

Cute As A Button

by *Tarah_Fae*

Hermione is away at a Charms convention and Severus has to take care of their child - will he cope? Answer to SASS's Baby Sitting Challenge.

I am sure I can handle a four year old

Chapter 1 of 3

Hermione is away at a Charms convention and Severus has to take care of their child - will he cope? Answer to SASS's Baby Sitting Challenge.

Disclaimer: JKR owns the rights to anything you recognize in this fic. I wish I did, but alas! Life is like a box of Bertie Bott's. Sometimes you get chocolate fudge, sometimes you get earwax.

AN: My answer to SASS's Baby Sitting Challenge (the guidelines can be found [here](#)). This was the second story I ever wrote.

"Must you wear those horrid things?"

Severus quirked an eyebrow and glanced down at his slippers. When he looked back up at her, that eyebrow was still higher than the other.

"What, pray tell, is wrong with them?" he asked, leaning against the kitchen counter and sipping at his coffee.

Hermione was bustling around the kitchen. "They are tatty and ugly. Why don't you wear those nice sheepskin slippers I got you?"

Severus grimaced. "I am not wearing dead sheep on my feet."

"But dead dragons are fine?" she asked testily.

He frowned. Well at least dragons weren't cute and fluffy. He watched her irritably clashing crockery around in the sink. Why Hermione insisted on doing all the domestic chores herself when there were perfectly good house elves infesting every corner of Hogwarts was beyond him. He decided that now wasn't a good time to raise that touchy issue. He knew she wasn't upset about his slippers, but the owl that had come earlier that morning.

His scowl faded. "Hermione."

She was industriously scrubbing at a plate that looked perfectly clean to him already, her curls bobbing with her jerky movements.

"Hermione..." he repeated, placing his cup on the counter and extending a hand out toward her when she finally looked up. When she took his hand, he pulled her into a warm embrace. "We will be fine... I promise." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Oh, Severus... I don't know. She's quite a handful on a fulltime basis. Are you sure you don't want me to owl my mother?" Her expression was tense as she looked up at him.

"She is my daughter, Hermione. I am sure I can handle a four year old," he replied irritably.

"But Severus... It is almost *that time of the month*," Hermione murmured, chewing at her lip as she always did when nervous. Both she and Severus knew that she wasn't referring to her cycle, but Lupin's.

"I know." He'd already started the base for the Wolfsbane potion last night. "All I need to get is some fresh monkshood from the Apothecary to complete it. I will just take her with me to Diagon Alley. She will no doubt enjoy it."

"I... I'll just tell them I can't come and that will be the end of it. Remus' well-being is too important. There will be other conventions," she said as she made to pull away, but he held her against him.

"Nonsense, Hermione. You might never get another chance to be plenary speaker. Your work needs the exposure, you deserve this chance." He tipped her chin up and kissed her gently. "Now cease your worrying. It is just one night; I am certain I can handle everything."

He felt her hands snaking up his bare back under his dressing gown as she nuzzled his neck. "Thank you."

She had just bounced out of bed and was racing down the hall to the kitchen. When she rounded the corner, she saw her parents hugging. Giggling, she wriggled in between them. "Morning, Mummy! Morning, Daddy!"

Her mother beamed down at her. "Morning, Auri. Did you have a good sleep?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Morning, Aurelia," her father rumbled, resting a hand on her head and running it over her tousled brown curls. Her father never smiled much, not even at Mummy. He was a rather frightening and sombre person compared to her mother. Mummy always said that Daddy was just tired or busy or worried, and that he loved them both with all his heart.

She didn't doubt that, but wondered how someone could not smile at the people they loved. Mummy had laughed and told her that she was too young to worry about things like that. And besides, Mummy smiled a lot to make up for it.

Suddenly her mother hunkered down to her level. "Auri," she said, taking her small hands in hers. "Mummy has to go away this weekend for a very important meeting."

What? Mummy was going away? Aurelia frowned. "How long will you be gone, Mummy?" she asked almost fearfully.

