up, and Severus retired with his mother to one of the sofas.

"Ginny," Hermione said, "have you seen the veranda? There's a lovely view."

"I'd love to!" the red-haired witch replied. She picked up her drink and linked her arm with Hermione's as they walked to the outdoor terrace.

"Oh, it's gorgeous," Ginny exclaimed as she set her glass on the small outside table.

The veranda overlooked the building's communal garden, a large grassed area with beautiful shade trees and flowerbeds that were blooming with autumn colour. Access to such a lovely outdoor space whilst living inside the city had been the deciding factor when Hermione and Severus had selected the flat.

The two young women sat in the wrought iron chairs that Hermione had purchased for the veranda.

"How are you, Hermione? Harry said you're finally feeling better."

"Yes, thank goodness! I've had no more infections, and Healer Attewell says I'm as healthy as a Hippogriff. The morning sickness is gone, but now I'm hungry all the time." Hermione's eyes widened. "This must be how Ron feels!"

Ginny laughed. "At least you have a reason! You're eating for two. What's Ron's excuse?"

"He's a growing boy," Hermione said with a smirk.

"Well, I hope he stops growing soon, or he'll be as big as Grawp!" Ginny grinned, and then her smile softened. "You look happy. I'm glad."

"Thanks, Gin. I am happy." Hermione placed her hand on Ginny's and gave it a squeeze.

"How are things with Professor Snape? Going well?"

"Yes," Hermione replied, her face flushing as she shyly smiled. "Very well, actually."

Ginny looked at her thoughtfully. "He seems different now. More relaxed, I suppose ... except when it comes to that walking stick," she teased.

"That thing is going to be the death of me," Hermione said, her tone exasperated but fond. "He hates it. Fortunately, he can usually get around without it."

Severus' recovery had been swift, thanks to the potions and rehabilitation techniques left by Healer Attewell. He had been stoic when it became obvious that the damage to his right leg had left him with a permanent limp, only letting his frustration show when they were alone. Typically he got around well enough, but the end of the day often necessitated the use of a walking stick, particularly when he was tired, which Severus steadfastly resented. His smooth, elegant glide was a thing of the past, and it pained Hermione that it bothered him so.

"Has he decided what he's going to do next?" Ginny asked.

"Not yet. He's had several offers from various apothecaries, as well as quite a few departments at the Ministry. Minerva contacted him last week and asked if he would be interested in returning to Hogwarts."

"Really? How does he feel about that?"

Hermione shrugged. "He hasn't said anything about it, but I can't imagine that he'd want to go back. There are just too many bad memories."

Ginny nodded, her expression pensive. "I can certainly understand that."

Hermione agreed. "I'm actually hoping that Severus will take a job at the Ministry, because I accepted a position in the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Congratulations, Hermione! When do you start?"

"Next week," she replied. "They've been very accommodating, and I'll have six months off after the baby is born. After that, I'll go in three days a week until he's a bit older. Eileen has volunteered to watch him, which will be lovely."

"That's wonderful," Ginny said. "Do you think Severus will go to the Ministry with you, then?"

Hermione laughed. "No. That's just wishful thinking. I fully expect him to eventually decide to venture out on his own, much like his mother did, and perhaps start his own apothecary. I think he would enjoy being his own boss."

Ginny nodded, and then clapped her hands together. "All right, enough of that. It's time for some serious girl talk." Ginny moved her chair so that she faced Hermione more directly and then leaned forward to whisper conspiratorially, "Tell me all about it!"

Hermione blinked in confusion. "About what?"

Ginny's eyes sparkled with excitement. "*It*. How is it? I mean, I know the baby was conceived with a spell, but you're married and living together now ... so, how is it?"

"Ginevra Weasley!" Hermione exclaimed, scandalised that her friend would ask such a personal question.

Ginny waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, please. Stop being such a prude and just tell me!"

Hermione remained silent.

"Come on," Ginny whined. "Mum hasn't left me alone with Harry since the war ended, and with school starting up again ... well, I'm doomed to be a virgin on my wedding night. Not for lack of trying on my part, though." She crossed her arms and pouted. "The least you could do is let me live vicariously through you."

Hermione sighed. "I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else to do that with, Gin. I've been dealing with a similar problem."

"What do you mean?"

Hermione could not believe she was about to share her most intimate secrets, but she forged ahead. "We haven't ... erm ... you know."

Ginny's jaw dropped. "At all?"

Hermione groaned, knowing that her friend was not going to let this go. "Do you want specifics? Fine. There are some ... physical displays of affection, but nothing more. Yes, we've shared a bed, but Severus adamantly refused to consummate the marriage with his mother sleeping in the room across the hall."

"Couldn't he have cast a Silencing Charm?" Ginny asked bluntly.

"One would think," Hermione muttered. "He made it clear it was not going to happen while we were staying with Eileen. Now that we have our own flat, I'm hoping that maybe tonight..."

Ginny jumped to her feet. "What the hell are you talking to me for? Let me get the boys, and we'll leave you to it!"

Hermione laughed as Ginny grabbed her hand and hauled her to her feet before dragging her back inside the flat. Once inside, the red-haired witch marched to the sitting area.

"Harry, Ron. Let's go."

