

Recovery

by SS Lupin

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy. My response to the "Fall 2006 Prompt Challenge" at Potter_Place.

One.

Chapter 1 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy. My response to the "Fall 2006 Prompt Challenge" at Potter_Place.

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~*~

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him.

"Please? Just one more chapter?"

"As pleasant as your whining may be, you need to go to bed."

"A page? A paragraph?"

"Bed. Now."

"Oh, okay." The girl placed a ribbon within the book, marking her place. When she tried to bring the book with her, she received a stern glance. Sighing, she set the book on the chair she had been sitting on and trudged toward her room. He followed her, lighting the fireplace with a flick of his wand and fixing the covers on her bed.

When she was just shy of closing her eyes, lying in the safety and warmth of her soft pillows and sheets, he turned to leave the room until he heard a sleepy murmur.

"You didn't kiss me goodnight."

He clenched his hands, took a deep breath and approached the bed, looking at the child's round face and bright green eyes. He sighed and bent over her, brushing a light kiss on her forehead.

"Goodnight, Marie."

"Goodnight, Severus."

~*~

Snape closed the door to her room partially, leaving a crack of light to comfort her in the darkness in case she awoke in the middle of the night. Another day was about to

end. Another day that Marie was in his care.

The child was as all children were to Snape – she grated on his nerves constantly, was stubborn and exasperating, and, at times, made him wish that he hadn't vowed to be responsible for her. She was just like her father, too, but Snape didn't care to dwell on that much.

Snape laid a tired hand on the armchair he had transfigured for Marie when she was old enough to walk and sit upright with a toddler's grace. He had just enlarged it a week ago to accommodate her growing height, and he had marveled at the child's ability to grow up so fast. He picked up the book Marie had been reading. The words *Little Women* graced the black leather spine in golden letters. Placing the book inside the already crowded bookshelf, Snape wondered if that was what Marie wanted: siblings, a Marmee, a family. No. She had him, and that was enough.

~*~

Snape bit back a groan of frustration, parchments littering the expanse of the desk in his study. He had poured over so many potions texts throughout his days and while Marie slept at night – had spent so many years trying to find the answer to the question that had upset Britain's Wizarding world and had kept Snape from living his own life.

Snape rubbed his forehead as he stared out into the flames of the fireplace opposite him. Orange-red flames sparked into green, and Snape started up from his tired state.

A woman's head floated in the Floo-enchanted fire. Snape half-hoped she would shake her head so he could continue his search on borrowed time.

"Harry woke up."

~*~

"When are you going to let her visit him?" Stepping out of the fireplace, Hermione fixed her robes and waited for his response.

Snape tried to hold back his rising anger, standing up so that he could look down at her. "I didn't give you permission to enter our home."

"You didn't answer my question."

"So now what? Precious Potter has woken up from his coma, and I'm supposed to expose Marie to that worthless wreck of a boy?"

"He saved us all, and it was his sacrifice that has left him dead to the world for so long."

"He wouldn't have been in a coma if he had practiced Occlumency with me. The Dark Lord split his mind open, and it has taken me ten years for me to put it back together."

"You act as if you were the only one trying to bring him back."

"But I was, Miss Granger. While you've been collecting awards for your research that had nothing to do with Potter's coma, I've been spending countless hours trying to save the wonder boy yet again."

"So it's back to 'Miss Granger' now?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." His heart racing, Snape placed a hand on the edge of the desk to steady himself.

"I had offered to help you raise her," Hermione said softly.

Snape remembered that offer all too well. "She has me, and that is all she needs."

"She has no mother."

"And whose fault is that?" Snape snarled, anger back in full force. "Her mother decided to wander around with no protection after the Battle as if she had a death wish. Stupid girl."

"How dare you tarnish Ginny Weasley's name that way! She was distraught after the Battle, after Harry and—"

"She did not have to get herself killed in a bout of grief. She had Marie inside of her, and if she wanted to go off and be murdered by rogue Death Eaters, she didn't have to put the child's life in danger!"

"But Marie isn't in danger, not anymore. She'll be going to Hogwarts in less than a year, and what will happen then? Even if Harry hadn't woken up, you would have to let her go."

"I'm not letting her go," Snape said as if the issue was decided.

"You're not her father, Severus."

"I'm more of a father than Potter could ever be. He still has the mind of a seventeen-year-old boy. How do you think he'll be able to take care of her?"