"Mummy's just going to be away for one sleep, Auri. I will be back tomorrow." Mummy's face was nervous and pale as she squeezed Aurelia's hands, but she quickly brightened up a bit and smiled again. "Daddy said he was going to take you to Diagon Alley with him! Won't that be exciting?"

Aurelia shot a glance up at her father. His face was impassive as he drank his coffee, watching them. Daddy never took her anywhere... well, not without Mummy. She felt tempted to cry. Her mother would stay then... but it sounded very important. What if Mummy got in trouble for not going?

She chewed on her bottom lip in unconscious imitation of her nervous mother, but then nodded slowly.

Two hours later, Severus walked Hermione out to the Apparation point outside Hogwarts' gates. Aurelia was hanging onto her mother's hand in a death grip, looking distressed but obviously trying not to. Severus fully expected tears to fall when Hermione knelt down and kissed Aurelia goodbye, blowing a noisy raspberry on her cheek to lighten the mood; but instead she had just sombrely grabbed onto his hand while Hermione hugged him.

He thought he saw Hermione wipe at a tear on her cheek before she smiled and blew Aurelia a kiss. There was a loud *crack* and Hermione was gone.

Father and daughter regarded each other for a long moment and then, as if coming to a mutual agreement, set off down the path to Hogsmeade.

They Flooed into the Leaky Cauldron from the Three Broomsticks. Their arrival was marked by the inevitable "Daddy... I don't feel so good..." and followed by breakfast making a reappearance on the flagstones. Severus shot Tom an apologetic look before cleaning the mess with a quick *Scourgify*.

Severus took out his handkerchief and wiped her face, grateful that she had missed the front of her sundress. "I'm sorry, Daddy," she whimpered.

"Do not worry, Aurelia." He sighed and put his handkerchief away again. "We need to hurry now, alright?" He needed to get the monkshood as soon as possible the base potion wouldn't stay stable for that much longer. He took her hand and led her out of the Leaky Cauldron.

Aurelia seemed stunned by all the activity, people, and shops around them as they walked down Diagon Alley and she clutched his hand very tightly. Severus had to keep reminding himself that she wasn't used to this much noise and activity. He wondered what it must be like for her, so used to the friendly people at Hogwarts and the village-closeness of Hogsmeade. So many strangers and even stranger things all around her.

He was shocked out of his reverie when she suddenly let go of his hand. "Aurelia!"

"Oh, Daddy! Look!" She was on tiptoe in her pink sandals, running her hands wonderingly through a tray of mixed buttons in front of Madame Malkin's.

"Aurelia... we are late. Come along now." Her face fell. She cast a longing gaze at the cacophony of shiny plastic and glass buttons, but went to take his hand again.

The witch that had been standing in the doorway came forward and filled a small brown paper packet with a handful of buttons. "Here you go, little miss." She smiled as she held the packet out to Aurelia. Aurelia shot a glance up at her father, as if asking him if it was all right to take the proffered gift.

Severus sighed and nodded. "What do you say, Aurelia?"

"Thank you!" Aurelia chimed as she happily rattled the buttons around in their paper container.

"You are very welcome, little miss."

"How much do I owe you?" he asked the saleswitch, reaching for his coin pouch.

"For such a sweet child, nothing," she replied airily, ruffling Aurelia's brown curls before disappearing into the clothing shop again.

Aurelia seemed to evoke that reaction from every adult she encountered. He was glad that she had inherited all of Hermione's sunny disposition and, most importantly, her looks. She was a beautiful child, with warm brown eyes to match her golden brown curls. She was always talking and smiling, except when she was alone with him. She was uncharacteristically reserved then, her young face serious and drawn. He knew it was undoubtedly because of his own cool demeanour, but he didn't want his child to suffer for his past sins. That was why he mostly let Hermione handle her no four year old should be so quiet for any amount of time, he knew this was bad from his own

experience. *Her* memories would be happy ones.

