

# Vitae Explicare Memento

*by sapphire\_phoenix*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 12*

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Prologue

October 31, 1998

The second Voldemort War was over. The Dark Lord Voldemort, Tom Riddle, was gone.

Severus was too shocked to absorb this information, and he sank into the rocking chair in his daughter's nursery, the site of the Dark Lord's demise. It was the very chair his wife had sat in while she fed their baby a short while ago. She'd chosen it especially for the gliding feature; she insisted they get it from a Muggle shop. The smooth back and forth lulled Severus's rattling mind as he tried to piece together all that had happened.

The Marriage Law had passed. The law's champion, the Dark Lord, had made it clear what was to be expected of Severus, his most trusted minion and spy. He was a wizard over the age of thirty with at least one pure-blood parent, and thus, had been required to marry. What was more; Lord Voldemort had had a bride in mind for him already: the most trusted follower of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger.

When Severus had informed Albus Dumbledore, Voldemort's rival and nemesis, of the development, Dumbledore took the information with surprising grace.

Severus was immediately suspicious but did not inquire. Anything that Albus didn't tell him, he could earnestly say he did not know and, instead, divulge other, more important business.

The prospect of marriage had not thrilled Severus or his bride. For him, it was yet another manoeuvre he made to serve his purpose; in her mind and in her heart, she was making a sacrifice for the cause. It would become the most important sacrifice she could make.

Hermione Granger married Severus Snape on her eighteenth birthday.

They agreed to be as polite as possible and had eventually found some sexual compatibility. Three months after they were married, she became pregnant.

The pregnancy pleased Lord Voldemort greatly, and he informed Severus that he would be coming to collect the child shortly after it was born.

Severus quickly agreed, despite his desire to throttle the Dark Lord with his own two hands. When Severus had learned of the pregnancy, his grudging respect for his wife had burnt into complete adoration. His hatred for Voldemort grew exponentially at the thought of the Dark Lord near his family.

Regardless of that, Hermione was never informed of the Dark Lord's plans. Albus convinced Severus not to tell her, but to be prepared and to prepare Harry Potter.

What Severus did not know was that Hermione had also had a secret. She had never told her husband that before they had married, Albus had taken her aside and told her that if she felt anything *unusual* happen to come to him and only him.

Almost as soon as she had conceived the baby, she had felt her magic grow right along with the life inside of her. She went to Albus, and he smiled at her. He told her everything was in order, and she had nothing to worry about.

Of course, what neither Severus nor Hermione knew was that Albus also had a secret. What he had not told her was that she would be the element that helped Harry Potter win the war against Voldemort. Albus knew that the day Voldemort came to take baby Snape would be his last.

And so it happened.

It was the night that Severus was to expect Voldemort to collect his daughter. Harry Potter, whose mother had protected her infant son from Voldemort seventeen years earlier, stood under his father's invisibility cloak, waiting for the Dark Lord. He watched as Hermione nursed her daughter and put her to bed. Just as the child dozed to the tune of her mother's lullaby, they felt the wards drop, and after a few tense moments, the Dark Lord entered the nursery.

He demanded the infant from the young mother. She drew her wand and aimed it at the wizard's chest. He chuckled mirthlessly and began to approach the witch. With a silent command he disarmed her.

Lord Voldemort offered Hermione her life in exchange for that of her daughter. He said it with generosity, as if it was an act of kindness towards the desperate, trembling witch.

What he did not know was that she was not trembling in fear.

Hermione Snape stood quaking with unbridled magical powers. They were beginning to seep from her every pore. Fuelled by the love of a mother for her child, Hermione began to glow pure white. As she grew brighter, Voldemort began to weaken.

Never taking his eyes off the Dark Lord, Harry Potter cast the killing curse on the wretched wizard and watched his body fall. They would dismantle his body, drawing it apart, burning the pieces, and forbidding the soul from re-entering the world.

Finally Hermione seemed to burst in a great show of magical expulsion.

When Harry looked up to check on his long-time friend, she was not there. There was only a soft white light surrounding the baby in the cot.

Harry called her name before falling miserably to his knees, weeping for his friend who seemingly had ceased to exist.

Severus Snape, who had been waiting in his bedroom, burst through the door that joined the master bedroom to the nursery. He had heard none of the commotion through the door. He was shocked to see the body of the Dark Lord crumpled on the floor, Harry Potter weeping inconsolably by the cot, and his perfect daughter sleeping soundly.

"Where's Granger?" the wizard demanded. He did not see her corpse, and yet Harry wept as if she were dead.

"Gone.... She... burst into white light... when he threatened the baby... She crippled Voldemort... so I was able to kill him," Harry managed between his sobs.

By all logic, Hermione had died for her daughter, helping to defeat Voldemort. The war was over.

Dropping his head into his hands, Severus breathed deep. From the moment he'd learned of Hermione's pregnancy, she was no longer his partner on a mission, but his wife, the mother of his child, and he knew to his core that he would have die for them. Now, Hermione had died for them instead.

He couldn't believe it.

What was more; he was a free man, a widower with a daughter. Severus looked at the cot a few steps away. For the first time in his life, he had no idea what to do with himself.

## Chapter 1

### *Chapter 2 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

2003

In the brief time that they had been married, one of the few things that Severus was able to enjoy with his wife was their love of books. They had both spent time in the Muggle world, and they had divulged the great secrets of where their favourite book shops were.

Potter had the baby for the day, and Severus was relaxing, wandering among the stacks at one of Hermione's shops. He had been having an unshakeable feeling of nostalgia, which was how he found himself there on a warm Saturday afternoon.

As he ran his fingers over the spines, looking for something new, a head of bushy brown hair in his peripheral vision caught his attention. Turning, he looked at the young woman who possessed it.

It was none other than his late wife.

His heart leapt, and his blood ran cold. Shelving the book he had just pulled out, Severus wound a serpentine path toward his prey. He observed her from an adjacent row of books. She was drumming her fingers on the shelf, her hip cocked to one side as she balanced some books there.

From the way she scowled at the stacks, Severus could tell something was not right.

He moved to the other side of his row, checking her book selection without giving himself away. The books were all about cognition and memory.

*Curious.*

Severus took his browsing even closer to her, quietly excusing himself when his elbow brushed against hers. Their eyes met, and she smiled politely before moving a little bit away from him.

She hadn't recognised him, and Severus knew a face like his was hard to forget.

Based on the books she was holding, he could assume she was working on her memory. How like Hermione to turn to books. Then he noticed the section he was in. The beginning of the row was scientific psychology, but it bled into self-help books after a few shelves.

Giving another sideways glance to the woman, he saw her scowling critically at the back of a book as she tried to discern its worth. Severus couldn't help but curl his lip in derision. He heard her murmur something, possibly the words 'worthless tripe', before forcefully shelving it.

Severus let the side of his lip curl up. Of course, it was not the side of his mouth she could see. He turned his attention back to her. She was eyeing something on the top shelf, just out of her reach.

"May I?" Severus asked and lifted his hand in the general direction she was looking.

Startled out of her thoughts, she nodded and pointed to the book she wanted. She had stepped back to allow him to move into the area.

Severus knew this was his opportunity, and as he handed her the book, their eyes met. He infiltrated her mind and lingered a moment. There were memories of a cheap flat, some roommates, some university classes, and many doctors' offices.

There was not a trace of the Wizarding world, or any world in fact, until very recently. He wasn't surprised. There was a portion of her mind that was heavily occluded. It piqued his interest, but he knew better than to try to penetrate it in the middle of a Muggle bookshop.

Pulling away, he saw her blushing and realised that he must appear to be some sort of creep. No young woman wanted an ugly man twice her age to be gazing deeply into her eyes. He looked away dropping his chin, trying to look contrite.

"I apologise. That was inappropriate of me," Severus offered, hoping she wasn't about to flee from him.

The girl smiled and mumbled, "No problem," before looking at the book.

Severus excused himself and moved away from her quickly enough to make distance without looking as if he was fleeing. When he found a safe place, he reached into his pocket for the Galleon that he and Potter used to communicate when Potter was watching his daughter.

*Come.*

Severus then positioned himself where he could wait for Potter's entrance while keeping an eye on his prey in the meantime. It was just a few minutes before Potter walked through the door. In his arms was a little girl, and Severus smiled and walked to meet them.

Potter saw him immediately, and the boy couldn't hold a back a snort at Severus' black jeans, black boots, black T-shirt. Severus had heard it all before. He smiled instead and tickled the little girl in his arms.

His daughter, Aurora, well, Rori, was his absolute delight in life. She had his silky black hair, his complexion, and her lips were shaped like his, although fuller. The rest of her was all Hermione: curls and nose and bucked teeth already. She was stubborn and impertinent, just like her mother too.

"Good afternoon, darling. Did you miss your father?" he asked as she leaned out of Potter's arms and into his.

She hugged Severus tightly as Potter ran through the events of the day.

Severus knew he was just acting his part. The way he'd been summoned, Potter would want to know what they were doing there.

"Potter, I think there's something you'd like to see over in self-help," Severus said as he walked towards the children's books. He set Rori down and moved to where he could watch his daughter and still see what Potter would do.

Potter was a shit spy, walking directly over to where Severus had told him to go without so much as a second glance anywhere else. Upon seeing the young woman who was now squatting in front of the low shelves, Harry couldn't help but exclaim, "Hermione?"

The girl looked up, confused, and then looked around her. Severus watched it all, rolling his eyes when Potter stuck his foot in it.

Luckily, Harry caught himself quickly and fell right into being a cute but bumbling young man, or so Severus supposed. At least he didn't take after his arrogant arse of a father.

"Er, sorry...you look just like an old school mate of mine," Harry said as he wiped his hand on his jeans before extending it to her. "I'm, uhm, Harry Potter."

Severus thought it was strange to see him introduce himself to her again, but she clearly didn't remember. This made Severus all the more sure that something was amiss. To be so blocked as to forget her best friend, Hermione must be buried deep below the surface.

"Nice to meet you." The girl smiled again. It was the same polite, almost tight smile that Severus had received.

That too sounded alarms for Severus. It was one thing to be civil to someone like Severus. For a young woman to be merely civil in response to the attentions of a bloke her age was something entirely different.

As Potter moved away, she did not get up but moved back to her quest for books. Harry awkwardly excused himself. Again with the stealth of an elephant, he came to where Severus was watching Rori read in an oversized chair.

They shared a look, and Severus said, "Perhaps you would like to come for tea? I think I'll be inviting Albus as well."

Potter nodded his agreement to come to Severus's place later that afternoon. He ruffled Rori's hair and left the shop.

Severus held his position, now giving his daughter the lion's share of his attention, but they stayed long enough to see the woman finish her shopping and pay for her things.

He was going to have his work cut out for him.

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Over the next week, Severus spoke with Potter and Albus about what he'd seen, and they'd talked to Minerva and Lupin as well. Severus had even prodded a couple of contacts he had at St. Mungo's, but there was nothing pertinent to be learned.

Instead, every night after Rori was asleep, Severus would sit in the living room and brood. He knew every inch of Hermione's body, and that was certainly it. But whose brain was inside? What had happened?

Twice during the week, he'd found himself at the mantel over the fireplace stroking Hermione's wand on its stand. She smiled down at him and waved from a photo as he did. Looking at her, at her *wand* only made him more curious and unsettled. That was why he'd felt so compelled to go back to the shop, and the next Saturday found Severus there. He had to see her again, as unlikely and improbable as it would be. At the very least, he had to do some reconnaissance and figure out how to strike up a conversation with her.

The first of his concerns, tracking her down again, was impossibly easy to solve; she was there when he arrived. However, that was only the beginning of his problems. Luckily, there was a little tea room in the shop behind the occult section, and Severus quickly bought a novel and moved to sit with a cup of tea, a scone, and his book. He was ready for a long stakeout.

He knew she had not left while he'd pulled himself together. After looking around the store a moment, he found she was not holding any scientific books or standing in the self-help section as she was last week. Now she was building up stacks at her feet of occult books and dream interpretation.

Severus snorted as the girl scowled at the books on dreams. *Was her inner eye opening?* Severus doubted it, almost as much as she probably did.

Finally the girl took the fourteen books she'd found and purchased them. As she was tucking things into a leather backpack, she noticed him.

Severus could practically feel the recognition as it swept over her face. Then she seemed to be deciding something. The next thing he knew, she was sliding into the chair across from him and studying him mercilessly.

Finally deciding for a verbal interrogation instead of a visual one, the girl asked, "Excuse me, but... Who are you?"

Severus slowly marked his page, closed the book, and set it on the table. "My name is Severus Snape; I'm a professor at a private school in Scotland. And who are you?"

His tone was somewhere between playful and acidic. He was angry at himself for not accounting for the possibility that this girl, like Hermione, might just go for what she was after.

She sat back and sighed. "I don't know. I showed up at hospital three years ago with no memories. I don't feel things like most people do, and I don't dream. I mean I didn't dream. I had never dreamed about anything until one week ago."

Severus slowly took a sip from his mug. His face stayed neutral as he began the waiting game.

She was very patient, which pleased him a lot. "So you do not have a name then?"

"Oh, erm, I'm sorry; my name is Gretchen," the girl said and extended her hand.

*Gretchen?* Severus couldn't fathom that name on her, and yet, it soon began to seem right.

"I'd say it's a pleasure, Gretchen, except that I don't know what spurred you to interrupt my tea." Severus leaned forward across the table.

"Well, you did something to me!" she insisted, "...when you were looking at me!"

"What could I have done to you by looking at you?" Severus needled gently.

"I don't know, but it was something. It was as though I could feel things happening in my brain."

"Do you understand how ludicrous that sounds?" Severus asked seriously.

She considered it and opened her mouth after a little while to respond, but Severus cut her off.

"I must apologise again for my behaviour last week. I can only explain myself by saying that I was struck by how much your eyes look like those of my late wife. I am afraid I forgot myself for a moment."

This seemed to shut the girl up. She was reasonably sympathetic to his tale. Too much so, perhaps. As if she had put in a good deal of practice in determining how much response some news warranted.

"I'm sorry to hear that." She swallowed loudly.

Gretchen toyed with an advert on the table and frowned. At first Severus thought that she was overly affected by what he'd said, but then he remembered seeing that frown on Hermione's face when she was doing her coursework. It was a look of concentration, not emotion.

Gretchen tipped the paper flyer over and then righted it. As the flat of her hand smacked the table quietly, she said, "But, it doesn't explain why I've started dreaming now and didn't in hospital while they were measuring my R.E.M. patterns and testing me to see if I was a sociopath."

"Why on earth would they think that you were a sociopath?" Severus was intrigued.

"Well, because I..." Gretchen looked away. "I don't emote. However, they decided I'm not because I never showed malice in the three months I was kept there, and I know the difference between right and wrong. I just don't emote, not on any significant scale, anyway. They say I have brain damage, but they can't localise it, so they let me out into the populace. Wasn't that nice of them?" Gretchen added sarcastically.

Severus stared at her for a long time, occasionally turning his chin every so often to designate that he wasn't just glaring. It was playing his hand much sooner than he had planned to, but Hermione's brain was probably in that occluded portion of this Gretchen person.

He wanted his wife, the mother of his beautiful daughter, to return, and he wasn't about to sit idly by when the opportunity arose.

"Well, if you are asking me, and I'm no specialist, I would say that there was an event in your life that you could not handle emotionally and you have repressed your memories as a coping method. But, that's only if you are asking. The question becomes, what do you intend to do about it?"

Would she take the bait?

"Well, I would want to know, wouldn't I?" she asked, almost accusingly, as if he had personally stolen her life from her. He had, of course, just not the way she thought.

"What if it was horrible, the stuff of nightmares?" Severus wished he could list the various things that had happened to her during her time at Hogwarts: three-headed dogs,

basilisks, fighting Death Eaters.

"I'm no coward," she argued.

Severus swallowed the last dregs of his tea. She had said enough to convince him.

He pulled a chain from inside the neck of his shirt and carefully removed it. Then he held it tightly in his palm, silently casting a spell to make it into a Portkey.

Gretchen watched him avidly. He was acting strangely, but Severus knew her curiosity would win out.

When the spell was finished, Severus looked deep into her eyes and nearly whispered, "Tell me, Gretchen, do things ever happen when you are particularly frustrated or feeling out of control? Do things break mysteriously when you are around?"

She nodded at him dumbly, unable to break his gaze.

"Good. I am going to give you this necklace. Try not to lose it; I may want it back one day. Most importantly though, when you truly wish to know, just hold it in your hand and say the word 'Portus'."

Then, Severus placed the chain in her hand, gathered his book and left.

## Chapter 2

### *Chapter 3 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

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Gretchen watched the strange man, *Snape*, leave, and then she slumped further into her chair.

Why had she been so compelled to sit with this strange man with the strange name and discuss her strange life?

At the table, Gretchen let the chain dangle from her fingers. The charm that dropped to the bottom took her breath away. She had one identifying mark, a small pink scar on her left hip in the shape of a bird; she thought it was a phoenix. Whatever it was, it was the same as the burnished silver charm that hung from the man's necklace.

She gathered her things to leave, unaware that she pulled the middle of her lower lip between her teeth, she was so lost in concentration.

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Gretchen did not say the word that Snape had told her later that day, or the day after, or the day after that. She thought about using it, but she couldn't muster the faith in this word, this "Portus".

As the weeks bled away and she went about her life, she quickly forgot about the necklace in her jewellery box too. She would get up, go to her job, order takeaway when she hadn't made it to the shops. Life went back to normal.

Her nights were peaceful and dreamless. Gretchen decided that what dreams she'd had were anomalies, and she shrugged them off.

She thought nothing of all that for a few weeks until she thought she saw that Harry Potter person in the bookshop. She had been walking in as he had been walking out, and she had been fighting her umbrella so she hadn't really been paying attention. Once it dawned on her, she turned to look for him, but there was a great bolt of lightning and a loud crack, and she couldn't see him anywhere.

That's when the dreams started up again. She dreamt that night and every night after. Wisps of dreams lingered in the morning if she was lucky enough to grab a strand of them in her mind before she found her way to her morning shower, but she had to be very, very lucky.

A blond boy being mean to her.

A large castle.

A giant.

Camping with her friends, and that Harry Potter was there.

They seemed so, so real as she tossed and turned, and she hated to lose that, even when they weren't pleasant.

It was weeks after the non-sighting of Harry Potter that Gretchen overturned her jewellery box and Snape's phoenix necklace fell far away from the others. She picked it up and looked at it for a good long while.

That dark brooding man who had given her the necklace had never come back.

Or had he? Gretchen had been frequenting other bookshops more often. She preferred shops with smaller crowds. Too many people made her... uncomfortable.

It had to be her imagination, but she always felt like a bull in a china shop when too much was happening, and she couldn't control it. The doctors had told her it was 'anxiousness'. Gretchen didn't think it was that, really. More like a foreign buzzing in her skull that she could not adequately describe.

When she was 'anxious' things would break. Gretchen was clever enough to know that it was her fault. It always happened where she was, so obviously she was doing it. People would look around for the cause, but Gretchen could not find it in herself to feel what the doctors had called 'embarrassment'.

Bugger the lot of them, she thought. It wasn't her fault that their windows would shatter or their carpets would split in two, right down the middle. It's not as if she'd thrown a

stone or slashed the floors intentionally. How does one even explain that? What would that serve, except to make her a menace? She simply mirrored the odd looks that the others had and regurgitated the idle prattle that always came up. 'How curious!' 'What on Earth?' 'How did that happen?'

Now that she was holding Snape's necklace, though, she remembered that he'd asked about it, out of the blue. They'd barely spoken and yet, he *knew*.

Did it happen to him, too? Had he been returning to that bookshop, looking for her, for his necklace, all this time? What had she missed by just falling back into her normal routine?

Gretchen went to the shop that day after work. She went the next day and then the next. She would wait as long as she thought was reasonable. Eventually, she began working for them, cataloguing books just so she could be there as much as possible. She didn't need the money—she'd gotten a good job out of uni, but she couldn't douse the need to be *there* in case he came back.

One day, when the Christmas rush was on, two girls came into the shop—one blonde and one with auburn hair. The girl with the auburn hair stopped in her tracks the moment she laid eyes on Gretchen, then ran to the loos. Gretchen had heard her sobs just as she went to the door. The blonde girl followed her friend in and came out alone after a while.

Gretchen had been shelving books that had just arrived when the blonde came up to her and asked the most bizarre question.

"Can you tell me where to find a book on applications for Thestral mane?"

What on Earth was a Thestral? Flabbergasted, Gretchen watched the other girl play with the stick that held her bun in its knot. Then she just walked away. It was as if she'd totally forgotten she'd asked that ridiculous question.

The two girls left immediately after, making no show of browsing the books.

The Christmas crowds were thick when two young men came, one with dark hair and a round face, the other tall and slender with red hair. That second chap made a really poor showing of browsing for books. He would pull one off the shelf, flip it open to a random page, stare for a moment, and finally, re-shelve the book in entirely the wrong place.

Gretchen fumed as she cleaned up after him. Then the buzzing began to sound in the back of her head, and she had to beg off early before she broke something in the shop she'd begun to think of as her own.

On Christmas morning, she lay in bed wondering what was going on. Were they people who recognized her? Did they think they were lost friends like that Harry had? Why didn't they ever speak to her, apart from that one bizarre time?

