

Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah

by Mama Weasley

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever. Response to the Adoption Act Challenge on WIKTT. SSHG

The Selection

Chapter 1 of 10

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever. Response to the Adoption Act Challenge on WIKTT. SSHG

Chapter One

The Selection

Severus Snape pulled the wooden chair out slowly, then collapsed into it with a sigh. He rested his elbows on the familiar desk in front of him and stared morosely at the classroom he knew so well. He was back.

He'd sworn he'd never come back. He hated this place. Hated the school, with its memories of his childhood and the accompanying emotions. He hated this classroom. Hated the imbeciles he'd be forced to teach.

But here he was. He had no choice, really; it was here or Azkaban. McGonagall had believed his story, and eventually the other Order members as well. Albus had left plenty of evidence behind in his Pensieve; he was innocent, an actor in a play. Yes, he'd said the forbidden words, but the real action had been a wandless Banishing Spell on the body of the already-dying man on that same man's orders. It was the fall from the tower, not an Unforgivable Curse, that had killed the already-dying Albus Dumbledore.

Scrimgeour, of course, did not believe him. But Minerva stood up for him--even Moody did. And so, he was reprieved, put on parole. So long as he behaved--and stayed under close supervision of his superiors at Hogwarts--he could go back to a "normal" life. He had two months to do research before term started, but after that, how much progress could he make? Life would be all lesson plans, marking, and detentions with dunderheads.

He sighed again. *Could Azkaban really be any worse than this hell hole? Looking on the bright side, life can probably get no worse.*

Had Severus Snape kept up with the news in the Daily Prophet, he would not have been so sure of the last sentiment.

Hermione ran her fingers aimlessly through the bushy mess of her hair, fixated on the fine print in the newspaper. She'd read it once, but she had to read through the provisions of the law again, looking for loopholes. There were none, of course. Scrimgeour's staff barristers were top notch. There was really no way out of it; she would have to adopt a child.

If she did, what would she do about her apprenticeship at Slug & Jiggers? Granted, she hadn't formally accepted it yet, but she certainly meant to. And she couldn't easily

complete the requirements of an apprenticeship while caring for an infant.

But wait, Hermione thought. This isn't a normal adoption I have to go through here; there probably won't be many infants available. I can get an older child, one old enough for school. I can send her to Muggle primary school until it's time for Hogwarts.

She pulled out quill and parchment and started scribbling a list of attributes she wanted in a child.

Voldemort's propensity for death and destruction had wrought terrible changes in the wizarding world. During his reign of terror, monuments that had stood for millennia had been destroyed. Traditions, which had been passed down from father to son, from mother to daughter, for generations, had been done away. But worst of all, hundreds of wizards had been killed in battle--on both sides of the field--leaving behind the innocent, the children, to fend for themselves.

After the Dark Lord had been defeated at the hand of Harry Potter, the bureaucrats at the Ministry of Magic had embarked upon a rebuilding program for damaged historical sites. They had instituted an archival program to chronicle the customs that were being abandoned. But they simply could not care for the two hundred and fifty-six orphans who found themselves not only without parents, but without any living relatives at all to take them in.

And so, the Adoption Act of 1998 had been announced. The law was simple: all wizards and witches between the ages of 18 and 50 were to adopt a child under age eleven; all wizards and witches between the ages of 51 and 80 were to adopt a child between eleven and seventeen. No exceptions. Many had argued for a "married couple exemption," one that allowed married couples to adopt only one child between them, but the Ministry had disagreed. Such a loophole would have left too many children in orphanages.

Hermione was among the throng who clustered outside the adoption agency's doorway on the first day. She already knew what she was looking for: a little girl, ideally about five or six years old (though somewhat older would be okay); preferably with brown hair and brown eyes, so she wouldn't look too unlike her mother.

When nine o'clock arrived, she was sucked through the doorway in the current of eager, prospective parents. Many of them were single older witches, she noticed. No doubt, several were old maids finally getting the child they'd wanted for so long.

As she entered the large hall where the younger children were being shown, Hermione glanced about, desperately searching for girls in the right age range. Unfortunately, the only one who was immediately visible was already being fawned over by no less than three witches. She watched in disgust as Lavender Brown, Padma Patil, and Susan Bones bickered over who would claim the precious creature.

After searching for a while, it became obvious that there were only three girls between the ages of five and six, and they were all eagerly sought after. Hermione's strategy of carefully evaluating each child had definitely not paid off. Flustered, she looked around for alternatives. Girls definitely seemed to be popular among the unmarried witches. Perhaps she could take a boy? After seven years of hanging out with Ron and Harry, she was sure she knew something about boys.

A movement by the bookcase caught her eye. Unnoticed by any adults near him, a small boy crawled slowly over to a bookshelf under one of the windows. He eased a large picture book from the shelf with the greatest of care, opened it almost reverently, and began running his finger under the words. His parents had obviously read to him on a regular basis. Would his new parent do the same for him?

Hermione's heart stopped, and tears welled in her eyes. That poor little guy. The caseworkers would probably not care if his parents liked books or not. He'd be lucky to get anyone at all--he was rather an ugly little thing.

With a sigh, Hermione walked over to the small child and swooped him up in her arms. "Hello, little man," she said gently. "Let me read you this book, and then we'll go home."

Indignant and sullen, Severus Snape stared fiercely into the Headmistress's stony visage. He longed for Dumbledore's cheerful twinkle; the old Headmaster would have grinned at him, daring him to challenge the request. Minerva's stern face didn't yield in the least to his penetrating glare. Nonetheless, he had to try. "I cannot adopt a child and maintain my position here at Hogwarts!"

She had adopted, he knew, as had some of the other professors. But they were all lucky enough to be over the age of fifty-one. They could adopt current Hogwarts students, a "change" which had little or no impact on their everyday lives. Unfortunately, as the "baby" on staff, he had to choose a child ten or younger. How would he keep an eye on the kid? How would he educate him?

McGonagall sighed. "I'm not saying it would be without its challenges. But you're a clever man, Severus. I'm sure you can figure out some means of child care for class time. Please, Severus. You know what will happen if you don't adopt."

Gloomily, Snape fingered the length of ebony in his pocket. "I can brew without a wand."

"It's not just the wand, Severus. Remember the terms of your parole. When they say you have to abide by the law, they don't just mean no murder and mayhem. They mean all laws, including this silly Adoption Law. Your monthly parole meeting is a week from Friday."

With a growl of anguish, the dark man sprang from his chair. "All right, all right! I'll take a bloody child! Merlin only knows how I'm going to care for the dunderhead, but I'll take one!" As he skulked out of the office, he muttered to himself, "If there are any left, that is."

The receptionist behind the main desk looked up. "Professor Snape," she said acidly.

"Ah, Miss Ellington. I remember your incompetence well. Small wonder that you have been reduced to performing a desk job."

Rolling her eyes, the witch gestured through an open doorway. "Whatever. You're not my professor any more, so take your pick and get out of here. There's only two left."

"There *are* only two left," Snape corrected automatically. Then he stalked menacingly through the door she'd indicated.

His dreams of picking a well-mannered boy, age ten, were quickly dashed. Miss Ellington had indicated that there were only two orphans remaining to adopt; he saw only one, a grubby little boy of about seven, who scowled at him as he entered. "You won't be my daddy! You won't!" he shouted. "I'm going to stay right here until my real daddy comes! I won't let you take me away!"

Snape moved closer to take a good look at the child. He was rewarded by a hand-with extremely sharp nails-raking across his face. "Get away, I said!" the child screamed.

"Very well," Severus said calmly, taking a step back. "Where is the other one?"

The boy pointed sullenly to a cot in the corner. Unconsciously rubbing the scrapes on his cheek, Severus walked over to investigate. He had been sure that no infants would be left; they were considered the most desirable adoptees, weren't they?

The girl lying in the cot was not really an infant any more. Two or three years old, if Severus guessed correctly--though, admittedly, he'd never been around small children

for extended periods of time. Her arms and legs lay limply, unresponsive to his touch. Her body scarcely moved at all, other than the faint rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Her head turned imperceptibly, and her eyes met his.

Severus leaped back in shock as he felt his mind being probed, quickly snapping his Occlumency shield up. The girl was a natural Legilimens! Despite his mind's protective barriers, he was still able to hear the probing question: *Are you my new daddy?*

Gently, carefully, he picked her up. "Yes," he whispered.

Outside the door, he was aware of a vaguely familiar voice speaking with the receptionist. "I was so wrapped up with the paperwork surrounding the Adoption Act that I totally forgot to adopt a child myself!" a man was saying frantically.

"Go on in, Perce. Even if the professor's already picked, there'll still be one left."

Snape, striding towards the doorway, nearly collided with Percy Weasley. "Enjoy your new son, Mr. Weasley," he smirked. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw the defiant look on the dark boy's face, and he grinned evilly to himself. Dealing with that brat would no doubt take the pompous former Head Boy down a notch.

In the reception area, Miss Ellington frowned at him. "Oh, you don't want to take her, Professor Snape. She has Minocore's Disease--a really rare ailment. If she survives to adulthood, it can be treated, and she'll be able to move normally. But the mediwizards can't do anything now, or it will affect the development of her magic."

No one told Severus Snape what he would or would not do. He pulled himself up to his full height and snarled menacingly, "I will take her. Furthermore, I want to."

"Whatever," the witch said, snapping her chewing gum annoyingly. She opened a mostly-empty file cabinet and took out a folder. "Her name is Carly. Carly Elizabeth...Snape, now, I guess. Unless you want to change it as part of the adoption process."

The Potions Master paused, considering. A child who had recently experienced trauma probably would not want the additional stress of her name changed. And yet... "Carly is not a proper name," he declared. "Her name will be Carlotta. Carlotta Elizabeth Snape."

Looking down, he re-established the link with his new daughter. *But I will call you Carly for short,* he thought. In his mind, he heard her giggle with pleasure.

The Arrangement

Chapter 2 of 10

In which Hermione explains what she wants to do with her life and Severus solves his child care dilemma.

Chapter Two

The Arrangement

Snape stumbled out of the fireplace at the Three Broomsticks. He'd always been adept at Floo arrivals, but trying to keep his balance while holding what was basically a floppy doll was disconcerting.

He looked into Carly's eyes. *Sorry about that, little one,* he thought. *The rest of the trip home should be much easier.* He saw the glimmer of understanding in her eyes and smirked, pleased that he could communicate so clearly with a child this young.

Straightening himself up, he brushed the soot from his cloak. Suddenly, he became aware of several pairs of eyes staring at him. "What are you all looking at?" he scowled. The patrons of the bar returned to their drinks and gossip (though Severus had no doubt that they were all gossiping about him now). Only Miss Larouche, the second-year who had been taken in by Madam Rosmerta, still gaped at him.