"Ginny!" Hermione gasped; she had thought the young witch had been joking.

"What's the rush?" Harry said, standing as his girlfriend tugged at his hand.

"It's been a long, stressful day. Hermione needs to rest," Ginny said shortly. "Now let's go."

"Hermione?"

Hermione groaned at the sound of her husband's voice. Ginny had spoken the only two words guaranteed to have Hermione tucked into bed for a long night's sleep faster than Harry could spot a Snitch: "stress" and "rest".

"I'm fine."

Severus raised an imperious brow and then turned to the group of family and friends. "All right. Everyone out. Hermione needs to rest."

Just as she had suspected, Severus herded everyone up and all but pushed them into the hallway and toward the door. Goodbyes, thanks, and apologies were quickly exchanged as they moved down the hallway, and Eileen managed to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before Severus unceremoniously informed them all that time was up and to get out. Ginny gave Hermione a rueful glance and mouthed, "Sorry," as Severus began to close the door.

"Bye, Hermione!" Harry called out, laughing as the door slammed shut.

Severus turned to her with a frown, his eyes intent upon her face. "Are you all right? You look pale. Maybe you should go lie down."

Hermione held up a hand. "I'm fine."

"Hmm. Perhaps." He took her hand and led her back to the sitting room where he seated her on one of the sofas. "Sit here. I shall return."

"Where are you..."

He disappeared into the kitchen.

"...going?"

Hermione sighed and kicked off her shoes, then tucked her legs underneath her.

Severus returned with two cups of tea. He handed one to her and then sat beside her. "What will it be tonight, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* or *Naming the Wee Witch and Wizard*?" he asked, setting his teacup on the table.

Hermione sipped the warm liquid, smiling as she noticed he had remembered how she liked it. She placed her cup next to his and scooted closer, pressing to his side. "No more baby names. We have plenty of time to choose a name."

"*Beedle the Bard* it is then," Severus said.

He was about to go to the bookshelf to retrieve the book when Hermione placed her hand on his arm.

"I really don't feel much like reading," she said, running her fingers along his arm. She could feel his warmth radiating through the fine linen shirt sleeve...she wished she could feel it on her skin.

"No?"

"No," she replied as her wandering fingers drew small circles on the back of his hand.

"What would you like?" Severus asked, his voice deepening to a sensual purr.

She knew what she wanted...him...but even though she was married and pregnant, she was a novice in the art of seduction. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and then raised her gaze to meet his.

That lopsided smile returned to his face, but now it was slow and lazy. Severus lifted a hand to cup her cheek and gently rubbed his thumb along the corner of her mouth until she released the abused flesh with a breathy sigh.

"Please," he said, "allow me."

Her breath caught in her throat as he dipped his head, and when he tenderly drew her lower lip into his warm mouth, she made a sound between a whimper and a moan. His teeth scraped the captured lip, nibbling, then he kissed her in earnest until she was gasping for breath. Her fingers found purchase in the material of his shirt, and she held on for dear life as he slid his tongue into her mouth. She wound a hand into the hair at the back of his head, wanting more, tugging insistently as her whimpers multiplied. He emitted a low growl in response, and the hand that had been cradling her face began to move, slipping downward to her neck. And then ...

Hermione inhaled sharply, and her eyes flew open before they closed again in mindless pleasure as his fingers caressed the binding mark on the nape of her neck.

Oh my.

His mouth left hers, and she turned her head to follow.

Don't go. More.

He evaded her, his lips skittering along her jaw to her ear, just barely touching her sensitised skin.

"What would you like, Hermione?" he repeated, his breath hot against her neck as his fingers continued to stroke the mark.

She shuddered, melting under his sensual assault.

You ... you ... you.

His deep chuckle resonated in her ear. "Once was satisfactory, dear one."

Hermione snuggled closer as Severus held her, her back to his front. One large hand rested on her bare stomach, his long fingers splaying over the small bump. She sighed in contented satisfaction, savouring the feel of his skin against hers. She felt boneless, completely sated, and very much adored.

"I can't believe you made me wait for that," she murmured sleepily.

Severus laughed softly. "You didn't know what you were missing."

"I do now."

He slid the hand on her stomach along her sweat-dampened skin, his caress gentle and soothing. "I am more than happy to accommodate you at any time."

"Good." She yawned. "I love you," she said as her eyes slipped shut.

As she drifted to sleep, she thought she heard him whisper, "I love you, too."

October 10, 1998

Ministry for Magic, London

Step, step, tap. Step, step, tap.

"I hate this bloody stick."

"Yes, I know."

"I do not understand why you insisted that I use it tonight."

"Because you were so nervous last night that you hardly slept a wink. You know as well as I that you will need the extra support by the end of the evening."

"I don't care. I'm going to toss the bloody thing in the rubbish bin at the earliest opportunity."

"You will not!"

"I will."

"Why do you hate it so?"

"I'm already almost twenty years older than you. It makes me feel like an old lecher."

"That's just silly, Severus. Loads of younger men use them."

"Name one."

"Erm ... Lucius Malfoy!"

"Lucius Malfoy is a drama queen."

"Says the man who charms his robes to billow."

"Hermione..."

"I'm not wearing any knickers."

"...listen What?"