Where was Severus Snape? She had taken to wearing the necklace all the time. That was months—*years*—ago now. Would this be the rest of her life?

Rolling out of bed, Gretchen wrote it off as a bad job. Apart from the occasional bit of odd behaviour, nothing had changed.

*She* had not changed, neither improving nor declining. The doctors had said that maybe, if she was patient and open to change, *maybe* she would get her memories back, get some emotion in her life. They seemed to think there were no resources left for her. They had done what they could and sent her on her way.

Gretchen often felt like a stranger in a strange land. She couldn't laugh, rarely cried unless she was hurt, and couldn't find any reason to be invested in another person.

Her dabbles into sex had been... unimpressive. She'd felt certain that sex should be a passionate affair, and she was steadfast that she would not settle for less. She would be damned if she'd put up with bad sex just for the sake of having it, and since she had so little interest in men to begin with, she'd given up on that as well.

Instead, Gretchen went about her life. She worked her two jobs and kept up her flat and tucked her money away for retirement.

When she was over-tired sometimes, she would reminisce over the days that she'd met Snape and Potter, and she looked forward to the moments when she thought that people from her past were brushing against her life.

However, Gretchen was certain that whatever door Severus Snape had opened for her had long since closed. It was the only thing she could bring herself to feel about, wistful and disappointed in herself. She had told the man that she was no coward, and yet, she'd never even tried.

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## Chapter 3

### *Chapter 4 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

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2008

It was Rori's tenth birthday, and Severus had every Weasley, Potter, and member of the Order in his house for the event. He and Rori had just got back from Japan, where Severus had been studying parental magic.

Since the last time he'd seen Hermione, or Gretchen rather, he decided that she hadn't died and come back, but merely been transported. He theorised that the magic and motherly love that had thrust her out of existence as they knew it was the same as what Lily had done for Harry, only she hadn't had the magic to survive.

He had spoken only to Potter and Albus about his thoughts. He spoke to Potter because he had stuck to the bereaved Snapes when they'd lost Hermione. He may have married Ginevra Weasley and started his own family, but Potter had never given up on Hermione either on the idea of her when they thought she was dead or on hope for her when she'd been found in Muggle London. Severus spoke to Albus because he was his friend and mentor, but also because the man was a vault of information like few others. Both believed his theory, and they were more than happy to aid him in returning Hermione back to where she belonged.

Severus surveyed the room. Everyone was enjoying the party. Then Harry sidled up next to him where he leaned against the wall.

"You are going tomorrow?" Harry asked with his mouth in his cup.

Severus confirmed with a drop of his chin.

"And what if Gretchen doesn't want to come?"

"She won't be Gretchen when I am finished with her." Severus curled his lip in irritation.

"She's got a life, Snape."

"She works two jobs and lives in a flat by herself. It's no life. She needs her daughter."

With no further explanation, Severus approached Rori, his calm but pleasant mood fuelling her exuberance as he led her over to a mountain of presents.

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The next day was Sunday, and Severus Apparated to an alley by Gretchen's flat. He had two ideas about how he could carry out Gretchen's abduction. One was to talk it through, using his honeyed words to draw her out. The other was to stupefy her and Apparate away.

Getting into her apartment building was easy enough. Severus knocked on Gretchen's door and looked it over, still deciding what he'd do once she opened the door. He still was not completely sure when he heard the lock shift and turn.

"Mr Snape?" Gretchen asked as the shock forced the air out of her lungs.

"Indeed."

"What on earth are you doing here? How did you find me?" she asked. Her disbelief was plain on her face.

Then he could tell that she had registered his size in comparison to hers, and she closed the door slightly.

Gretchen's voice took on a steel edge as she asked, "What do you want?"

Severus was comforted to know that she didn't just swing the door open to unfamiliar men. She was at least aware of her surroundings.

"I've come for my necklace. I did say I might want it back one day."

Gretchen's hand immediately went to the chain around her neck, but she stared at him with her jaw flapping as if she had something to say.

"Look how you cling to possibility but never took the chance," Severus sneered, pushing the door open and walking through. "Look at your life, Gretchen." His eyes travelled around her flat. He had been there before. Apparating in when he knew her to be working. "How is your relationship with the telly going? Fulfilled, are we? Maybe if you wouldn't work so much. You could probably afford all this," he stopped his acidic speech to flick his wrist around the room, "without working at the bookshop, don't you think?"

Severus looked down his nose at her, and she trembled like a first year.

"I like working at the bookshop." Gretchen stuck out her chin.

It was a pale imitation of the indignant gesture Hermione would have made, but it was hers, nonetheless.

Severus pushed on.

"I'm sure you find it quite the opportunity for people watching." Severus sniffed, holding her gaze for a long moment before chuckling darkly. "Or is it because you like to be watched?" he asked, advancing on her.

"I am quite sure I have no idea what you're talking about." Gretchen leaned forward, not totally willing to let him invade her personal space.

*Good, he thought, fight for it. There's my girl.*

Severus continued to stare at Gretchen's flat in disgust. It was a fine place, really, for a single Muggle who made a fair amount of money. It wasn't good enough for his wife, though, and Severus was on a mission to make sure she never saw it again.

He snapped his head back to her and said, "On the contrary, I am quite certain that you do."

Gretchen scowled at him.

"Does the name Harry Potter ring a bell?" He could tell by her face that it did.

A clever girl like Gretchen wouldn't forget precious details like that. It was, indeed, very precious since Potter and Ronald Weasley had been the least inclined to go. It was too bittersweet for them.

"What does he has to do with my necklace?" Gretchen's sharp mind got back to the point.

Severus smiled. She kept forcing the conversation back to the points that Severus benefited from the most.

"Your necklace? Dear girl, I assure you that he has *everything* to do *my* necklace." Severus made sure to enunciate the word 'everything'.

She was obviously still the curious girl she'd always been, books lining every open surface, various newspapers strewn about, and piles of magazines tied up by the door.

He watched as her face flushed hot with impatience and humiliation.

"I am not a little girl, Mr Snape, and I wo...!"

"Not a little girl? *Not a little girl?* How old are you then? Twenty-five? Thirty? When, may I inquire, is your birthday? Perhaps I'll send a card."

"May the fifteenth!" she shouted at him.

Severus smiled. He had poked through her records. That happened to be the date that she had been released from hospital. Moreover, she was starting to lose her cool, her frustration and anger over the whole situation getting the better of her as she fought to hold her ground against him. Tears were beginning to stream down her cheeks.

"My, Gretchen, feeling angry?" Severus asked with malicious delight.

Severus watched as she froze and took stock of herself. Then Gretchen looked at him, her face going wide with shock.

Ever quick to capitalise on a situation, Severus whipped out his handkerchief and firmly grabbed hold of her chin. As he gently dabbed the tears away from her face, he asked, "And if I told you that your birthday was the nineteenth of September 1979, how would you feel?"

Gretchen was panting, and Severus could feel her hot breaths puff onto his wrist. She tried to reply but he was holding her mouth shut.

When she scowled at him, Severus whispered in his most soothing voice, "And if I told you that you were an only child of two dentists?"

Severus looked into her eyes and could see the fear and hope. Fear that he was a horrible man, as evil as he was ugly, one who would feed her lies and lead her astray. Hope that these things were true, that her parents lived, and that they had been wishing her happy birthday all these years.

She swallowed.

He loosened his hold of her chin and slid his hand down her neck to hold her shoulder gently. "There is so much more I could tell you; you've waited far too long to know. I cannot, however, tell you everything, and you will believe nothing if we stay here. That necklace is returning with me today, and if you are brave and wise, you will whisper that word that you've been thinking of for so long."

Severus slowly pulled his hand away, his face blank as he pushed his handkerchief into her fist.

Gretchen nodded. They looked at each other for a long minute.

Finally, she began to whisper, but he stopped her. "I might be a moment behind you. Do not fear, the door is unlocked." And then he smiled.

Gretchen closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she whispered, "P-portus?"

Severus watched as she got sucked through with the Portkey. Wasting no time, he turned to begin warding the apartment. He Vanished all of the food from the refrigerator. He unplugged all of the appliances. Then he sat down at her computer and secured it as well. This was a little trickier, trying to hack into her accounts, reset passwords, and set automated responses. Gretchen was about to be on permanent vacation.

Finishing up, he had to go to the bookshop as well. He had to get to her manager, Confund her, tell her that Gretchen had an important emergency to take care of, and make sure that her job remained intact.

Her day job would have to wait for tomorrow. And then, hopefully, for forever.

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Gretchen landed in front of a quaint stone cottage in the shadow of a castle. She was trying her best not to wonder at how she'd got there, where 'there' was, and what was going on. What had happened to her? No, mustn't think, because nothing made sense.

With her hands clasped behind her head, Gretchen tried to get her brain to catch up with what was happening.

She had been surprised to hear a knock on her door on a Sunday. It was *her* day; she would spend it at home by herself doing whatever chores around the house had to be done. No one ever came by.

She had been busy cleaning the floors when she had heard the loud rapping at her door. Gretchen remembered appraising her flat as she walked through it, completely unaware that her life was about to change drastically once the door had been opened.

Her hand had gone to the chain around her neck, her heart beating in her chest.

Mister Snape.

Severus Snape.

Oh, *he* knew how to push her buttons. She remembered how her blood had pounded as his voice drilled into her.

Yes! Yes, she had been angry!

Then, with her head spinning from this new thing, this new state of mind, Gretchen had said the word.

And here she was.

"Just go inside," he'd said, "the door will be unlocked."

Gretchen tried the handle.

It was open.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward. Inside, the home was beautiful but masculine. Things were clearly well kept, though it was obvious a young girl lived here. Along with the dark green leather chair and couch, there lay a small lavender sweater as well as a paddle brush and hair bands.

"Hello? Is someone home?"

There was a ticking of what sounded like several clocks, and as she looked around, she saw two by the door, almost identical. One read the time while the one next to it... well, it didn't act like a clock at all. There were no numbers, but two arms. One read 'Rori', and one read 'Daddy'. The longer one, Daddy's, designated he was 'on business'. Rori's was set to 'The Potters'. The face also read, 'at school', 'at home', 'up to mischief'.

Turning away from the clocks, Gretchen called out again, but no one answered. She assumed she was alone and decided to sit down and wait on the couch. She was just about to make contact with it when she saw the pictures spread across the mantel. All but one were in silver frames, and there was something on a stand. Gretchen lurched forward to investigate and nearly toppled over the coffee table.

She began with the odd picture. It showed two boys and a girl; the girl looked just like her!

Everyone was laughing and waving. She'd seen digital picture frames like that before. They could hold a little bit of a movie if you wanted them to. That must be what this was. But the children were all so young, maybe twelve or thirteen.

If this was her, and that man said that she has been born in '79, that would mean this was taken in 1992 or '91. They didn't have this kind of technology then.

Gretchen scowled.

Something was definitely going on around here.

She continued to look at the other pictures. An older version of that girl standing in a white dress with Mr Snape, clearly on their wedding day. They didn't look overjoyed,



but there was a satisfied pride to the image. Then there was another picture of her with a rounded belly, shying away from the camera. Then another and another until the last had her marooned on the green couch like a whale.

The last picture on the mantel was of an exhausted woman and a little baby. She would pull down the blanket and tilt its little face to the camera.

*Very sweet.*

Was this her life? Is this what she had forgotten all about? Why would she ever want to leave this?

Gretchen turned to the centre of the mantel and looked at the plaque that rested by the stand.

"Hermione Granger, Order of Merlin, First Class, for Outstanding Magic and Assisting the Banishment of Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord Voldemort."

It looked as though no speck of dust had ever landed on it. That couldn't be true, though; nothing was impervious to dust.

Gretchen jumped when Snape cleared his throat by the door. "I see you've located the most obvious evidence, Gretchen."

She turned to the now relatively familiar man. "The first day we met, you said I looked just like your wife. You were right." She hedged. She was fairly overwhelmed and maybe not feeling ready for any more 'truths'.

"I have come to believe you *are* my wife and that she's locked inside your mind."

"And how do you plan to get her out? Magic?" she snorted.

"Precisely."

Their eyes met, and he looked perfectly serious.

"I am surprised you haven't touched it yet," Severus noted, inclining his head to the stand where her wand was.

"What? That beautiful baton? Was this Hermione person some sort of conductor?"

He smirked. "Touch it, wrap your hand around it; I guarantee you that you won't break it."

Gretchen turned to face the wand and reached out her hand. She did not think this was a good idea, though she couldn't pinpoint why, and she felt pretty stupid being afraid of a little carved stick. However, it was special enough to be displayed on a stand, so she couldn't be too batty.

Her fingers drew closer and closer, and the thing began to shake. The frames on the mantel also began to shake, and in the next moment, the glass began to crack on each one. Finally, when she was nearly there, the stick started to sizzle and smoke.

Gretchen watched. Nothing good could be coming from this. However, her fingers were drawing closer of their own volition. Although the stick continued to shake, and she was terrified, she couldn't stop herself.

Then she felt the cool, smooth grip of Snape's fingers around her wrist, pulling her away. Her skin quickly began to warm where he was touching her, though. He was standing close behind her.

"I may have to retract that guarantee," he whispered as he spun her to face him.

"Wh-what happened?"

"You happened. You are a very powerful being."

Gretchen was about to ask what that meant when Snape brandished a baton from his sleeve. The tip was a short distance away from her nose, but she couldn't look away.

"You are a witch. Your name is Hermione Snape. You are my wife. I am a wizard. *Lumos.*"

Gretchen felt her eyes strain to adjust to the new light. They followed the point of brilliance, which he moved to shine between them.

"You fought the most horrible wizard of our time, defeating him with this...*unimaginable* power, to save our daughter and the world. That is what your mind is hiding from you."

Gretchen felt as if her blood was rushing from her head to her feet and back again, colliding with all of this new information. The way her stomach roiled, she wondered if she was going to be sick, and a part of her brain tried to remember what she ate last.

"And you can, what? Cast a spell to get inside my mind? Pull out these memories? Forgive me if I'm a little sceptical."

Her words were harsh, but she couldn't keep from staring at the tip of his wand. It seemed that it was the only thing keeping her rooted in reality, if that's what this even was.

"You don't believe me."

From what he'd said, Gretchen would think that he'd feel offended, at least. However, she finally seemed free to look at him again.

His crooked teeth showed from a predator's smile.

Gretchen's heart pounded faster as her blood ran cold. Warily, she shook her head just a bit.

His expression changed. Immediately it was a mask of gentle encouragement. "Perhaps you would like to try for yourself? *Nox.*"

Gretchen was trying to figure out what 'nox' meant as her eyes dilated with the fading of the light. Her brain was so turned around that she didn't resist when he took her hand and led her to the couch.

Snape waited until she met his eyes again. He nodded once and said, "Now, you need to put your fingers on my temples, look into my eyes, and say 'Legilimens'."

It was her turn to nod, although hers was much more enthusiastic. Gretchen thought she must look daft, agreeing so enthusiastically to something she had no idea about. However, the day was only getting weirder. Ever the good student that she was at uni, she repeated back to him, "Touch your temples. Look into your eyes. Legitimize."

Snape's lip curled. Gretchen thought she was about to get cast off of the face the planet.

The tone of his voice was clearly restrained when he said, "Do pay attention! This is *my* mind you are moving into here. Not 'legitimize', Le-gil-i-mens! **Legilimens!**"

Gretchen wondered what he was holding back but was thankful that he was anyway. She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. After a moment, she turned back to him.

"'Legilimens' is not a word!" she huffed and scowled.

"Neither is 'Portus', but look where it got you!" He ground his teeth, barely reining in his temper. "Do you wish to be the watcher or the watched on your first go?"

She blanched. As broken as her brain was, Gretchen was quite fond of it and wasn't quite sure she wanted him messing about with it.

"Point taken. 'Legilimens'." She nodded, conceding the point.

He exhaled and leaned forward so she could touch him.

"You have beautiful eyes, by the way," she said quietly, nearing the end of her tether.

He muttered his thanks, blinking slowly before opening his eyes and nodding a little to let her know he was ready.

"*Legilimens*."

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## Chapter 4

### *Chapter 5 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

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It had been almost ten years of having his mind to himself, so Severus did not relish having someone, especially an inexperienced, untrained witch, in his mind again. However, he felt this was necessary, and Severus was very familiar with doing what was necessary.

He played his memories for Gretchen as though they were a film. Many nights he'd lain awake thinking of what to show her, how she would react, and if Hermione would react as well. What would Hermione say to a film of their life as seen through his perspective?

Was he getting soft in his old age to think that his wife would look back fondly with him at where they had started?

Dumbledore's office: the walls covered with portraits and the shelves covered in bizarre instruments. They were... *discussing* the marriage law and how it would play out. His view of Hermione was obstructed by a high-backed chair. At the time, Severus had ignored her presence as much as he could, wanting to sort it out with the Headmaster on his own.

He remembered being furious. Suddenly, he wanted to watch it with Gretchen, see her seeing him, as if they were in a Pensieve.

He'd opted for the direct connection because he wanted to be able to guide her, something he couldn't do in a Pensieve. However, Severus did have one trick up his sleeve, something he'd practiced a bit with Albus many years ago. Since Gretchen was so open, so naïve, he cast the spell on her in return.

Suddenly, he was standing beside her. She was so focused on what was happening around her that the connection fluttered a moment when Gretchen noticed him. What she did next surprised him but pleased him immensely.

Gretchen turned to him as if it were normal to chat with the man whose mind you were looking into. "You look furious, and she *she* looks... not too put out."

Severus nodded and motioned for her to watch.

Memory-Severus began to shout, "I will not, absolutely *not*, in the name of Merlin, Circe, Jesus, Apollo, or anyone-bloody-else marry *her*!"

Gretchen and the girl in the chair both flinched.

Severus smirked. He remembered being frightening, and their fear filled him with pride.

Dumbledore sat and withstood the abuse. He was in fluorescent purple robes that seemed to flash as he sat there, looking back as if he were watching an amusing play.

Memory-Severus stormed on. "She is my student; she is a child! She has already done too much! I have too much to do! Get Malfoy! Get Nott! I draw the line, thin as it may be, at being lent out like a stud horse, especially to someone who has barely started bleeding!" Memory-Severus stopped to pant and formulate his next invectives.

The older man cleared his throat, letting his steepled fingers drop down onto the table top. "This is what you told Tom?"

"Would I be here if I had, Albus?" Memory-Severus let his head drop into his hands and raked his fingers harshly through his hair.

Gretchen frowned and stared, waiting for the volley to come back. Beside her, Severus braced himself for the words that he'd heard too many times.

"The prophecy, my dear boy, the prophecy," Albus said as if the answer were written out clearly.

"Which prophecy, you old coot? The one with which I killed her twenty bloody years ago, or would you like to make Miss Granger another sacrificial fucking lamb?"

Gretchen narrowed her eyes now.

Before the scene could continue, Severus moved on to a later point that night. For theatrical effect, he directed Gretchen's body to turn with his hand on her back. As if it mattered what their bodies did inside their imaginations.

Severus watched Gretchen as she got her first good look at Hermione. Gretchen had gone as pale as a ghost but was enthralled by the scene. She was staring at herself, ten years younger, standing in front of a door, looking absolutely petrified.

He continued to watch Gretchen as Memory-Severus's growl pierced the air. "I did not intend to wound your vanity, Miss Granger. Please do not take personal insult at my refusal of this farce."

She was shaking like a leaf; her face was white. "I've uhm... come to appeal your decision, Professor Snape, sir. I, uh... well, I think that it's possi..."

"Do *shut up*. I haven't the time to rebut your stuttering argument. Let me put your mind at ease. Do you really want to shag me, Miss Granger, when one of the more appropriate boys your age will do?"

Gretchen turned to look between the man she'd known for all of a few minutes and this earlier, uglier version of himself. While Severus knew he'd never be a handsome man, there was something very ugly about his old life and his old self. He was hunched over his desk, his head dropped, which forced his nose even further to the fore. His hair was unwashed, stringy and greasy around his face, and his eyes like slits, all of their beauty masked.

Severus could tell by the look on her face that *Gretchen* didn't want to shag that man. She looked between the two of them again, as if to compare. She started to say something, but Severus jerked his head to the scene. She had to watch now; there would be time for questions later.

"I wouldn't mind," Hermione managed to squeak.

"Excuse me?" Memory-Severus chuckled cruelly. "I do not believe I just heard what you said. You wouldn't *mind*?" His voice was low and malicious, and when he pushed away from the desk and stalked towards the girl, Gretchen couldn't help but follow. By the time she'd stopped, she was standing an arm's length away. Severus moved to stand behind her.

Memory-Severus immediately boxed in the young girl, who trembled like a scared mouse looking at the dripping jaws of a cat. He leaned further into her, impossibly close for someone who wasn't touching her, and when his calloused finger did meet her jaw, she exhaled deeply, managing not to flinch too much. Her eyes, however, did stay closed.

"Tell me, are you a virgin? Did you let that puling Weasley into your knickers? Or Krum? Is that what makes you think you wouldn't mind?" He kicked her feet apart and moved his feet to stand inside hers, and her knees trembled against his calves. "Or do you fancy me a misunderstood hero? A filthy puppy that just needs paper training and a good scrub?" His finger continued to stroke her jaw, even as she swallowed and brought her trembling hands up to the latch on her cloak.