"I don't know." Hermione sighed. "I did not come here to fight, even though that's what I almost end up doing when I come here." She looked at the Muggle watch on her wrist. "It's late. I'll come back tomorrow afternoon... Just remember your promise."

Snape watched her retreat into the fireplace after throwing a pinch of Floo powder from the jar on the mantel. With a short command of "St. Mungo's Hospital" and a swirl of green flames, she was gone.

~*~

Author's Note: This was in response to the Potter Place Prompt Challenge: *Number 13. In a cozy, comfortable, secluded cottage a young girl (7-10?) lies on the floor reading one evening while her father tries once again to shoo her off to bed. When a visitor arrives to reclaim the child that Severus has been protecting and caring for since infancy, what will he do? Visitor could be Minerva, Remus, Harry, Hermione or other. Is Snape father? Or just guardian? Has there been a hunt for the child or is the "threat" now over? Will Severus let go easily and then realize what he's lost? Or will he fight the intrusion?*

Thanks to Southern_Witch_69 for her beta skills.

Two.

Chapter 2 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

Disclaimer: The following characters and places you recognize do not belong to me and are the property of JKR and her affiliates. The book Marie's reading in this chapter is the same as in Chapter One - *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott. I do not own that, either.

~*~

It seemed that as soon as Snape rested his head on the pillow after Hermione's unexpected arrival, he was being brought back to consciousness by an insistent push to his shoulder.

"Wake up! Hermione's here!" Opening his eyes, Snape could see that Marie was already dressed with half of her wild black hair gathered into a neat braid.

"You took your time before informing me." Snape ruffled the side of her unbound hair and reached for his robe. The past ten years must have softened him if he'd slept through half the morning. And while he was sleeping, that interfering woman could have been poisoning Marie's mind about the glories of Saint Potter.

He had one arm in the sleeve of his robe when Hermione stood in the doorway, smiling with a brush in hand.

"Hello, Severus."

Snape put on the rest of his robe in haste, feeling that he must look horrible after just waking up. Tying up the robe, he said, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm in your home because I said I'd be here, and I'm in your bedroom because Marie was worried about how long you've been sleeping."

"You'd said that you would come in the afternoon." Retrieving his wand from under his pillow, he set his bed to rights with some furious jabs of his wand.

"And I kept my word." Hermione pointed to the single window in Snape's room, and he saw that the sun was high in the sky. "Relax, Severus, it's not like I haven't seen you in your nightgown before."

Snape glowered at Hermione, shooting a quick glance at Marie before speaking. She was staring at the both of them with a speculative look on her face. *Time to retreat.* "I'll keep my word as well." He headed toward his chest of drawers, searching for the clothes he needed. "I've always thought the shower to be a good place for rumination. And Marie?"

"Yes?"

"Make sure your godmother uses that brush on her own hair." A smirk played across his lips as he brushed past Hermione to head for the bathroom.

~*~

He was stuck.

Matters of morality wouldn't have stopped Snape. With a swish, flick and wave of his wand, he could be off with Marie in a country where Harry Potter's name was an unpleasant memory that wizards had forgotten. He *had* killed a man, after all, though that action also came from circumstances almost identical to the problem Snape had now.

Damn Draco Malfoy.

So, he had to take care of the child. Serve the best interests of the child. And no matter how much Snape thought about it, he knew there was only one solution, the same blasted outcome he knew was in store for him the moment Britain's Hero woke up.

With a loud curse, Snape punched the tiled shower wall, water droplets gathering on his face as if he were crying.

~*~

Dressed in jeans and a black long-sleeved shirt, Snape peered into the sitting room. Marie was sitting in Hermione's lap, her hair done into braided pigtails. She was reading to Hermione from her book, happily going over the chapter in which Jo and her sisters were producing a newsletter for the Pickwick Club. She closed the book and looked up at Hermione.

"I've helped Severus do research for the Potions books he writes. That's sort of like what the March sisters are doing, right?"

"Sure it is, dear." Hermione leaned over her and kissed her cheek with the simple affection only a mother could have.

Snape strode into the room, not caring to see any more of the Madonna and Child act.

"Are we going to visit my sleeping dad now?" Marie asked.

Snape looked to Hermione, searching for evidence that she'd revealed anything to the girl while he was in the shower, but Marie spoke up again.

"I heard you and Hermione fi – I mean – discussing while I was sleeping." Damn it, he'd forgot the Silencing Charm last night. "So is it true? Can we visit him?"

He had made his decision. He would stand by it, even if he could feel his chest tighten and a headache begin. Even if he could lose her.

"Yes. We're going."