"I will not grade your essays any less harshly, despite the fact that I have a child," he snarled at her. Nodding timidly, she went back to drying glasses. Her antagonist stalked out of the bar, not looking where he was going.

As he strolled out of the pub, he was so busy looking at his new daughter that he nearly collided with a young witch pushing a pram.

"Oh! Professor...umm, Mr. Snape! Excuse me!"

He looked up to see Hermione Granger. Or was she a Weasley now? There had been a rash of Weasley weddings following the final battle with Voldemort; he hadn't kept track of who married whom.

"Miss Granger." She didn't correct him, so obviously she was not a Weasley. Not yet. "And it's Professor Snape again, I'm afraid." Glancing down, he connected with Carly, making sure that she hadn't been shaken up too badly by the sudden stop.

As he prepared to walk away, a thought hit him suddenly. "Miss Granger, you did take that position at Slug and Jiggers, didn't you?"

"No. I was going to," she said quietly, "but I ended up canceling the apprenticeship, sir. Once Stephen came along, I could hardly...well, anyway, I have a more flexible position now."

"What job did you take, then?"

With a satisfied smirk, Hermione explained, "I am an independent researcher."

Severus stared at her slack-jawed. "An...an...an..." It had been his dream for years. He'd saved for his independence from the time he started his apprenticeship.

"An independent researcher," Hermione confirmed. Her voice quieted as she continued, "My parents both had life insurance...quite a lot, actually. And I sold the big house in Sussex and bought a small cottage instead...and I sold their practice, too. I get just enough income off the principal to squeeze by. But it's better than wasting years in apprenticeships."

The dark man straightened up, full of hope. He saw an opportunity, and he would not be able to call himself a Slytherin if he didn't exploit it to its fullest. "Miss Granger, my congratulations. You have achieved a dream that many hope for but never attain. But--Miss Granger, are you sure you have enough income to purchase rare potions

ingredients?"

"No," she admitted. "but I can do most of the theoretical work the first few years, while I have Stephen home full time. I'll only be able to squeeze a few hours of work in each day, anyway."

Snape looked at her with what he hoped was his most amiable expression. "You see, I, too, find myself in a predicament. I am in need of child care for a few hours each day, but I don't have much money to pay for it. I do, however, have access to quite a few potions ingredients... available at an educational discount, of course... and I do happen to have rather an extensive library of rare potions texts which I could make available to you."

Hermione Granger's face lit up. "Oh, sir!" she exclaimed happily. "I think we might be able to reach an agreement that we both find acceptable!"

Severus smirked contentedly. "Would you care for lunch, Miss Granger? We should discuss arrangements. We could eat here, if you like, or at Hogwarts...the house-elves do rather miss having all the children during the summer..."

"Hogwarts, please," said Hermione shyly. "It feels like home, and I miss it."

They walked along in silence for a bit before Severus spoke up. "Miss Granger, have you ever heard of Minocre's disease?"

"Yes, sir! It's what Muggles would call an autoimmune disorder. The immune system goes haywire and attacks the muscles. It only appears in children with latent magic, but it can't be fixed until adulthood, because their magic would be affected. Children with Minocre's are basically invalids. They can't move their limbs at all, only autonomic muscles..." She broke off suddenly. "Oh. It's what she has, isn't it?"

He nodded, unsure of what to say.

"I haven't read much...I mean, I don't know...I mean, can she talk at all?"

"No," he admitted. "But I can communicate with her."

"Of course! You're a Legilimens. That's handy!"

He nodded again, not feeling it necessary to disclose Carly's natural aptitude for the subject.

"But then...how will I..."

He glared at her. "Everyone knows of your natural brilliance and creativity, Miss Granger. If you cannot find a way, no one can."

Over lunch they discussed scheduling and fees. Snape was struck by how quiet Hermione's new son--Stephen, if he remembered correctly--stayed throughout the ordeal. Then he noticed the stack of books in the pram. Though his face remained coldly impersonal, in his mind, he smiled. It appeared that he was not the only one who had found a child after his own heart.

Surprises

Chapter 3 of 10

Hermione discovers Carly's secret, and we meet some new children.

Chapter Three

Surprises

Hermione's left shoulder was aching dreadfully. She had discovered early on that she had to keep Carly within eyesight, but Stephen refused to stay put. Her solution to this problem had been to buy a baby sling for Carly; that way, she could carry the little girl everywhere as she chased her son all over the house.

In the three months since his adoption, Stephen had become a toddler. A month ago, he'd learned to pull up to standing and soon after began taking hesitant steps. Now he was walking confidently all over the small cottage that they called home. He was barely a year old, but walking like a champ--and chattering like a chimp!

There was only one way, really, to get her son to stay in one spot: she could read to him. And so she did, as often as possible. It was the only time she could take Carly out of the sling.

"Capir book, Mum," announced Stephen, thrusting a picture book into her hands.

Hermione rolled her eyes; she had to read this particular volume several times a day. However, she knew that disobeying a request was liable to result in a tantrum, and she didn't think she could deal with that right now.

"Okay, okay. In the light of the..."

"Moom!" interjected Stephen.

"A little..."

"Egg!"

"Lay on a..."

"Yeaf!"

They had read this book together so many times that the little guy had it almost memorized. Hermione ran her finger under the words as she read, hoping he would make the connection between the familiar sounds and the black shapes on the page.

"One Sunday morning, the warm sun came up, and..."

Pop!

Hermione frowned. That had not been Stephen. In fact, she wasn't entirely sure that she had actually heard the voice.

"Out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry..."

"Capir!" shrieked Stephen gleefully.

Caterpillar, said the strange voice quietly.

Well, that was definitely not Stephen; he couldn't pronounce the word properly, though she had often tried to get him to do so. Where was that voice coming from? Who was speaking?

He started to look for some food, said the strange voice. Except the room was deathly quiet.

Comprehension struck suddenly. Hermione turned the little girl in her lap and looked into her eyes. "Carly?"

It's about time you noticed me, the voice said.

"Oh, Carly! I'm so sorry. I would have thought Professor Snape would have told me..."

You mean you would have told. He doesn't tell anything.

"Very true," said Hermione wistfully.

"Mama, more book!" ordered Stephen imperiously.

And so Hermione returned to the story.

She knows, Carly said to her father as he fed her a spoonful of mashed food. It was easy for her to carry on a conversation while eating, since she didn't have to use her mouth to speak.

"Who knows?" Snape replied, refilling the spoon. "And what?"

Hermione. I talked to her today.

"Oh, great. Now the news will be all over Britain."

I don't think so. She doesn't talk to anyone really. She is rather lonely.

"How would you know? You're only there six hours a day."

She doesn't know Occlumency.

Severus Snape sighed, "Well, tell her not to speak of it, please."

I will. Next time I see her.

"Thank you, Carly." The Potions master carefully scraped up the last bits of mashed potato and spooned it into her mouth. He would never let his students see him like this, holding his tiny daughter on his lap and feeding her. But he enjoyed it nonetheless.

Carly was good company. Severus had been surprised to learn that she was not two or three, but just past six years old; her ailment had stunted her physical growth considerably. But her mind seemed far older than that. If he had not seen her birth certificate for himself, he would have sworn that she was at least ten or eleven years of age.

It all made sense when he thought about it, though. She'd been reading the thoughts of those around her for the last four years, at least, so adult concepts and vocabulary came naturally to her.

Of course, she wasn't an adult, or even at an adult level. Still, he could show her his potions ingredients, and tell her about what he was doing; he could explain why he added each ingredient as he created elixirs for Poppy Pomfrey; and he could point out some of life's little ironies and share a laugh with her.

Carly had not yet done any accidental magic, but her Legilimency was strong and her mind was sharp. Severus had no doubt that his daughter was brilliant, worthy of the Snape name. He just wished that she could jump up and perch on the workbench next to him, instead of having to be strapped into a restraining chair.

Ron had once told Hermione that she should charge Snape extra for (as he put it) "delivering the brat to his door." Hermione disagreed. Her twice-daily walks to Hogwarts--once to pick up her charge, and the other to bring her home--were the highlight of her day. She was an introvert, but she still enjoyed watching people.

There were so many interesting people in Hogsmeade; then, too, there was the chance to see some of the students at Hogwarts. She'd counseled many of the younger students during her days as Head Girl, and, although they weren't really her friends, she enjoyed seeing them again.

She did not recognize the young girl who was currently standing on the steps with the Headmistress, however. Probably she was a first year.

"Well, sure, I've agreed to call you Mum. But that doesn't mean I've agreed to obey you!" the small blond witch snapped.

Hermione grinned as she watched her former Head of House straighten up to her full height. So, this was another "staff kid?" Snape had it easy; he didn't have to teach his daughter in class.

"Nonetheless, I insist that you apologize to Miss Zabini," McGonagall said clearly.

"But Mum! She's a Slytherin!"

"Well, yes. So she is. But you know as well as I that the Zabini family supported our side during the war. Patrice's brother, Blaise, was a spy for..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But still..."

"Apologize or I will take house points and give you a detention."

"Yes, Mum." The words were obedient, but the tone was anything but. As Hermione watched the girl stomp away, she noticed the look on her face: the same scheming look that she'd often seen on Fred and George's countenances.

Professor McGonagall looked up, suddenly noticing her former student. "Hello, Hermione," she sighed heavily. "Aren't you lucky. You have one who won't talk back."

Hermione winked, grinning evilly. "He's learning to run. Want to swap?"

"Oh!" McGonagall's face hovered somewhere between a frown and a pout. "Perhaps I should just stick with Sarah, then... Well, good day, Miss Granger, I have some paperwork to deal with."

Hermione spent several days snickering about McGonagall's new daughter. She had no doubt that the poor headmistress had picked the worst orphan possible--until Friday morning, as she walked through Hogsmeade. She was just passing Madam Puddifoot's, with Stephen and Carly both securely strapped into the double pram, when a tremendous scream rent the brisk November air.

"Help! Help me!"

Down the street, the source of the noise was immediately obvious. A small boy was clinging tightly to a light post, screaming at the top of his lungs as a red-haired man tried to pick him up.

"Help! Don't let him take me away! I need to go home to my Daddy!"

By now, a number of curious onlookers were starting to approach the scene.

"Don't let him kidnap me! I want my Mummy!"

A young, burly man approached the redhead, who was desperately trying to pry the boy's hands loose from the post. "Ere now, what's all this? Leave the boy be! Where's your parents, kid?"

"I... I dunno," the boy sobbed, "I haven't seen them for a while."

"I am his parent," said the gangly redhead, straightening up to his full height. "His only parent. And he will come home now and have a nap whether he likes it or not."

The muscular wizard frowned at this request. Hermione, edging closer, saw him look back and forth between the boy and his supposed father: dark hair... red hair; dark eyes... blue eyes; olive skin... pale, freckled skin. "Why do I not believe this?" he said slowly.