Without speaking, she worked the clasp. Once it clicked open, she opened her eyes and looked at him, leaning into his body so that her cloak would fall smoothly to the floor. As it did, it revealed her body, bare but for knickers and boots.

They both stood and stared at each other for what felt like an eternity.

Finally, Hermione grabbed the wrist by her chin and moved his teasing fingers. She stroked his hand down her neck, pulling it past her breast and onto the swell of her hips. "I'm no child, and I'll do *anything* to defeat him."

Seeing that moment again, living it again, Severus felt his heart swell for Hermione Granger. Her courage and determination were indomitable.

But they didn't have time to linger. He shifted the scene again, catching Gretchen as she moved to chase the pair as they faded away.

Gretchen scowled back at him until there was a new room. It was very similar to the living room their bodies sat in, but the walls were formed of great stones. There was an eerie green glow about the place. It was his sitting room at Hogwarts, and he was at the small dining table, eating toast.

Hermione walked into a doorway and hovered, a bundle of plastic clenched tight in her fist. She was silent except for the exaggerated breathing of someone who was deathly nervous about something.

Memory-Severus looked up from his tea and glared. "What the bloody fuck has been taking you so long in the toilet this morning? I have the staff meeting in twenty minutes."

Hermione flinched at the dressing-down and opened her mouth to speak. She didn't manage more than a squeak, though, because Memory-Severus began to pay attention to her.

"Why are you still in your nightclothes? And what are you holding? Toothbrushes? What is this about?"

"S-S-Severus, uhm, I... I well... that is to say...." Hermione looked at the sticks in her hands to avoid having to look at him.

"Spit it out, or I'll give you Veritaserum!" Memory-Severus pounded his fist on the table, flinching when Hermione jumped. Severus flinched as he watched, too. He was usually so careful with his temper; she hadn't truly seen it since a few days after their marriage.

"I'm pregnant."

Memory-Severus barely heard her. "What? Hurry up, woman, I haven't got all day!"

Finally exasperated with the situation, she threw the three Muggle pregnancy tests at him, all hitting his chest and one bouncing off into his half eaten eggs as the others fell into his lap. "I'm pregnant!"

Having got the words out and at an undeniable volume Hermione pressed herself against the door. They hadn't talked about the possibility of pregnancy, even though that was what the marriage law was supposed to promote. They had barely managed to have sex a handful of times, what with having to acquaint themselves with each other and everything else that came with a forced and unwanted marriage.

Memory-Severus leaned back in his chair.

She was pregnant.

He was going to be a father.

She was pregnant.

With a baby.

*His* baby.

She could never divorce him if they had a baby.

They were tied together for life under Wizarding law.

Severus remembered thinking that maybe he would do the gentlemanly thing and die in the war. He shoved that thought aside; it wasn't serviceable.

Hermione cleared her throat and they all looked back at her.

Severus remembered it was like seeing her for the first time. She was so young, but so perfect. She would be an excellent mother; she'd been mothering her friends and the house-elves and anything that came within arm's reach of her. Even him, he'd realised.

She looked as if she was staring down the face of a dragon.

Memory-Severus looked down at the plastic wand sticking out of his breakfast. There were two pink lines on it.

"What are your thoughts about this?"

She swallowed audibly. "Excited... but terrified." Her body peeled itself away from the doorway, and she looked less defensive and more curious. She swallowed again. "And you?"

Around him and Gretchen, Severus's remembered thoughts sounded:

That was the million Galleon question, wasn't it?

He was going to be a father.

He would not be the last Snape.

It was as though the weight of the world was lifted from his shoulders. And then reality sank in again. They were at war, a war that had to be won. He had to win it for his child now and not because of the loss of a woman who'd never really been his. It changed everything. It made it so much better and so much worse.

Gretchen and Hermione watched Memory-Severus staring at his plate. It took a long time for him to answer.

Finally, Hermione lost patience. "Severus?"

Pulled once again to the fore, he tossed his linen napkin onto the table, mindless of the two pregnancy tests falling to the floor as he rose.

He walked to her, his gaze now burning with more than a reluctant lust. She was the mother of his child. She had given him the greatest gift. Severus approached her like a supplicant, sliding his hands under her jaw and bringing his nose close to hers. "You've changed everything. I vow to keep you and our baby safe, no matter the cost."

Their lips met, and he kissed her. He saw her, now, as an oasis, and he'd been trapped in the desert.

Gretchen watched with rapt attention.

Severus flinched. He hadn't meant to show her the kiss, but he'd gotten wrapped up in the moment. When the scene began to fade away, Gretchen tried to run into it again, but Severus pushed her out of his mind as if she was nothing.

Coming to himself, he found her panting with her fingers still pressing into his temples as they sat on his sofa.

She didn't move. She just stared at the eyes that had shown her something beyond her wildest imagination. Severus moved Gretchen's hands gently away from his face, resting them in her lap.

"That was...?" Gretchen asked, although she was unsure, exactly, what it was.

"That was the beginning. It is the tip of the iceberg." Severus turned away from her, rolling his head around his shoulders. He summoned tea, sandwiches and iced water, which all appeared on the table in front of the sofa.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked, watching her skin flush and fade. She even became a little green around the gills.

"Things... happen... when I..."

"Accidental magic. You shouldn't stifle it. Let it out." His tone was encouraging, but dry.

"It'll go away," she whispered.

"Well... the impertinence remains," Severus said, mostly to himself. He then conjured a pillow and floated it over her head. "I would prefer it if you intentionally destroyed something rather than obliterating items at random, if you please."

Gretchen looked up at the pillow hovering over her.

Severus could see the signs of anger and irritation on her face.

The pillow exploded into a shower of feathers and silk, raining down over them. Gretchen covered her eyes again.

"Sit up. Eat. Drink. You'll feel better," Severus instructed before taking a hearty bite from one of the sandwiches.

"Sod off."

"Language. There is a child in this house."

"Right now?" Gretchen sat up, looking around for a child that might just be hers.

"No," Severus ground out, his patience waning. It hadn't been unpleasant having her in his mind, but he'd rather that he never had to do it again. "Since you are still something of an unknown variable, I won't let you meet my daughter until I know it is safe."

"I like children well enough." Gretchen shrugged and reached for a cup of tea.

Severus was sure that 'well enough' for Gretchen meant the same absolute neutrality she had for adults. She would be non-committal, polite, *pleasant* even.

Rori would tear her apart. He smiled at the thought. A torn-apart Gretchen, if dissected correctly, should yield a whole, reinvigorated Hermione.

"Tomorrow, then. But I must warn you," Severus paused to turn Gretchen's face towards his by pinching her chin between his fingers. "If you do any permanent damage to my daughter, I will torture you in ways you could never imagine. I was once a very bad man, Gretchen."

She was looking at him, not breathing.

Then he smiled at her, and the moment evaporated. "Look at that. Fear as well. Aren't you the over-achiever? Two new emotions in one day." Severus picked up a sandwich and chewed efficiently.

It took a moment for Gretchen to pick up what was happening, and then she too smiled. She reached for a sandwich, lost in her thoughts. It was a good sandwich too, just the right proportion of meat and cheese, with a little tomato and a delightful mustard.

"If you'd like to join us now, I think we're ready."

Gretchen looked at Severus completely unaware what was going on. Then, a clamouring came from the stairs, and two men appeared on the other side of the coffee table.

She knew one and she smiled, whispering, "Harry Potter?"

Severus tried not to roll his eyes.

Potter nodded excitedly, as though it was his birthday and he was expecting a big surprise. Both he and Weasley were practically bouncing out from their shoes. Gretchen stood and turned towards Weasley. "And you are?"

"Ronald Weasley." He smiled.

Severus thought he was just barely keeping himself from knocking over the table and taking her up into his arms.

"Ronald Weasley." Gretchen was nodding, but nothing was registering

Severus watched Weasley pull a face and say, "Oi, don't say it like that. Pretend I've done something ridiculous, like... put a book back in the wrong spot."

"What?"

"Come on, just do it for us?"

"But, why?"

"For me, please? I've gone a million years without hearing it."

"Really, Weasley, this is the first conversation you want to have with her? She has no idea what you're talking about," Severus added.

"Sod off, Snape. I've waited longer than all of you have to talk to her, and I want to hear it."

"No." Gretchen scowled at him.

"Yes." Ron replied, a handsome smile forming under his nose.

"No." Gretchen gritted her teeth.

Severus forced himself to stay still.

"Please?"

"No." She was starting to lose her patience.

"Just really quickly."

"No."

"It won't take a minute."

"I said, 'no'."

"C'mon, 'Mione!"

"Ronald Weasley, I will *not* do your homework for you just because you and Harry spent the whole weekend on your brooms!"

Severus stood and stared. He must have been practicing nagging all week to get this sort of a response.

Before Severus could think on it, Ron *had* knocked over the table to sweep her into his arms. Tears were streaming down his face as he clung to her.

"Well, that was enlightening," Severus said as he righted the room with a wave of his wand.

"What was?" Gretchen asked, awkwardly returning Weasley's hug.

He sniffled and pulled back. "What you just said."

"I said... 'I said, 'no'.?'"

"Then you said something after that." Weasley swiped the tears from his face with the sleeve of his shirt. Then he had his hands on her shoulders, and he searched over her face.

Gretchen flinched.

Severus shook his head. "Weasley, if you'd been this insightful at school, you might have got a few more NEWTs." He moved towards the door.

Gretchen looked at them, her eyes finally landing on a very disappointed-looking Harry Potter. "Tell me. What did I say?"

Before Potter could answer, Severus raised his hand and said, "You've done quite enough for one day, Gretchen. I'll tell you tomorrow. For now, I think, perhaps some rest."

Harry spoke up, saying, "But the Pensieve?"

"Tomorrow. We can't do too much too soon, or it will all be for naught." Severus opened the door.

The two men moved towards it, waving shyly at Gretchen. She waved back and watched as Severus closed the door behind them. She was, indeed, looking very tired.

"Come, I'll show you to your bed."

They passed a closed door on either side of the hallway, and then Severus led her into a room that was clearly the master bedroom. The furnishings were all in rich deep-coloured woods, with the stark white linens highlighting dark drapes. There was a sitting area with several shelves full of books. The only thing out of place in the room was that instead of one large bed, there were two beds, slightly larger than twin-sized.

Gretchen opened her mouth, but Severus seemed already to know her question.

He spoke quietly, saying, "The second time we met, you said you'd started dreaming. I believe this is because the first time we met, I used Legilimency on you to look inside your mind. I believe it... shook things up. We've done a lot more shaking today, Gretchen, and I need to be available to help you when you dream. At that same second meeting, I asked you if you would still want to know, even if your old life had been the stuff of nightmares. Let me assure you, some of it very much was. I don't want you to be alone should you remember something... unpleasant. Furthermore, this is the room Rori expects me to be in late at night. If she were to have a nightmare of her own, and I were in a different room, she might not remember, and not finding me here would cause her further distress. This is the best solution."

By the end of his speech, Severus was standing directly in front of her, looking at her earnestly. His expression seemed to halt any further questions, and Gretchen toed off her shoes and looked between the beds. Severus gestured to the one closer to the reading area, and she moved to it, pulling back the sheets and climbing in fully dressed.

"Sweet dreams, Gretchen." Severus nodded and moved to his sitting area, knowing that the potion-infused pillowcase would put her to sleep almost immediately. By the time he'd opened his book, the delicate snore he'd been dreaming of for many years was issuing from the bed a few feet away.

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Gretchen was moaning and writhing in her bed.

Ever the light sleeper, especially when he was guarding something or someone, Severus woke immediately and wrapped his hand around his wand in its place under his pillow. He was prepared for anything.

Or so he thought. He was quite surprised when she giggled.

It made him remember the first time he'd heard her giggle. It was right after she'd told him about the pregnancy. He had spent the whole day concocting ways to congratulate and thank her spry little body for accepting his seed. Severus remembered how he'd mercilessly tickled her feet, making her giggle until she couldn't take anymore. From there his intent had turned... lascivious.

She had squirmed and giggled, naked on their bed. He had licked and sucked and kissed her until she cried out, "Severus!"

He barely resisted the urge to jump out of bed, but Severus remembered that that was then, and this was now. Besides, it looked as though Gretchen was still dreaming, her body calming back into the blankets after her body tossed and turned a few more times.

How many times had he heard that voice calling to him in his dreams? He had told no one, but he had dreamt of Hermione long before he met Gretchen at the book shop. The day after she'd disappeared, the dreams had begun, and always she called for him. Sometimes her voice was terrified, sometimes it was seductive, sometimes it was just the voice that called for him as she set her things by the door and took off her outer robes.

Now he could say that she did the same in her dreams as well. Were they dreams, though? Was Gretchen's consciousness level low enough that Hermione could come out? Was Hermione trapped in Gretchen, desperate for his aid?

Severus's thoughts were stopped by her gentle snores once again. He rolled over and turned away from the woman who was and was not his wife. He'd had many terrible heartbroken nights as well, most notably when Rori did something so like her mother, the indomitable spirit she'd never had the opportunity to know.

He sighed in a way that didn't seem like a sigh at all; to anyone besides his wife, it would simply be a breath. Severus focused on the plan because the plan was what was going to make this work. Tomorrow, Rori would come home for lunch, and then they'd see each other. He would minimize the child in front of Gretchen and make her appear to be less of a threat, but he would prompt Rori to draw Gretchen in, and then they would go in for the kill. Well, for the resurrection, actually.

Rori would be attending Hogwarts in a few months, and Severus hoped that by then Hermione would be back, and Rori would have a whole family. Tomorrow would come faster if he slept, though, so Severus forced his eyes to still beneath his eyelids. He began drawing deep breaths, and soon enough, he was back to the stable doze that had fuelled his work for many years.

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## Chapter 5

*Chapter 6 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

Gretchen woke up more rested than she could ever remember feeling. She stretched and turned and realised she must be late for work. Sitting up straight, she realised she wasn't in her flat. Refusing to panic, she took a deep breath and began recalling the events of the previous day.

She fell back into the comfort of her pillows. She was a witch, a *real* witch, her name was Hermione Granger. Years ago, she had helped her friend fight one of the worst beings the world would ever see.

What's more, she was sleeping in the house of a man, a wizard, a *real* wizard, who claimed to be her husband, who had shown her bits of her life from inside *his own mind*. He said they have a daughter. And there were Ron Weasley and Harry Potter.

What of her parents? Would she meet them, too? Did she want to? What if they wanted to ask her questions? What would she tell them? What if it was all a big misunderstanding and this wasn't real?

The bedroom door flew open, barely avoiding banging against the wall when Severus caught the knob. He was barefoot, wearing a thin black tee shirt and very faded black denims. His hair was still wet, it seemed, from the shower.

His nose was all bone and hooking cartilage, and his jawline jutted forward, as did his shoulders, and presumably his hips. Gretchen caught herself as her eyes pushed to find out if that 'presumably' was, in fact, fact.

Oh! She'd been checking him out! And he'd been watching her every glance.

Severus stood very straight and said, "My apologies. I didn't mean to leave you alone with your thoughts for even a minute. Breakfast is ready."

He said it with such smug satisfaction Gretchen could just imagine what his mind was doing, thinking about her, in that bed, staring at him as if he was the last ice cube on a hot day. She could just imagine him 'accidentally' brushing against her, or... oh, she remembered in the book store on that very first day, helping her to reach that book. She could imagine him pressing his body against hers, backing her against the shelves.

"Are you attracted to me, Gretchen? I don't know if that counts as an actual *emotion*, but we'll count it for now."

Severus flicked his wand at the wardrobe, and the doors swung open, revealing all her clothes.

"The bathroom is through that door. Be quick; the boys will be here at half past."

And then he was gone. His teasing, smirking face and his damned glinting eyes were gone. Gretchen wandered to the bathroom.

Her mind went blank, and she sighed as the spray of the shower came on. She'd been enjoying the ideas she'd had been having before Severus interrupted. Gretchen tried to regain her line of thinking, but... *nothing* came. She slapped the shower wall and swore quietly. Once again, she was so close to a 'what would happen if...' scenario, and she'd failed. Again.

It was one of the things they tested for when she was in hospital: her ability to imagine, to make something up. Or rather, her *inability*. Feeling discouraged, Gretchen brusquely cleaned herself up, realising she was hungry. That, at least, was something she could prove she felt.

She moped down the stairs, past the living room and into the kitchen, numbly following her nose to breakfast. Gretchen hardly even noticed the two places that had been set at the table and how one had a plate full of eggs and charred potatoes while the other had some toast and kippers. Instinctively, she reached for the toast as she sat.

Severus, who had been leaning on the counter and watching her, pushed away and sat in the other chair at the table.

Gretchen watched as he ate efficiently, almost mechanically, without looking at her. As she picked up her second slice of toast, she began to feel as though she'd done something wrong.

Once his plate was clean, Severus leaned back in his chair and wiped his mouth with his napkin. Then he turned his gaze upon her.

Gretchen froze, her bite of kippers on toast squishing impossibly loudly in her mouth.

Words began flowing from his lips, quiet enough that she had to strain to hear.

"I must admit, Gretchen, that I am of several minds as to how to proceed. On the one hand, my wife is sitting across from me, eating kippers on toast as she did many times in our short union, and I can't help but believe that you are her. I want to... have intercourse with her: intellectual, emotional, and sexual alike. However, I know that you are not her, you have no idea about her, and just because you look like her and act like her, I can't expect you to just *become* her overnight."

He took a deep breath.

"Or ever."

Gretchen swallowed. "You don't think it will work?" She couldn't believe her ears. This couldn't fail, it just couldn't. Sure, she had been moping and uncertain, but he couldn't be uncertain. She needed his certainty.

"I think that it is highly probable that great strides can be made. However, since this is the first time in recent memory anything of this sort has happened, it's impossible to say."

She reached for her cup, any excuse to turn away from his penetrating stare.

"Aurora thinks that she can... *fix* you. She is a very clever girl, but you know children they never see the full picture. She will be exuberant that you are here, possibly too much so. Do you think you can manage her without being patronising? She hates being patronised."

Gretchen took a slow, deep breath and nodded, flinching painfully when the door-knocker sounded. She had little time to prepare herself for the tiny voice that called out, "Daddy?" Then she was coughing: she was choking on the last bite of her toast.

With no apparent concern for Gretchen's state, Severus hurried into the living room. Soon enough, her coughing fit ended, and she was bent over the table trying to catch her breath.

A cold, damp cloth was pressed into her hand, and she quietly said thanks before wiping off her face. When she pulled it away, her head was already turned, angled to look Severus in the eye. She was quite surprised when he wasn't there. She dropped her gaze and came face to face with a little girl.

She had long hair falling past her shoulders. It looked like silky soft curls that were such a dark brown they were almost black. She had Snape's skin, but a smattering of freckles across her nose. Gretchen noticed the shape of her nose and upper lip and became mesmerised by them.

"What'd you say?" the girl asked, confused.

"Oh, nothing. Thank you. Uhm... for the cloth." Gretchen shook the loose fist that held the cloth in her hand gently and looked between her hand and the girl.

The girl's face contorted in confusion, but she remembered herself. She smiled and stuck out her hand. Then she said, "Aurora Snape."

Gretchen shook her hand, having to first transfer the wet cloth to her other hand in order to do so. She was just about to introduce herself when another new voice came from the doorway.

"Remarkable."

Gretchen whipped her head around. She regretted it immediately, feeling a twinge in her neck. In the doorway stood an impossibly old man and Severus, who looked very put out. The old man was smiling at her.

"I know you." Gretchen turned and stepped toward the old man. Her heart was beating in her chest. It was like chasing a dream in those last few moments before waking, but he didn't seem to be going anywhere.

His blue eyes sparkled behind half-moon glasses. "Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster these many, many long years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"The what?"

"The school in the castle atop the hill behind this cottage," the man said and smiled.

The way he looked her over, soaking her in, made Gretchen feel like she was on display. His utter fascination with her was so flattering. But she was as fascinated by him and came closer and closer to him.

"And meddlesome coot."

Severus's voice cut in, but it didn't pull her away from Albus. Gretchen stepped closer still, feeling almost as if she were being compelled to do so. Those blue eyes held something, *something big*, but she just didn't know what. She needed a closer look.

The next thing she knew, Gretchen was lost in those blue eyes, diving deeper and deeper with every breath.

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Determining that Gretchen was thoroughly entranced by Albus, Severus moved to check on Rori. He and Potter had agreed that she would come home at lunch, after Gretchen had viewed the Pensieve memories and talked with Potter and Weasley.

As ever, Albus had his own agenda, and now Severus was not ready.

"Dad, she said something before you came in, I swear," Rori whispered.

"Tell me."

"Well, I handed her the cloth, and she wiped her face. Then she looked up, but I'm not that tall, so she looked down. And then she gasped and said, 'Oh, you're so beautiful. You look just like your father and my father.' And then she hugged me. See, the back of my shirt is wet from the cloth, Dad." Rori's voice cracked a little, but she pushed through it, hurrying to tell him everything.