"I said I'm not wearing any knickers."

"..."

"What are you looking for?"

"Some place I can ravish you. You work here Where is a good spot?"

"Severus!"

"What?"

"You can ravish me at home, after you receive your Order of Merlin. Besides, I'm absolutely huge now; the only way to ravish me properly is in our own bed."

"You are evil, madam. How in the hell do you expect me to concentrate on some meaningless ceremony when I know you're not wearing any bloody knickers?"

"It made you forget about the walking stick, didn't it?"

"You have been spending far too much time with the former head of Slytherin."

"Indeed."

November 14, 1998

Chelsea, London

"Alexander."

"No."

"Jacob."

"No."

"Simon."

"Simon Snape? No. No alliterations."

"Fine. No alliterations. Edward."

"No."

"Joseph."

"No."

"Duncan."

"No."

"Henry."

"No."

"Andrew."

"No."

"Michael."

"No."

"Wirathat."

"No What?"

"Just making sure you were still paying attention. For Merlin's sake, Severus. What name *do* you like?"

"This one."

"Really?"

"Yes. Look at the meaning."

"'Son of my right hand.' Oh, Severus. It's perfect."

"Shh, dear one. There's no need to imitate a watering pot."

December 24, 1998

The Burrow

"Hermione, Severus! Come in, come in. It's bloody cold out there." Bill quickly ushered them inside, shaking Severus' hand and enfolding Hermione in a quick hug. "Mum's waiting for you in the kitchen. I expect she wants to see how huge you are."

Hermione laughed and stomped the snow from her boots, and then Severus helped her remove her cloak. She breathed in the scent of freshly baked gingerbread and smiled.

She adored spending Christmas at the Burrow. Having been raised an only child, Hermione had been accustomed to a very quiet, almost solemn observance of the holiday. The loud, boisterous celebration with the Weasleys intrigued, delighted, and horrified her ... and she loved it.

"Molly," she said as she waddled toward the older witch and embraced her, "the house looks amazing!"

"Thank you, dear. We thought Fred would have enjoyed all the decorations." Molly's words had been cheerfully spoken, but Hermione could see the lingering sadness in her eyes.

"He would have loved it," Hermione said as she squeezed Molly's hand. "It's wonderful."

And it was. The small sitting room was covered from floor to ceiling in all sorts of holiday decorations, and the entire room was illuminated by what seemed like thousands of twinkling fairy lights. The fireplace mantle was covered in holly and ivy and held eight stockings, one for each Weasley child and one more for Harry. A tree stood in the far corner, a tin star precariously perched on top. The room was beautiful ... and very crowded.

The Burrow was near to bursting at the seams with people. Andromeda Tonks had brought little Teddy Lupin, who was being cooed over by a newly expecting Fleur. All of the Weasley boys were present...minus one...as were spouses and girlfriends. Ginny and Harry were off in a corner attempting to sneak in a snog whenever Molly wasn't looking. George was helping in the effort by Charming mistletoe to hover over various heads, but Hermione soon noticed that Harry and Ginny were his favourite "victims."

It was good to see George playing pranks, even if it made Fred's absence feel all the more acute. It was even lovelier to see that he had brought a date, albeit a surprising one. Hermione watched as he tenderly grasped Luna's hand, causing the eccentric young witch to smile at him with unrestrained happiness.

Even Ron had brought a date...Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Hermione, Professor!" Harry called out as he and Ginny finally came up for air.

There was a cacophony of voices as everyone greeted them, and then Severus guided Hermione into the room.

"How are you feeling, Hermione?" Ginny asked, her eyes widening at the sight of how huge her friend had become since she had last seen her.

"Tired," Hermione said, "and my back hurts. I couldn't find a comfortable position to sleep in last night, and I think I may have pulled a muscle or something."

"That's awful! Here, take my seat." Ginny elbowed Harry, and they both vacated their position on the sofa.

She warily eyed the piece of furniture. It was terribly low. "If I sit there, I'll never get up again." Everyone laughed, but Hermione was serious. She would be stuck there forever.

She sighed. She wanted to sit down, yet she didn't relish the idea of getting up again. Severus had not wanted to leave their flat for Christmas Eve dinner as she was so close to her due date, and Hermione now wondered if he had been right. She was feeling a bit off, but since she wasn't having any contractions, she decided not to mention it to Severus until they returned home. Instead, she poked a finger at her extended belly. "You are going to be nothing but trouble." A solid kick was her response.

"Ahem."

She looked at Severus, who was watching her as if she were insane.

"Help me down, then," she said, and he stepped forward to support her by the arm until she was finally seated on the low sofa.

"Dinner's ready! Everyone into the kitchen."

Hermione scowled and once again poked at the swollen protuberance that used to be her stomach. "You see? Nothing but trouble."

Dinner was a raucous affair, loud and boisterous and filled with laughter, and Hermione was thoroughly enjoying every moment. Even Severus appeared to be having a pleasant time, judging by his relaxed posture and the lack of stinging remarks to Harry and Ron.

Even though she was having a grand evening, Hermione picked at her food. She just wasn't hungry for some reason, even though she loved Molly's cooking. She shifted in her chair, drawing Severus' attention.