He would have to make sure such a thing would never happen.

Author's Note: Beta'd by the illustrious Southern_Witch_69.

Three.

Chapter 3 of 15

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~*~

Marie laughed at her reflection in the small mirror Snape held in front of her. She rubbed at her nose, staring at her face's image in the mirror and at her fingers.

"It doesn't come off!" she exclaimed, trying to wipe off the blue on her nose.

"Color Change Charm." Snape cast a Finite Incantatem, and the blue on her nose, orange on her lips, and purple on her cheeks faded until her pale skin showed should take her outside more.

Marie stared at herself in the mirror again, tugging at her lower lip and tracing the outline of her eyebrows. Snape knew what she would see in Snape's face after examining her own. She had vibrant green eyes. He had expressionless back ones. She smiled with upturned red lips and bold eyebrows. He frowned with thin creased brows and even thinner lips. And as she turned up her face to him, Snape knew what she would say.

"We don't look the same, Daddy."

She had been using the word for some time now, and Snape had tried to ignore it. She was only five years old, he had thought. Let her have her illusion for a little while longer. But she would be hurt worse later, and Hermione was going to poke her nose into the issue in her visit next week...

"Marie, you shouldn't call me that."

"Why not?"

He took a deep breath before continuing. "You remember Harry Potter?"

Marie's face lit up. "He was the Boy Who Lived!" she said, happy to answer a question. "I read about him."

"I'm sure you have." Snape got up from his chair and scanned the bookshelves in his study. A high bookshelf held a bundle of yellowing newspapers. He untied it and selected the topmost one. Putting the rest back, Snape returned to his seat and held the newspaper out to Marie.

Her eyes went first to the picture of a thin young man with unruly dark hair and glasses who was waving, his face almost identical to Marie's. His other arm wrapped around a woman his age with long hair streaming behind her. She smiled as she gave the man a kiss and patted her rounded belly.

The next picture, which took up most of the space on the paper, was of the same man lying on a hospital bed. His eyes were closed, and the only movement seen was from a few mediwizards working in the background.

"The Boy Who Lived in Coma," Marie slowly read the headline out loud, placing a fingertip on the woman in the first picture. Marie asked, "Is she my mum?"

"Yes."

"And my daddy?" She pointed to the picture of the man.

"Yes." Snape reached for her hand and moved it to the woman's stomach in the picture. "And that's you." His hand trembled while still on hers.

Marie continued to stare at the pictures. "So my mum... is she..."

Snape nodded and then realized she couldn't see it. "Dead, yes," he said again, feeling half glad she somehow pieced it together on her own and half like a coward for not being able to say it himself.

"And my dad?" She started to rub at her eyes.

"He's... sleeping."

"Then he will be my sleeping daddy, and you will be my Severus." She looked away from the paper, climbed into Snape's lap and sobbed.

As Snape wrapped his arms around her and patted her back slowly, he couldn't avert his eyes from the newspaper.

~*~

The door stood as the last guard between Snape and his former life. He knew that as soon as Marie saw her... father standing behind those doors, arms welcoming and waiting to snatch Marie away to some cottage even more beautiful than the one Snape had now. Hermione had probably made sure that the curtains and furniture matched before coming to tell Snape that someone else would be taken from him.

He, Marie, and Hermione had already passed the lobby's desks, ignored the pointed stares and whispers *(That bastard's alive?)*, and were cleared by the Aurors standing guard by Harry's room with unsure glances. Snape continued to look at the doors as if one angry glare could melt the doors and everything behind them.

"Severus, are you ready?" Hermione asked, one hand on the door, the other on Snape's arm.

Snape flinched from her touch but held on tightly to Marie's cold and sweaty hand, proof that she was just as scared as *just scared*.

He closed his eyes briefly and pulled himself up to his full height. And as he pushed through the door, his cloak flaring out behind him and Marie's hand still entwined with his, he prepared himself to watch his Marie forget her childhood and run to a sickly father she only knew about in annotated histories and sordid newspapers.

~*~

Four.

Chapter 4 of 15

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~*~

The first thing Snape saw when he opened the door was a sight almost identical to the picture in the old newspaper he had saved for Marie years ago.

Potter was still lying on the bed, now propped up by pillows and sitting up. He did look somewhat different from his seventeen-year-old self, though he was still too thin in the face and his hair was just as messy. His chin was outlined with a trace of stubble on his jaw, and somehow there were faint lines on his face that Snape could see in the distance – he couldn't take another step near Potter – creases in his forehead and around his eyes, but nothing of the sort around his mouth, which seemed unnaturally red in the glaring light of the hospital room.