He was about to step into the Apothecary when he recalled all the slimy and horrid things that abounded within its shadowy walls. Aurelia was too young and would possibly be upset by the sights and smells. He grimaced, but took her into the shop. As if by some divine intervention, there was a small bench just by the door under the cloak hooks.

He lifted her onto the bench. "Aurelia, I have to get something from this shop. I want you to sit right here and wait for me."

"All right, Daddy." She was swinging her legs under the seat and humming to herself as she peered into the brown paper packet when Severus walked up to the counter.

It had taken fifteen minutes to bully the assistant into letting him see the Apothecary's stock of raw monkshood. "It is essential that I prepare this myself" and pick out his own plants. He growled and paid the man. He checked his pocket watch as he stalked toward the door with his purchase carefully clasped under his arm. There would still be enough time if they hurried home.

His eyes fell upon the empty bench.

Now remember, kids - my work will always show up here first. This includes the sequels (yes I have two completed drafts waiting in the wings) of "Cute as a Button". Tell your friends!

What Are Friends For?

Chapter 2 of 3

A frantic search and late night brandy.

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AN: Only one more chapter after this one. I will upload it sometime next week. I've uploaded a new icon to my [user profile](#), I rather like it. Happy reading.

It felt as if a bucket of cold water had been emptied over his head. Don't panic... he told himself, maybe she had just followed him into the store when he was away for too long. He turned on his heel and swept up and down every aisle of the Apothecary.

She wasn't there.

He repeated the search. Maybe he had just missed her around the corner of an aisle. "Aurelia?" he called, resolutely ignoring the edge of panic in his voice.

"May I help you?" a junior assistant asked him as he started his third circuit of the shop.

"Have you seen a little girl? She was sitting on that bench by the door."

"No, I'm afraid not. My shift started ten minutes ago and that bench was empty when I arrived."

Severus stormed out onto the street, darting into the surrounding shops, asking if anyone had seen his daughter. On one such trip into Flourish & Blotts, he bumped into the last person he expected to see.

"Steady on there! Look where you're going... Severus?" Remus' frown turned to wide-eyed surprise when Severus grabbed at his robes.

"She is gone. Gods, Remus! I just turned around for a few minutes and she was gone!" The use of his first name wasn't lost on Remus. The man in front of him seemed close to collapse, his face oddly pale yet flushed at the same time. He had never seen him like this, not even at the final battle.

"Who?"

"Aurelia! I left her on the bench. I told her to wait!" Severus moaned in despair. "I should have taken her with me. Oh Merlin."

"Don't worry, we'll find her. Take the left side of the street and I'll take the right. She couldn't have wandered off too far."

The two men scrambled up and down Diagon Alley, asking passers-by about a little girl in a pink and green striped sundress. Most shook their heads in the negative, but one or two leads brought them out onto Charing Cross Road in Muggle London outside the Leaky Cauldron.

Severus barged into the bookstore that flanked the Leaky Cauldron, moving swiftly between the shelves. His heart leapt into his throat when he heard Lupin calling to him from outside. He rushed across the street, barely avoiding a Muggle taxi, trading quite a few of his own choice expletives with the driver who'd nearly flattened him.

Lupin was grinning like an idiot when Severus reached him. "I am glad my near-demise brings you so much pleasure, Lupin," he growled.

Lupin rolled his eyes at him and pointed through the display window of the store. It was a Muggle electrical appliance shop by the looks of it. Demonstration models of many strange contraptions with 'mains leads' snaking into 'wall sockets' lined the display shelves, and there, in front of a wall of 'televisions', was a little bushy-haired girl, blissfully hopping and dancing along to the moving images on the screens.

"Gods!" Severus cried as he fumbled with the door. When he reached his daughter he swept her up in his arms, hugging her tightly to him. "Aurelia," he whispered hoarsely, relief muting his voice.

She was squirming in his grasp. "Look, Daddy! Look! It's the Teletubbies! Just like at Gran's house!"