The redhead, who Hermione now saw was Percy Weasley, snorted in disgust. "Oh, please. Am I the only one here who had to adopt a child? I thought the law applied to everyone!"

There were murmurs and nods among the crowd, which started to disperse. "But my missus said that you had to choose one what looked like you," said the not-so-bright wizard, still looking back and forth between Percy and his adoptive son.

"There were no redheads left," said the other man curtly. Seeing that the boy had loosened his grip on the pole somewhat, Percy leaned down, grabbed his child by the waist and swung him over his shoulder. As he marched down the street, Hermione heard the little boy piteously wailing: "Isn't anyone going to help me?"

That afternoon, after Stephen went to bed for his nap, Hermione collapsed into the rocking chair, still holding Carly. They often spent this time together chatting--or, rather, communicating, since Carly still could not speak.

He noticed you.

"Who?"

That red-haired man with the brat. Percy, I think?

"You mean that he recognized me?"

Well, yes. But more than that. He saw that you were there without a man. And he looked at your hand to see if you wore a wedding ring. He was thinking that you were probably the only woman in the world who could handle the kid, and you wouldn't be a bad wife, either.

Hermione found the situation terribly funny and started to laugh. But then, to her surprise, she found a tear trickling down her cheek. "Sorry," she whispered softly.

But there was no need to explain her conflicted feelings to Carly. *Someday maybe you'll find a man who really loves you. Wait for a good one. You deserve one.*

Two Reasons for Living

Chapter 4 of 10

Response to WIKTT Adoption Challenge.

In this chapter, Hermione and Severus discover that they have two things in common.

Chapter Four

Two Reasons for Living

Setting down her teacup, Hermione sighed with relief. It was Saturday afternoon. Carly was with her father; Stephen was down for his nap; and the potion she'd been

working on for the last two weeks was simmering in the lab--she couldn't add the next ingredient for two more hours.

For the first time in a long time, Hermione Granger was able to sit on the couch, feet up on the coffee table, with nothing more to do than read. Flipping through the latest copy of *Ars Alchemica* (provided by Snape, at educator's discount rate), she located an interesting article and began to read. Five minutes later, her head slumped against the back of the couch and she began to snore.

"Hermione? Hermione?"

Hermione blinked, then sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Hmm?"

"Oh, Hermione, there you are!" Remus Lupin's head was in her fireplace.

"Mmmm... Hi, Remus," she mumbled blearily.

"Hermione, I'm sorry I interrupted your nap! And I'm even sorrier to ask a favor of you, but I don't know who else to bother..."

She kept her lips pressed tightly together, forcing herself to resist sighing in frustration.

"Tuesday's the full moon, you see, and Tonks is away on assignment. Normally I would send Christopher and Cassie over to Harry's house, but he's got an away game. Molly Weasley had agreed to be my backup sitter, but that's her anniversary--she and Arthur are going to be away for the week! It's just for one night, please..."

"I don't babysit for free," Hermione said sharply.

"Fine, fine, is five Galleons enough?"

"Yes, that will do. But Remus--I'm surprised they let you two have children!"

Hermione was surprised by the look of anguish in Lupin's eyes. "Well, their parents were both werewolves too. The Ministry thought they might be infected too, so they gave them to us... but they're not. They're clean."

"At least they didn't take them away after they figured that out," she replied softly.

"Yes, I don't think they could handle another loss so soon," mumbled Remus sadly. "But they're going to have to handle another death eventually. I don't think I have more than ten years left."

Looking at his gaunt and pale face, Hermione's heart swelled with compassion. At last, she had a focus for her research. Well, a second focus anyway. Any decent Potions mistress had at least two projects going on at a time, in case one potion had to simmer for days on end. Not that she was a Potions mistress yet, but she did have to practice.

"So this is the little Snape, eh?" Remus cast a critical eye over Carly. "At least she doesn't look like a Snape. No black robes! No ugly nose! She looks so sweet; too bad she has to put up with a father like that."

Hermione bit her tongue, trying to curtail the floodtide of criticisms, which was eager to spew forth.

Tell him my father is a better man than he thinks he is begged Carly.

"Professor Snape takes very good care of her. Emotionally as well as physically," Hermione said sternly. It was the only thing she could think of to say that didn't involve threats, insults, or slurs on Remus's parentage. Rather than drag out the uncomfortable situation, she quickly changed the subject. "So, are there any special instructions for taking care of the children?"

"Here she is, sir," Hermione said, passing Carly over to her father.

Snape scowled over the desk at the blond seven-year-old examining the books on his shelves. "Who is that? I understood we had an exclusive arrangement! I will not have my daughter in a full-fledged daycare!"

"Christopher Lupin, sir. And Cassie too--she's hiding behind the pram. Remus said it was a one-time thing. Harry is unavailable to care for them tonight."

The Potions master gave the boy another piercing glare, the kind that usually left first-years quaking in their boots.

"I'm not afraid of you! You can't be any scarier than my Pa! He's a real werewolf!" said the child seriously.

Hermione was shocked to hear Severus Snape laugh, something she'd never heard before. "Good for you, Mr. Lupin. Good for you."

Christopher managed a weak smile at the Potions master before turning to his babysitter. "Hermione, can I ride in the pram on the way back? I'm tired."

Cuddling his daughter gently in his arms, Snape spoke up. "If Mr. Lupin is unwilling to walk all the way down here tomorrow morning, I will accommodate him. Shall I bring Carly up to your house?"

"I would appreciate that, sir. Thank you."

Hermione was still trying to straighten up the house the next morning when Snape came by with Carly. She'd been up late reading the night before, as she had for the past three nights.

The professor set Carly down on the couch gently. "What do you have here, Miss Granger?" he said, examining a stack of books that had yet to be returned to their hiding places. "Genetic Markers in Lycanthropes? A bunch of rot, if you ask me. Magic can ascertain all important physiological functions in werewolves. Wizards have no need for Muggle technology."

Hermione frowned, snatching the book from his hands. "If magic can ascertain every important physiological function, why in Merlin's name hasn't anyone cured lycanthropy yet?"

He scowled in reply; but then, suddenly, his expression dissolved into one of shock. "Oh, no. Not you too?"

"What do you mean, me too?" she snapped irritably.

"A cure for lycanthropy. You're working on it too."

"What do you mean, 'too'?" Hermione said slowly.

"Well, it's something I've been looking into for the last three, four... well, ever since Albus made me start brewing the Wolfsbane for Lupin," the dark man confessed cautiously.

Hermione's eyes lit up. "Great! I've just started this project, so I've only done some light reading--" (here she interjected a list of two dozen books) "--but I have some wonderful ideas on where to start. If I gave you a list, would you tell me what you've tried so far? And I really would love to get your input on the feasibility of the others, you see--"

"What I see," he said sternly, with his eyes fixed on the clock, "is that I must hurry back to Hogwarts. End of term examinations today, you know. We shall resume this discussion later. Goodbye, Miss Granger."

"Thank you!" she yelled as he strode briskly down the road towards Hogwarts. If he heard her, he did not show it.

That Saturday found Hermione Granger and Severus Snape huddled together in the Hogwarts Potions Classroom. Piles of parchment and thick, musty tomes surrounded them as they discussed the merits and failings of different approaches to curing lycanthropy.

In one corner, fenced in by a Border spell, Stephen played curiously with a set of unbreakable potion vials. Near him, Carly sat strapped into her chair while Dobby read a book to her. Hermione and Severus were too busy to pay attention to what the house-elf was saying; no doubt, they would have been horrified to hear the mangling of the classic tale. ("Missie Goldilocks is climbing through the window. What a naughty girl, she is having to iron her hands when she gets home! Now Goldilocks is seeing three bowls of porridge on the table...")

The hours ticked away; Dobby changed Stephen's nappy, fed the two children, and eventually tucked both of them into portable cots for their afternoon nap. The two adults didn't even notice that the little elf had disappeared momentarily until he reappeared between them with a pop. "You is not eating, missie and sir! You is very clever, but you is also very forgetful!"

With a sigh, Hermione pushed away the large scroll and the inkwell that sat on the table in front of her. A quick Scourgify removed the large blots of ink from her fingers. Without a word, she accepted the roast beef sandwich that Severus handed her. They ate quietly yet ravenously for ten minutes before looking up at each other.

"Albus always told me I was mad for embarking on this project," remarked Severus seriously. "Do you agree with him, now that you have an idea of what you're up against?"

The bushy-haired witch grinned. "I think you're asking the wrong person. Come on, you're looking at the lady who developed a charm for bringing down Voldemort, Britain's sole crusader for house-elf rights, not to mention probably the only researcher to be working on..." She stopped abruptly and blushed.

"Working on what?" His voice, soft and low, slid sensuously into her ears.

She pressed her lips together and refused to meet his gaze--she remembered that he was a Legilimens. Years as a spy had taught him to pick up on the subtlest of signals, however, and he caught the way her eyes flickered over to Carly and back.

He laughed heartily. "Miss Granger, I do believe you are a masochist."

She smirked in return. "My mother always used to say, 'Why do a small project when you can do a large one instead?' I have always taken her advice to heart."

"Indeed, Miss Granger. Well, I see that we shall have to compare notes on our other joint project as well. In the meantime, shall we return to the problem at hand?"

Hermione smiled at him bashfully. For the first time in a long time, she felt at home.

Author's Notes: Coming next, chapter five: Connections. In which Hermione takes a stab at a skill she's only read about before, we learn a little about Carly's past, and Stephen surprises even his adoptive mother.

In response to readers' remarks: In the beginning of chapter three, it's mentioned that Stephen is just over a year old. His birthday is in October and Chapters 3 & 4 take place in November.

Yes, Percy's kid has some serious problems. I promise he will get help, but not just yet; something drastic has to happen before Percy will realize that he needs a therapist! We don't see much of Percy in this story (though his son will materialize again later), but he's still at odds with his mother, so he's not getting any good parenting advice. I promise that he won't make a move on Hermione. This is good, because I like Hermione, and Percy makes me shudder.

Connections

Chapter 5 of 10

Communication made easy... makes life more difficult! A response to the WIKTT Adoption Challenge.

Chapter Five

Connections

From that day on, Saturdays were devoted to joint research. Hermione and Severus would usually begin by comparing the lab notebooks, which documented their solo efforts during the week. After discussing the results, they'd brainstorm avenues for further research, then work together to begin the processes they wanted to test during the week to come

On one such Saturday in early February, they agreed that mermaid scales might be a useful constituent in Lupin's cure. Neither Severus nor Hermione had such an ingredient in stock; nor was it something that the local apothecary carried. Severus had agreed to apparate to Diagon Alley to find a source of the elusive component.