He hasn't smiled for ten years, Snape thought nastily, but the effect was ruined by a trace of shock. That man-boy sitting there had lain on that bed for a decade, not able to experience the small joys and larger stresses that was a common part of Snape's life. He hadn't matured, raised his perfect famous family in a perfect famous house or worked to make a living. He had only sacrificed his consciousness and helped make a life.

Snape mentally shook himself. With Marie's hand still clutching his, he would make sure that the status quo could be maintained – minus the comforting coma that had lasted for so long.

Hermione slowly walked past him, stopping at the side of the bed. She placed a hand on his forehead and said, "Wake up, Harry. We have visitors."

He stirred a little but didn't open his eyes.

"Do you think he'll grace us with his awakening soon?"

Hermione took her hand back and crossed her arms. "It was only yesterday when he woke up for the first time. He could slip back into unconsciousness at any moment!"

He should not have woken up at all. "Remember who created the cure that brought him back to consciousness."

"Shhh." Marie tugged Snape's sleeve and pointed at the bed.

Potter was awake, and the lone mediwitch in the corner sat up from her chair to begin to test the wizard.

"Won't take long," the mediwitch said as she waved her wand over Potter and took notes with a levitating quill and parchment.

"Where's Madame Pomfrey?" Potter asked once the mediwitch had left them with some time for privacy.

Hermione began to smooth the sheets on Potter's bed. "She's at Hogwarts," she said.

Snape looked at them with shock. *It couldn't be.* "He doesn't know?"

Potter's head swiveled in Snape's direction. He scowled at his former professor, saying, "What *is* he doing here?"

"He... saved you," Hermione said with a nervous edge to her voice.

"Why is he here?" Harry insisted.

"I brought Marie here, and he doesn't know what has happened to him. Who *she's*?"

"He was only awake for a little while last night – we were so happy to just to have him here–"

"You had no right to risk our coming out of hiding when he knows nothing of the past ten years!"

"I was only trying to–"

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here!"

Snape turned to Marie and Hermione to Potter, who had spoken in unison with his daughter. Potter looked at the girl as if seeing her for the first time *Then again, this is the first time*, Snape thought as Harry sent a confused smile to Marie. Snape had a sudden impulse to stand in front of her and protect her from that smile.

Hermione sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It's just that we have so much to tell you. So much has changed."

Potter, now looking at Marie with curiosity, said, "Then can you tell me where we are? This doesn't look like the hospital wing."

"No, we're at St. Mungo's."

"So I take it we won?" Potter said as though he was injured in a Quidditch match.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, we won. Voldemort is dead."

Potter smiled again. "Brilliant. Then what has changed?"

"I've changed," Marie spoke up. She looked at Snape and whispered, "Can I tell him?"

"I believe you are quite capable of doing so. But *may* you?" Perhaps this reminder of proper grammar would be the last fatherly lesson he could teach her.

"*May* I tell him?" Marie asked, impatience in her voice.

"Yes." A heartbeat. "You may."

Marie beamed and slowly made her way to the bed, her exuberance fading with each step. She stood next to Hermione and took hold of the woman's hand.

"You're my sleeping daddy," Marie said.

Potter looked at the girl and then at Hermione as if to receive a confirmation of the fact.

"I'm... your father? You're my daughter?" Potter stammered. He reached for his glasses on the night table, which Snape suspected had been cleaned, shined, and God knows what else for Potter's eventual use in the past decade.

"Yeah. My father is Harry James Potter, born on the thirty-first of July in the year 1980. He is the Boy Who Lived to Defeat Voldemort on June thirteenth, 1998. Upon killing the Dark Wizard with wandless magic still unknown to most wizards today, Harry was put into a coma from the force of his spell. He left no surviving relatives." Marie paused for breath after reciting the passage in *Encyclopedia Magica* she had read so many times.

"But they were wrong because I'm alive. My name is Marie Potter. I don't have a middle name 'coz Hermione thought that you should make up one for me. I was born on June fifteenth, and my daddies are you and Severus. My mum was Ginevra Molly Weasley, and—"

Snape stared at Marie, astonished with all the talking she was doing. *She must have been saving this speech for years.*

"Your mother was? What happened to Ginny? And Ron?" Potter looked frantic with his glasses that were now too small for his pale face and the blankets that seemed to swallow him up in white folds. He looked at Hermione again.