His overwrought mind reeled. What the hell was a 'telltubby'? His arms felt numb and he flashed Lupin a look of gratitude when he took Aurelia from him.

"Hi, Pumpkin!" Lupin smiled over-enthusiastically, twirling her around a bit. "How's my favourite girl today?"

"Uncle Remus!" she squealed in delight. "I got buttons! A nice lady gave them to me." She thrust the crumpled paper packet at Lupin.

"That was very nice of her." The corners of his pale blue eyes crinkled as he smiled at her, his greying goatee exaggerating the motion of his mouth.

With Aurelia still sitting on his arm, jabbering about her buttons, Lupin grabbed hold of Severus' elbow and firmly steered him out of the shop. The Muggles were starting to give the two oddly-clothed men curious glances. Had Severus not been so relieved at finding Aurelia, he would have snarled at Lupin.

Once they were back in the Leaky Cauldron, Severus took Aurelia from Lupin and sat her on the bar. "Why did you not wait for me, Aurelia? I asked you to wait."

She'd gone very quiet, her small packet of buttons clutched in front of her like a shield. "... I'm sorry, Daddy."

"You scared me half to death. Why did you disobey me?"

Her eyes had grown large, tears welling dangerously. "... I'm... sorry... D...Daddy." A small hiccup sent the first of them rolling over her cheeks.

He gathered her against his chest with a sigh. "Daddy is not angry, Aurelia... I was just very frightened when I could not find you... I thought I would never find you again."

"Would it make you sad, Daddy?" she whispered against his black robes, sniffing softly.

Severus thought it an odd question. He squeezed her tightly before he answered, "That would have made me very sad indeed."

Rubbing her back soothingly, he looked up at Lupin. He had no choice. By this time the base potion was ruined - he'd have to start over again. He had to ask him. "Lupin... I need a favour."

And that was how Lupin ended up sitting on his living room floor, entertaining his freshly bathed and pyjama-ed daughter while Severus brewed the Wolfsbane potion for him. Lupin had been kind enough to make them an early dinner, although Severus doubted that spaghetti bolognese was the best meal to serve a four year old. She had been covered in sauce by the end of the meal because of her and Lupin's 'sketti slurping contest'.

The door to his lab stood open in case Aurelia needed him, but he doubted whether she would with 'Uncle Remus' around. The sandy haired man wasn't afraid of playing the fool for his daughter, leaving her in peals of laughter with his antics. The odd quiet that had descended on the adjoining room made Severus perk up his ears.

"What's Daddy doing, Uncle Remus?"

"He's brewing me a potion, Auri."

"Are you ill?"

"Not all the time... but I do get very ill every once in a while."

"Does Daddy's potion make you better?"

There was a pause. "Your daddy's potion saves my life. I am very lucky that he is clever enough to make it for me."

"Yes, my Daddy is very clever, isn't he, Uncle Remus?" Severus could hear the childlike pride in her voice; it clutched at his heart.

"Oh, very clever indeed," Lupin agreed. Severus wondered how he had ever hated that kind-hearted and soft-spoken man. Yes... there had been that whole 'trying to kill him while being a murderous monster' episode, but they were boys then and it hadn't been Lupin's doing. Through their work for the Order and their fighting side-by-side during the final battle, the two men had developed an indefinable relationship. Severus had stubbornly refused to call it 'friendship', but he could tell from the knowing smile whenever Lupin greeted him, that they both knew that was exactly what it was. It came as no surprise when Lupin was best man at their wedding and only certain... health issues, had kept Severus from insisting that Lupin be Aurelia's godfather. The honour had passed to Potter, to his immeasurable irritation.

"Mummy!" Aurelia's squeal made him start.

"Hi, Sweetie! How are you? Mummy's missing you so much," Hermione's voice rang out from the living room. "Hi, Remus what a pleasant surprise! What are you doing there?" There was a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"Hi, Hermione. I'm just helping out a bit while Severus is busy."

"Speaking of which... where is Severus?"