Hermione finished dicing the Wolfsbane, comfrey, and sage they would need, then returned to Severus' quarters for a rest. Scooping up Carly in one arm and Stephen in the other, she decided to try the practical application of a skill she'd been reading up on.

Carly, can you hear me? The little girl remained quiet, staring at Stephen. *If you can hear me, respond. Please?* Carly turned towards her but said nothing. Carly?

"Staring contest, Miss Granger?" The pointed jab roused Hermione from her efforts.

"Sorry, sir... and didn't I ask you to call me Hermione?"

"You did. But a habit of seven years is difficult to break." Snape narrowed his eyes, skewering her with a thoughtful gaze.

Her latest hobby had left her alert to intruders in her mind, and she felt the gentle probing of his presence. Quickly she attempted to pull up her mental shields, trying to eject him from her mind. Unfortunately, Occlumency was something she'd only read about, but never practiced.

"Legilimency, Miss Granger-- Hermione?"

"It seemed a natural thing to attempt, given the amount of time I'm around Carly."

He looked at her shrewdly. "Don't tell me. You read a book about it."

Hermione blushed. "Five books, actually."

Shaking his head in dismay, Snape rolled his eyes. "You cannot learn Legilimency from a book. You either learn by trial and error, or you learn from someone who's already mastered the skill."

Her shoulders slumped. "I suppose. The theory sounds so simple--"

"Ah, but theory is not real life, is it? Otherwise lycanthropy would have been cured years ago."

"Unfortunately true," she sighed.

"You know, it's too late to extract the essence of these mermaid scales today. Perhaps I could give you a few pointers after dinner instead?"

A grin was her only answer.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Cooking is much easier in the Wizarding World, thought Hermione as she prepared dinner that night in Snape's quarters. A flick of her wand not only filled the pasta pot with water, but also brought it to boiling; after adding the fettucine, all she had to do was put a timing spell on it, and it drained itself as soon as it was cooked al dente. As she finished the salad--the one thing she still made by hand--the pesto applied itself to the pasta, and two crusty baguettes flew out of the oven and sliced themselves into the bread basket.

The only words spoken during the meal came from Stephen. As her son babbled away, Hermione watched silently as Severus carefully mashed the pasta and fed it to Carly, who was slumped on his lap. Somehow he managed to remove the crusts from the baguette with one hand before slipping bits of bread into his daughter's mouth. Their eyes were locked; it was clear they were conversing silently.

Carly had said he was a good father. She'd seen him doing fatherly things, but she'd never before realized what a wonderful relationship Severus had with his little girl. She sighed, causing the Potions master to break his eye contact with his daughter. "We'll be done soon," he said, mistaking her appreciative stare for impatience.

"No, no, take your time," Hermione reassured him. "Really." And she settled down to watch him again.

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Clear your mind." The Potion master's black eyes were boring into Hermione's. "All your emotions must be swept to the side. On three. One, two, three... *Legilimens!*"

A warm trickle ran down her legs. She looked down and saw a puddle on the floor. "Hermione!" her mother screeched, "I don't care how interesting a book is, put it down if you need to visit the loo!" ... Mr. Stevens was bending over her desk. "Why, Miss Granger, you've made an arithmetic error. Someone alert the newspapers!" Her cheeks flushed as her classmates giggled.... Viktor Krum was pulling away from her. "I don't know why I waited this long for THIS," he spat. "You are a terrible kisser."

Hermione shook her head. She was back in Snape's office.

"I apologize," he said gruffly. "People often clear their minds of hatred and fear and anger, but they often forget embarrassment; it's the best chink in most people's armor."

"Let me try again," she said.

She was in her room at her parents' house, reading a textbook. She picked up her shiny new wand, pointed it at her teddy bear, and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Teddy floated above the bed... Dumbledore flicked his wand, and the green and silver decorations turned into red and gold. People were slapping Neville on the back, shaking her hand as well as Harry's...

Aha, she thought, lost in memory but still somehow conscious of her surroundings. *He can use positive emotions as an entry point too.* She probed a bit and found his consciousness in hers; she could sense where it was entering and pushed a bit, hoping to get him out of her mind.

Two tall boys with messy black hair were taunting a teenage boy who was surely a younger Severus, throwing hexes in his direction... As Severus lowered himself into the hole under the Whomping Willow, an eerie howl rent the night air... Professor Flitwick stood above a scrawny little boy with an expression of consternation on his minute face. "Severus," he squeaked, "surely you could get at least one charm right?"

They were back in the office again, staring at each other and panting a bit as though they'd taken a brisk jog.

"If Potter were as analytical as you, he would have mastered this in no time," Severus said blandly.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she replied with a grin.

He smirked at her. "Alas, I'm afraid it's Carly's bedtime."

"Stephen's too," Hermione replied, noticing the clock for the first time. "Severus--thank you for your time. Really--"

"Not at all," he replied softly. "If there's anything else you need, just ask. I'll do anything for you."

She was shocked by the sincerity of his words. They stood there staring at each other for a while before she left to find Dobby and Stephen.

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Carly?"

Hermione's charge was sitting in her special chair, watching the snow falling on the front garden. She didn't reply but stayed motionless and unresponsive.

"Carly? Carly?"

The little girl's eyes remained fixed, staring out the window. She was still breathing; what could be wrong? *I wonder*, thought Hermione, *if I could... especially after I came so close on Saturday...* She sent tendrils of her consciousness outward, probing at the edges of Carly's mind.

She was standing in a room all done up in pinks and yellows. A young woman, not much older than Hermione herself, stood by the window clutching a bundle of blankets. She couldn't see the woman's face at all, but her body was shaking, and her sniffles were all too obvious.

"Oh, Carly, my sweet little girl... I won't let Grandpa hurt you; don't worry. I won't let him near you again. And I won't leave you alone with Daddy either. He does love you, Carly, but he's so scared of his father... Oh my little girl, I don't care what anybody says, you will grow up to be beautiful and talented and powerful..."

Hermione?

She was back in her sitting room, staring at Carly in disbelief.

Hermione, were you in my mind just now?

"Ummm... yeah, sorry."

I was just thinking about my mum.

"I noticed. Carly..."

She ran away. Left my dad. My grandpa strong-armed him into trying to kill me.

Hermione stopped, realizing for the first time that, while she knew Carly's personality far too well, she knew absolutely nothing about her life before coming to Hogwarts. "Carly... what was your last name before Severus adopted you?"

MacNair.

"MacNair--as in Walden?"

Yep. He was my grandpa.

"Oh--I'm sorry, so so sorry..."

Hey, it's not like I chose him. You know what they say about family.

"Does Severus know?"

Are you crazy? He'd blame himself for not rescuing me sooner. He thinks all the evils in the world are his fault.

Hermione sighed. She'd been around Severus around long enough to know that it was true.

Just keep him busy for me. When he's working on potions, he never remembers his sins. He's always happy when he's brewing. Please?

"Okay, okay, Carly." She gently lifted the little girl out of her seat, then hugged her tightly. As she rocked her back and forth, she heard the words that would change her life forever.

Stephen, where are you? Ask your Mum for lunch. I'm hungry.

Okay.

Hermione heard the words in her head but didn't really comprehend what they meant until her son walked into the room with a book in one hand. "Time fo yunch, Mama?"

"Carly!"

What?

"Can Stephen talk to you with Legilimency too?"

Yeah. First I talked to him. Then he figured out how to talk back. I like talking to him. He's funny. It's like have a younger sibling. He brings me things when you're busy, and I read the words for his books...

Hermione collapsed into a chair. They could scheme all they wanted, and most of the time she wouldn't be able to hear it! How would she ever keep these two out of mischief?

Nerves

Chapter 6 of 10

Severus and Hermione both have nerve-racking days. Can they muddle through, without killing each other or those

around them?

Chapter Six

Nerves

"It's better than nothing--"

"Yes, but if it doesn't work properly--"

"It won't make things worse. I'm sure of that."

"How can we ask her to take it without being positive of that? What if she dies, how would I live with myself? How would you live with yourself? OR WOULD YOU EVEN CARE, YOU COLD-HEARTED B--"

SLAP! The sound of Hermione's hand connecting with Severus's cheek resounded throughout the potions lab. "How DARE you insinuate that I would threaten Carly's life in such a fashion? She may not be my daughter but... but..." She broke into sobs and rushed from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Severus collapsed into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"Mama?"

Oh, sweet Merlin--she didn't take her kid with her, thought Severus, as he lowered the containment field with a flick of his wand. "Your Mama will be right back," he said to Stephen, scooping him up in his arms. "She's just a little... frustrated, I guess. This one hits a little too close to home, I think."

I'll do it, Da.

"Carly?"

I'll try it.

"Carly, you don't know what you're saying."

I do, Da. You don't Occlude when you're working on potions. I know exactly what I'm getting into. I'll try it.

"But Carly--"

Da, my physical condition can't get any worse than it already is. Please? Let me take it.

Severus dropped to his knees in front of his daughter and set Stephen carefully to one side. "Carly, oh, Carly. I couldn't bear to lose you. You know that, don't you?" He picked her up and hugged her close.

"Carly sad?" asked Stephen curiously.

"Yes," the Potions master, still on his knees, responded without looking up.

"Sevus sad too?" A chubby hand reached up and wiped a tear clumsily from Snape's cheek.

"I'm scared, Stephen," he said in a rare moment of openness.

"Sevus need a hug," replied the toddler. "Hug make Sevus all better." His small arms only made it halfway around the tall man.

"What is this, a hug-a-thon?" Hermione was standing in the doorway.

Severus flushed. "I think we all needed a little reassurance."

"I'm sorry, Severus. I shouldn't have pushed you so hard. I think there is one other currently living child with Minocre's disease--a boy in China, if I remember correctly."

No. It wouldn't be fair to him. I want to try it.

"Carly, are you sure?"

Da and I have been through this already. I'm going to try it out.

"I'm still not sure I can bear to watch," admitted Snape nervously.

Let me go home with Hermione, then. She's not squeamish about anything.

"No, Carly, being here all alone would be worse. I'd have no one to talk to, nothing to do except sit there and wonder how you were doing."

"Take Stephen," interjected Hermione. "It would allow me to focus more on Carly and give you something to do with yourself."

Severus looked down at the little boy who was still hugging him. "Hey, little man. Would you like to sleep over at my house tonight? We could have dinner in the Great Hall."

Stephen looked up at him with a grin on his face. "I seep at Sevus house. Eat in Gate Hall wif Mirva."

Snape looked up at Hermione and took a deep breath. "Okay. I think I can do this. But--but will you administer the potion to her? I don't think I could handle that part."

She nodded and, reaching over, picked up the small vial. "All right. Hand me Carly."

Severus hugged his daughter tightly. *No matter what happens, I'll always love you. You know that, don't you?*

I love you too, Da. And I know this will work. You're too brilliant to make a mistake.