But Marie was still eager to answer another question. "I've never met Ron before, but Hermione talks about him all the time. He's my godfather. And my mum is with your mum and dad. In heaven."

Potter's eyes seemed to go dead for a moment. "Um... thanks for coming by to see me, but I think I need to — er — rest again. It was nice meeting you, Marie."

Marie frowned. "Okay... but can I see you soon?"

Potter stared at his hands. "Sure. But I don't feel well right now."

Marie nodded. "Kiss me goodbye?" she asked hopefully.

Potter faced her and leaned as far as he could. Marie closed the distance and received an unsure peck on the cheek.

"Goodbye, Marie."

"Goodbye, Daddy."

Marie ran back to Snape and held out her hand. Taking it into his own, Snape turned on his heel and led Marie out of the room in triumph.

The last thing he saw before he had turned was the lost face of a boy re-awakening to a world of men and an equally lost woman who would have to help the boy find his way.

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Five.

Chapter 5 of 15

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~*~

Snape wanted to leave St. Mungo's as soon as they had left Potter's room. The Aurors continued to fidget along the corridor, and Snape just sneered his way past them with Marie in tow. *Let them think what they want.* Things would only get worse when the press found out.

Think of the devil, Snape groaned inwardly as he came face-to-face with Rita Skeeter, who hadn't seemed to age since the time Snape saw her last. With a sharp intake of breath and a hand raised to her mouth, the woman began to speak.

"Severus Snape, what a surprise." She smiled, and Snape could almost see the tinge of green ink she used to write with on her teeth.

"Miss Skeeter," Snape said dispassionately. "It's a *pleasure* to see you again, but I must be going—"

"Nonsense, Severus. I won't be taking up any of your time. It's just been so long. We all thought you were dead." She conjured some parchment and whipped out a Quick Quotes Quill from her magenta Kneazle-fur bag. "What are your feelings toward being back amongst your fellow wizardkind?"

"Dreadful. Now I must be going." Snape pulled Marie's hand, and she stood up straighter next to him.

He regretted his move once Skeeter's gaze lowered to Marie, who looked up at the reporter with the same distasteful glare she saved for broccoli and black pudding.

"So who might you be, dear?" Skeeter asked too sweetly.

Snape spoke before Marie revealed too much. *Not that she seems willing to talk to the shrew.* "Her name is of no importance. Now *I must* be leaving." Snape squeezed Marie's hand and headed toward the Floo center of the hospital when a small pop sounded to his right. He saw a skinny man clutching a camera, thick yellow smoke rising out of the device.

"Not until I got a picture of you and your exquisite child. But it's so strange – she looks *just* like Harry Potter, poor soul. Isn't it such a miracle that he woke?"

Snape made a noncommittal noise and threw a handful of Floo powder into the nearest fireplace. He held onto Marie's hand as he whispered the words that would bring him back to the cottage.

But as he and Marie traveled through the green flames, Snape thought of the last words Skeeter had said with disgust.

A miracle indeed.

~*~

"Do you think my daddy likes me?" Marie asked during dinner. She had been tactful enough not to say anything of the visit earlier in the day, which allowed Snape to be headache-free as he went over the research he had made during Potter's coma. She also did not ask him about the Skeeter woman, whose very mention could bring Snape to say words that he did not want Marie to hear.

How easy it would be to lie to her, to say that Potter did not like anything about Marie, that Snape was the only good father that Marie would ever have. He swallowed his water slowly and prepared an answer for her.

"It was a confusing day for him, Marie. He will get to know you soon enough."

"But does he like me?"

"Being liked is not everything. No one likes me, and I get along fine." Snape stood to put his emptied plate into the sink.

"I like you, and Hermione does, too."

Snape started. Either he could continue this uncomfortable tangent or turn the subject back to Potter. Tangent it was.

"Liking and tolerating others are two different things."

Marie shook her head and grinned. "I think that she *likes* you likes you."

What? Then the memories of his childhood and playful crushes (never on him, of course) in his Muggle elementary school came back to him.

"Hermione and I are only... colleagues. Nothing more."

Marie was about to open her mouth and say something else when Snape shot her a look that said their conversation was over.

"Oh, fine," she said, marching away from the table in a snit.

Liking him. Ha. Snape levitated Marie's dishes to the sink and left them there. It was time to brood in his study with a book not related to Potions.

~*~

Later on that night, after Snape fought to get Marie to sleep without her book, he sat upright in his bed, thinking.