He marched out into the living room like a doomed man. "Here I am. How is the convention?" he asked, kneeling in front of the hearth where Hermione's head was floating amidst green flames. Lupin had discreetly vacated the room, taking Aurelia to the bathroom to brush her teeth before bed.

"My...? Oh, yes, it is going well. I've been meeting a lot of interesting people. It is wonderful to be among people who are passionate about my work. My lecture is tomorrow afternoon." Hermione's eyes sparkled with barely suppressed excitement. "So... why is Remus there? I thought you said you could 'handle a four year old'?" She smiled impishly up at him.

"I... There was a slight miscalculation on my time. I had to restart the base potion. Lupin was kind enough to watch Aurelia while I worked."

"A miscalculation?" Her smile faded. "What happened?"

Severus drew in a deep steadying breath. She would find out sooner or later; *far* better to tell her himself. "Aurelia wandered off in Diago-"

"She... WHAT!"

Severus Snape, who had stood unafraid before the Dark Lord many times, cringed. "She was only gone for about fifteen minutes. She did not even know she was lost."

"That's it, I'm coming home." She made as if to pull back in order to step through the hearth. "I can't believe you lost her. I'm not leaving her ever again. I do-"

"Hermione!" His annoyed voice cut through her muttering and she froze. "There is no need for you to come home." His scowl softened. "I want you to stay and give your lecture. Aurelia is fine. The potion is fine. Lupin will be able to take it with him when he leaves."

She looked up at him for a long moment and then gave him a shaky smile. "I'm just missing you both so terribly. I can't wait to come home."

"I miss you too..." he murmured. She blew him a kiss before the hearth went dead.

"Auri's in bed, dropped straight off to sleep." Lupin was standing in the doorway of the lab. "Was she angry?"

"Livid," Severus sighed, adding the aconite to the gently bubbling potion. "This needs to simmer for two hours. Join me in a drink?"

The two men talked over several snifters of brandy, reminiscing about the past and wondering about the future. The time passed quickly, much to both's dismay. Severus decanted the potion into phials, ready for use.

"Are you sure you will not stay, Lupin? It is late, and Hermione has gone to a considerable amount of trouble decorating the guest room we never use."

When Lupin unstopped and drank down one of the phials immediately, he had his answer. "Not tonight... I don't think it would be..." his eyes flickered down the hall to Aurelia's room, "...safe."

"As you wish... old friend." Severus squeezed Lupin's shoulder. "You must visit when you are well. Aurelia loves having you here."

"But you don't?" Lupin's pale blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

Severus sighed theatrically. "If the women in my life require me to tolerate your presence, I will of course have to acquiesce or have a mutiny on my hands," he drawled, but his eyes glittered with suppressed mirth. "... am very grateful for the help today, Lupin."

Lupin smiled. "What are friends for?" He shook Severus' hand and declined the offer of accompanying him to the Apparation point. Severus nodded grimly in understanding and securely locked and bolted the door once Lupin's shadow had disappeared up the stairs.

My work will always show up on the Petulant Poetess first (if not exclusively).

St Mungo's!

Chapter 3 of 3

Severus has to rush Aurelia off to St Mungo's - will she be all right?

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AN: And now for the final installment. I hope you've enjoyed reading this ficlet as much as I've enjoyed writing it. I am currently working on getting the rough drafts for the sequels tightened up and am chasing around some plot bunnies for a possible prequel (or two).

Something I have forgotten to mention in my earlier chapters and for which I should be flayed alive and dragged over many salt flats - all these chapters were beta-ed by the wonderful Tevildo! Much love to him!

Severus groaned as he opened his eye to bright sunlight streaming in through the high windows of his room. He was sprawled across the bed. He didn't remember getting into his pyjama bottoms, but was glad that he did - he hated the tangle of robes when he fell asleep fully clothed.

A tuneless humming permeated the throbbing in his head. He groaned. The days where he could consume a small basinful of alcohol and come off unscathed had obviously passed. What he needed was some hangover remedy... and he needed it fast.