He leaned toward her and asked, "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine, just a bit restless." She laid her hand on his thigh, and he covered it with his own, entwining his fingers with hers.

Soon, the food had been cleared away, and George was once again sending his enchanted mistletoe to flit about the room and linger over the heads of various family members. Hermione could only assume that George had intended to send the mistletoe to hover over Charlie, who was seated on Severus' right; however, the mistletoe had someone else in mind.

They had all just stood from the table, preparing to return to the sitting room, when the plant zoomed forward, lingering over Severus' head. Sniggers and poorly disguised coughs could be heard throughout the kitchen, and Severus glowered fiercely.

Hermione could not help but laugh. "It's all right, Severus. I'll take care of that for you."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and stretched up onto her toes ... and then she froze.

"Oh, no." The blood drained from her face.

"Hermione?" Severus said, his eyes wide with concern.

She looked at him with a dazed expression. "My waters just broke."

"Oh, no."

Hermione nodded. "That's what I said."

"We need to get to St Mungo's."

With Molly's help, he found their cloaks and was assisting Hermione with her clasp when he noticed the mistletoe still hovering over his head.

"Damn it! Get that thing off me!" Severus bellowed at no one in particular as he swiped at the offending plant. When it immediately returned to its position above his head, he growled and said, "Sod it." He kissed Hermione briefly but soundly, then destroyed the mistletoe with a wave of his wand before gently shoving her out the door. He hurriedly limped past her waddling form, turned on his heel and Disapparated with a loud *pop!*

Hermione stood alone in the Burrow's back garden, the sound of laughter from inside the house floating to her ears. She sighed and waited patiently for her husband to realise his error.

Pop!

"Damn it! I'm sorry."

Severus pulled her to him and once again Disapparated, this time with his labouring wife in tow.

A/N: My profound thanks to my beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and my Brit picker, LettyBird. You three are my golden trio!

Chapter Eight

Chapter 9 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Chapter Eight

Christmas Day, 1998

St Mungo's Hospital

Severus looked at the small blue bundle in his wife's arms with trepidation and awe.

"Go ahead," she said. "Hold him."

His eyes flitted to an exhausted Hermione. Her labour had been long and arduous, and she looked awful; her hair was matted and damp, and her face was flushed and splotchy. Yet her eyes sparkled under half-closed lids, and a small smile lingered on her lips. Severus was quite certain he had never loved her more than he did in that moment.

"Go on," she encouraged as the bundle began to squirm and fuss.

Severus swallowed and gingerly took the child, cradling him in the crook of his elbow. He sat in the chair next to Hermione's bed to examine his son. Loosening the blanket, he first uncovered the boy's slightly oblong head and discovered a wealth of dark hair which stuck up in all directions. He then removed the blanket altogether so that he could study the infant in earnest.

The diminutive face was red and wrinkled and slightly squished, but upon closer scrutiny, Severus could see that his son would look much like him. The shape of the baby's eyes, brow, and chin were miniature copies of his own. His mouth, however, was absolutely Hermione's. He would know that mouth anywhere.

"He looks like you, doesn't he?" Hermione asked.

Severus did not trust his voice, so he nodded and then continued his inspection. Ten tiny fingers were counted, as were ten tiny toes. Severus marvelled at the softness of the baby's skin as he touched the impossibly small hands and feet.

"He's amazing," Severus breathed as his son yawned, his little mouth stretching impossibly wide.

Hermione smiled tiredly. "He is."

Severus stared at the tiny creature in his arms and remembered the unique circumstances that had led them all to that exact moment. "Thank you, Hermione," he whispered as he gently ran a finger along one downy cheek.

Then the baby's eyes opened, and the corner of Severus' mouth lifted into a small smile.

"Hello, Benjamin Prince Snape. Welcome to the world."

March 15, 1999

Chelsea, London

Severus eased himself from the bed, careful not to awaken his sleeping wife. Ben had just recovered from a cold, and Hermione was exhausted after a week of interrupted sleep. She deserved a bit of a lie-in, and he could tell from the whimpering cry that Ben was not hungry but rather needed a nappy change.

He grabbed his wand from the nightstand and then padded into the nursery, walking directly to the cot that held his fussing son. "Good morning," he said as he picked up the now wailing infant. "Is that any way to greet your father? What seems to be the problem, hmm?"

Ben stopped crying at hearing his father's voice, and his dark eyes opened, blinking owlishly. Severus smiled as Ben's face lit up in a toothless grin.

"Much better."

Severus was now a deft hand at changing wet nappies, but the other variety continued to turn his stomach. Hermione insisted on changing the baby the Muggle way, which caused Severus no small amount of consternation. He was of the opinion that magic was best used in such malodorous circumstances.

He groaned as he checked the nappy and then scowled at his son, who merely grinned and babbled in response. Glancing at the open door, he looked to Ben conspiratorially. "What Mummy doesn't know won't hurt her," he whispered. "*Tergeo*. Isn't that easier? Yes, I see you agree."

Severus swiftly replaced the nappy with a clean one and then tossed the dirty nappy into the deodorising rubbish bin, which had been a gift from Molly and Arthur. He scooped the now clean baby into his arms and sat in the rocking chair Hermione had purchased for the room.