Severus looked around Rori's back, and there was, in fact, a moist patch on her shirt under her left shoulder blade. "Then, it was as if nothing happened," he prompted. Severus hated seeing the small flinches in her face. It was so close to the ideal reunion, dangled and withdrawn. Seeing Rori struggle made his heart wrench.

Rori nodded, her face smoothing into a mask like her father's. "The Janus. There is Gretchen, and there is Mum, and they are separate, and we have to weave them together. Documented examples include Nepal in 356, Morocco in 808, and Denmark, 1310." She nodded to herself.

Severus knew she was taking comfort in the knowledge they had been digging up all her life. "Very good," he said and winked at her. He swept his hand over her back to dry the spot and frowned down at her when the spot remained, in fact lightening significantly. If he looked carefully, he could almost see the outline of two arms forming.

As he watched the fabric change, he put the pieces together immediately. He had taught her a spell a while ago that kept an impression on material. They had been studying how light and shadow work, and they had done impressions of objects on paper.

Rori looked at the floor guiltily with her chin stuck out completely impertinent. She wasn't going to apologise for ruining her blouse; he could tell.

Could he really blame her? Who wouldn't want a souvenir from the moment they finally met their mother?

"We'll get you a larger memory chest when we go into Diagon Alley."

Rori sent him a beaming smile, relieved that she wouldn't be punished and thrilled that she would get to pick out a new piece of furniture for her room. Severus was very particular about the items she brought into the house; anything new would activate a ward and alert him.

Severus didn't care that Rori thought it was annoying. Constant vigilance had to be maintained.

He turned Rori to look at Gretchen and Albus, pushing his fingers slightly into Rori's hair while her hand gripped the back of his thigh. Like Severus had been, she was tall for her age and lithe they looked almost like two reeds bending towards each other.

Albus was standing, smiling softly as he interviewed Gretchen. Severus recognised that this was actually his first foray into her thoughts. A master Legilimens like Albus didn't need to secure his subject and keep them from moving. Most people who were in engaging conversations especially ones where they were asked about themselves willingly opened their gaze directly to the other person in the conversation.

Severus whispered down to Rori, "Invite Gretchen up to your room, per our original plan."

She nodded seriously and moved to the doorway, tugging gently on the bell of Albus' sleeve. "Can I show Gretchen my room now, Papa Albus?"

Severus's teeth clenched on his tongue. Oh, she was laying it on thick! His little girl had Albus Dumbledore wrapped around her finger, and if he knew it, Albus loved every minute of it.

"If that is what she wants?" Albus passed the invitation to Gretchen, who nodded her acceptance.

It looked as if Gretchen was coming out of a dream. She looked down as Rori grabbed her hand before dragging her through the sitting room and up the stairs.

Albus looked at Severus, smiling and moving toward the kitchen table, taking up Gretchen's vacated chair. Severus brought over the teapot and poured tea for the both of them.

"Severus, I am most pleased."

Warding the kitchen immediately, Severus worked to keep his ire down. "If you could please be so kind as to not raise Rori's hopes, Albus! This is a very tenuous affair!"

Looking into his tea, Albus tried to look chastised, but Severus was not convinced. He sat stiffly in his chair and sighed. "What did you see?"

"If Gretchen were a boat, Hermione would have the ear of the captain and the crew. She has been working very hard for a long time to get Gretchen into your grasp."

"You can't be saying she is cognisant of what is happening. It is totally implausible." Severus had done his research, and the likelihood of Hermione coming back to them completely as her former self, an eighteen-year-old mother and all of the other things Hermione would have been, was as likely as a Norwegian Ridgeback flying out of his arse. This endeavour would require both patience and perseverance.

Albus nodded. "What I am saying is that in the way someone who wants to go to the sea might decorate their house with seashells and such, Hermione has been encouraging Gretchen at a very deep subconscious level. As time has passed, Gretchen has been orbiting Hermione's life, such as her bookshop."

Severus could believe that, at least.

"Will Potter and Weasley be joining us today?"

"Yes, I suspect after lunch. Harry said that Rori had a hard time sleeping last night, and they both ended up on the sofa in front of the telly all night."

Severus nodded. He didn't have a television in the house; the magic surrounding Hogwarts blocked all the signals. He wouldn't have had one anyway, but it was a good reason to give Rori when she took up the never-ending crusade to buy one. Potter had one, and Hermione's parents had one, so it was a special treat for her to watch when she visited.

Picking up his tea, he pushed away from the table. "Shall we watch the ladies from my study?" Severus moved to the hallway off the kitchen, not bothering to see if Albus



was following. In there, he had a large enchanted mirror that showed Rori's room. He could work for hours and watch her while giving her space to feel comfortable and independent. In the event of an emergency, he could also use that mirror to travel directly between the two rooms.

Once both men were settled on the sofa, they sat back to watch the happenings upstairs.

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Gretchen was sitting on the floor, at the foot of a twin bed. The footboard looked like a knotted and gnarled old tree stump, and the headboard like the tree it grew, the branches and leaves pushing up and across the ceiling. It was a 'fairly complicated enchantment,' or so Rori said.

The floor was covered in a soft, thick moss which was very comfortable to sit on. Gretchen was avidly watching Rori as she flit about the room. It was pleasant watching as Rori showed off mementos from all of the travels she'd gone on with her father.

"And when we were in Spain, I got to see an old bladesmith, who would enchant the hilts to do special things, like be lighter or stronger. He gave me this dagger because he was so honoured that my father would go to him for information," Rori said as she walked across the room.

She passed Gretchen a bundle of cloth. Unrolling it, Gretchen found a beautifully crafted, very sharp-looking weapon. "Your father lets you keep this? You could really hurt yourself!" Gretchen looked at the shining blade and the inlaid handle. It was beautiful, with sirens carved into it from the tip to the pommel. There was even a brass guard, just big enough to cover a woman's hand.

Rori shrugged. "My father has taught me how to use blades. He says fear and ignorance are dangerous, and knowledge and respect are our best weapons."

"What do you mean, 'taught you how to use blades'?" Gretchen asked suspiciously. Was it or was it not the year 2008?

Relieving Gretchen of the dagger and wrapping it carefully, Rori said, "I help him brew sometimes. And he said that there will always be men who will want to harm me because I'm a girl, and wizards and witches who want to harm me because I am a Snape, or because I'm the daughter of Hermione Granger. I need to know how to protect myself."

Gretchen was dumbstruck. She had never met a child like Rori before. She was so serious, so like her father one minute, and then so carefree the next, leaving things strewn about her room when her attention found a new focus.

Rori was watching her, and it set Gretchen on edge. However, there was something so comfortable for Gretchen in this place that she watched Rori in return. Emotions passed over her face, and she thought she saw a flicker of pride.

"What are you looking at?" Gretchen whispered.

"You look like the pictures of my mum when she was holding me as a baby."

The two stared at each other another moment, and then Rori shrugged and began picking up her room.

"Why is it so important, you being a Snape?" Gretchen asked. She didn't want the conversation to diminish into tense silence.

"You really don't know, do you?" Rori asked, snorting like her father.

Gretchen frowned, and Rori must have realised she sounded like a snot because she hurried to continue. "Sorry, I forget about the Statute of Secrecy and that all you know about magic is what you've seen in the last day."

Grabbing a pillow from her bed, Rori flopped down on the floor in front of Gretchen.

"A long time ago, there was a horrible wizard, named Voldemort. Well, his name was Tom Riddle really, but he wanted to be great, so he changed his name. And he thought that only wizards and witches who had magical parents were any good, so witches like my mum and my dad really were rubbish to him.

"He had lots of followers, and they were going to have a war. Then, Papa Albus heard a prophecy that said that there was a baby who would be his equal, and neither could live while the other one lived. Voldemort knew that my Uncle Harry's parents had a baby because my dad told him so. My dad was in love with Harry's mum, and he thought that he could save her by telling Voldemort about the prophecy.

"So, Voldemort went to Uncle Harry's house and tried to kill him, but his mum her name was Lily stopped him with her love as his mum, which is a special kind of magic. Oh, and there's this curse that you can cast that kills someone right there on the spot, which Voldemort used all the time. Anyway, Voldemort cast the spell on Uncle Harry, who was just a baby then, and he didn't die! Can you believe it?"

Gretchen, who had been entranced by the story all along, shook her head, her wide eyes never leaving Rori's face.

"So, when Uncle Harry didn't die, something happened to Voldemort, and he went away. Lots of people thought he was gone forever, but not my dad or Papa Albus.

"Then, when Uncle Harry got to Hogwarts, Voldemort kept coming for him because they were both getting stronger. My mum and my Uncle Ron helped Uncle Harry the whole time. They went on lots of stupid errands trying to figure everything out instead of just asking questions and thinking things through, but they were all Gryffindors, and Gryffindors are foolish.

"Anyway, the summer before their seventh year, Voldemort heard *another* prophecy which said that one of his loyal followers would have a baby with one of Uncle Harry's loyal followers, and whoever had the baby on the last night before its first birthday would win the second war. Voldemort picked my dad, and since he was a spy for Papa Albus, he had to do it.

"And of course my mum was the most loyal of Uncle Harry's followers since she followed him all over the place getting in trouble and fighting Voldemort anyway. Well, except for maybe Uncle Ron, but two boys can't have a baby, so it had to be my mum. So, they got married.

"Then, Voldemort came to take me away because he wanted to win the war, but my mum stopped him to protect me. She knocked him down so Uncle Harry could take him out, which he did. Then, she burst into light."

"How?" Gretchen asked, leaning forward.

"How did she burst into light? I don't know," Rori said, rolling onto her back and staring at her ceiling. She waved her hand at the leaves hanging overhead, and they watched as they quivered as if there was a breeze in the room.

"Right," Gretchen said and sighed. Of course she didn't know; she was just a little girl. She was an astonishing, clever girl, but just a child, nonetheless.

"Well, Papa Albus said she sublimated. Do you know what that means?"

"Of course I do. Who wouldn't?"

Rori giggled. "My Uncle Ron! It was so funny, the look on his face when I said it for the first time. He gaped like a fish."

"I can imagine. I met him yesterday. He seemed..." Gretchen trailed off. She couldn't say 'unnecessarily tedious and possibly over-emotional.' That wouldn't do.

"He's sharp as a whip, in his way. He's just not bookish like us."

Not wanting to cause an argument about Ron, Gretchen redirected the conversation. "So, sublimation means that a solid has turned to gas or a gas to a solid without being liquid at all. How does a person sublimate?" She stretched out next to Rori and looked up at the leaves on the ceiling. They were rustling softly still, and she marvelled at them.

"Well, not a Muggle person unless they were incinerated or something. That would be gross."

"Muggle?"

"Someone who doesn't have magic, like my Nana Carol and Grandpa Jack. There's nothing wrong with not having magic. They do lots of wonderful things anyway. Like my Grandpa Jack can make, like, a hundred different kinds of paper air planes that sail through the air without magic. They do turns and things. Nana landscapes gardens for people at the weekends, and she turns their little tiny plots of grass into these amazing rooms. That's where I got the idea for the tree bed."

Gretchen nodded. Hermione's parents sounded like wonderful people. If she was Hermione, then they were *her* parents. What would they have been like as parents? What was she like? The frustration of not knowing boiled up in her. Above them, the leaves started to wave again.

"You're magic," Rori announced just before pushing Gretchen's arm away from her side so she could lie against her, although now she was on her belly. "You activated the spell for my tree without even knowing it. My dad says you are going to do lots of accidental magic while you're here."

"Is that so?" Gretchen sighed and closed her eyes.

"It's okay; everyone does accidental magic for a while. I do it a lot."

A moment of silence began to draw out, and Gretchen felt like she would be more than happy to just curl up on the soft mossy floor and be transported back through the rabbit hole or whatever she'd fallen down to be trapped in this bizarre dream. She turned to rub her cheek on the floor, still not quite believing it.

"If you ladies would like to rest, there are plenty of beds on which you can nap."

On the floor, Gretchen and Rori turned to find Severus standing in the doorway. Gretchen thought he was frowning disapprovingly, but a quick look at Rori showed that she was unfazed.

Severus moved into the room and said, "However, Albus would like to chat with you more in private, Gretchen. He's waiting for you in the sitting room."

Gretchen nodded and got up muttering her excuses as she went out the door.

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Once Gretchen's footsteps hit the stairs, Severus entered Rori's room and closed the door behind him.

"I see you've changed clothes. Did she notice?"

Rori shook her head, creeping toward Gretchen's vacated spot on the floor.

Severus joined her on the floor and pulled her next to him so she was fully in Gretchen's imprint on the moss. He stretched out on his back and flicked his wand; honeysuckle vines bloomed in the leaves, and the sweet smell permeated the room. "I'm very proud of you, Rori. This is very challenging, and you have handled it better than anyone could have hoped."

He felt her head slide against his chest when Rori nodded, and then the warm wetness of a few tears soaked his shirt. Severus rubbed her back and continued to speak, making his voice as deep and rhythmic as he could. "It is very difficult; she looks just like the pictures. Sitting across from her at breakfast this morning was like living a dream. I am certain, however, that in a few days' time it will be a seamless shift into having a third person in the house. We just have to be patient with her."

"Patience pays," Rori whispered, her voice cracking. Then she started crying in earnest.

Severus didn't whisper any words of comfort, but he did pull Rori so she lay on his chest. His arms wrapped around her as she clung to him, weeping, her little body shaking as she expelled all of her pent up emotions. She'd been holding them in since her birthday, knowing that this would be the year that they got her back. Her excitement and anxiety had been compounding over the last few days. He was astonished that she hadn't started breaking mirrors and windows with all of the high-strung energy that radiated from her.

It took a few minutes, but eventually Rori finished. Sniffing, she finally worked up the courage to ask, "How long until Mum is back?"

"I can't answer that question, Rori."

She sighed and pushed herself up so she could look down at him. "I know."

"I think you should try to rest before lunch. Albus said you were up all night with Potter."

Rori nodded. "Rotted our brains clear away, Father." She moved around the stump and slid across the mattress.

"Not much of a challenge for Potter." Severus leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. He watched her nestle into her bed and nodded before turning and walking out the door.

In the sitting room, Gretchen was reclining with a cold compress on her forehead and holding a cup of tea on her belly. Albus sat in a nearby chair, his fingers steepled. He looked as though he was seriously contemplating the teapot.

Severus sat in the chair on the opposite side of the table from Albus and poured himself a cup of tea. They sipped in silence for a great while.

Finally, over half an hour after he'd sat down, Severus got an answer.

Albus spoke softly, still distracted by the puzzle. "I found a lead. Hermione, as we knew her, is lost behind that magic that weakened Tom Riddle. She is safe and sound, I believe, but the magic is dividing her from Gretchen as though they are on opposite sides of a wall."

Severus nodded.

"Events of high emotional value, such as Mr Weasley's nagging yesterday I heard the report or Rori's appearance this morning, seemed to have flattened that wall enough that Hermione could come out, but then the wall immediately solidifies. Gretchen has no recollection of the event."

Severus looked at her, wary of how Albus spoke.

"She's asleep. I attempted to remove the tea cup from her hands but she was holding it too tightly, and I didn't want to wake her."

"I was also able to detect very minute fissures in the barrier, possibly from previous attempts of Legilimency. You said that at your second meeting with Gretchen, she

reported dreaming for the first time?"

"Correct," Severus replied quietly and took the final sip of his tea. "The solution then is to teach Gretchen to control the magic. As she incorporates it into her being, Hermione will eventually be exposed."

"I agree. Has she attempted to hold her wand?"

"Yes, with violent reaction before she even got her fingers to it."

"A trip to Ollivander's, then. After lunch."

"Albus, the Pensieve." Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to keep from whining.

"It can wait. Ollivander, I believe, cannot."

So many careful plans, so many strategies developed in the preceding years, up in smoke. Severus scowled; that was the price to pay for involving Albus. The man loved to be a hair's breadth from ruin, it seemed.

However, as the idea sank in, it seemed to have merit. Better to have the base of the situation managed before adding any more. Finally Severus nodded and stood to begin preparations for lunch.

## Chapter 6

### *Chapter 7 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

After a pleasant lunch, where Rori traded notes with Albus on all the places she'd seen in Japan, the four of them got ready to go to Diagon Alley.

Albus was already wearing his wizard's robes, so he did not have to change. Rori ran up to her room and came back down in pale blue robes. Severus came down next wearing black, the fabric moving fluidly in time with his stride. Over his arm was a set of robes in navy blue and Gretchen's trainers.

"Rori, help Gretchen with these, please."

After setting the shoes on the floor, he passed the garment to Gretchen, who just stared at him numbly. Two small hands on her bum pushed her towards the stairs, and she came out of her fog, marching up the stairs to Rori's room. When the door clicked shut behind them, Rori was almost bursting with excitement.

"Hurry! Diagon Alley is so amazing you won't believe it!"

Spreading out the robes in front of her, Gretchen looked at them. They were basically a tent with sleeves. How... unflattering.

"There're laces in the back; that's why you need help. They can go on over your shirt, but Dad gets them in really nice material so you don't have to. It is cold out, though, so..." Rori shrugged her shoulders.

Gretchen thought about it and then pulled off her top, passing it absently to Rori. Wadding up the skirts, she pulled the garment over her head. It definitely *felt* like a tent with sleeves.

"Sit on the bed so I can do your laces." Rori's little voice was strong and commanding, not unlike her father's.

Like a puppet, Gretchen complied. Rori hopped on the bed behind her and tightened the laces that started at the small part of Gretchen's waist and moved up over her shoulder blades. With the garment pulled over her bosom, Gretchen was glad that she'd removed her old jumper.

Rori stroked the fabric in front of her for a second and then said, "Mirror's over there."

Gretchen turned to look by the closet door, and then she walked over to the long mirror that stood next to it. Well, she was fit for Halloween, dressed like this. She looked as if she'd been sent back in time a couple of hundred years. She caught sight of Rori behind her in the mirror and waved her over.

"It's as if I'm going to a fancy dress party. Is this really how people dress to go to Diagon Alley?"

Rori nodded, playing with her skirts. "Uncle Harry says it's a throwback. He was raised Muggle. Oh, and my dad is super traditional, so there are more modern robes for sale. He just got these for you because he didn't know what you would like."

Gretchen pulled Rori to stand in front of her in the mirror. Looking at the two of them, she gasped. Their robes were comparable in style, and both of them had curls flowing down their backs. It could very easily be the portrait of a mother and daughter. Rori and Gretchen stared at each other, lost in the mirror until a loud knock came from the door.

Severus asked, "Is there a problem?"

"No, Dad, we'll be right out!" Rori replied, desperately trying to hang on to the moment. She leaned back against Gretchen and clutched at her robes.

"Let's go," Gretchen whispered, also reluctant to leave the mirror. Rori nodded, getting her shoes out of her wardrobe. Gretchen stood with the door open, shifting her weight awkwardly.

Feeling embarrassed, Rori reluctantly backed away. "What?"

Gretchen stifled a groan, but she couldn't help herself. "Uhm, hold my hand?" She even dared to extend it just a little.

Rori rushed to take it, and the two of them walked hand in hand back to the sitting room. It meant taking the stairs a little awkwardly, but it was worth it. They sat thigh to thigh on the couch as they put on their shoes. Both were aware of the attention they were drawing, although a quick glance at Severus or Albus revealed nothing.

"Unfortunately, you'll have to separate so you can Side-Along," Albus announced as he offered a small travelling cloak to Rori. She nodded and reluctantly moved away, getting up to don the cloak before embracing him. With a soft pop, they Disappeared.

"Where'd they go? Where'd he take her?" Gretchen felt panic rise up inside of her.

Severus stepped forward carefully. "They've just gone ahead; we'll be right behind them." He extended his hand.

Following Rori's example, she took it and felt better instantly. He led her over to the door where a cloak for each of them hung on the wall. Severus put on his and then helped her, moving to secure the clasp at the top when it gave her trouble. Then she wrapped her arms around him, sighing contentedly.

"Gretchen," Severus whispered, "Embracing is not strictly necessary."

Her face flamed. God, she was such a fool! She started to pull away, but he wrapped his arms around her to stop her.

"I'm not complaining; I just want you to know. And we'll add embarrassment to your list of accomplishments. Very impressive."

Without another word, Severus followed Albus and Rori.

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It was a cold day, and the streets were empty as most people worked on Mondays. They had all landed in a back alley, and once he had Gretchen's feet on the ground, Severus pulled back slightly, retrieving a vial and a small paper envelope from his pocket. He began whispering, "Now, Gretchen. We can't have you running around looking like the heroine of the Wizarding world. We won't make it five minutes in Diagon Alley before the media frenzy begins, and we do not want that."

Gretchen nodded, leaning away from his body so she could look up at him as he spoke.

"This vial contains a potion that will make you look like Ginevra Potter, Harry's wife, for an hour. It's totally harmless, and I believe it will taste like aniseed balls."

Gretchen nodded again, and Severus pulled his arm from around her to uncork the bottle, open the envelope and pull out one of Ginny's hairs. Dropping it in the vial, he put his thumb over the top to verify that it fizzed properly.

"Bottoms up."