Movement caught his eye. Painfully cracking his other eye open he saw Aurelia sitting on the floor by his bed. The humming was coming from her. His daughter was quietly arranging her buttons in neat piles according to rules evident only to her. Suddenly her small finger disappeared up to the first knuckle in her nose.

"Aurelia, do not do that."

"But Daddy, my "

"I can never see an excusable reason as to why you, or anyone for that matter, would insert her finger into her nostril," he croaked, his voice rough from sleep.

She quietly stared at him for a while. "But Daddy... my favourite button's twin brother is gone," she explained, holding up a rather large pink button.

"Where did you have it last, Poppet?" he murmured, his eyes drifting closed again.

"Right here. I was seeing how far I could blow him, but he got stuck and "

Severus shot up in bed, very much awake and sober all of the sudden. "What?"

"I was seeing how far I could blow him and "

Severus grabbed her head and tilted it back, peering up her nostrils. He couldn't see anything. Oh gods... what if it slipped down into her airway? She'd choke! He shrugged on his dressing gown and scooped her up.

"Let us go and see Madame Pomfrey. Maybe she can retrieve your button," he said as calmly as possible, hoping she couldn't feel his heart hammering against her little body as he swept swiftly up the stairs towards the infirmary.

"Poppy? Poppy!" he called out as he opened the doors. She wasn't there. He groaned, of course she wouldn't be there... she was at her sister's for a week. It was summer, after all, and there were no students for her to tend. Luckily there was a back-up plan.

Grabbing a handful of Floo powder, he stepped into the wide hearth of the infirmary. "Hold on tight to Daddy, Aurelia. *St. Mungo's!*" There was a flash of green and then the hearth was empty again.

"Uncle Remus told me the greatest story last night, Daddy! It was about a rabbit and a fox and the rabbit got thrown into these thorns but he was happy because the fox couldn't get him and -"

"Aurelia... Daddy has a headache..." They had been sitting in the waiting area for over three hours. The scene he had caused an hour ago did nothing to bump them ahead in the queue and instead resulted in the receptionist flashing him nasty looks at every opportunity, which he answered with equally hostile scowls.

"Aurelia Snape?"

Severus gathered Aurelia up and hurried over to the mediwitch in case they decided to skip him entirely. She led him to a curtained cubicle and indicated the examination couch. Severus set Aurelia down and she sat dangling her legs over the edge while he hovered protectively by her side like some dark angel. The effect was much diminished by his bare feet, messy hair and the dressing gown over his bare upper body.

"Hi. My name is Claire. What's your name?" the mediwitch asked Aurelia, who smiled brightly and chirruped her name. "What a lovely name! How old are you, Aurelia?"

"She is four," Severus supplied impatiently. Were these people determined to see his child die a horrible death? Why weren't they *doing* anything?

The mediwitch's gaze flicked to him. "She's as cute as a button! What seems to be the problem, Mr. Snape?"

Severus shot her a withering look. "It would appear that she has... lost a button up her nose," he replied through gritted teeth, almost daring her to laugh at the situation, but she didn't.

"Wife away for the weekend?" she asked off-handedly while doing a general check on Aurelia.

"I... yes."

"You might not believe me, but this happens all the time. Don't feel bad about it."

"I do no-" Severus began angrily.

"Aurelia, you wouldn't guess what I do for a living! I am a heffalump hunter. Do you know where heffalumps like to live? Inside little girls' noses!"

Aurelia giggled uncontrollably. "Nuh uh!"

"Yuh huh! Can I look up your nose to check for heffalumps?"

"Okay!" Aurelia was still giggling when the mediwitch shone a thin beam of light from her wand up her nose, her eyes darting from side to side with practiced movements.

"No heffalumps there! And no buttons either," she added as she turned towards Severus. "She's swallowed it. It should come out the natural way in a few days."

"But what if it is working its way to her lungs?"

"Trust me, Mr. Snape, we'd know by now if that were the case. Your little girl is perfectly healthy, you can take her home," she said as she made some notes on her clipboard. "You can settle your bill before you leave."