"Let's have a look at you today, shall we?" he said. Ben seemed to change on a daily basis, and Severus did not want to miss a single thing. "Hmm. You appear quite similar to yesterday, but I do believe you have a new ticklish spot ... right here," he said as his fingers stroked behind the baby's knee.

Ben grinned and squirmed, his cooing laughter filling the small room until both father and son were chuckling loudly.

Severus cleared his throat and then scowled at his laughing son. "I believe it is *you* who should be laughing, not I."

Ben chuckled at his father's expression and then did the same, his little brow furrowing and his eyes narrowing in a perfect imitation of Severus.

"Are you teaching our son to scowl already?"

Severus looked up to see his wife standing in the doorway, her arms crossed under her breasts and her eyes filled with mirth.

"Don't be absurd," Severus replied as he stood and handed her the baby.

She dropped a kiss onto the top of Ben's head and then rose on her toes to press her lips to Severus' cheek. "Good morning," she said as she assumed Severus' previous position in the rocking chair.

"Good morning." He pulled up a small stool and watched in fascination as Hermione pushed aside the neck of her nightdress and fed their child. Something from their brief exchange niggled at his brain, however, as he stared at the tiny mouth suckling at Hermione's breast.

"Are you teaching our son to scowl already?"

He hadn't been, of course...not intentionally...although, Severus supposed that most things Ben would learn from him would be unintentional. His son would watch and observe...indeed, he already was...and would thus learn from his father what it meant to be a man. And if that were true, then it was equally so that Severus had learned in the same manner from his father and would pass that knowledge to Ben.

With that troubling thought, Severus left the room without a word.

April 2, 1999

Chelsea, London

Ben must have sensed the excitement of the day, as he awoke early, his shrill cry piercing the morning silence.

Severus lay on his side in his warm bed, his eyes open as he forced himself to remain still. He heard Hermione's exhausted sigh as she roused and then left the bed to care for their son. When he was certain she had gone, he rolled to his side and buried his face in her pillow, inhaling her scent. He missed holding her; he missed rushing from the bed to the nursery to allow her a few more minutes rest.

But it was for the best. His influence would only taint the boy. Severus had spent the past few weeks poring over every tome and text he could think of, searching for what he believed was the only solution. If he could find the right spell Yes, that would be the best thing for them, his wife and child. They would be better off without him. In the meantime, he would continue to distance himself. It was painful for all of them, but it was the right thing to do.

Severus could hear her talking with Ben as she changed him, and he listened as she hummed a lullaby as she fed him...the same lullaby his mother had sung to him when he had been a child.

It was such bittersweet agony, to be so close to them and yet so far.

He dragged himself from the bed, and limped to the bathroom to shower. They were visiting his mother that afternoon, and Severus mentally prepared himself for another long day spent with his family, yet apart from them.

It was a surprisingly warm afternoon in Mousehole for the time of year, and Eileen had insisted that they all go outside to enjoy the sunshine. She, Hermione, and Ben were sitting on a blanket they had spread out on the ground, surrounded by a vast assortment of playthings.

Severus leaned against the stone wall in his mother's back garden, watching from a distance as she and his wife rolled a ball to his son. At just over three months of age, the baby could not yet sit by himself, so Hermione had propped him up with some sort of Muggle device. Severus had been sceptical, but Ben appeared to enjoy it.

His lips twitched in a faint smile as Ben's infectious laughter rang in the air. The ball bounced against the baby's chubby legs, and his arms flailed wildly as he reached for the toy and laughed.

"Severus, don't just stand there. Come play with us," Eileen called.

Severus shook his head and entered the house, ignoring the confusion and hurt on his wife's face...something he had become quite familiar with over the past few weeks.

He sat at the kitchen table, alone, his shoulders slumped as he ran a weary hand across his face. He wanted to join them, to laugh and be free from care. His decision to distance himself from his wife and child was slowly killing him, but he had no choice.

The door opened, and Severus immediately straightened, his spine rigid.

Eileen sat at the table across from him, her brow furrowed in concern. "What's going on, Severus?"

"I do not know what you are talking about. Everything is fine."

Her hand hit the table with a loud bang, and her expression darkened. "Do not lie to me! Everything is certainly *not* fine! You have a wife and a child just outside that door, Severus, who love you and need you. And what are you doing? Hiding."

"I am not hid..."

"You are," Eileen interrupted. "Hermione has reluctantly told me some of what has been happening over the past few weeks. You are never home, and when you are, your nose is stuck in some book, researching Merlin knows what."

Severus stiffened but remained silent.

"She says you no longer touch her," his mother continued, "not even in the most perfunctory manner. Even more disturbing, to her and to me as well, is how you are behaving toward Ben. You don't pick him up, you don't hold him, you don't play with him ... you don't seem to interact with him at all. This certainly was not the case when I last saw you. Now, what is going on?"

His jaw clenched with the effort to retain control, and he could not meet his mother's eyes. "I am doing what is best for my family."

"And just how are you doing that?" Eileen asked, incredulous. "Because what I see are a confused and unhappy wife and a baby who is begging for his father's attention. How is that of any benefit to them?"

"It is for the best!" Severus shouted, horrified as his vision blurred with tears. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, schooling his features into an impassive mask.