She took the vial from him and put it to her lips. When she hesitated in tipping it back, Rori grabbed her free hand and nodded up at her. That was all she needed to move forward. The liquid in the tube made her belly feel warm. Then she felt her body change, her scalp tingling as her hair straightened and brightened. The form of her shoulders flattened out into more of a spritelike shape. She grew half an inch and lost fifteen pounds from her body. It felt as if she could run a marathon. She hopped on her toes a few times and giggled.

"This is extraordinary!"

"There's a window over there if you'd like to look." Severus pointed his gaze down the alleyway, and Gretchen and Rori trotted over to it.

With her free hand, she touched her face, amazed. "She's beautiful. No wonder Harry married her!"

After agreeing with her and tidied her hair and her travelling cloak, Rori said, "Well, *Aunt Ginny*, it only lasts an hour so we have to hurry."

The group hurried out of the alley and onto the street. Severus glared at everyone who dared to look their way, but the friendly face of Albus Dumbledore always drew a crowd. By the time they got to Fortescue's Ice Cream, they had to leave him behind; he was delaying them too greatly.

Luckily, once they were without him, they made it to Ollivander's Wands in almost no time. Severus opened the door for them, following behind them quickly. Once she crossed the threshold, though, Gretchen dropped to the floor. The shop was raucous and the clamour caused her physical pain, as if she was being struck every time the noise sounded.

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Severus entered the shop and discovered the horrible noise of every wand in the shop rattling furiously in its box. He also saw Gretchen kneeling on the floor, covering her ears. From somewhere in the back, Ollivander came running out.

"Hurry, hurry! Follow me!" He kicked a rug, which flipped back to reveal a trap door. Rori ran for it, but Gretchen didn't move; she seemed frozen in pain. Severus kneeled down and picked her up before hurrying behind them. Going down the stairs beneath the trap door last, Ollivander pointed his wand at the rug so that it would right itself once he closed the trap door.

The basement room was as large as the shop above it, but there were no small boxes of wands stacked there. In their place were dozens, if not hundreds, of magical staves. Severus took in the room, noticing there were couches all around. Most importantly, everything was blessedly quiet.

Severus held Gretchen sitting against him while she recovered. Rori was wrapped around her, and everyone was catching their breath.

Ollivander pointed his wand at the coffee table, and a tea service appeared. "Good afternoon, Mister Snape, Miss Snape, Mrs Potter." He pointedly looked at Gretchen, his brow furrowed and his face pulled down grimly. "Or should I say, 'Gretchen Jones?'" Then he turned around and muttered, "Hermione Granger, Hermione Snape," again and again as he wandered around the room.

"Father, I thought we were here to look at wands," Rori said softly.

Then a tapping on the trap door sounded, and Severus said, "I think that would be the man who has ruined every plan I made for today." He tried to be sour, but he was too intrigued to put his heart into it. Almost no one had carried a staff in the last few hundred years, not since wizards became heavily persecuted. Occasionally, someone with a penchant for awkward channelling tools would walk about with one, but it was rare.

Once Albus was shaking Ollivander's hand, he said, "You've gone on an errand I put the sign up on the door for you."

Severus loosened his arm from around Gretchen and rubbed her back. She pulled away from his body and moved to sit properly on the couch, taking in Albus and Ollivander and, finally, the room.

"Very good." Ollivander went back to his search, walking along the walls and through racks of staves. He came back holding one in each hand. The first was straight as a post and longer than he was tall. It was a lighter tone than the second but not by much. The second was more natural with an intricate twist at the top. He moved to stand in front of Gretchen and said, "Which shall you try first?"

"What do you mean, try?" Gretchen looked at him, and her eyebrows furrowed.

"Well, hold, mostly. A staff is like a wand in that each one is looking for its master; once you've found your staff, you'll know. Also, a staff is much heartier. It is more of a conduit for wandless magic. In a case such as this, it is important to channel the magic intentionally before trying to put it through a wand, which is much more delicate."

Gretchen stood and shrugged. She reached for the straight, pole-like staff. Once her hand was around it, she dropped it, as if burned.

Severus leaned back to watch, intrigued by the turn of events. He wasn't surprised that she was reluctant to try the next.

"They are of opposing craftsmanship, dear, I'm certain that you will not have the same experience." Ollivander nodded at her encouragingly.

She frowned back at him but reached for it anyway. Once it was in her hand, nothing.

Ollivander was surprised by this, but unfazed and began his search again. He wandered the basement room, occasionally changing direction suddenly as if struck with inspiration, and when he came back with a third staff, he was confident it was the right one.

Gretchen was walking toward him when he turned to bring it to her. She was immediately drawn to it, the sheen of the wood, dark brown with highlights in rose and blond woods. Her hand reached for it, even as she investigated the way it tapered from top to bottom. The bottom was rectangular with rounded corners. There was a narrower place just about at the height of her waist, and her hand fitted around it easily. Above her hand, there was about a foot of solid staff before the blond-, dark brown-, and rose-coloured woods extended in small branches that curled together into a knot at the top.

"Oh, yes!" Gretchen smiled.

The light in the room seemed to brighten then, and Severus was awestruck. Rori hopped off the couch and walked over to Gretchen, taking her hand.

"Isn't it beautiful, sweetie?"

"Yes, Mum," Rori said.

The light in the room dimmed then. In the next moment, Rori's face froze as if she'd uttered a swear word and been caught.

Holding the staff in one hand and Rori's hand in the other, Gretchen smiled and nodded. Then she collapsed.

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When Gretchen woke up, she was in a very cosy bed. The grey light of dawn was coming through the cracks in the curtains. As she moved to rub her eyes, her head began to throb, and she winced. It wasn't like her to drink, but she supposed everyone got carried away now and again. She rolled to her side to reach for the glass of water she knew would be waiting on her bedside table. She needed to hydrate and sleep it off.

Unsure of where exactly on the table the glass was, Gretchen dared to open one eye to the room. What she saw froze her body but made her heart pound in her chest.

The man from her dreams was staring at her, his beady black eyes and hooked nose peering from behind a cascade of silky black curls. In her blearyness, she thought he looked quite like a bird, or maybe a demon. Then he carefully withdrew one arm from around the little girl in his lap, and she realised he was, indeed, a man. Gretchen's heart began to slow to a more natural rhythm. She heaved a scratching, shuddering sigh of relief and allowed him to make the next move.

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Severus put his finger to his lips. Rori stirred for a moment before her hips slid into the crevice between his thighs and the arm of the chair. With one arm totally unburdened, he gestured to the water glass just beyond Gretchen's finger tips. She reached for it and drank up.

"What is your name?"

The answer was out of her lips before she even drew a breath. "Gretchen Jones." She flinched.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what fear is."

"Do you remember the events from approximately thirty-six hours ago?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Do you remember anything from your time spent unconscious?"

"No."

With that, Severus frowned and began to bundle Rori up in his arms. Her quiet whimper slowed him, but he finished arranging her with practiced efficiency. Finally, he stood, moving for the door.

"Wait!" Gretchen cried softly.

Severus' feet stilled but he didn't turn.

"Please, please let me have her. I..." Gretchen stopped. She was wincing with every sound she made.

As her words quieted, Severus turned. He had drugged her, lacing her water with Veritaserum. He had to know what he was dealing with for Rori's sake, as well as his own. He nodded, and Gretchen moved as quickly as she could to make room. It wasn't very quick at all, but Severus could easily see the feverish intent of her actions.

Gretchen lay on her side, forfeiting the lion's share of the narrow twin bed to the girl. Severus filled the space with Rori's body and pulled his arms from around her carefully. He stood to watch what Gretchen would do.

Immediately, she pulled the blankets from behind her over Rori's body, thoroughly verifying that the girl was covered. When she was through, she sank her shoulder and arm under the blankets as well and moved to hold the girl against her body.

"Not too tight or she'll thrash about." Severus' command was whisper quiet but strong as steel.

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know. I just do!" Gretchen's voice cracked as if she was sobbing, but her face was dry and her features neutral. She pressed her lips into Rori's hairline for a moment. Then Gretchen buried her face in Rori's hair and sighed.

"Are you feeling something, Gretchen?" Severus demanded. He needed to be patient, but he wasn't conditioned for such high-stakes emotional deconstruction any more.

Brown curls tumbled over black as Gretchen shook her head in the negative.

Severus watched them for several long minutes despite noticing that, shortly after his final question, they both had the level breathing of those in deep sleep. As much as he longed to watch over them every second, he knew his weary body wasn't up to it. Severus turned and pointed his wand at the chair, and it vanished for a moment before returning to its normal place by the fire.

Then he slithered into bed. He had numerous kinks in his body from acting as Rori's mattress since she had appeared in his doorway several hours ago. Severus couldn't turn her away when her eyes were so full of tears and worries that she had ruined it all. He had explained again to her that she hadn't done anything wrong, and she seemed, finally after over an hour of whimpered counter-arguments to concede. Every muscle in her body relaxed once she let go of her emotional burden, and she slept on him with the weight of someone four times her size.

Now it was his turn to rest. He would sleep with his ears ever attentive, but he would prepare his body for another impossible day.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter 8 of 12

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

Gretchen awoke with a start. Her eyes snapped open, and she found herself looking straight into a pair of dark eyes.

This must have been what Rori was waiting for because she smiled wide and whispered, "Good morning. Are you hungry?"

Rubbing her eyes and rolling onto her back, Gretchen stretched and groaned. Her body felt stiff, but in a good way. She had tried running and yoga for a while, and that same happy stiffness was in her body now. Also, she was downright famished, and she told Rori so.

Rori practically bounced where she stood at the side of the bed. "Good. Dad's making breakfast right now, and then Papa Albus is coming over to start your practice. Dad said you should wear whatever you would wear to work out." She patted a small pile of clothes at the foot of the bed.

"I need to brush my teeth," Gretchen muttered, grimacing at the taste of morning breath. It seemed so much worse than usual. "How long did I sleep?" she called through the bathroom door after she used the loo.

She was well on her way to giving her teeth a good scrub when Rori replied, "Just three days."

Gretchen found that difficult to believe. She turned and opened the door open. "What?" she asked around her toothbrush.

"You had a lot of magic in you, that's all."

"And I don't now?"

Rori played with the end of the bedspread. "Well, not less, but..."

"But?" Gretchen turned and spat into the sink. A quick rinse of her mouth, and then she had a cool, damp flannel on her face, trying to get three days' worth of sleep out of her eyes.

"It's just organised differently, that's all." Rori moved around the bed and leaned on the door frame.

Gretchen looked at the reflection in the mirror. The girl definitely took after her father, with her arms crossed just like his and the same expression on her face. Perhaps it was a non-expression, though. Working in the bookshop had given Gretchen some exposure to children, and she noticed that they usually wore their thoughts plain as day on their faces. Rori, though, looked as pleasantly blank as could be.

Narrowing her eyes, Gretchen wrung out the flannel and draped it over the side of the sink. She turned to Rori. "What?"

Rori shifted her weight to stand equally on both feet, fingers playing together absently and replied, "What do you mean 'what'?"

"I mean, *Aurora*, that you are being intentionally vague. I can see it in your face."

The girl crossed her arms again, but her face stayed the same. "You can't see anything on my face."

"My point exactly." Gretchen walked past her, back into the bedroom and moved to the pile of clothes. She made quick work of putting them on. The pile included knickers, socks, tracksuit bottoms, and a sports bra. She moved to the wardrobe where her things had been, but Rori darted in front of it, blocking the drawers.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting a shirt."

"You don't need a shirt. You're very fit and pretty. You should go down like that," Rori said with a sweet smile.

Too sweet.

"I will be just as fit and pretty with a shirt on. Besides, I'm not going to breakfast half-dressed." Gretchen locked eyes with the girl, and Rori eventually moved to the side.

She opened the drawers until she found what she was looking for.

"What is the delay up here?" Severus asked from the doorway, startling the room's occupants.

Gretchen turned around, fumbling to cover up with the still-folded top. Before she could get her other hand around to unfolding it, Rori stepped in and entwined their fingers.

It was obviously a plot to keep Gretchen exposed, she thought, but there was something so right about that tiny hand in hers. She could not pull away.

Just as Rori was about to reply, Severus said, "Mischief, clearly."

"No, Father. Gretchen and I were just talking about clothes. You wouldn't be interested."

Severus smiled, and Gretchen felt her skin prick up. It was not a nice smile. "Fashion is a subject where my knowledge is lacking. Why don't you enlighten me?"

Gretchen looked down at Rori and saw that the girl was not intimidated. After a moment, their hands pulled apart, and Rori moved to stand beside her father. Then she wrapped one arm around him and said, "Gretchen wants to wear that ratty old top to do her practice, and I said that she would look better without it."

"Define 'better'." Severus was looking down at his daughter now, and Gretchen eyed the two. She felt as much like the watcher as the watched.

"Well, I think that Gretchen looks good just as she is. Don't you, Father?"

"I do."

"So that settles it." Rori smiled and moved away from Severus, her arm already stretched to take the shirt from Gretchen.

However, Severus's hand clamped down on Rori's shoulder and kept her in place. "I think not. When has incomplete attire ever been allowable at the table?"

Finally, Rori's confidence seemed to stutter. "I thought we just decided that her attire was complete."

"Hardly. Furthermore, from the context of your earlier assertion, you are using 'good' to mean 'attractive'. Do you think it is wise for Gretchen to present herself in such a way to... Papa Albus?"

Gretchen watched Rori's face, and it seemed that the other shoe had dropped for Rori. She shook her head rather quickly, her nose scrunching up in distaste. Gretchen felt it was allowable to put the top on at last.

Rori shrugged, smiling genuinely for the first time all morning, and then darted out of the room, shouting, "Better hurry, or I'll eat all the bacon!"

Severus watched, an indulgent smile on his face. "It's true; she will. I encourage you to eat heartily this morning, Gretchen. You have quite the day ahead of you." His arm swept in front of him, indicating that she should exit the room first.

As Gretchen walked by, Severus touched her lower back. At first it was with just his fingertips, but soon his whole hand was pressed against her. She looked up at him, and he was staring down at her. His breathing was slow and steady, and her breath deepened to match.

His voice, when he spoke, was smooth and quiet. "I apologise. I suspect her exposure to Potter and his wife, among other couples, has given her unwarranted expectations about the nature of our relationship. I will speak to her."

By the time he had finished speaking, Gretchen was entranced. His voice had lulled her. All she could do in response was nod dumbly. Then his hand pulled away from her body, but not before his fingers tickled up her spine. She had never felt anything like it, and she walked down the stairs in a daze. Only the sight of Rori sitting in her chair at the table chewing her bacon could bring Gretchen back to reality. The smells at the table brought her hunger back to the fore, and she dug in as if nothing else mattered in the world.

---

After breakfast, Severus had Rori clean up the dishes, and he took Gretchen into his study. Albus would be coming soon, and he wanted to talk to Gretchen when they both seemed to be feeling stable. He chose his usual chair, and she chose the two-seater sofa. It occurred to Severus, then, that he would need to buy a chair for Hermione and perhaps also a sofa fit for three.

Those concerns were better saved for later, though. Gretchen was staring at him, and he wanted to take advantage of her complete attention.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked. He had been going over this discussion again and again as he watched and waited for her to wake up. Without his careful plans to keep a measured pace, events had unfurled into chaos. He wouldn't allow it to happen again.

Gretchen nodded and sank back onto the pillows. Severus let the silence embrace them for a moment. He wanted to watch her, to let her feel comfortable in this life he had built with Rori. His study was warm, perhaps even cosy. There were nice windows and bookshelves. The wall colour, where it could be seen, was a shade of blue that Hermione had told him she favoured. It was striking against the polished wood throughout the room. The fabrics in the room were variations on a paisley pattern, large enough to avoid looking busy.

She sighed and asked, "You wanted to talk?"

Severus was tracing the pattern on the arm of his chair. He knew he looked thoughtful, perhaps even concerned. That is what he wanted Gretchen to think, at least. He had so many skills that had served him over his life. He was preparing to employ them all to achieve this goal. He needed to reel her in slowly.

"Sunday and Monday, too were overwhelming, and for that, I must apologise. I felt it, and Rori felt it, and we didn't even experience the world turn on its ear as you did." Severus looked over at Gretchen, as if searching for confirmation from her.

A shrug was his only answer. Severus watched her closely, storing away bits and pieces. He *knew* she had over-exerted herself on Sunday. After she had been in his mind, she had vented magically, and even though it had only been late afternoon, she had gone to bed and slept through the night. Monday, with Albus and Rori, Rori's summary of events, and then Ollivander's. It was dizzying even to remember.

But Gretchen didn't seem to appreciate that aspect. She just sat there, waiting for him.

He went back to tracing the pattern on his chair for a moment. "What's more, I was glib about your emotional reactions." Severus held up his hand when she started to speak. "I do not mean that you did not get angry at your flat on Sunday, or any of the other reactions we noted prior to visiting Ollivander's. However, I do want to impress upon you that this will not be simple, nor will it be easy.

"What we have accomplished and I can assure you that they are great accomplishments in your situation are the most superficial expressions of human emotion. I want you to know what it feels like to be blind with fury, paralysed by your sadness. I want you to know what fear is and to feel, truly experience, the happiness that life can award."

She stared at him for a moment before nodding. The silence in the room spread out again, and Severus could hear Rori putting the dry dishes away. They clattered together because Rori insisted she was too tall to warrant using the step stool any more. He felt his heart swell at the thought of his daughter.

"Gretchen, do you believe that your life was good enough?"

Looking away from him, Gretchen let her eyes wander about the room. "Better than most, surely. I have a good job, and I make a fair living. I don't have to worry about my safety."

Severus leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and steepling his fingers. "Why did you come here, then?"

There was a long pause before she spoke. "Well, you came for the necklace." She realised she hadn't thought of it since she arrived, and she reached for it at her neck.

Severus smiled at her. "You are very interesting to me, Gretchen. The way you cling to that necklace is... curious." The clock on his desk in the corner chimed. Albus would be arriving in fifteen minutes. "We can discuss this more later. I did not intend to spend so much time on this at all. What I wanted to preface is that Albus will be here to begin your training with your new staff." He opened his hand up to the corner by the door where the staff from Ollivander's rested. It was on the wall in a mounted bracket, as if it had always been there. "It will be your primary tool in the work ahead."

She looked over at the staff and gasped. It was truly a sight to behold, and Severus had spent a fair amount of time this week staring at it. Albus had come by each day to check on Gretchen and Hermione and to give Severus some respite. Severus had used the break to maintain the house and to shower and nap furtively. When he had extra time, he would stare at the beautiful staff, the top twisting and curling around itself.

It reminded Severus of Hermione's hair, particularly one morning, early in her pregnancy. She had been teasing him as she lay in bed, and he had finally given in to her prodding, grabbing her feet as he stood at the foot of the bed and pulling her body towards him. Her hair had trailed down the bed, but curled and turned around itself, golden and chestnut highlights catching the morning light.

Severus had examined the staff thoroughly, finding the thinner branches at the top to be sturdy. Also, though they hadn't been there before Gretchen gripped it, symbols had been burnt around the hand-hold in the moments between her reaching for it and her fainting. Ollivander had said that was not an unusual occurrence when a staff chose a witch or wizard. There was a larger magical core in a staff, and the immediate connection could cause 'spontaneous inscription'.

"The last time I held it, I passed out for three days. What makes you think I'm interested?" she asked, never taking her eyes off it.

Rising to retrieve the staff, Severus didn't speak until he was standing in front of her, angling it towards her in an inviting way. "Your holding of this staff was not the issue. We have a fair idea what the issue is, but we do not have time to discuss it. Albus and I both believe that you and your staff alone will cause no problem. The issue arose when Rori took your hand while you were holding the staff, causing some sort of magical short circuit, if you will.

"For the time being, directly before and after your practice with Albus, Rori will not be present. After you complete your daily practice, you will rest. In the afternoons, when you are feeling up to it, we will work on trying to trigger your memories. We will make a conscious effort not to overdo any of these activities. Agreed?"

Gretchen stood and slid her hand around the smallest section of the staff. "Sounds reasonable."

She didn't say anything about the symbols, which surprised Severus. She had stared at the staff as he outlined her day and not asked about them. Something was not right. As he opened his mouth to speak, the doorbell rang. "And that will be Albus." It would have to wait. Severus led her out of the room to greet the headmaster.

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Gretchen wasn't sure what she was doing out in this field, holding her staff in both of her hands in front of her body, obeying the prompts of this impossibly old man. Recite the alphabet from a to z. Recite the alphabet from z to a. Again. From alpha to omega. From omega to alpha. Again. Asch to ziu. Ziu to asch. Again.

She didn't feel as if she was *doing* anything.

Count to forty-nine. Count down. Count by odds. Count down. Count by evens. Count down. Count by squares. Count down. Count by cubes. Count down. Count to zero.

Open your eyes.

She did. Gretchen opened her eyes to the man. He was smiling. A fog had swept up from the lake and was catching the light as it lifted from the horizon. She swooned, but held herself up with the staff in her hands. She felt empty. She felt clean. It felt so good to see Professor Dumbledore again; she knew he'd know what to do. He always did.

But now he was frowning. He moved his staff to his right side, and although she had been mirroring him before, she moved her staff to *her* right side.

Count down from one hundred. 'Breathe, Gretchen,' he was saying. She heard a whimper, and that heaviness was growing again inside her body. How had she not noticed it before? And then that dark man was carrying her. He wasn't a nice man, but she trusted him. He smelled good, like home. Why couldn't she remember his name?