He released his hold on Carly with a gasp, placing her gently in Hermione's arms. "Take good care of her. And please--don't give her the elixir until I'm out of the room."

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Hermione waited until she got back to her cottage to administer the potion to Carly. The little girl swallowed it without complaint, then looked up at her.

Go ahead and put on the monitoring spells. They'll ease your mind.

Hermione nodded gently, flicking her wand and muttering to herself. Blue and green runes appeared on the wall opposite her, informing her of Carly's pulse rate, blood pressure, and other vitals.

May I have a hug? I need some cuddling.

"Of course, Carly," she whispered, picking up the little girl and sitting down in the rocking chair. Carly was putting on a brave front, but it was clear that, deep down, she was afraid too.

Tell me a story, please.

"Okay, Carly. Hmm," Hermione stalled for time as she wracked her brain for a suitable story. "Okay. Once upon a time there was a little girl. Well, she was older than you, but still little... Anyway, this little girl wanted to know everything in the world. She read, she experimented, and she read some more, but it seemed that there was still so much that she didn't know. Worst of all, no one around her seemed to think that knowing everything was very important."

Carly giggled silently: The little girl in the story hadn't been named, but it was clear who she was. Hermione continued, "When she was eleven, she got a letter from Hogwarts. She was a little surprised that she was a witch, for she had been born into a family of Muggles. She was excited, though. She was going away to a school where everyone would be like her. But when she got there, she discovered that witches and wizards weren't really very different from Muggles after all. They were all content with ignorance; and teasing those who wanted to understand the world was normal."

Hermione paused briefly, smiling to herself. "One day," she began again, "someone made a particularly cutting remark, and the girl hid in the loo to cry. She'd been there for a while when the door burst open and a huge, smelly troll rushed in."

A quiet snore interrupted the narrative. "Do you always go to sleep at the most exciting part of the story?" asked Hermione. She watched the sleeping girl, eying her vital signs. Carly's breathing was irregular and labored, her temperature was starting to climb, and her pulse rate was well above average.

Maybe I'd better not put her down just yet, Hermione thought. *I need to be right here, keeping an eye on her* A flick of her wand brought the book she'd been reading through; she levitated it into the air above her lap and flipped it open to the right page. A Summoning Charm brought her tea and biscuits, which she consumed absentmindedly as she perused the book.

The hours passed; Carly's pulse was still fast and irregular, and her fever had not yet broken. Hermione rocked the little girl, holding her close, still reading from the thick tome in front of her. It was well past midnight when her eyes drifted shut, and she slipped into slumber, still holding Carly in her arms.

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Hermione had left in such a hurry, she hadn't really given Severus instructions on how to care for her son. After feeding Carly for nine months, Severus found that mealtime was a breeze, and it was easy enough to Transfigure some pajamas and conjure a toothbrush. Unfortunately, the Potions master had no idea how to get the kid to sleep.

At eight thirty, after trying unsuccessfully to make the boy doze off, Severus stood up abruptly and announced, "I'm going to leave you with Dobby. I have duties to perform."

"I come too." It was a statement, not a question. The determined expression on the child's face was remarkably similar to one Snape had seen many times on Hermione.

"You may come on one condition. You must be quiet. If not, I will get Dobby to put you back in bed."

"Awwright. I quiet."

Severus swooped him up and nestled him in the crook of his left arm. The boy was the same weight as Carly, even though she was four times as old. He took his daughter out with him every night; bringing Stephen should pose no hardship as long as the boy didn't make a peep.

With a wave of his wand, he Transfigured his boots into soft-soled shoes. Extinguishing the lights in the room, he opened the door and slipped into the corridor. It was important for him to be stealthy from the beginning; otherwise, the Slytherins would post a guard near his door to monitor his comings and goings. He all but floated down the hall, then cautiously descended into the lower dungeons to begin his patrol.

It was a typical night.

"Miss Hardcastle, Mr. Gilman. Ten points each from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw for being out after curfew.... Goyle and Martin, being caught in the kitchens is inadvisable. Two points apiece from Slytherin.... Miss McGonagall, you are lucky that it is I who caught you. I will not inform your mother this time, but next time you will not be so fortunate. Five points from Gryffindor.... Messieurs Creevey, if you two are attempting to follow in the footsteps of the Weasley twins, you are failing miserably! They lost twice as many points as you ever have. Nonetheless, I am feeling charitable; let me assist you in drawing closer to their mark. Twenty points apiece from Gryffindor..."

And so it went. From the lowest dungeon, up to the Great Hall, then up and around and up again, Severus Snape swept through the corridors of Hogwarts, flushing out wayward students and sending them back to their beds. By the time he reached the third floor, Stephen's face glowed with each new discovery. By the time he reached the fifth floor, Stephen giggled every time he deducted points.

On the sixth floor, Severus paused outside an empty classroom. On the other side of the door, someone was mumbling in a vaguely familiar voice. Stephen caught his eye and grinned as he put his hand on the door. Snape pushed the door open with a bang, strode in with his cloak swirling behind him, and delivered his trademark glare.

"Ten points fum Huffpuff!" crowed Stephen.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a student; it was Sibyll Trelawney. The Divination teacher was curled in a corner with a bottle of cooking sherry, mumbling to herself.

Severus's instincts told him he should just leave, close the door behind him, and pretend he hadn't entered the room at all. Unfortunately, his dramatic entrance--and Stephen's loud pronouncement--could not be undone. He wondered how the little guy had known that Sibyll had been a Hufflepuff.

Trelawney rose from the floor, brandishing an empty bottle like a weapon. "You!" she shrieked, pointing the bottle at him accusingly. "You vile, evil, disgusting, uncouth creature! You dare disturb my meditations?"

Her glasses had slipped down, giving Severus a clear view of the malicious fire that burned in her eyes. "And you have the Granger boy with you too. No doubt his blind mother wants you to teach him how useless divination is. Amazing that she would trust a tarnished cretin like you with her innocent child! Isn't it bad enough that the Ministry let you take a child of your own? Not that she's innocent; breeding runs true, as they say, and she's already responsible for the death of one innocent..."

Snape's intention had been to back out of the classroom, slam the door in Sibyll's face, and take off down the corridor at top speed. However, as soon as she had begun laying into Hermione, he stood rooted to the spot, paralyzed by anger. When she began questioning Carly's innocence, he lost control. He could think of no words with which to defend his daughter's honor; instead, he stood frozen, clutching Stephen tightly, as his instinctive magic took over.

Raw power crackled out from his body; the desks and chairs flew to the side of the room and crashed against the walls. Trelawney gasped in horror, her invective cut short, and backed against the wall. Snape towered before her, glowing with a halo of magic, his long hair blowing in an invisible wind. Majestic and solemn, holding Stephen in his arms, he looked not like an evil Death Eater, or even the Bat of the Dungeons; he appeared before her as an angel, the guardian angel of the children.

"Speak no ill of Severus," said a loud voice. It was only the Bloody Baron who descended from the ceiling, but Trelawney would not have been surprised if God Himself had come down to speak on the Potion master's behalf. "He has made mistakes in his life, 'tis true, but he has also acknowledged his sins and his faults and seeks to rectify them. Can ye say the same for yourself, Sibyll Trelawney?"

A sudden burst of magic flung the Divination teacher from the room; she rose to her feet unsteadily, then fluttered down the hall without a word, escaping back to the comfort of the North Tower. Severus groaned, unconscious of everything around him. He did not hear the Bloody Baron calling for the house-elves. When Dobby took Stephen from his arms, he did not notice at all. He collapsed to the ground soon after; ten house-elves levitated him gently onto a stretcher, which they carried through the secret passages of the school. He was levitated into his bed, and twenty small hands tucked the covers in gently around him.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Hermione opened her eyes with a groan. Her back seemed permanently crooked to the left, and her left arm ached more than she thought possible. *Next time*, she thought, *I'll use some pillows to prop Carly up. If there is a next time. I sincerely hope not.*

She blinked at the bright sunlight, then looked up at the monitoring runes on the wall. Carly's vital signs had stabilized. She exhaled sharply, trying to suppress the tears of relief that were flooding into her eyes.

"Mmmm... Aaaa..."

"Carly?"

"Mmmm... Aaaa..."

"Sweet Merlin, can you talk now?"

Not really. But I have a lot more control of my mouth and tongue now. Legilimency is a lot easier, anyway.

"How about your other muscles? Can you move them at all?" Hermione watched in awe as Carly's fingers twitched, followed by her toes.

It's hard. I don't know. I can feel them a lot better, though. Maybe with practice? Or maybe not, I don't know. I like the extra sensation, though.

Hermione reached up to wipe the tears, which were cascading freely down her face. "Do you mind waiting for breakfast, honey? I want to go tell Severus."

For the first time in her short lifetime, Carly actually grinned.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Severus woke, squinting in the dim light. *Where am I? How did I end up in bed?* He remembered something happening, something with Trelawney...

"Severus, you're awake. I wasn't sure if you'd wake at all," Minerva choked out through her sobs.

"What happened?" Looking around, he spotted the Bloody Baron floating up near the canopy of his four-poster. "You were there; tell me what happened!"

"Evidently," said Minerva slowly, "what happened was the same thing that happened to Lily Potter. And my mother."

"Your mother?" Severus had never really thought about Minerva's family before. He'd met her Muggle husband at staff parties, of course--Malcolm had a knack for delivering witty one-liners with a perfectly straight face--but he'd never thought about her mother or father. Minerva was a pure-blood witch who wasn't all that old; what had happened to her parents?

"She was here, at Hogwarts, when it happened. You know that Grindelwald came here, right? He was after my father, of course, but when he spotted my mum taking me for a walk, he couldn't resist. There's some power a woman calls upon when her child is in danger, something elemental and uncontrollable. She stopped Grindelwald in his tracks, knocked him out cold for ten minutes. That was enough time for Daddy to kill the man once and for all, but the strain of all that power passing through Mum killed her."

Severus stared at the Headmistress, slack-jawed. All the pieces fell into place; he was amazed that he'd never seen it before. Those cold blue eyes of hers--they were the same color as her father's. Without the customary twinkle, he'd never noticed the resemblance. The nose was the same, too, but a little straighter; for, unlike her father's, it had never been broken. Those two had always been so close: the winks, the casual touches, the inside jokes. He'd always thought that maybe they were lovers.

"And you forgave me?" To Minerva, it sounded at first like a non-sequitur: Snape hadn't had anything at all to do with her mother's death. But then, suddenly, she realized that he'd made the connection she'd kept secret for so long.

"You didn't murder him, Severus. It was a mercy killing. I know how much he suffered that last year of his life. I know you still blame yourself, but you shouldn't. It was what he wanted."

Snape shook his head solemnly. "I still don't understand what happened last night. I'm not a mother. Stephen's not even my child."