"Don't," Eileen said sharply. "Don't hide behind that damn façade, Severus Snape. It may work with everyone else, but it does not with me."

Severus seemed to deflate, his chin touching his chest as he struggled to contain his tumultuous emotions. "What if something I do or say somehow teaches Ben to be like me ... to be like *him*?" he whispered, his gaze fixed upon the top of the table.

He felt his mother's fingers in his hair as she gently stroked his head. "Like who?"

Severus raised his head, his expression bleak. "My father."

"Oh, Severus!" Eileen's face was filled with sudden comprehension. "You think you're like Tobias?"

"Am I not? Ben watches me, he observes and learns how to behave from me. Not just what I say, but what I do. I must have done the same with my own father. What if I somehow cause him harm or teach him something wrong, something that will make him hate me?" *Like I hated my father.*

"Severus, surely you know how ridiculous that sounds?" Eileen said soothingly. "Let me tell you something. You are nothing like your father."

He looked at her, his disbelief evident in his eyes. "No?"

"No. You would never hurt anyone the way Tobias hurt me ... and you."

"But I have," Severus whispered brokenly, sounding much younger than his thirty-nine years. "Not physically, but he called you horrible, terrible names that would make you cry. I remember it well. And ... I did the same thing. I called Lily a Mudblood."

Eileen placed a hand upon his cheek. "You were fifteen, and I do believe you learned your lesson."

Severus shook his head. "I could hurt them. I could."

"And you're not now?" Eileen asked, not unkindly. "Of course you could hurt them. You are at this very moment, in fact, and you most certainly will again. Your feelings will be hurt, as well. It's normal, Severus. Loving someone and being loved in return is an amazing thing, but it also makes us vulnerable. It does not mean that it isn't worth the struggle, however."

He scoffed, though inwardly his mind was spinning. Her assertions rang true, but "And you learned this from marriage to Tobias?" he asked with a sneer.

To his surprise, two bright pink spots appeared on Eileen's cheeks. "Surely you don't believe that I've been alone for the last two decades?"

Severus' eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Of course not," he lied.

They sat in silence as Severus considered his mother's words carefully. He closed his eyes. "I am confused."

"Obviously," she said with a smile. "Do you love them?"

"More than anything."

Eileen stood, bending to kiss his cheek. "Then go to them, love. They need you."

Severus remained pensive for a few more minutes, and then, finally, he nodded. "Pardon me," he said as rose to his feet. "I believe I shall go spend the day with my wife and son."

He paused for a moment, then wrapped his arms about his mother in a warm embrace. "Thank you, Mum."

He joined his family in the back garden, their welcoming, happy smiles soothing his battered heart.

April 7, 1999

Chelsea, London

Hermione sighed. "If you'd stay still," she said to the squirming infant as she struggled to get his little leg inside the footed pyjamas, "we would be done by now."

Ben merely smiled and gurgled, his little hands reaching for his mother's hair.

"Ah, ah, ah. No pulling Mummy's hair."

Hermione finally managed to get one foot into the leg of the pyjamas. She blew a straying lock from her face and then groaned as Ben managed to kick his leg free.

"Is my assistance required?" Severus asked, entering the room and standing behind her, his hands on her hips.

She craned her head to smile at him. "He's a wiggly little thing. I'm afraid he isn't cooperating at all this evening."

"Hmm. Budge over. Let me try."

"By all means," Hermione replied, stepping to the side.

"Right. Now, Benjamin," Severus said to the grinning baby, "let's show your mother how it's done." He spoke to the child in low tones about nothing particular, and in less than half a minute, he had Ben dressed and ready for bed.

Hermione stared at him in wonder. "How did you get him to stay so still? He never does that for me."

Severus shrugged. "He likes to listen to my voice ... much like his mother," he added slyly.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

"You wound me, madam," Severus replied, placing one hand dramatically over his heart.

Ben chuckled at his father, and both Hermione and Severus turned to look at their son.

Severus picked the baby up and handed him to Hermione. "I need to go out for a few minutes. I will return shortly."

"All right," Hermione said, accepting a small kiss. "Come home safe."

He winked at her as he rubbed a hand over Ben's head. "Always."

Hermione was fixing a cup of tea when Severus returned to the flat.

"Hermione?"

"In the kitchen," she called and then entered the sitting room, a cup of tea in her hands, only to find that her husband had not returned alone. "Eileen! I didn't realise Severus was bringing you for a visit. It's good to see you!"

Eileen laughed. "I didn't know I was coming for a visit, either."

Severus cleared his throat. "Hermione, there is something I would like to discuss with you. Mum has come to stay with Ben for the evening."

"Oh," Hermione said. What could he possibly have to discuss with her that would cause them to go outside their home? Setting aside her reservations, she asked, "Do I look all right? Should I change?" She ran a hand down the leg of her trousers.

Severus nodded. "You might want to put on a jumper and grab a cloak. It will be cooler at our destination."

Hermione looked at him curiously but left the room to do as he suggested.

She went to the wardrobe, grabbed a jumper, and quickly pulled it over her head. Butterflies had erupted in her stomach. Something had been bothering Severus, but over the last few days it seemed as though whatever he had struggled with had been resolved. Now, Hermione was not so certain. Gathering her courage, she picked up her warm cloak and returned to the sitting room.