And then she was lying on the sofa, and she thought maybe a house-elf could bring her toast. It was all she could keep down some days. But Severus brought her a cup of tea instead. She had had just a couple of swallows when she felt the Calming Draught kick in. She lifted the cup away from her chest, and someone took it away. Gretchen frowned. She had just got up; she shouldn't be napping on the couch. What had they put in her tea? She couldn't remember. Maybe she *did* need a little more sleep. Curling up under her favourite blanket, she dozed off right away.

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Gretchen woke up confused. She was wearing her workout clothes, and she was under a blanket on an unfamiliar green sofa. It was far too nice to be hers. There were voices trailing in from another room. A masculine baritone and the twitter of a little girl. Gretchen stretched, her arms sweeping out to the side. Her fingers tingled, and she shook them out gently.

"She's up!" announced the girl, and Gretchen heard a chair scrape in the other room. The next thing she knew, she had a ten-year-old pressed against her hip on the sofa. Rori asked, "How do you feel?"

"Fine." Gretchen rubbed her eyes and frowned. "Why am I on the sofa? Did I miss the practice?"

"No! Papa Albus came, and after, he said you did a very good job. He also mentioned to tell you that your memory will be questionable, but that it's okay."

Gretchen put her hands over her face. Well, she *did* remember a little something, but it was very dreamlike. She twisted around, looking for Severus. He was leaning in the doorway and watching her.

"So I just have to believe that I didn't sleep the day away."

Severus said, "Only about forty-five minutes. We have not had lunch yet."

His voice was very soothing and rich. Perhaps it was foolish, but Gretchen felt safe when he spoke, secure even. She turned back to Rori. "Now what?"

"Well, we were playing Cheat in the kitchen while you rested. Do you want to play? We can teach you."

Rubbing her eyes one last time, Gretchen nodded. "I know how to play. It was actually one of the things I did while I was in hospital."

"Play games?" Rori asked, taking Gretchen's hand in hers and pulling her to the kitchen, choosing to sit them in neighbouring chairs at the table.



Severus put a tall mug of tea by Gretchen's hand, and then he picked up the cards and began to shuffle them. He and Rori picked up the conversation they had left off when Gretchen woke, and as she picked up her tea, she closed her eyes just to listen to the sound of them. The steam rose against her cheeks, and she was completely at ease.

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They played cards until lunch and then kept at it until dinner. Severus had left for a moment to send an owl to Longbottom, who had tentatively been appointed to start the Pensieve viewings. It would wait until the next day, however. Gretchen and Rori were too engrossed in the game for Severus to disturb them.

He knew that he and Rori were far too good at this particular game for most of their friends. Potter always lost miserably to Rori, and Severus loved to watch him get outwitted by his daughter. They always had a good time, but Potter would rather play other games, like Quidditch. Gretchen was different though. As they played, she watched them like a hawk. All she said about her difficulties was that the doctors had been much easier on her when she was first learning than Rori and Severus were now.

Of course, the doctors would have been looking for data on Gretchen's capacity, and he and Rori were not. Well, not the same sort of data anyway. Severus had to admit, though, that Gretchen had a strong aptitude for card counting and, by the end of the afternoon, was beginning to hold her own against Rori, who was quite sly for her age.

The two of them combined were a challenge for Severus, but he had no qualms about pitting them against each other to ensure his own victory every now and again. And while they did that, he watched.

Severus thought that Gretchen was having a pleasant time. She began to speak informally and began to tease Rori when either of them did well on any given round. He couldn't deny that he felt a little jealous of Gretchen's focus on the little girl, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. More importantly, any reactions that Rori could provoke in Gretchen were invaluable. Little eye rolls and conspiratorial glances her way and plenty of quips that had Rori giggling all seemed to accumulate into something momentous for Gretchen.

She, however, never giggled. Severus could see her face smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes. She was well trained in pleasantry, adept in adapting.

No matter. It was only the first real day. They would do the work, slowly and steadily. Seeds were being planted and would need time to grow, so to speak. If Severus was anything, it was patient.

## Chapter 8

*Chapter 9 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

The next day after lunch, Severus let Neville Longbottom into the house, nodding to the man as he walked through the door. Longbottom's visits were regular but infrequent. He and Severus had established a very delicate peace, and neither wanted to risk it by invoking Longbottom's curious ability to be a complete dunderhead.

When Rori poked her head out of the kitchen and saw who was there, she squealed and ran into the room. "Uncle Nev!"

Longbottom scooped her up and squeezed until Rori groaned. "You can't be that excited to see me. Seems as if I just saw you a week ago at some party or other."

Back on her feet, Rori stuck her tongue out at Longbottom. "You said you'd show me the new Chinese Chomping Cabbages!"

"And *you* said you'd come and visit me in the greenhouse." Longbottom sniffed and pouted. Rori began to pull faces at him, and then Longbottom was tickling her, and her gales of laughter filled the room.

Severus looked up to see Gretchen standing near the bottom of the steps, one foot lifted as she stared at Longbottom and Rori. Her jaw was slack, and one small tear ran down the side of her cheek. Severus cleared his throat, and the noise broke up the scene in the room. Gretchen moved forward, wiping her face with one hand and then wiping her hand on her denims.

As if he were her anchor, Gretchen moved to stand besides Severus. Neville and Rori stood opposite from them, Rori squirming each time Neville poked her in the side. Severus watched Gretchen from the corner of his eye. This was to be a control test of what Weasley had done on Sunday. Trevor, Longbottom's adventurous amphibian from his first years at school, was a loaded name, and if Gretchen held true to form, Hermione would get the first reaction.

Severus turned his body toward Gretchen and placed his hand on the small of her back. "Gretchen, I'd like you to meet Neville Longbottom."

She leaned forward and shook his hand.

After the pleasantries, Longbottom asked, "Have you seen Trevor yet?"

Gretchen frowned. "I don't know whom you are talking about. I've never met a Trevor."

Rori frowned, but Longbottom seemed only to take it as a challenge. He reached out and took Gretchen's hand, leading her into the kitchen, where the Pensieve was set out. Longbottom, in that inane, prattling way of his, was telling Gretchen all about Trevor and how he had got loose all the time.

It was at this point that Gretchen said, "Well, I hope Malfoy doesn't find him before we do."

*There* was the marker they had been waiting for! "Rori," Severus whispered, "Go and invite Draco to Sunday dinner. Quick now, and then stay in your room until someone comes for you."

And then Rori was off up the stairs to the top of the house, where their owl roosted. Once she was gone, Severus moved into the kitchen, where Gretchen and Longbottom were already in the Pensieve. He started up the kettle for tea and then sat at the head of the table, waiting for them to return from Longbottom's memories.

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Nearly half an hour later, Gretchen found herself staring into her tea mug, trying to keep dizziness at bay.

Longbottom stirred his tea with slow, silent rotations. He hadn't put anything in it, but he stirred it, nonetheless. "I came to the bookshop more times than you knew," Neville said.

Gretchen, who had had to vomit after coming out of the Pensieve and had then destroyed another lovely silk pillow that Severus had provided for her, shifted in her chair. "Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Well, you're not her, are you? You don't know me. You don't even know what Potions is, let alone how many points you lost for helping me through it."

Severus snorted, and Gretchen's head snapped round to look at him a moment. He seemed ... just a bit irritated. Then she turned back to Neville and put her hands around her teacup. "Still ..."

Neville scowled at her. "What 'still'? This is a two-way street, Gretchen. If we were so easy to pick out of the crowd, why didn't you ever say anything to us? Hermione would have."

Confronted with the hurt and anger on Neville's face, Gretchen felt short of breath. She tried to speak, but nothing would come out; her jaw just worked as if she were a fish trying to breathe air. Something slimy stretched into her gut, and she felt her skin crawl.

"And that necklace! Do you know I drew that phoenix? It was something Ron and I worked out just before our lot joined the Order. We had it made from goblin-wrought silver, and then we each put the phoenix on our skin with a spell." Neville was rolling up his sleeve now, and on the inside of his forearm, just below his elbow, was a phoenix. It was larger than hers by a good deal, but it was the same pink as the scar she had. "I would see *that necklace* on you, and I knew it was a Portkey, and you were so close, Gretchen, so close!" His fist hit the table. Then he pulled a cloth from his pocket and wiped his eyes.

Gretchen's fingers fiddled with the charm, with a definite sense of something uncomfortable happening. The atmosphere in the room was thick, and she was staring at this man, completely befuddled by what he'd told her and what he'd shown her. She didn't know what to do with herself, so she reviewed the day so far, attempting to feel grounded again. She decided right off that the Pensieve was not as nice as 'Legilimens', whatever that was. But Neville had been so disarming, charming even, with his nice face and warm smile, why should she not follow him into the magic salad bowl? Then, as she'd watched the little girl they all thought her to have been, she had felt more detached than ever.

Had that been a sign that they were close? Did she lose interest the closer they got? Her eyes were tracing the wood grain of the table top when Neville finally pushed away from the table.

"I should go. I'm sorry. I had no intention of saying any of these things tonight. I just ..." His head fell back, and he sighed. It was loud and tired.

Severus stood and Gretchen followed. Neville moved toward the door, and she went to see him out. Once the two of them were standing before it, Neville, with his hand on the doorknob, toed the floor and said, "Gretchen, it's good to have you here. It's weird but very good. I don't want you to think that... Well, it's not like you are intentionally doing any of this. I'm sure once you get your magic in hand, even if you don't regain your memory, that you can have a good life here *with us*."

Then she was surrounded by one of his bear hugs. Just as she had watched happen to Rori, Gretchen was now feeling the strong arms cradle her, squeezing just a bit much. She didn't really go for hugging, hadn't really understood the appeal. Now, however, she felt like she could relax into him, and she even dared to return it. It was quite nice, in fact, and she didn't even realise when she lost consciousness again.

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When she passed out this time, Severus did not hesitate to cast the Rennervate. He had seen the magical pulse that happened before Gretchen's body went slack, and it was nothing more than a run-of-the-mill moment of magical flux. Much as rising too quickly after being stationary for an extended period could cause rapid blood shift, so could Gretchen's magic sweep in and out like an angry tide.

This would have to be accounted for as they proceeded.

Longbottom held Gretchen in his arms when her body went slack. He hefted her up under her knees and shoulders after Severus cast the spell. Gretchen was blinking, her eyes unfocused as her head lolled forward.

Severus muttered something about careless Gryffindors but decided action was the best course now. "To my bedroom, upstairs on the left, just past Rori's." He followed Longbottom, barely registering that Rori's door was open as they passed by.

Longbottom lay Gretchen down on top of the covers. Too bad he had chosen Severus's bed instead of the one Gretchen had been using. Severus was just about to move her when she stretched out, smelling the pillow and then sighing in satisfaction.

The two men met at the door, and Severus spoke low as he said, "Thank you for coming. Please compare your thoughts with the Headmaster's."

With one last look at the woman in bed, Longbottom loped out the door. Severus listened to him knock at Rori's and then say his goodbyes. After, Rori came and took his hand.

"Is it okay that she keeps passing out, Dad?"

"I'm awake, Rori," Gretchen announced, rolling over, although she pulled the blanket around her as she went. She burrowed beneath it, sniffing it as if it were the most pleasant scent.

Severus stroked Rori's hair, an absent-minded pastime. "Yes, I woke her back up. Sometimes it will be viable to do so, although we must keep our pace moderate and try to avoid overdoing it to begin with."

Rori sighed, sounding disappointed. "So that's it for the day?" She walked to where Gretchen lay in bed and took her hand. Their fingers interlocked, and Gretchen let go of the blanket to stroke Rori's hair.

"As far as visitors with memories in Pensieve silver are concerned, yes. However, I suspect we can find something to while away the hours." Severus watched from the doorway as Gretchen poured all of her attention onto Rori, as if memorising her. "Perhaps Gretchen would like to sit with her staff after she has rested and do the breathing Albus recommended. You could show her how you learned to meditate while we were in Japan, if you like."

Rori bounced a couple of times and turned to Gretchen. "Would that be okay?"

Gretchen smiled, and Severus felt a pang of loss as her face took on one of Hermione's old expressions. After Rori had been born, Hermione had spent hours staring at their baby, stroking her hair, and all the time she had worn a secret smile. Long after she'd rocked her daughter to sleep, sometimes even forgetting to tuck her breast away after a feeding, Hermione had watched Aurora. He didn't hear Gretchen's response, but from the way Rori clapped her hands, the answer must have been a 'yes'.

The two were enchanted with each other, so Severus stepped from the room to the bathroom, being as quiet as he could be, to get himself together.

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Gretchen saw Severus leave from the corner of her eye, and she saw the strange non-expression on his face just before he went. She didn't stop watching Rori, though. "You know that you and I and the staff aren't allowed to be together, right?" Gretchen asked.

Rori was swinging their clasped hands back and forth in gentle time. "I know. I don't like it, but it's better that way. I was really scared when you fainted in Ollivander's."

The little girl's face fell, and their hands stopped swinging. Gretchen moved back on the bed, stretched out on her side. She patted one hand on the bed beside her, and Rori crawled up. Sitting with her legs folded, she fiddled with the ends of her hair.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Rori." Gretchen looked up at the girl. "You understand that, right?"

She nodded. "Dad explained it to me. It's just..."

Silence stretched out, and then Rori flopped on her back, pushing herself until her head was on the pillow.

Gretchen took up one of Rori's curls, so familiar and yet so different. "It's a lot. A lot of pressure and a lot of change." Rori looked at her, and Gretchen felt the unbelievable weight of her attention. Also, the unbelievable lightness of it. "I'm glad I'm here, though, with you and Severus."

Rori budged up closer, pulling the blanket over her so they were under it together. They both took a deep breath and sighed.

After a few moments of twisting the near-black curl around her finger, Gretchen was jarred when Rori asked, "Do you want to kiss my dad?"

The air left Gretchen's lungs in a loud puff. She recovered her breath and said, "I don't even know your dad, and I'm not about to go snogging strange men just because they happen to claim to be my long-lost husband."

Rori smiled. "You're bad at lying. You *do* want to snog him!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not lying." Gretchen pursed her lips at Rori and then moved to sit up. She also tried to keep the blanket around the pair of them, and soon Rori was sitting again as well. The blanket was wrapped around their shoulders, and their knees brushed against each other.

"Yes. Yes you are. If you didn't want to snog him, you would make a face or something and just say no."

Gretchen stared down at the girl: she was looking quite pleased with herself. "You're only saying that because you want me to want to." The look on Rori's face was all the answer she needed. Rori was embarrassed enough from talking about her father snogging that she couldn't hide the truth.

Then Rori switched tack. "He hasn't ever had a girlfriend my whole life."

"I can't have a girlfriend when I have an impertinent daughter like you in my life."

Gretchen's body startled at the sound of Severus's voice, and Gretchen just barely kept herself from swearing loudly. "Must you always creep in like that?"

"Yes," he said.

Then Rori smiled. "That's how he catches all the trouble-makers."

"Curly-headed ones in particular. Dinner is downstairs, ladies."

"That was quick. You couldn't have been gone for more than a few minutes."

Rori hopped off the bed and said, "House-elves."

"What?"

Severus, frowning at Rori for some reason, said, "Take-away. It just arrived. I thought that, since you got little benefit from lunch, you might be hungry now."

"I am, thanks." Gretchen felt the sides of her mouth turn up just a little. It felt odd, and she rubbed the side of her cheek a moment. However, Severus was talking about something as he led them into the kitchen, and Gretchen soon forgot about it as she tried to follow along.

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Severus had been a solitary man for much of his life. He had had one friend as a child, and by the time he left Hogwarts, he'd had none. Fellow Death Eaters could hardly have been considered friends. Comrades might have been a better word, but he would never have turned to one of them in a vulnerable moment. He liked to think that Albus was his friend, and some of the other staff from his time teaching, but those people could be counted on his fingers, and none of those relationships were a simple acquaintanceship that had taken root and flourished. Further, it had been his assignment to drive people away, as a good double-agent should.

When he had married, Severus had felt for the first time since he was very small what it was like to be taken care of. At first it had scoured his nerves. Hermione would set out his socks and boots when he was a few minutes late or some such thing. He had grumbled and griped, sneering at her even if she wasn't present.

She wore him down. Hermione was excellent at caring for other people, particularly if they didn't want her to. It seemed as if she liked the challenge. Their marriage had lasted barely over a year before the Dark Lord's demise, but it was all the time she needed to break through Severus's walls.

Thus, he knew what signs to look for when a person was coming to rely on someone else.

What's more, Hermione, the true spirit of Gretchen's body, obviously wanted out and back into her life. Why else would she have been so moved by seeing Longbottom play with Rori or be so entranced by her daughter? If this were any other child, she would have lost interest long ago.

Severus was keeping a tally of all the little bits he'd seen over the week, and for such a short time, there was rapid growth. He would not be announcing her progress, though, or congratulating her every move. Little smiles over such considerations were best unnoted.

At least, that's how Hermione had managed to make him feel safe enough to be taken care of all those years ago.

When Gretchen had arrived in the world, the state had provided for her welfare while she had been in their care and had provided her with an education to get her on her feet, and after that, she'd been on her own. Their care hadn't been such a warm affair that she'd stayed with any of her counsellors for any length of time; she had been alone for all the life she could remember. She had done well for herself, all things considered.

However, those times were over. Severus had every resource Gretchen needed in order to feel at home and cared for, and he would not refrain from doing anything if it furthered his agenda. Asking Hogwarts's house-elves to bring over some of Hermione's favourite foods was hardly an inconvenience. Gretchen's gasp of surprise and furrowed eyebrows were well worth it.

Severus watched Gretchen as she enjoyed her meal, feeling safe and relaxed with him and Rori. The conversation ebbed and flowed, and although he and Rori didn't eat much, Gretchen did. When at last she pushed her plate away, both sides of her mouth turned up just so.

They retired to the living room, each taking a spot on the green couch.

"So, Neville was the first wizard I met?" Gretchen asked, twisting her body so she could look at Severus.

Shaking his head, he said, "He was the first student you met on the train to Hogwarts. You would have gone shopping for your supplies, books, and your wand in Diagon

Alley first. He was your first friend on the train and your only friend for some time."

"But I thought Harry and Ronald..."

"Oh, they became your best friends, but not at first. You were quite insufferable. Always waving your hand about and regurgitating unwanted information onto innocent bystanders."

Gretchen's eyes narrowed. "That's not very nice, Severus."

He mimicked her position on the couch, and Rori took her usual position at his side, her head pillowed on his chest.

"I am not nice, Gretchen. Furthermore, it's true. Tell me, what was it like when you first got to university? Did you do all your reading well in advance? Did you have every answer to every question ready with which to assault your poor professors?"

"I did the work. I was prepared. It's not my fault the others stayed out drinking and couldn't be bothered."

"As I suspected." Severus smiled, baring his teeth.

"I was a very good student! The best you ever had!"

Beside him, Rori twitched, but Severus just wrapped his arm around her, holding her secure against his body. He hummed and turned his attention to the hearth. A flick of his wand and it was blazing.

Gretchen looked between them for a moment and then stared off into space. The conversation in the room was replaced by the ticking of the clock and a gentle wind rustling through the trees outside. With a start, Gretchen jumped up from the couch.

"My job! I can't believe I forgot about my work! I have to ring my boss. Where's the phone?"

Severus looked at her and said, "There is no phone, Gretchen. I've taken care of all that."

"What do you mean? I just came, and I didn't call or anything."

Leaning forward, Severus withdrew his body from under Rori and stood in front of Gretchen. He rested his hands on her shoulders and spoke in a calm voice. "Gretchen, I took care of it. If you want to go back, everything will be waiting for you."

"Don't go!" Rori exclaimed from her spot in the centre of the couch. "You can't go yet!"

"I don't want to go. I just...I just remembered about my job, this second. How could I forget something like that? All my work?"

Severus looked over her face; her brow was pulled down, and she looked a bit sour. "Apart from being unconscious for half the week, I would posit that Rori and I have kept you on your toes, so to speak." He slid his hands over her shoulders and down to her arms. "When I contacted your supervisor, she was adamant that you pursue this lead on your memories. I know it may be hard to believe, but the people in your life are not as apathetic towards your situation as you are towards them."

On the mantel, a picture frame cracked.

"I don't choose to be apathetic! I didn't choose any of this!"

The sounds of glass cracking around the room sent Severus into action mode. "Rori, go to your room at once. *Accio* Gretchen's staff." As Rori's footsteps pounded up the stairs, Severus reached out and caught the long staff as it sailed in from his office. He stood it in front of Gretchen and moved her hands to the thinnest part.

Once she had a grip of the thing, her head fell back, and she gasped aloud. The pressure in the room changed, and the air seemed to glow just a bit.

Severus's heart pounded. It was the same glow that had surrounded Rori's crib the night Hermione vanished and had been seen after the first morning of practice with Albus. They were in it together, standing in a luminescent fog.

"Severus? Severus, what's happening?" Gretchen's head rolled forward on her shoulders. When she tried to lift it, she looked drunk, her pupils wide and glassy.

"I'm not sure. You're doing fine. You're okay. Rori's okay. It was just a bit of broken glass. Slow your breathing. There's a girl."