The Bloody Baron floated down and arranged himself in a sitting position next to the bed. "'Twas thought in my day that having children sapped your strength. 'Tis still thought so today, in some circles. Hogwash, I say. I knew even back then that the more children ye had, the more powerful ye would become. But I forgot the most important thing of all." He broke off suddenly, staring off into space.

"Which is?" Severus interrupted sharply.

"'Tisn't the number of children ye have, 'tis the love ye have for each of them. If only I had known that. They came, and I let them kill my children to spare my own life. Seven sons and three daughters I had, but not love enough to sacrifice myself for even one of them. It didn't save me in the end, either," he added morosely, tapping his finger on the bloody hole on his left temple. "This blood is mine. The rest--the rest belongs to my children. I did not save them. And so I stay here now and for all eternity, protecting the children of others."

Severus looked at the silvery blood dripping from the arms, torso, and legs of the ghostly figure and shuddered in revulsion. "But Stephen is not my child," he repeated firmly.

"Ye love him as your own, man. That is enough. And now, I must away: your little one will return shortly."

"I must find Sarah now, so I'll be leaving as well," said McGonagall gruffly. "Best wishes to you, Severus. I'm sure the house-elves will care for you adequately." She exited the room just as Hermione stepped in with Carly in her arms.

"Severus?"

The Potions master leaped out of bed, ignoring the dizziness that swept over him, and rushed over to see his daughter.

Carly looked up at him and smiled. Then she said the word that she'd been practicing during the long walk to Hogwarts: "Da!"

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Author's Notes: Whew! My longest chapter so far! This chapter and the next one are definitely the hardest to write.

Carly is a Legilimens--she can read people's minds and otherwise get into their heads. She can't handle Occlumency yet, though. We will be hearing a bit more about Carly's background in the future, though JuneW has a good idea of what happened.

And yes, I do write fluff. My life is angsty and dramatic enough as is; I don't need to include more of that junk in my writing! Snape has seemed a bit too sweet in previous chapters, but that's because we always see him with Carly. Hopefully this chapter shows that he's still a bastard around everyone else.

Troublemakers

Chapter 7 of 10

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever. Response to the Adoption Act Challenge on WIKTT.

Chapter Seven

Troublemakers

Early Saturday morning, Hermione was startled by a knock on her door. It was Severus holding Carly.

"What are you doing here? I was going to go down to Hogwarts after breakfast."

"Don't bother," he said curtly. "We're working here today."

It had been a couple of weeks since the administration of the Magic Elixir (they still hadn't come up with a better name), but Hermione was still surprised by the fact that Carly could giggle.

"What happened?" she asked curiously.

"Coffee first," said Severus harshly.

Hermione grabbed a mug out of the cupboard. "Lucky for you, I just brewed some."

The Potions master drank a sip of the dark brew and exhaled sharply. "Strong stuff there! Don't apologize; I need all the caffeine I can get. It seems Christopher Lupin is an early riser--"

"Christopher? What's he doing at Hogwarts?"

"Visiting Hagrid. You know how Hagrid is."

Hermione nodded. The half-giant had been elated upon hearing of the Adoption Act and then was crushed to learn that he wasn't considered an eligible parent.

"He was having a sleepover at Hagrid's, evidently, and he woke up before Hagrid did. And somehow he got it in his head that it would be fun to ride a Blast-Ended Skrewt."

"Oh, my word! Is he okay?"

"As good as ever, I imagine. I don't think anything could hurt that child. He didn't just ride it; he harnessed it somehow and directed it up the front steps and into the Entrance Hall..."

And it was the mother Skrewt, too, so all its babies were following it, added Carly with a chuckle.

"The Great Hall was still locked for the night, so he started up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower."

Enter Sarah McGonagall! Carly's little smirk was the closest she could come to a real smile.

"Ah, yes, Sarah McGonagall. I don't believe Minerva knew what that child was capable of when she selected her. That girl would give the Weasley twins a run for their money. She didn't know what Mr. Lupin was up to, of course; she was up early for her own nefarious reason. Pranking her adoptive mother."

At this point Hermione abandoned her half-hearted attempts at eating breakfast and snickered.

"No one's sure what she actually meant to do. All we know is that Minerva heard a Skrewt blast, opened her door, and found Sarah outside holding a bouquet of roses, a bucket of pitch, and some hippogriff dung. And she was saying, 'Hurry up, Peeves!' But Peeves saw that they were caught, so he took off down the hall--"

And decided to cause a Skrewt stampede! interjected Carly.

"To make a long story short, the students are barricaded in their common rooms while Hagrid and Minerva try to round up the Skrewts. I really didn't think it would be a good day for you and Stephen to come visit."

Hermione wiped the tears of mirth from her eyes. "Well, there aren't any house-elves here to watch the children. But we can manage for a day, can't we?"

Severus frowned at his now-empty coffee cup. "I hadn't thought of that. But anything the children cook up will be better than herds of Blast-Ended Skrewts, right?"

"True enough," remarked Hermione before she resumed shoveling her porridge into her mouth in a methodical fashion.

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Severus Snape regarded the small dishes of finely minced ingredients before him. "Comfrey, sage, wolfsbane..."

"Dice the valerian root next," ordered Hermione, who was meticulously slicing mermaid scales into paper-thin wafers.

"I knew that," he snapped.

"Uh huh, right," mumbled Hermione sarcastically.

"Bossy Know-It-All."

"Bitter bastard."

"Bushy-haired bitch."

"Insecure bat."

"Insecure? That's a new one," commented Severus mildly, eying the last slice of valerian root, which was just a hair too thin. He tossed it to the side, rotated the remaining slices ninety degrees, and resumed his methodical slicing. The personal insults had become a form of recreation for the two of them; they much preferred the verbal sparring of a debate, but it was dangerous to engage in such talk while brewing.

"I don't know," said Hermione with a frown, pushing the mermaid scales aside. "It's far too quiet in the sitting room. I have a feeling they're getting in trouble."

"Maybe they're asleep?" inquired Severus hopefully. "It's three o'clock, just about nap time."

They regarded one another for a moment before proclaiming, in unison, "*Legilimens!*"

Carly and Stephen were certainly capable of communicating with each other via Legilimency. However, neither of them had learned yet how to focus their thought broadcasts. Anyone even remotely capable of Legilimency themselves could listen in to the conversation without even making eye contact. And so Severus and Hermione stopped just inside the door to the hall and "listened."

How close am I?

Stretch up another inch or so.

Yeah, I've got it!

Good job, Stephen. Almost there.

These books are sticking out so much that I can't see what I'm doing. How close is my hand to the top?

I can't see. Hold on a moment; let me change perspective here...

There was a loud thump from the direction of the sitting room. Snape flung the door open and ran down the hall, followed closely by Hermione.

Carly was lying on the sitting room floor. Her legs were lying limply, as usual, but she was using her arms to pull herself over the floor. Stephen was perched on one of the tall bookshelves: his feet were planted on the fourth shelf, one hand was holding on tightly to the fifth shelf, and his other hand was waving up around some bulky books, trying to locate the very top of the piece of furniture.

Both adults stood paralyzed for a while, trying to take in the implications of the scene before them. Carly broke the ice with a pleased, "Hi, Da!" Immediately Severus rushed to his daughter, swooped her up in his arms, and gave her a big hug.

"Working here is much better than herds of Blast-Ended Skrewts. Sure," snarled Hermione sarcastically, snatching her son off of the bookshelf.

"They were much better than the Skrewts. If you'd been at Hogwarts, you'd agree," protested Severus, tickling Carly's tummy. "Your arm control is getting very good, young lady. Nonetheless, next time, please practice under controlled conditions."

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That evening, the four of them sat around Hermione's kitchen table, devouring shepherd's pie.

Do you think it's safe to return to Hogwarts yet? Carly might be able to speak out loud nowadays, but she still resorted to Legilimency during mealtime.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," joked Hermione. "I imagine Minerva has everything under control by now."

Severus was staring out the window, oblivious to the conversation. His large, crooked nose twitched, and his forehead crinkled. "You didn't leave the oven on, did you, Hermione?"

"Of course not," she replied, shooting a glance at the oven knob to make sure her memory was correct.

"And no fire in the hearth, correct?"

Hermione sniffed cautiously and detected a faint smell of smoke. Leaping from her seat, she strode quickly around the house, searching for the source of the elusive smell. "I think it's coming from outside," she said, stopping next to the open sitting room window.

"Maybe the Blast-ended Skrewts escaped and set fire to the Forbidden Forest? I think we should go outside and take a look."

"I come too!" squealed Stephen, running to fetch his shoes.

When they got out onto High Street, the source of the smoke became obvious. A block of flats directly behind the Three Broomsticks was ablaze. Frantic residents were casting *Aguamenti* spells in an attempt to extinguish the flames. Sparks had jumped over to adjacent buildings--the pub, the post office, and Zonko's--and several wizards and witches were trying to extinguish the smaller fires before they spread further. Severus thrust Carly into Hermione's arms and ran off, wand drawn, to join the firefighters.

Stephen watched, gleefully, as the burning dwelling collapsed in a shower of sparks. "Do it again!" he exclaimed, jumping up and down in excitement.

When the fire was mostly extinguished, Hermione approached an exhausted and bedraggled Severus Snape. Still holding Carly, she used her free hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Here he is! I found the culprit!" A witch dressed in slightly scorched purple robes was dragging a black-haired boy behind her. The grubby child had a mahogany wand clutched firmly in his grasp. "He was doing lots of *Incendio* Spells; I saw him! He was standing right in the middle of the building, shooting fire everywhere! He's the one who did all this!"

Percy Weasley stepped forward. "So that's what happened to my wand. Edward Weasley! What on earth did you think you were doing?"

"I'm Edward Cathcart. Edward Cathcart, do you hear me? I told you that I wouldn't live in your stinking flat any longer, and now there's no way that I can!"

A tear ran down Percy's cheek. "But you could have died," he whispered.

"Would it have really mattered if I had?" growled the dark-haired child.

Percy threw his arms around his son and sobbed. "It would have mattered to me. You're still my boy, even if we have to sleep in a rubbish bin."

"Percy Ignatius Weasley!" snapped a plump, red-haired woman, who was pushing her way through the crowd. "I will not have any of my children sleeping in rubbish bins, do you hear me? Nor grandchildren, either," she remarked sternly, affixing Edward under her indignant glare.

Her lecture was interrupted by a loud cheep that seemed to be emanating from her apron pocket. "Oh, goodness me," she said, frowning, "I thought I'd put all the chickies back with Fluffers, but it looks like I've missed one." She pulled a little ball of fluff out of the pocket and showed it to the quivering child before her. "Want to help me feed my chickens? Fluffers just hatched a brood today. And I'll give you a bit of supper when we're done. There's trifle for pudding tonight. Percy, you will come home as soon as you've finished cleaning up this mess."