"Is this all right?" Hermione asked.

Severus nodded and grasped his walking stick. "Perfect. Let's go. We'll be back in a few hours, Mum."

"Ben just fell asleep," Hermione said as she put on her cloak and fastened the clasp. "He shouldn't be any trouble."

"That's fine, dear. Now go," Eileen said with a wave of her hand, "and have a good time!"

Hermione smiled tentatively and stepped into her husband's arms. He held her close, her head resting against his shoulder, and then Disappeared.

Pop!

Severus kept a hand on Hermione's elbow as she caught her balance.

Hermione immediately recognised their location as the cliffs near Shell Cottage. "What are we doing here?" she asked, turning to him in confusion.

He took her hand and placed it in the crook of his left arm. Walking toward the cliffs, he asked, "Do you know what today is?"

She smiled...he had remembered. "It's our anniversary."

Severus smirked. "It is."

He stopped at the exact location where they had stood a year before, when she had inadvertently been irrevocably bound to him. He tossed his walking stick to the ground and took her hands in his, looking down at her with serious eyes.

"You know that I have been doing some research of late, but I have not yet shared with you the subject of my quest." He tightened his grip on her hands and said, "I was looking for a way to dissolve the binding."

Hermione's eyes widened in shock and then filled with tears. "What?" She tried to pull away, but Severus held firm.

"I wanted you to have some recourse, in the event that you ever wish to be rid of me."

Hermione took a shuddering breath and blinked away her tears. "I love you, Severus. I'll never want to be rid of you."

He flashed a lopsided smile. "I love you, as well, and I've found a way to prove it."

Hermione shook her head. "You don't need to..."

"I want to," Severus said firmly. "The binding that married us and gave us our son is an imbalance. You are bound to me, but I am not bound to you. I want to change that."

"How?"

Severus rubbed his thumbs across the back of her hands. "During my research, I found another spell. The lugo ex Eternus Amor."

Hermione tilted her head to the side as she translated, then stared at him with wide eyes. "The Binding of Eternal love?"

He nodded. "Yes. It will bind me to you just as you are bound to me."

"You would do that?" That he would even consider binding himself to her, after decades of being bound to two masters, astounded and amazed her. She was overwhelmed by the trust and love such an act would mean, coming from the man standing before her.

Severus looked at her intently, as though willing her to believe him. "I would like to, yes."

Hermione threw herself into his arms and clung to his neck. "Yes!"

Severus held her tightly to him for several minutes before releasing her.

"Let us begin," he said, just as he had the last time they had stood together by the cliffs near Shell Cottage. Severus drew his wand, and cast the spell.

Hermione smiled as the magic swirled and danced about them once more, uniting them for all time.

A/N: Only the epilogue is left. It will post in a few days!

Thank you, once again, to my fabulous beta readers, Subversa and DeeMichelle, and my wonderful Brit picker, LettyBird.

Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

An ancient spell, sealed with a kiss, leads to consequences both expected and unexpected. When truths are revealed, lives will be irrevocably changed, and two people will learn that a legacy is more than something left behind.

JKR owns it all. I'm just having fun.

Epilogue

September 1, 2017

Kings Cross Station, Platform 9¾

Severus refrained from grumbling aloud as he and the children passed through the barrier and arrived at Platform 9¾. He had always been irritable when it came time for Ben and Abigail to leave for Hogwarts, and this day was no different. Hermione's absence only compounded his bad-temper.

After weeks of pleading, Ron Weasley had finally had his opportunity to demonstrate his new driving skills to his Muggle-born friend. Hermione had hesitated until Ron's wife, Mandy, had assured her that Ron had passed his driver's test with flying colours and had proven to be a very responsible driver. With that assurance, Hermione had finally relented. She had accompanied the Weasleys and their children, Rose and Hugo, to the station, promising to meet her own family there. Severus had remained unconvinced of the wizard's driving abilities; he dearly hoped his wife had survived the experience unscathed.

"Do you see them?" Ben asked as they angled their way through the crowd.

Severus looked around; a veritable sea of red hair at the opposite end of the platform alerted him to the Weasleys and Potters.

"There they are. Grab your sister's trunk, Ben. If your mum managed to live through the car ride with your Uncle Ron, she'll be wondering where we are."

Abigail smirked at her brother, then tucked her hand in the crook of her father's arm before beaming up at him with her mother's eyes.

Severus could not help but to smile at her. Abigail was an amazing creature ... amazingly beautiful, amazingly intelligent, and amazingly cunning. She had wrapped him around her little finger from the moment she was born, and she knew it. It was little wonder that she had been sorted into Slytherin. Yet her warm personality and kind spirit endeared her to everyone she met. Now in her fifth year, Abigail was excited about returning to Hogwarts as a prefect, especially now that her older brother would be gone.

Ben had completed his seventh year the previous June and was preparing to leave for his apprenticeship at Durmstrang. Severus had been proud beyond measure when his son had proven to be a natural with Potions. To his mother's chagrin, Ben had also proven to be a natural at Quidditch; Ravenclaw had never had a more successful Seeker. Severus suppressed a smile as Ben scowled at Abigail ... some days, looking at his son was like looking in a mirror.