As her breathing slowed and her panic diminished, Severus thought he could almost see the fog sweeping back into her, through her nose, soaking into her pores. The more that she absorbed, the more stable she became.

Feeling the pressure of the crisis was over, he rolled his shoulders back.

Gretchen looked up at him from around her staff. "What happened?"

"What do you remember?"

"Everything. Flipping out over my job, the accidental magic, the fog. What is that fog?"

Severus sank onto the couch. "That appears to be a very important question. We will have to investigate."

"I scared Rori." Gretchen sat beside him then and rested her head on her wrists. Her head was cradled where her hands met at the centre part of her staff, and Severus noticed there were more inscriptions than there had been before.

"No, I scared Rori. She rarely causes me to raise my voice, so hearing any sense of command or urgency causes her... distress."

"I want to see her. I do not want to let go of this. It feels like the only thing anchoring me to the world right now."

Severus turned and observed Gretchen and her staff. "Perhaps we will try a controlled run to discover what it means for you and Rori and that staff to be in the same place at the same time?"

Gretchen nodded. "Will you go and talk to her first? She's probably very confused right now. I know I am."

He let his eyes rest on Gretchen's bowed head for a moment before he agreed, ascending the stairs to Rori's room.

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Gretchen sat on the couch, trying yet again to get her body under control. She had never anticipated that any of these things would happen if she were to activate the necklace. The most, she had thought, was that the word would activate a beacon, and someone would come and get her, perhaps, as they did on the television.

She reached for her necklace with her left hand, securing the staff in her right. No wonder the doctors, the *Muggle* doctors, as Rori had called them, didn't understand and couldn't fix her. All of the things that had happened so far were beyond imagination, let alone science.

Severus called to her from upstairs, and Gretchen rose, eager, so oddlyeager to see Rori again. Navigating the room with the staff wasn't difficult, but it was longer and heavier than a mop or broom, so it wasn't exactly easy, either. Up the stairs and around the corner to Rori's room, where the little girl stood holding her father's hand.

"How are you?" Rori asked as if nothing had happened.

"Not having kittens about my boring old work anymore. That's something, right?" Gretchen turned her lips up to smile, but her forehead felt heavy with the seriousness of the moment.

Rori smiled back at her in just the same way. "Dad says we should hold hands."

"Your dad is a very clever man." Gretchen extended her left arm and flexed her fingers a bit, encouraging Rori to come over.

The little girl's smile faded, and her face turned down. "He's not always right, you know."

"Well, what do you think we should do, then?"

Her only answer was to shrug. Gretchen licked her lips and curled her fingers, beckoning Rori her way. She looked like she was tempted, and soon Gretchen was feeling that peace she could only find when Rori was near, was touching her. They blinked at each other, waiting for something, anything, but nothing happened.

Severus nodded. "Very well. The new arrangement is that Gretchen keeps the staff with her at all times."

"I seriously do not want to carry this with me all the time. Is that absolutely necessary?"

He stuck out his hand and said, "*Accio* Ollivander's package."

Gretchen watched as a paper package sailed into the room from who knew where. It landed in Severus's hand, and he presented to her.

"What's this?" She dropped Rori's hand to take the package, moving to the bed to sit down. Rori moved with her, though, and Gretchen laid the staff across both their laps so she could unwrap the package.

Inside were two harnesses. One was of thick leather; the other was brushed satin. Rori reached for the satin one, which shone softly, a deep blue colour that was uniform throughout. A page fluttered to the floor from the packaging, and Severus bent to pick it up.

Gretchen was investigating the leather harness, finding it adjustable, with two circle loops on one side. Looking up, she saw that Severus had read the note. "Well?"

"Take care around doors." He flipped it so she could see.

"I'm to strap it to my back? Well that's something, I suppose."

Severus lifted the leather harness from her lap. "Shall we try it?"

Gretchen stood, holding the staff in her right hand as Severus put the large loop of the harness over her head and one shoulder. He moved to stand behind her and smoothed the leather between her shoulder blades and down over her left hip, adjusting the loops for the staff to be toward the top of her back. Then he stepped in front of her, ensuring that the leather lay flat over her collar and between her breasts.

He did not seem to notice how close his hands were to her... body, but Gretchen felt her heart rate rise when his fingers ensured size and fit. She knew for certain that she was attracted to him now but kept it to herself. She had gone years without seeking the attentions of a man; she could certainly go without now. This seemed the wisest plan, what with her life turned upside down and inside out.

"How am I to put it in there? The loops are solid."

Severus, letting his eyes drift up her body without hurry, smirked. "*Magic*, Gretchen. Just place the staff behind your back."

She tried first to lift her hand up, but the bottom of her staff hit the stump of Rori's bed. It startled her, and Gretchen jumped. "Sorry," she muttered and bent her elbow so that the tip of staff moved from her hip up toward her shoulders. As if feeding something down the Hoover tube, the staff was sucked into the harness, and Gretchen caressed the staff as it left her hand.

Looking between Rori and Severus, she asked, "Yes? Is it in there?"

Severus nodded, moving behind her again to make some final adjustments.

Rori bounced a bit with excitement. "Do this one next, Dad. I think it's for inside anyway."

They repeated the process for the finer harness, Rori smiling at her the whole time. Once it was set, Gretchen reached out for Rori again. It was delightful how the girl gained confidence now that the staff was in its place.

"Can I show you the breathing now?" Rori asked, stroking the smooth fabric of the harness.

"I think that is a very good idea, indeed."

Rori turned then to her father and said, "Witches only, please."

Looking up, Gretchen saw Severus smile down at his daughter. His eyes were truly sparkling as he said, "As if I want to sit around and watch you *breathe*. I think I'd rather have each of my arm hairs pulled out one by one."

"That could be arranged." Rori waved at him, pulling Gretchen to the mossy floor in the centre of the room to begin their lesson.

## Chapter 9

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

Stepping back for a moment, Gretchen surveyed the progress. A big Sunday dinner was spread across the kitchen table. The food had arrived out of thin air, it seemed, the moment she had turned away to ask Severus a question. The table was set for four, and Rori had helped her get ready, prattling away the whole time.

For some reason Gretchen had found that settled her. This was odd because she generally hated prattle. Rori was special, it seemed.

A knock came from the front door, and Severus asked Gretchen to answer it. He was sitting on the couch in the living room. Why he couldn't answer the door, she didn't know, but Gretchen moved from the kitchen anyway.

She was starting to get used to having her staff on her back in the harness and found the weight of it very... secure. It was interesting how simple it had been to get comfortable with the staff... with all of this.

As she turned the knob and let the door swing open, Gretchen stepped around it. Looking up at the visitor, she said, "Draco Malfoy!"

Severus had said they were having a special guest to celebrate her first full week back in the Wizarding world, but she never would have thought it would be ~~Draco Malfoy~~. She gaped at him for a moment and then snapped her jaw shut.

He seemed to take that as his cue to move because he flattened his hand on his chest and bowed a bit toward her. "And you are?"

"Gretchen Jones." She extended her hand. Gretchen didn't want to give Draco Malfoy any sort of satisfaction by being discourteous, although she wasn't sure why. Then she watched as his lips pursed making his chin look even pointier.

He was the most sour-looking man she'd ever met.

Draco took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he twisted it and kissed the back of her knuckles. "I was hoping you'd say 'Hermione Granger' so I could lord it over Potty."

Gretchen removed her hand from his as soon as was polite, moving into the open doorway and pulling the door closer to her body. She did not want to let Draco Malfoy into the house. After a moment, Severus slid his hand over her shoulder, squeezing her gently.

His palm was warm, and Gretchen felt her muscles relax. Severus was easing her out of the doorway, though. She had to assume that Draco Malfoy was the expected guest for dinner.

Severus inclined his head toward the man at the door and said, "You're the first person she's known on sight; that should be more than enough."

"It will have to do, I suppose." Draco came in and shrugged off his cloak. It was a casual gesture, but it made Gretchen narrow her eyes. Then he tossed it toward the hooks on the wall, and it floated away from him, arranging itself nicely upon landing.

The three of them stood near the closed door, each waiting to see what the others were about to do. Only when Rori called from the kitchen did they break apart.

"Draco?" Rori asked, poking her head out. Then she hurried into the room, arms already outstretched.

"No, sweetie." Gretchen darted forward, pulling Rori behind her body. She needed to be between the girl and Draco Malfoy. "Stay away from him."

Rori started to protest, but Draco Malfoy leaned so he could look around Gretchen's body and signalled for her to quiet. His move irritated Gretchen, but she didn't want to do anything too bold... yet.

An evil smile spread across his face. "Oh, it's too late, Jones. I've been helping Severus with Rori since Granger disappeared. Nine years, I've been here for her." Draco Malfoy took a step back and adjusted his posture so that he was standing very rigidly on his feet. His nose rose into the air.

Severus moved toward the girl, and Gretchen frowned. How could he let *Draco Malfoy* near his precious daughter?

Draco chimed in again, saying, "It's fine, Rori. Gretchen knows all about me. She remembers."

"Go back to the kitchen, Rori." Gretchen turned and pointed toward the doorway.

Rori glanced at her father and then did as she was told.

When Rori was gone, Gretchen turned back and scowled. "Severus, why do I remember him?"

"Anger and fear are very powerful emotions, Gretchen, and much easier to tap into than happiness. Hermione and Draco have a sordid history. Do you remember why?"

Gretchen put her hands on her hips and let herself take in Draco Malfoy. His mouth, his horrid, pointy mouth stuck out in her mind. "A word."

Severus stepped closer to them, and Gretchen looked up at his face. He was nodding, and she thought that was a good sign, encouraging. However, she was less at ease than she had been in the last eight days, and for the first time, having Severus beside her did not seem to be helping.

He pulled out his wand and said, "*Muffliato*."

Draco Malfoy approached her again and loomed over her. He was using his greater height and weight to his advantage. Gretchen wanted to step back, if only to keep from craning her neck, but she stood her ground.

"What word, *Gretchen*?" He sneered down at her.

The next thing she knew, Severus was pushing her arm toward her staff, and she pulled it out of the harness with her left hand. The smooth wood slid across her palm until she found the grip, and then she had it loose, a third point of contact for her and the floor. Gretchen immediately felt better, but Draco Malfoy was still invading her space.

Something was happening inside her, but she couldn't name it. It was as if something was coming, something thrilling, but she could not imagine what it might be.

In front of her, Draco Malfoy let his head drop down. "I should have known she wouldn't know. *They* never do."

"What's that supposed to mean, Malfoy?"

"I wouldn't expect the likes of you to get it, stupid Mudblood."

The next thing Gretchen knew, her hand was stinging from the hard slap she had delivered across Draco Malfoy's face. It felt so good, *so, so good!* It was just like that time

in third year.

She hadn't realised she was speaking her thoughts until Draco Malfoy exclaimed, "Yes! Third year!" He smiled at her despite the hand print growing pink on his cheek.

The sight of his happiness at being struck jarred Gretchen. She didn't think that it was normal to celebrate getting hit in the face. Her brow furrowed.

Then Draco Malfoy seemed to pick up on the change in her mood. "You self-important cow!" he bellowed, throwing his hands out to either side. "How dare *you* lay a hand on *me*!"

Another wave of... *something* came over her. "He was innocent! And you were going to..." Gretchen turned away from the two men, wracking her brain for what had happened. She licked her lips and turned her hand over again and again. Something bad was going to happen to someone, and Draco Malfoy had done something...

*Fuck!* She'd lost it! She turned back to them and saw them watching her, waiting. She threw her free hand into the air, eyes darting between the two of them. "Don't you dare say a bloody thing! I'll remember it myself, thank you!" She turned toward the kitchen, sliding her staff back in the harness as she went.

"*Finite Incantatem.*"

Just as she passed the green couch, Draco Malfoy cleared his throat. "You know, erm, Gretchen, we sort of became friends while Hermione was pregnant. Not best mates like Potty and the Weasel, of course, but she and I buried the hatchet."

Spinning on her heel, Gretchen turned to look at him with her hands on her hips. "If you're really my friend, Draco Malfoy, you'll let me hate you for as long as I want. This is the *closest* I've ever got to remembering something, and you're not going to take that away from me!"

Then she turned back to the kitchen. Inside, Rori was sitting in her chair looking sullen and fiddling with her napkin.

Gretchen touched her shoulder. The security she had lost in the other room swept back over her, and Gretchen just had to get closer to Rori. Then her hands were cradling the girl's chin, and she had no idea what she was doing, invading this girl's personal space and bringing her closer still.

Rori just accepted it, although her eyes closed for a long moment. When she opened them again, Gretchen thought she could see something in them, devotion perhaps.

Not wanting to hurt Rori by denying her, Gretchen asked, "Has he ever done anything mean to you? Said one single thing, Rori?"

She shook her head as hard and fast as she could. Maybe Draco Malfoy was Rori's friend. Gretchen thought it was possible that he had been hers, too, although everything about him set her on edge now. It was as plausible as any of this, at least. Taking a deep breath, Gretchen said, "Okay, go and say hello."

"Really?"

Gretchen nodded. "Of course."

Rori was off like a shot, leaving Gretchen to fiddle with the napkin as she waited for the others to come into the kitchen.

Severus watched as Draco squatted down to take Rori into his arms. Hugs were something that Draco only did for children, and they had started with Rori.

Draco and his peers hadn't started having their own children until Rori was almost five, but she had thoroughly schooled him on what small children liked and wanted. This included a lot of spinning around and a lot of being held securely. If Draco's father had done those things with him at all, it had ended at a very early age, so Draco had had quite a lot to learn.

"I apologise for scaring you, Aurora," Draco said into her ear.

She just squeezed him tighter. Severus knew that Rori liked Draco just as much as any of Hermione's other contemporaries, save Potter and Weasley. However, Draco had not cared to try to make peace with them, and thus was not often present at gatherings such as Rori's birthday party last Saturday.

"Thank you for the prezzies, Draco. I started writing in the journal you gave me, and the blanket from Oslo is on my bed now."

"You are most welcome," he replied and stood up. "Now, Aurora, we have to talk about me and Gretchen."

"I heard what you said about you and my mum, and I heard what Gretchen said."

Severus opened his mouth, but Draco carried on, saying, "Yes, and Gretchen is perfectly right. I would rather never be friends with her again if it meant I was helping her remember things. She certainly has plenty of reasons not to be my friend."

"Because you were bad when you were a boy."

"Very bad. Especially to Hermione Granger."

Rori moved closer to Severus, and he watched as she worked out the best way to express her next thoughts. Her lips smacked together a few times, although it was nearly silent. "What if she won't let me see you anymore?"

"Well, we would have to respect that. But I don't think that's what will happen."

She must have been very nervous, because Rori, who was normally a very calm child, began to fidget with the hem of her shirt, avoiding Draco's eyes. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, she certainly doesn't like me now, but she still let you come and see me. She didn't throw me out, did she?"

Rori shook her head and took a deep breath.

"Dinner is on the table," Severus said, hoping to divert Rori from her grim line of thought.

Draco flourished his arm, inviting Rori to precede him out of the sitting room. Severus followed, finding Gretchen leaning on the counter with her arms crossed. Her staff was hooked over what had come to be *her* chair. "Severus, I need your help."

"Of course; would you like to come and sit, first?"

Her chin jutted forward, and she stared at the ceiling. "In a moment. I would like to discuss something. You said this was a special dinner, and you invited *Draco Malfoy*. You have misrepresented this event."

"I have to disagree. Recognising someone from your past is significant for you. Today is a special day precisely *because* Draco Malfoy is here."

She didn't answer right away, mulling it over and leaning her head from side to side a couple times. Then she said, "Fine, I can accept that. However, I am... experiencing something. Two things actually."

"Frustration," Draco said as Severus replied, "Betrayal."

Severus watched as Gretchen took these words and weighed them. She must have known the dictionary definition of them because after a moment she began to nod her head.

"Why betrayal, Dad?" Rori slid into her chair and waved Gretchen over.

Severus watched as Gretchen did Rori's bidding, stroking her staff, almost as if she were petting a cat, before she sat. "Betrayal because she wasn't expecting me to prod her memory in uncomfortable places. Frustration because she can't remember the name of something..."

"Buckbeak."

Everyone at the table turned to look at Gretchen, who had just announced the name she couldn't find just minutes before. Careful to ensure that she remembered that she *had* remembered, Severus asked, "I'm sorry?"

Gretchen unfolded her napkin and laid it in her lap. "Buckbeak. He's not a person, but some sort of animal with some sort of bird's head."

"He's a bloody menace." Draco flicked his wand at the water pitcher, setting it to fill everyone's glasses.

Severus set the dishes to serving themselves as well before sitting back. Gretchen hadn't seen much magic in action, and he wanted to watch her as she saw the simple spell go to work.

Her face was pink, and she was grinding her teeth. It was clear that Draco was irritating her with his manner. Good. Then Rori started to tell the story of Buckbeak, but Severus cut in. "No stories at the table, please. Gretchen will probably remember on her own, so we shouldn't spoil it."

"Good." Draco began cutting his meat.

"No matter what a whiny ickle boy Draco is in the story."

That comment earned Severus a glare from across the table. Rori giggled, and Draco gave her one of his haughtiest looks, but that just made Rori giggle harder. Soon, tears were streaming down her cheeks, and everyone, Gretchen included, was smiling as they began dinner.

Severus watched as Rori took control of the table, first by being polite and asking for this or that. Then she told Gretchen a story about when she and Severus had gone to Moscow. This was followed by asking after Draco's father, to which he replied, "He is doing better than the Ministry had hoped."

Rori leaned toward Gretchen and said, "Draco's father has been banished to Muggle London in an attempt to rehabilitate him."

"Information I do not believe I gave my daughter," Severus replied. The hard look he sent Rori's way did little to faze her. "Where did you hear about this?"

With a shrug, she said, "It was in the *Prophet*, Dad."

"Worthless rag," Gretchen muttered. Draco looked at her, but she didn't seem to realise what she'd said.

"Very well, I would like a report on the happenings of *Lucien Malphred*."

This got Gretchen's attention. "Lucien Malphred is your *father*?"

Pushing his plate away, Draco frowned. "He is."

"So, he's a wizard? Or are your parents Muggle, too?"

This caused Draco to cough on his drink of water. As he sputtered and slapped his hand on the table, Severus tapped Gretchen on the shoulder. "You don't understand what he called you in the other room?"

"You mean stu..."

Severus cut her off with a shake of his finger. "Neither that word nor the other word are acceptable language in this house." He tilted his head toward Rori, who was now looking very put out about being excluded. With her head on her hand, she stabbed at her dinner. "Head up, Aurora."

She scowled but obeyed. She was just about to speak when Draco, with the grace of someone trained in diversion, said, "My father is a wizard; however, he has moved to Muggle London as something of a social experiment. I'm terribly interested in what you know about him."

"Not much, really. People have been raving about his restaurant for years, but I never saw the point in going." Gretchen paused to chew and then frowned at the centre of the table. "Eight or nine years ago, he went bankrupt, but was able to buy a little restaurant. He built it up and up, and now he's got one of the premier spots in Knightsbridge. All of the society people go there and politicians."

"Nine years ago you say?" Severus asked as he loaded his fork.

Gretchen turned her frown on him, and it turned to a scowl. "Are you intending to imply that Lucien Malphred has something to do with me?"

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Severus took a bite of food. He locked eyes with Gretchen and gave her a blank look as he chewed.

She looked back at him, taking a few slow breaths before she said, "Every door I open leads to ten more." Then she looked around the table. With a sigh, Gretchen excused herself, grabbing her staff from behind her chair as she went.

"Can I go, too, Dad?"

A look at Rori's plate showed she had eaten a fair amount. He nodded and said, "Do not seek her out, Rori. She'll come to you when she's ready."

"But..."

Lifting his eyebrow, Severus quelled his daughter's protest. She took a deep breath and spun around, her posture curved as if her life were tragic and unfair. She didn't stomp her feet, but only because she knew her father wouldn't allow it.

When he was finally alone with Draco, Severus cracked his neck. "Lucius Malfoy, a Muggle."

Both men gave a rueful chuckle. Draco pulled a metal tube from his shirt pocket, shaking out a thin cigar and offering it to Severus.

After considering, Severus accepted, moving to Rori's chair so the two men could smoke together. He cast a spell over the table and one on the kitchen window to help



ventilate the room.

"Do you think she's got the patience, the perseverance, Severus?"

"Hermione certainly does."

"She's *not* Hermione, Severus," Draco said. He had been one of the few people involved who was not optimistic about reconciling Gretchen and Hermione. He had wished Severus the best fortune and used Malfoy contacts to get him into exclusive libraries, all the time saying it couldn't be done.

Severus took a long, smooth drag from the cigar. He held his breath a moment, feeling the delicious burn in his lungs, and said, "I don't know any other witch who would lay a hand to that pretty-boy face of yours." Curls of smoke came from his nose as he chuckled.

Draco rolled his eyes and rubbed his jaw. "Luckily for me."

"I'm sure your wife will be able to tend to your wounds."

"Perhaps I should let Gretchen practice fisticuffs on me. My wife certainly makes an excellent nurse." Draco conjured a flat glass ashtray, and rolled the ash off the end of his cigar. When he was finished, he said, "It's been a long time since I said *that* word."