The lanky redhead nodded meekly at his mother's demand, then turned to start discussing reparations with the owner of his building. Molly walked down the street with her newly-discovered grandchild, muttering under her breath, "And if you'd kept in touch with Penelope, you'd know that she's a therapist at St. Mungo's now. Heaven only knows what this little treasure has been through..."

"I don't suppose you have any alcohol at home, do you?" sighed Snape. "Minerva doesn't allow me to keep any at the school, and I don't think either of the pubs is open." Looking around, Hermione noticed both Madame Rosmerta and the bartender from the Hog's Head up on the roof of the Three Broomsticks, putting out glowing embers and casting Reparo Spells on the thatch.

"I do, actually. Scotch okay?"

"Perfect," sighed the Potions Master.

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When the clock struck nine, the children were both asleep in cots in Stephen's bedroom, and Hermione and Severus were snuggled up together on the sofa, both snoozing. Severus opened his eyes open as the last chime sounded.

"Wake up, Hermione. You need to get to bed."

"I'm afraid to," she mumbled blearily. "Everything keeps getting worse and worse. Who's to say what will happen if I fall asleep?"

"You're already asleep," he whispered softly. "Would it make you feel better if I stayed here on the couch?"

"That would help," she said with a sigh as she struggled to pull herself to her feet *But what I'd really like is to have you stay with me, holding me like you just were. Because I've never felt so comfortable in my life.*

Severus helped her walk to bed and tucked her in. "Sweet dreams, Hermione. Tomorrow will be better." She was already asleep before he finished saying the words. She didn't notice when he leaned down and kissed her gently on the forehead.

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Author's Notes: Sorry for the huge delay. The completed fic has actually been available on Fanfiction.net for some time, but it's only in the last few weeks that I've had time to edit this to TPP standards. Thanks to SoulBound for being a quick & efficient beta!

RL is still being a beast, but I'm going to try and finish posting the remaining chapters as quickly as possible.

Coming next: Chapter Eight: Celebrations. Things go well for our favorite couple. After all, nothing could be worse than this last chapter, right?

Celebrations

Chapter 8 of 10

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever.

Chapter Eight

Celebrations

Hermione lowered the flame beneath the cauldron and put away her wand with a sigh. The potion would need to simmer for two hours now; she could take a little break. Severus had already retired to one of the armchairs in the corner to read *Ars Alchemica*. He looked up as she collapsed into the chair next to his.

"I forgot to tell you. Miss Weasley--Ginny, I mean--told me during NEWTs class that Edward is in therapy now."

"Firefighters everywhere are rejoicing," Hermione giggled. "Poor Percy is rather clueless, isn't he? Why didn't Molly speak up sooner?"

"They were still estranged, I believe. He never admitted that he was wrong, and he refused to have anything to do with his family."

"I have trouble feeling sorry for Edward," she continued. "I know he's been through a lot, but that's no excuse for the tricks he got up to. Mrs. Crowley at the Apothecary has been telling me stories that you wouldn't believe."

"Hmmpf," grunted Snape, burying himself in his potions journal again. Hermione got up and wandered off to see what Dobby was up to; his methods of babysitting could be rather unorthodox at times.

After lunch, Severus removed a sample of elixir from the cauldron and eyed it cautiously. "It is the predicted color," he said cautiously.

Hermione was standing by with vials of blood from different werewolves. Wordlessly, she took the beaker from her partner and began transferring aliquots of potion into each with a pipette. She stared at the vials for ten minutes, then looked at Severus, who had been unnaturally quiet. "I think this batch has done it," she muttered unsteadily.

"I daresay you are right, Miss Granger," he replied.

"Dare we take the risk?"

Frowning, the Potions master considered for a moment. "Let's leave the decision to Remus, shall we? Just in time, too--the full moon is tonight."

She grinned suddenly, realizing the implications. "Let me give Mrs. Weasley a call--see if she'll babysit. Dobby is off tonight," she added by way of explanation since Severus seemed alarmed at having anyone else watch Carly.

"All right. I'll notify Remus. Shall we use the old dungeon, then?"

"Yes, definitely! I'll meet you there in oh, say, an hour?"

A nod was her only reply. Severus Snape was far too dignified to run in public, or he would have; instead, he set off at a brisk pace towards Hogsmeade.

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Deep in the bowels of Hogwarts castle, there was a block of cells where prisoners were once kept. Students referred to Slytherin and the Potions classroom as "the dungeons," but those domains were far more hospitable than the cold, dank hallway where Hermione met Severus and Remus that afternoon.

"You have the key?" she asked, not even bothering to say hello. Severus waved a piece of metal in the air.

"Can we just get on with this?" Remus pleaded. "I'm a little, well, nervous. Please?"

Hermione put on her best mediwitch impersonation. "Drink this all up, dearie; that's a good lad."

Remus sniffed cautiously at the vial and frowned. "Doesn't smell too great," he snarled.

"Every last drop," Hermione ordered imperiously. "Otherwise it may not take."

The werewolf lifted it to his lips with one hand, making a show of plugging his nose with the other.

"Oh, get on with it already," growled Severus impatiently.

Remus gulped the concoction and forced himself to swallow. "Yuck! I think I'm going to..."

"Don't you dare!" Severus backed away from the man, who looked suspiciously like he was going to vomit.

"That's foul," Lupin admitted. "Am I allowed to rinse out my mouth or eat something?"

"Sorry, no. We're not sure how it might interact with food. Even diluting it with water might not be such a great idea."

"Get in the cell, Lupin," ordered Snape, brandishing the key. He grinned evilly. "Winky's arranged for a chamber pot, so you should be fine until morning."

Remus groaned, but meekly consented to being locked in.

Severus thought it would be fun to eat dinner in front of his former classmate, taunting him with a feast he couldn't take part in, but Hermione convinced him to eat in the Great Hall, as always. After supper, they went back to the dungeons, where they watched the clock and the former professor.

"Nine fifteen. Moonrise," whispered Hermione reverently, basking in the sight of Remus sitting unchanged before her.

"Normally I feel the moon tugging at me long before the change happens, but I don't feel anything right now!" Lupin exclaimed.

"Be patient. It may wear off," Severus added cautiously.

By one o'clock in the morning, they were sure that it wouldn't. "I'm far away from the moon here, though," Remus commented.

"True," agreed Severus. "The students will be in bed now; would you like to go out to the grounds?"

Under the light of the full moon, Severus and Hermione watched Remus Lupin dancing a jig on the front lawn. "Whee!" he shouted as he frolicked around. "I'm free! Hey, is the Leaky Cauldron still open? Who cares? I'm going to go find out. Someone, somewhere, will sell me a celebratory drink!" He took off, full speed, towards the gates.

"Despite my qualms about Mr. Lupin's character, I believe he is essentially correct," Snape said slowly. "A drink is in order. I believe the Three Broomsticks is closer, however. Would you care to join me?"

"The children--"

"Are with Mrs. Weasley, who expects to keep them for the whole night."

"I forgot," Hermione said bashfully.

"Now you remember. Shall we?" She took his proffered arm and walked slowly with him towards the village.

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Two hours later, they stumbled through the door of Hermione's little cottage.

"You are the most beauuuutiful woman in the world," Severus slurred. "Come to bed with me; be my witch tonight."

Hermione did not seem to notice that he was having difficulty speaking clearly. "Your voice is just so sexy, you know that?" she mumbled. "I can't wait to get into your pants, you hot man, you." She led him into her bedroom and began kissing him clumsily but passionately. He tossed her on the bed and lay down next to her.

Nuzzling her neck gently, he slipped his hands under her shirt. With gasps of pleasure, he fondled her lace-covered breasts. His left hand wandered around to her back and began fumbling with the clasp of her bra. His efforts became weaker and weaker, and then, amazingly, his hands slumped to the bed, and he began to snore.

"Severus, darling, wake up," she murmured. "I want you so badly." She wanted to wake him, but she didn't seem to have the energy to do much more than caress him. "You are so hot, did you know that?" Her hand wandered up and down his back, slower and slower, until she too dozed off.

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Author's Notes: Thanks to SoulBound, who betas faster than I can upload.

Up Next: Independent Researchers. The consequences of the night before catch up with Hermione and Severus.

Independent Researchers

Chapter 9 of 10

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever. Response to the Adoption Act Challenge on WIKTT.

Chapter Nine

Independent Researchers

The sun was just too bright for a Sunday morning. Hermione blinked slowly, rolled over in bed, and promptly bumped into... Severus Snape? She sat up quickly, surprised. The dark man in her bed did not stir at the sudden movement; rather, he began to snore gently.

Hermione forced her thinking processes to function despite the throbbing ache that pounded through her head. He was still dressed--she was still fully dressed--they hadn't had done anything last night. Good.

Or was it? There was a part of her that really wouldn't mind seeing him undressed. "Wouldn't mind? Not quite the words I'd use. I think 'desperate' might be a more apt term," she mumbled to herself as she stumbled out into the sitting room. A flick of her wand in the direction of the kitchen and a mug bounced down onto the counter while the coffee maker gurgled to life.

"Merlin's beard, Granger, you look like shit," sneered a familiar aristocratic voice.

Spinning around, she saw Draco Malfoy sitting in her favorite chair.

"What are you doing here, Malfoy? How'd you get in my house?"

"You didn't bother to close the door last night, much less lock or ward it."

"I don't know what you want, Malfoy, but whatever it is can wait until I've had some coffee. Preferably the whole pot."

He smirked at her but nodded. She shuffled into the kitchen where she did, indeed, down the entire pot of coffee, after which she ran like crazy for the loo. As she washed her hands afterwards, she looked at her reflection in the mirror and laughed. She could pass for Medusa with her hair in its present state--no wonder Malfoy was so amused!

After combing out the worst of the tangles, she returned to the sitting room to greet her unwanted visitor.

"So what do you want?"

"Well, you might not believe this, but I was at the Leaky Cauldron last night, and who did I see but a former professor of ours? He had a bottle of Ogden's in one hand, and he was dancing a jig on one of the tables! When Tom told him to get down, he said it was the full moon, and he was still human; why shouldn't he celebrate?"

"Why should you care that the cure worked? There's never been any love lost between you and Remus," Hermione snapped.

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "Granger, Granger, where do you think my family gets its fortune from?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've always assumed it was inherited."

He grinned. "At least you didn't say 'stolen from Death Eater victims' or something like that."

"Are you kidding? I doubt your father would have touched anything having to do with Muggles."

"Touché, Granger. No, seriously, we own several companies. Some are overseas, so you wouldn't have heard of them. But others are right here in the good ol' UK. The one that concerns you is Malfoy Medicinals."

"Never heard of it," she said promptly.

"Never read the labels on the bottles in the Hospital Wing?"

"No. I thought Severus, er, Snape brewed Pomfrey's elixirs."