And yet Ben was everything Severus had not been at his age. He was happy, open and friendly in a way that Severus could have never imagined being, and for that, Severus was eminently thankful.

He was thankful for many things these days. His mother was doing quite well. She remained in Mousehole, content in her little cottage with the bright blue door. Her baking business had continued to flourish until finally the town baker, Mr Smythe, had offered to bring her into the business...and his life...as an equal partner. Eileen had refused the offer of marriage but had eagerly agreed to the business partnership. Severus had worried that she might be lonely, but she had assured him...much to his mortification...that her love life was just fine, thank you very much, and certainly was none of his business. Severus had readily agreed.

It had taken several years for Hermione's parents to come to terms with the fact that their daughter's decision to modify their memories had been made with their best interest at heart. It had been Abigail's birth that had provided the excuse for them to reintroduce themselves into their daughter's life. Even so, it had taken time and effort on all sides in order to rebuild the relationship, but the familial bond had eventually been restored, much to Hermione's relief. The Grangers were now an integral part of the Snape family.

Severus' reverie was broken when Abigail stopped walking. "Daddy," she breathed, and then she looked at him, her lower lip trembling piteously and her brown eyes filling with tears.

"What is it?" Abigail rarely cried, and Severus was immediately concerned.

"There," she said with small jerk of her head, her dark brown curls bouncing with the movement.

Severus followed her gaze and immediately understood. "Ah, I see. You knew it was bound to happen, Abigail."

"I know," she whispered. "I just didn't think I'd have to witness it."

Severus bit back the words that first leapt to his mind and instead wrapped his daughter in a warm embrace. She allowed him to hold her for a few moments before she pulled away.

"I'm going to get on the train here, all right?"

"No. Your mum is waiting Don't give me that look, young lady," Severus said. When a lone tear slid down her pale cheek, he sighed and relented. "All right, I shall inform your mother. However, you will write to her immediately upon your arrival in your common room. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Daddy," Abigail said dutifully.

Ben and Severus helped her with her trunk and then watched as she boarded the train. She leaned out the window as the train began to pull away.

"Bye, Daddy! Bye, Ben! Write to me, okay?"

Ben laughed and nodded as he waved.

Once the train was well on its way, Ben turned to his father. "I'm going to go say hello to Uncle Harry and Uncle Ron, all right?"

Severus nodded, his eyes fixed upon the departing train.

Ben laughed and said, "Don't worry, Dad. She'll be back in your hair before you know it." Then he walked away in search of his uncles. Severus suspected he wanted to talk Quidditch.

He continued to watch the train until he felt a familiar hand slip into his, and he looked down into his wife's smiling eyes.

"I was wondering where you all were. I assume you got her on the train?"

Severus nodded, knowing Hermione would not be happy with him for allowing their daughter to leave without telling her goodbye.

He was surprised, then, when Hermione murmured, "I take it she saw Teddy with Victoire?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Hermione sighed. "James told us. I'm sure she was devastated. She's had a crush on Teddy since she was four years old."

"Yes," Severus said tightly. "And the boy has encouraged it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He has not. He has been cordial and nice. Just because Abigail chooses to interpret his friendliness as something more does not mean that he is encouraging her."

Severus grunted in reply but otherwise said nothing.

"However," Hermione added thoughtfully, "I don't believe Teddy and Victoire will last. There's just no spark there. Don't tell Abigail I said this, but I don't think she should give up hope just yet."

Severus stiffened as he thought of that blue-haired Casanova manhandling his little girl.

Hermione laughed, rising to her toes as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I didn't say it was going to happen tomorrow, Severus. It may never happen. It's just a feeling I have. Your daughter is quite stubborn. She may get what she wants in the end."

Severus pushed the images flitting through his mind from his head and returned his wife's embrace. "Like you did?"

Hermione nodded and smiled against his neck. "Yes, just like I did."

He kissed her then, in the middle of the platform, and said, "Let's go home. Ben can find his own way back."

As they walked through the station, their arms linked, Severus considered the events in his life that had led to where he now found himself. It had been a long, hard journey, and yet, looking back, he knew he would not change a thing.

He glanced at Hermione. She had entered his life like whirlwind, pushing and prodding and poking until he had finally caved in to her demands. Thinking about his family and the years of happiness he had been given, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

He had wished to leave a legacy, and instead he had lived it.

A/N: And we've reached the end. I hope you enjoyed the story!

For those of you who are curious, here is the prompt that I was given.

Prompt: Hermione was already secretly married to Severus, and pregnant with his child, when he seemingly died. These secrets are revealed, and they garner strong reactions. Not too long after that, Severus is found alive. He's ill and has been unable to make himself known. The couple is reunited, and Hurt/Comfort ensues. At the end, Severus is whole and healthy. Please make this all lead up to a happily-ever-after for Severus and Hermione. (EWE is fine; but an epilogue to this fic with an explanation for Mrs Snape being with her friend Ron at the station is better.)

A huge thank you to my beta readers, Subversa and Deanna, and my Brit picker, LettyBird. You three are simply amazing.

There is a four-part spin-off featuring Teddy and Abigail, titled Look Me in the Eyes. It is also archived at TPP.