Another drag, and Severus replied, "I know. You are not the wretched little prig you once were."

"I'll say it a thousand more times if it helps."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

The silence stretched out as the cigars burnt down. Then Severus felt Draco's toe nudge his own under the table. "You know, Rori is always welcome to stay with us if she needs a change. Scorpius is devoted to her. You're welcome, too."

Severus nodded and raised his chin in understanding. "We should find Gretchen and Rori."

"I'll check on your daughter. I should leave soon anyway."

Extinguishing their cigars, Severus and Draco peered into the living room. The clock on the wall designated that Rori was 'cuddling'. That particular designation had not been on the clock earlier that day, but Severus was glad of its sudden appearance. Severus stood, and Draco followed him out of the kitchen.

Severus was quite pleased to find Rori and Gretchen curled together on the couch. Gretchen was fast asleep with her arm wrapped tight around Rori's belly. Circling the couch, he found Gretchen's staff on the floor.

Rori opened her eyes and whispered, "She invited me...I swear, Dad."

Draco leaned forward and kissed Rori's head. He smoothed her hair back from her forehead. Then he shook Severus's hand, Summoning his cloak from the rack. With one final wave, he was out the door.

Taking up his chair, Severus turned back to Rori. "You might be trapped there all night." He let his smile take on an edge until Rori stuck her tongue out at him.

"You know, this would be the perfect time to watch telly, Dad."

Severus, shark-like smile still in place, shook his head. A flick of his wand sent a book to Rori on the couch. She caught it and rolled her eyes. Still, within moments her nose was buried between the pages. Severus then Summoned a book for himself, ready for a quiet night at home.

## Chapter 10

### *Chapter 11 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

Gretchen was standing alone in the field where she did her daily practice with Albus. Her staff was out, gripped in her left hand as had become her habit. A few days had passed since Draco Malfoy had been to the house, and Severus had kept things calm and quiet for her since then. No guests had come by, and they had done little around the house besides read and play cards, taking the occasional walk around the lake when they were feeling restless.

Severus had said that today they would be adding a new link to the chain. Gretchen wasn't sure what this meant, but here she was, out in the middle of nowhere as the cold wind blew past her.

It was only a few minutes later when Gretchen spotted something coming from within the forest. It was tall and grey and loped forward with a heavy gait. As it approached, she saw Harry and Ron walking beside it. When they noticed her, they waved their arms over their heads.

When they were closer, she could see them smiling at her, as if they were truly excited to see her. That was not something that Gretchen had experienced much of. People were nice to her, but she had never really felt *wanted*. It was clear that Harry and Ron *wanted* to see her. She decided that she liked being wanted, and she hoped they would continue to want to see her in the future.

The beast walking beside them paused a short distance before her. It was huge! The head of an eagle was turning and looking at her. It snapped its beak a couple of times, and the front... talons, it seemed, dug at the grass.

"Buckbeak?" Gretchen asked, head bowing forward as she tried to look him over.

"Right in one," Ron said. He smiled at her with unrestrained pride.

Gretchen stared at Ron for a moment, wondering what the man saw when he looked at her. Compared to Harry, he was clearly excited. His body leaned forward a bit every so often. What had Ron been like when he was her friend?

Her attention was pulled back to Buckbeak, who was walking forward towards Gretchen. Her heart began to pound in her chest. She couldn't guess what he was about to do, and something in her brain was setting off an alarm. The closer Buckbeak came, the larger he appeared. The slope of his beak seemed sharper every moment. Gretchen was scared. She was absolutely frightened. She was just about to turn and run when Buckbeak stopped in front of her and moved to sit on the ground.

It was not a graceful landing, by any means. Soon the horse-ish back legs were tucked under his body, and the talon-like claws were bent in front of him. Then he blinked at Gretchen, and his head dipped forward as if he meant to nuzzle her.

"Go ahead, give him a rub," Harry said as he and Ron moved around Buckbeak toward her. They appeared to be giving his hind legs a wide berth.

So Gretchen stepped forward, letting her staff move beside her left foot as she extended her right hand. Soon it was sliding over the rock-hard beak and through silken feathers. In front of her, Buckbeak let out a quiet coo, and soon he was rubbing his face against the front of her cloak.

"I've never seen him do *that* before," Harry said, his voice quiet.

"She saved his life; of course he knows her," Ron said as he came around behind Gretchen.

"I *did* save his life." Gretchen was now wrapping her arms around Buckbeak's neck. She loved the feel of his feathers stroking her arms, tickling her until it felt as if all her hair was standing on end. "It was terrifying." She missed the look the men shared, having moved to slide her cheek along the smooth beak. Even Buckbeak's breath was tolerable, if only for a moment.

"Oh, really?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Harry, you remember. We crept out to the pumpkin patch behind Hagrid's and undid the chain just in the nick of time. And then we got on his back and flew away."

"Right. I do remember that. I can't even believe what happened next."

Gretchen blinked. She didn't remember anything after that. Clearly, they must have done *something*. She looked up at Harry and shook her head. Watching his face fall as he gathered her meaning, Gretchen turned back to Buckbeak, rubbing her cheek now on the feathers on his neck.

"S nothing to worry about, Gretchen," Ron said, setting his hand on her back. "You got the first part, and that's something." Then he rubbed his hand over her back. Before she knew it, there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

Gretchen froze and then buried her face in Buckbeak's feathers. For some reason, she didn't want Harry or Ron to see that she was crying. She had no idea *why* she was crying, only that being with them like this seemed to wring her out.

"Sh, sh...", Ron said, and Gretchen felt the hand on her back press harder, flat except when it passed over her staff's harness. "There's a lot in there that's got to come out. It can't all come out at once."

Then Gretchen felt a hand stroking her hair, and Harry was sitting closer on her other side. She felt enclosed by them but in a safe way. It wasn't much longer before her tears slowed, but Gretchen longed to stretch the moment out as long as she could.

There was something about being here with them that was settling. Harry passed her a handkerchief, and she mopped up her face a bit. "Thanks. Sorry."

Harry sprang to his feet then. "Sorry for what? Anyway, I have an idea about how we can help you remember. Want to go for a ride?"

"What, you mean *on* him?" Gretchen pushed away from Buckbeak; she was *not* interested in that proposition.

"Of course, on him. As long as you don't kick him too hard or pull his feathers, he's happy to. For you, especially."

"Well, I ... I just couldn't. That's hardly safe; there's not even a saddle or anything."

Ron leaned over to her then and said, "You aren't afraid, are you?"

"Well, I..."

By then, Harry was already climbing onto Buckbeak, legs straddling his back just behind his wings. "Come on, I'll hold you."

Ron was urging Gretchen up from behind, her arms in his hands. "I'll ride in front; you can hold onto me."

The next moment, Gretchen found herself sandwiched between Ron and Harry, Harry having to hold her staff still to keep it from knocking against his chin while in its harness. Her arms were tight around Ron, and Harry was holding her around her belly with his free hand. Then she felt the jerky motion of Buckbeak rising to his feet and jostling back and forth. He walked forward, increasing in speed as his wings flapped faster and faster, and then Gretchen was shrieking as they flew into the sky, higher and higher as Harry and Ron screamed and laughed around her.

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Gretchen wasn't sure if it was hours or minutes later, but Buckbeak had done enough laps around the castle, which Harry reminded her was called Hogwarts, for her to pry her eyes open and look at the scene. It took her breath away, all of it did, and then Buckbeak landed in front of Severus's cottage where he was waiting for them on the steps. Severus looked rather put out.

"You're late. Get inside before we have to wait for you any longer, *Potter*."

Gretchen turned back to look at Harry, who was scowling at Snape. Gretchen turned back to Snape, and he looked just like he always had: lank black hair, sallow skin, black teaching robes buttoned from right under his chin all the way down.

"I'm going to inform the headmaster about this, *Potter*, and you and your little friends will be facing a good deal more trouble than *detention*."

Stepping forward, Harry said, "Hagrid's a professor, too, *Snape*."

Lunging forward, Gretchen grabbed Harry's hand. "Don't, Harry. It'll only make it worse."

"What could be worse than detention?" Harry asked as he turned.

"I don't know! He could take away Hogsmeade visits or something," she replied with hushed urgency.

Harry smiled then and took Gretchen up in his arms. As he spun her, Gretchen realised she had been remembering, and she laughed and tightened her arms around Harry's shoulders. Harry set her down after a moment, and she stepped towards Ron. He had to bend down a bit, but he took her into his arms as well, lifting her straight

up off her toes.

They held each other for a moment, and then Ron set her back down. "Very impressive day, I think."

Gretchen looked between Harry and Ron and smiled. "Thanks, boys. And you too, Buckbeak." She bowed to him, watching as his head dropped down a bit. It made her heart skip, but she hoped she would learn to deal with it. Finally, she turned towards Severus, who looked very different now. He was wearing the same robes, of course, but his skin had lost its yellow pallor, and his cheeks had filled in. His hair looked soft again, not at all greasy.

He walked forward and put his hand on her shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

Opening her mouth to reply, Gretchen couldn't stop the yawn that came from nowhere. It was quite big, and her elbows lifted and stretched out beside her.

"I think that's enough for the day," Severus said.

A quick look to Harry and Ron and Gretchen could see that they were disappointed. She felt something like that, too, she thought.

As if hearing her thoughts, Severus said, "Well, tomorrow is another day. Perhaps if you are up to it, Potter and Weasley can return tomorrow."

That seemed to cheer the boys, and Gretchen felt better. They said their good-byes, and Gretchen and Severus went inside the cottage.

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"What are the odds that you are feeling studious, Gretchen?"

Severus watched as her chin lifted away from where she'd been staring into space. A bit of tea and fruit had refreshed her, and now he wanted to get to the bottom of something that had been bothering him.

She smiled and said, "I'm always ready for that."

"Quite right." Severus then presented her with a rune lexicon and a long sheet of runes. Last night, after she'd gone to bed, Severus had taken a rubbing of her staff. She still did not seem to notice the inscriptions there, and it niggled at his senses whenever he thought about it. "I have some translation work I'd like you to do. You may use the kitchen table or my desk if you like."

Her hands were around the book before he'd even finished speaking, and she leaned back on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her as she went.

"Don't you want the work?" Severus asked, extending his arm to show her the parchment.

She just shook her head and said, "I will want to have a base knowledge first, to avoid false starts."

She didn't even look interested in the length of runes he held out. Part of him thought that her response was reasonable, but Severus was curious about how little she seemed to care about it, let alone that she had yet to remark on the changes on her staff. He set the sheet on the coffee table and excused himself, although Gretchen was already focused on the book in her hands.

Mounting the stairs, Severus went to check on Rori. She had been tasked with putting her clean laundry in her wardrobe, her least favourite chore. Severus shook his head, thinking about how quickly she could have it done if she simply *did* it. However, true to form, when Severus got up to her room, Rori was lying on her bed with some of her folded clothes right by her elbow.

Her feet bounced back and forth as she turned the page of a book. Severus cleared his throat, announcing his presence before leaning against the door jamb. "You have ninety seconds to finish your chore." Then he conjured an hourglass and turned it so the sands began to fall.

"What? Dad! That's not fair!"

"Time is passing, Aurora."

Quick as a flash, she was up and hanging blouses in her wardrobe. Then trousers disappeared inside drawers, and her bed was clear. When she finished, she turned and glared at him, hands on her hips. It was a position Hermione had taken on many an occasion, and as always, he had to keep himself calm when Rori did it. "Thank you."

"I can do it myself, Dad."

Severus crossed the threshold and took a seat on Rori's bed. "Clearly not. It should not take two hours to put away two weeks' worth of laundry."

"Well, it's my laundry to put away. Also, I can't see why it's okay to have house-elves wash our clothes, only for them to leave half the job and not put them away."

"It's about personal responsibility." Severus turned toward her as she mimicked his words 'personal responsibility'. He took a deep breath. He loved his daughter and knew her to be an exceptional young girl. Still, she could be as tedious and arrogant as any of the spiteful little tossers he'd had the misfortune of educating over the years. Luckily, she was clever enough to realise when she over-stepped. Severus held her gaze for a moment.

"Sorry," Rori said, ducking her head as she moved to sit beside him.

"Thank you." Severus looked around Rori's room. "You can see the runes on Gretchen's staff, correct?"

"Yeah."

Severus rubbed his forehead. "Gretchen is completely unaware of them. It makes no sense."

"Maybe it's Mum trying to tell us something."

"Perhaps."

Rori lay down, her head moving to Severus's thigh, and she looked up at him. "You're frowning a lot."

"If you are inverted, does it not look like a smile?"

At that, Rori stuck out her tongue. Severus applied his fingertips to her belly and began tickling. "Impertinent scoundrel!"

Gales of laughter surrounded him, and Rori wriggled on her bed, trying to get away. He kept up for a few seconds but relented as her breathing became laboured. They smiled at each other for a few moments.

Then Gretchen appeared at the door. Severus looked up at her, still smiling. Gretchen hesitated, and her eyebrows were turned up in confusion and perhaps something more.

"Come in," Severus said and waved her over.

Gretchen followed his command. She walked around the bed and sat besides Rori, who quickly worked herself so that she could put her head on Gretchen's thigh and have her legs on Severus's.

"It sounded as if I was missing something." Gretchen spoke quietly, working her fingers through some of the loose hair on Rori's forehead.

Severus's heart pounded. She *had* been missing something, the most important thing in the world. He was thrilled that she had answered the siren's call of Rori's laughter without hesitation. But, as all things were, this was a tenuous thread. Could it be spun? Could it be woven?

"Aurora managed to tidy up after only two hours. I think it was the quickest go on record."

"Dad!" Rori whined and pushed her feet away from him. This put Rori just where Severus wanted her, closer to Gretchen, closer to the target.

"*Most* importantly, I think, is that we should now, as a group, decide about Hogsmeade."

"Right!" Rori sat up and turned toward Gretchen. "It's not nearly as neat as Diagon Alley, but it'll be interesting for *you* to go back."

Severus watched as Gretchen became entranced once more. She was still pushing Rori's hair back from her face, and that smile was back, although much more subtle now.

"Hogsmeade is a treat when you are experiencing it for the first time. However, it is also small enough that odd behaviour would be noticed by the townspeople at once. We would not be able to use Polyjuice again. It would not do to have your Aunt Ginny remarking about Honeydukes, now would it?"

Rori groaned and fell forward. It was a stealthy move that put her arms around Gretchen's middle with her shoulders now in Gretchen's lap.

Gretchen flattened her legs on the bed and said, "What have you got in mind, then?"

"If you can be especially patient, I know of a place we can go when there is a requirement."

With a shrug and nod, Gretchen agreed. Severus smiled and nodded back before getting up to send an owl to the headmaster.

## Chapter 11

### *Chapter 12 of 12*

Severus sacrificed a great many things ensuring that the Dark Lord fell, most notably his young wife, Hermione. It was to his great surprise that he should find her in a bookshop one day, years later, with no memories whatsoever of him... or their daughter. In search of her past, and perhaps her humanity, can the disaffected Gretchen trust this dark, mysterious man?

"Severus?" Gretchen asked as they settled in for the evening.

Rori was in bed, and as the weeks fell away, Gretchen and Severus had taken to moving directly to their bedroom and reading by the fire once Rori was tucked in. Severus was just selecting a book from his shelf when she interrupted him. He thought that she sounded nervous, if Gretchen was even capable of such a thing.

"Yes?" he answered, feeling whole awareness taking in the moment. Severus didn't have to look at her to gather information.

In fact, looking at her could prove to be distracting, especially after she had readied herself for bed. Breasts untethered beneath an over-sized top, hair loosely collected away from her face, her quiet sighs and hums as she decompressed from her day: all made Severus impatient to have Hermione back.

"When *Malfoy* was here..."

Severus smiled then. It had taken her a long time to move to calling Draco 'Malfoy', as if the idea of 'Draco Malfoy' had had to be woven into her consciousness. Having found a book, Severus turned and sat in his chair across from Gretchen.

She was staring into the fire which blazed in the hearth. He cleared his throat, and Gretchen looked up at him and said, "Stupid Mudblood."

Adjusting his position in his chair, Severus put his book on the table.

"Yes."

"You wouldn't let me say that in front of Rori. The one is obviously a slur of some sort, but I don't understand about 'stupid'."

"Really?" Severus sat back and placed his elbows on the armrests, pushing his fingertips together.

Gretchen wriggled in her chair as though she were uncomfortable under his scrutiny. Severus watched, letting the time unfold before them. She marked her page and closed her book, setting it on the table next to his. Then she sat forward, her elbows on her knees, her wrists loose. Her eyes turned up at him, beseeching.

"I would prefer that you remember on your own."

"Damn it, Severus! I can't remember it *all*! Just tell me!"

Then she was standing in front of him. Her chin jutted out, her frustration and impatience were evident, and Severus was taken back to a time when she was so desperate for information, to be validated in his class.

"I'll tell you about one. The other, you will have to figure out for yourself. Which will it be?"

In front of him, Gretchen fumed. Severus wasn't certain if he should let her do that without her staff in hand, but she couldn't use it as a crutch. She would have to stretch her legs, emotionally speaking.

"Fine. 'Stupid.' It seems like a stupid rule to have in the house."

Severus watched her hair in the firelight bouncing softly as she gesticulated. "Hermione and I agreed that some words would be taboo in the house. She felt, based on her time as my student, that if our child heard me even imply that she was stupid, she would be demoralised."

"Because you are so smart." Gretchen turned to look at the fire.

Nodding, Severus watched as she worked to take in the information. "Hermione was clearly unaware of how condescending and cold *she* could seem at times when other students did not catch on as readily as she did."

"What?" Gretchen exclaimed, looking back at him as if he had called *her* condescending and cold.

Like a shark smelling blood, Severus pressed on. "Oh, surely, Gretchen, you've spent enough time with Ronald Weasley to know how easy it is to become impatient with him, never mind Longbottom."

"Are you calling my friends stupid?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. I'm sure you are capable of making them feel inadequate without my assistance."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, maybe, just *maybe* Mr Longbottom could have managed his own potions if you had kept your mouth shut and let him work on them by himself."

"I was just trying to help!"

"And of course, it's no wonder Weasley passed you over for someone who could manage to get her face out of a book and into a mirror long enough to see what she had to offer a young wizard."

"So now you're saying that I should be more like Lavender Brown? Is this what you've been teaching our daughter, Severus?"

Lavender Brown, who had gone to the continent to attend university and had not come back, had never been mentioned in Gretchen's hearing, so Severus found himself, for the very first time, eager to hear that name. "It is quite obvious that Rori has no need to waste time in front of a mirror, not that she has any care to."

"What has this got to do with our promise?"

"What promise?"

"About certain words in the house! Why are we even talking about this? I thought it was all settled."

Severus looked at the woman across from him very closely. "What's your name?"

She looked at him, frozen as if she'd been hexed.

Immediately, Severus felt as though he'd botched it. He imagined Hermione's consciousness being sucked back into the core of this person as Gretchen struggled to hold on. "What are the other words?" he demanded, using his most impatient professor's voice.

"Perfect. Stupid. Hate. Mudblood." She put her fingers to her temples, bending over. She didn't look like she was in pain, only as if she was listening for the smallest noise. "Severus, what's happening?"

"Relax. It's just a little episode. Breathe. Just breathe."

"Hold me."

Severus was on his feet, but instead of wrapping his arms around her, he moved toward her staff. "You just need this."

"No!" She reached for him and grabbed his arm. "Hold me, please, Severus. I don't understand what's happening. I'm scared."

Her fingers were like talons on his arm, and Severus wasn't sure he could get away without losing any flesh. He did as she asked, pulling her body against his. One arm wrapped completely around her ribs under her arms. She was now clutching his old sleep shirt with both hands and holding her face against his chest. Severus wrapped his other arm around her shoulders, bending his wrist up until his fingers were in her hair.

"What have you to be scared of?" he whispered, hoping that his voice was as smooth as he wanted it to be.

"I don't know. I don't know what there is." Her head dropped, rolling so she could press her other cheek against him. "Who am I?" she asked.

"You are a brave, intelligent woman. You're indomitable."

"Please, just hold me."

Severus stood there, his arms full of this witch, and felt simultaneously thrilled and terrified. He could feel her heart hammering in her chest, although it was slowing now. After a long while, the tension in her body changed, and her weight sank into the floor. Severus began to pull his arms away, tilting his head to look down upon her.

Her head was tilted up, and her face was pink. Severus clamped down on the internal parts of him who asserted that this was his *wife*. One year of wedded 'bliss' did not make this witch his to have.

Unfortunately, she seemed to have read his mind. "Why don't you kiss me? Why do we sleep in separate beds? How can you touch me and be unaffected?"

These in-between moments were torture for Severus. If she were Hermione – if she still wanted him – he would know what to do. If she were Gretchen – if she were not his wife – he would know what to do.

"This has nothing to do with me." He pulled his arms back, finally, and took a step away from her. He took another step, twisting his body so he could reach her staff. "I will leave you to meditate while I check on Aurora. It has been a very long day."

Her hand touched his as she moved to grip her staff. Severus looked up, and their eyes met for just a moment before he moved from the room. When he returned nearly a half hour later, she was sound asleep... in *his* bed.