"The ones whose recipes are public domain, yes. But there are others for which the recipe is still under patent. Skele-Gro, for example." Reaching down, he pulled a thick catalog--containing the complete Malfoy Medicinals line--from a bag Hermione hadn't noticed before. Thumbing through, she was surprised to see how many medicinal potions were the intellectual property of the Malfoy family.

"Got any more coffee, Granger? I've been up all night doing research." She nodded and flicked her wand at the coffee maker again, not bothering to look up from the catalog.

"No Wolfsbane, Malfoy?"

"Nope. That one is too hard for our flunkies to make. Otherwise we would have bought the recipe, I'm sure. But we don't need the recipe--not now, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Slow this morning, aren't we, Granger? Because you and Snape just came up with a cure for lycanthropy, dol! Hold on; let me get my coffee. Want more?"

Hermione waited until the blond Slytherin returned from the kitchen with two steaming mugs before speaking up again.

"The cure is even more difficult to brew than Wolfsbane."

"Ah, but that's fixable. See, Wolfsbane had to be manufactured in large quantities--enough for every werewolf, every month. There weren't enough Potions masters in the world to handle that. But the cure--that's a one time thing. That we can handle. Gotta come up with a better name than 'the cure,' by the way--it's just not marketable."

She blinked at him. "How much are you willing to pay?"

"For the patent rights? Hold on..." He pulled out a parchment and glanced at some figures. "Maybe two hundred thousand Galleons. And if you and Snape contract with us to manufacture the potion, maybe a hundred Galleons a dose."

"Couldn't we just sell it ourselves?"

"You want to be a worldwide saleswoman, Granger?"

She shook her head. "But still--no, hold on. How many werewolves are there worldwide?"

"Ten thousand, six hundred and twenty two. No, hold on--" He consulted the parchment in front of him. "Ten thousand, two hundred and sixty two."

"Good grief. With that small of a market and the high consulting and patent fees--how in the world do you expect to make a profit? Werewolves are usually quite poor--"

"They are also a menace to society, and, as such, governments will be quite pleased to pay for the cure." Snape's voice was a bit raspy. "Get me some coffee, Hermione. I don't suppose you have any hangover remedy in this house of yours?"

"If I had, I would have used it by now."

Draco reached into his bag and pulled out two small bottles. "On the house." As the two bleary-eyed researchers downed the potion, he tossed a roll of parchment on the table. "Here's a contract. Look it over. I'll be back tonight at dinner time."

Hermione didn't notice the door closing behind Malfoy. She was fixated on the wording of the contract.

"Two hundred thousand Galleons..." whispered Snape softly.

"One million two hundred thousand," she amended. "If we brew it for them, anyway."

"I could be an independent researcher. No more silly elixirs for Poppy. No more dunderheads to teach." His face was glowing, his voice suffused with energy.

"You could probably buy something a bit better than this lousy cottage with your share."

"Yes, of course. A real house with a huge Potions lab in the dungeons... far away from prying eyes.... I would do all my ordering by owl, never have to talk to anyone unless..." He broke off suddenly and looked shyly into Hermione's eyes. "Hermione--are we still going to work together?"

"You wouldn't have to, if you didn't want to," she said with a sigh.

"I do want to," he said. "Very much. Besides, Carly would kill me if she couldn't see you anymore. And I was wondering, well--" He broke off suddenly, staring off into space.

Without thinking, Hermione reached up and brushed a strand of hair out of his face. "You were wondering what?"

He turned back to look at her. "Well, it would be more convenient if we lived near each other, and I was just thinking that if the house was big enough, well--there might be room for two of us? You in one side and me in the other?"

"I would love that, Severus. You don't mind?"

He shook his head solemnly, and she realized with a start that her hand was still stroking his hair. His eyes were fixed on her; his hands were on her waist, drawing her near. He leaned down gracefully and pressed his lips to hers.

She was lost in his kiss. She'd kissed others before, but she'd never realized how much tenderness and emotion could be wrapped into a simple gesture. When, at last, they came up for air, she looked at him shyly and said, "On second thought, the house wouldn't have to be very big at all."

He pulled her towards him with a growl and didn't give her a reason to say anything else for over an hour.

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Author's Notes: Many thanks to SoulBound for doing beta duty.

Just the epilogue left: we get to see what becomes of Severus and Hermione as the years pass.

Epilogue

Chapter 10 of 10

All eligible witches and wizards are required to adopt a child. Forced to make hasty decisions, several people choose children who will change their outlook on life forever. Response to the Adoption Act Challenge on WIKTT.

Chapter Ten

Epilogue

In his eagerness to exercise his newfound financial independence, Severus Snape had forgotten one crucial factor: his parole required him to stay at Hogwarts. It took another year of appeals--as well as testimony from Remus Lupin, Minerva McGonagall, and Harry Potter, among others--to release him from that bondage.

On the day he was finally cleared of all charges, he and Hermione had been married for exactly six months. They'd chosen the Winter Solstice for their wedding to symbolize the fact that, though life had been dark, it would only get brighter. And it did.

Hermione had known that her husband's appeal would be granted; Percy Weasley had leaked her the information a week in advance. While Severus hunched over end-of-term exams, she'd taken Carly and Stephen out house hunting.

When, at the end of the hearing, he'd been given the papers that signified his freedom, she'd never seen him glow so brightly. Of course, that record was shattered fifteen minutes later when she Apparated him to the aging Tudor estate she'd bought for a song. It would need a bit more fixing, but in time it would be a spacious and stately manor.

On a bright summer morning four years later, Ron Weasley Apparated just outside the boundaries of the Snape estate. The gates swung open as he approached, and he began the long, pleasant walk to the front door.

Ron had been quite successful in both his Quidditch career and the investment ventures that he'd dabbled in on the side. He had a large house, too, but it was nothing like this. Something was different--what, he wasn't sure.

His former professor opened the door. "I was unaware that you would be arriving early, Mr. Weasley."

"Hermione wanted me to help set up for the party. Luna and the kids will arrive later."

"Well, carry on." Severus indicated the rear of the house with a toss of his head. "She knows where to find me if I'm needed." He turned and went down a staircase without another word.

Ron snorted. The Bat still preferred dungeons, it seemed. He meandered into the kitchen, where Dobby was putting the finishing touches on a large cake. "Missus is decorating the verandah," the diminutive creature squeaked.

"Thanks, Dobby. It smells great by the way. I don't suppose..."

Dobby grinned. He was quite familiar with the habits of the red-haired wizard. "I be making an appetizer cake just for you, Mr. Ron." He waved one green arm in the direction of the sideboard, where there was a miniature version of the culinary masterpiece.

"Ron! There you are!" Hermione bustled into the kitchen with an armful of streamers. The redhead looked up from the half-finished plate and mumbled something through a mouthful of cake.

"Eliza is dying of impatience. Can you finish that later? I'm about done with the decorations, but the enchanted maze hasn't been started yet. When is Luna coming?"

"Just before noon. Not nearly soon enough for Anna--she's been up since the crack of dawn."

Eliza Snape and Anna Weasley were the same age--to the very hour. At the tender age of four, they were already "bestest" friends and would not dream of having separate birthday parties.

It was while Ron was putting faerie enchantments on the privet bushes that he realized why the Snape household was so different than his own: it was quiet. His own home was a riot of noise--Anna was a chatterbox; Arthur was constantly tearing things apart to see how they worked; and the twins, just past a year old, were always walking around, making a mess, and screaming just for the heck of it. Fawn and Alan, the two adoptees, were off at Hogwarts most of the year, which was the only reason his home was even halfway sane.

Here, in Hermione's house, there was never even a whisper until his own children showed up. It was unnaturally quiet. He looked out across the lawn. Carly was zooming around in her enchanted chair, and Stephen and Eliza and even little Toby were playing some sort of running game--hide and seek, perhaps. In the Weasley home, such a game would have been accompanied by giggles, if not shrieks of laughter. Yet not one of the Snape children uttered so much as a snicker.

"Don't your children ever speak?"

Hermione grinned. "They're chattering like mad, Ron. Learn Legilimency, why don't you?"

Flushing bright red, Ron stammered, "They... they can read my thoughts?" He tried quickly to shove thoughts of his morning activities with Luna to the back of his mind.

"Oh, grow up, Ron. They aren't interested in adults. But if you want to be safe... why, you could learn Occlumency, too. I've been telling you to do so for years."

At that moment, Eliza ran up to him. "Hi, Unca Ron! I saw your name in Hogwarts, a History last night!"

This solemn pronouncement caused the redhead to chuckle hysterically. When, at last, he'd finally calmed down, he managed to choke out these words: "Hermione, I am terribly glad that I am not your child."

"I'm glad I'm not her child, too," deadpanned Severus, who suddenly appeared behind his wife. "You can't have much fun with your own mother."

Ron groaned, "Spare me the thought."

Pulling his wife close, Severus whispered, "Brewing complete." She saw the subtle twinkle in his dark eyes; the rest of his face remained completely sober.

She thought ahead to the Polyjuice potion that would soon be slipped into Ron's drink and suppressed a giggle. Being married to a Potions master was never dull.

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And that's where I would end the story, Dear Readers. However, I know that, were I to do so, I would receive about 1,000 reviews begging me to tell you what happened to the Snapes. Here is a brief summary of what happened to each member of that illustrious family.

Carly went to Hogwarts that fall, was sorted into Ravenclaw, and became an academic superstar just like her mother. The elixir that Severus and Hermione had developed years earlier allowed her enough freedom of movement to write and control her wand movements, but not much else. It wasn't until the age of eighteen that she underwent the medical treatments that allowed her full use of her body. She went on to become a mediwitch specializing in degenerative diseases.

Stephen became Gryffindor's star chaser a few years later. He did well in school (though never so well as Carly--he was too busy partying to study) and went into Auror training fresh out of Hogwarts. His training in Legilimency and Occlumency gave him an edge over his adversaries.

Eliza was the first Snape to be sorted into Slytherin. Her grades were barely above average, and she took a menial desk job after finishing her NEWTs. Once out of school, however, she blossomed; within fifteen years, she became the Minister of Magic.

Toby was also sorted into Slytherin. When he graduated, he followed in his father's footsteps by completing an apprenticeship in Potions. Soon afterward, Ron Weasley, the new Headmaster of Hogwarts, called on him to be the new Potions master and Head of Slytherin House. His students swore that he could tell what they were thinking!

Severus and Hermione founded Snape Potions LLC, the premier distributor of medicinal elixirs in Britain. In time, they even bought out Malfoy Medicinals; they immediately hired Draco to take over management of the company so they could continue spending the bulk of their time on potions development and refinement.

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Author's Notes: Whew, I'm done! With all the RL writing I've been doing, I wasn't sure it would ever happen.

Thanks to SoulBound for all the comma help!