Severus scowled at the smiling woman, but scooped Aurelia up and left the cubicle with an impressive snap of his dressing gown hem.

Severus spent the early afternoon casting an *Obstruktus* charm on all the small objects in their quarters. The charm prevented things from being wedged into tight spaces, repelling the object away when a certain pressure was exerted on it. He was confident that this would prevent any future trips to the hospital.

He was just finishing up all the Muggle pennies Hermione kept in a jar on the bookshelf (Merlin knew *why*), when he heard a *ping* sound followed by a giggle. He stuck his head around Aurelia's door.

She was sitting on the floor, all of her (now safe) buttons spread out in front of her. She noticed him by the door, her eyes twinkling happily. "Look at my new game, Daddy!" She selected one of them and set it down on the hardwood floor. Slapping her hand down quickly onto the back of the charmed button caused it to shoot across the floor, coming to rest a few inches ahead of a blue speckled button.

She clapped her hands in glee. "They go much further now than when I tried blowing them! Do you want to try too, Daddy?"

He was about to decline, when he saw that solemn look she always wore in his presence slowly eclipsing her smile. "Of course! But you will have to pick a button for me."

Her face screwed up in concentration as she contemplated the pile of buttons. By the time he had folded himself onto the floor next to her, she held up a button triumphantly. "This one, Daddy! It's like yours!" Sure enough, the button was shiny and black. He took it from her, placing it on the floor and pressing down on the back with one finger. It lurched sluggishly across the floor, not even reaching a third of the way to her two markers.

"No, Daddy! Like this." Severus allowed himself to be instructed, bathing in the attention and unending chatter his daughter provided. An hour later they had moved the game out into the hallway, laughing together and urging their buttons across the floor with shouted encouragement.

Severus felt curiously carefree when he laughed with her, his smooth baritone chuckles mixing with her high-pitched childish giggles. So this was what he was missing reading by the fire? No wonder Hermione was so flushed and breathless and happy when she returned from Aurelia's presence the child was like a catalyst; the more she laughed, the more you laughed.

She was currently splashing around in the bath, pretending to be an otter and sloshing water over the sides. Instead of reprimanding her when his slippers and dressing gown got soaked, he'd just shrugged them off and laughed. She had finally settled enough for him to wash her hair. After rinsing, he lifted her out of the tub and folded her into a big fluffy towel. He was sitting on the edge of the tub, carefully combing snarls out of her wet hair when he caught her staring up at him.

"What is it, Aurelia?"

"Daddy... why do you have so many white lines on your skin?"

White lines? His scars... How do you explain torture to a four year old? "Daddy was in a war, Poppet. I got hurt badly, but I am all right now."

"Who hurt you, Daddy?"

"Bad people."

She looked up at him fearfully. "Can they hurt me?"

"No... Daddy made sure that they could never hurt anyone else." He hugged her close to him. "I would never let anyone hurt you, Auri."

"Why don't you smile as much as Mummy?"

He sighed, breathing in her innocence. "Daddy was very sad for a very long time. I thought I had forgotten how to smile, but now everyday I remember a bit more, but sometimes I still forget."

"Do I help you to remember, Daddy?"

From the mouths of babes, Severus thought, smiling ruefully. "Yes, Poppet."

Hermione came in a few minutes after ten, fully expecting Severus to still be up and reading in front of the fire. The living room was dark except for the glowing embers in the grate. She could see his arm on the armrest.

"Severus?" she called softly, but there was no movement.

She quietly rounded the chair and smiled at the scene in front of her. Severus was sitting in his pyjama bottoms with a book held limply in his sleeping hand. Aurelia was sprawled out across his lap and chest, her wild brown curls a golden nimbus against his pale skin in the glow from the hearth. Aurelia stirred in her sleep, and Hermione saw her husband unconsciously tightening his arm around her daughter protectively.

Hermione's smile broadened as her eyes travelled down his body to his feet - he was wearing his sheepskin slippers.