Potter was awake. Confused and dim-witted, but awake. And knowing his stubbornness, Potter would most likely not slip back to a coma. Would he want Marie? Of course. The brat had little to call his own. But would Marie want to leave? Would Snape let her? The questions swirled together into nightmarish speculation until Snape fell asleep.

~*~

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Six

Chapter 6 of 15

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~*~

It had ended in Diagon Alley.

Snape had always thought it would happen outside of Hogwarts, a grand scene on the fields in front of the school, or in one of the Dark Lord's safe houses with an invasion of Order members. Preferably with Snape already dead and gone.

But Snape was still alive, miserable and alive as his true loyalties still remained hidden after the end of the Battle, even to himself. The one wizard he had followed died by Snape's hand, another wizard with no humanity left still expecting Snape to prostrate himself at his feet. How could have Snape continued to spy for the Order, their last defense a young boy who would have killed Snape without a second thought? All Snape had was the ability to deceive both sides until the end.

Wiping sweat and blood from his brow and donning his Death Eater's mask, Snape stepped back into the smoke and stench of missed curses. Potter had already defeated the Dark Lord and was Merlin knows where, but small battles were still being fought by the Death Eaters who had escaped the night before. And though Snape knew it was cowardice, it would be so easy to be targeted with his mask instead of baiting other Death Eaters to incarceration. All he had to do was to be on the wrong end of an ignorant Order member's wand...

"Expelliarmus!"

Snape whirled around, following the path of his wand until it reached its magicked destination. In the shadows of the side street Snape had just exited stood Draco Malfoy, who was gripping two wands in one trembling hand. His other arm seemed to be holding some writhing mass of blankets. Could it be that the Dark Lord had still found a way to return, there within those bloodstained sheets?

"Professor Snape... Severus."

"I brought you to the Order to keep you safe, and this is how I'm repaid? If you're going to kill me without me being able to defend myself, please do so without stuttering my name." As he spoke, Snape wondered if the wizards who would clean up this mess later would remember to take his body.

"I don't want to kill you," Draco said, clutching the blankets to his chest. "I just remembered how quick you are with your wand, and—"

"Then what do you want with me?"

"I've asked a lot of you, and you've always been able to help. But I must ask you one more thing."

Snape held back his rising retort. "What?"

"I need you to make the Vow."

"After the fiasco with you and your mother, I will never make an Unbreakable Vow with a Malfoy again."

"It's not for me," Draco almost whined. "It's for... this." Draco held the bundle up to Snape.

Snape walked toward Draco and pulled back a sheet. Within the many blankets lay an infant, recently born by the looks of its pink wrinkled skin and flecks of blood still on its face. Though it seemed to be newly born, a shock of black hair was on its head.

"She's Potter's girl," Draco explained.

"And the mother?" Snape asked with a sick feeling in his chest.

"Dead, most likely." Draco shook his head. "I didn't see much — just the baby crying — I took her and Apparated. But they'll be after me... and Potter—"

"You know what happened to him?"

"He's worse than dead — in a coma or something. Please, Severus. Take the child. Raise her as your own."

"I can't. The Weasleys—"

"No time. Just take her... make the Vow." Draco handed Snape his wand. "She's life when there is none."

"Don't wax poetic on my behalf." Snape gripped his wand tightly. "You know the spell?"

"Yeah." Draco offered Snape the bundle. "It'll help if you hold her."

Snape held himself back, almost repulsed by the idea. He approached Draco and the bundle slowly, then remembered his mask might scare it. Ripping off the mask and tossing it aside, Snape held out his other arm and took the baby in his arms. It settled into him comfortably, its eyes fluttering closed. It was a miracle it hadn't cried.

As Draco held out his hand, Snape asked, "Where's the Bonder?"

"She's here."

Snape saw some movement to his left. The air parted to reveal Hermione Granger holding a silvery cloak.

"You had no time to contact the Weasleys, but plenty to enlist her help. What motives do you have here?"

Draco muttered something Snape couldn't catch and said, "Doesn't matter. Hermione?"

She came forward, holding out her wand, never taking her eyes off Snape. He responded to her heated gaze with a cold one as he took hold of Draco's hand.

"Let's begin," she said, touching her wand to their joined hands.

After they finished the spell, Snape looked down at the child.

"What should I name it?" he asked. Once he had spoken, he cringed at the word he had been using in his mind. "Her," he amended.

Draco spoke up before Hermione could suggest something insipid like Ginevra James. "Marie."

"A French name?"

"My mother — if she ever had a daughter, that's what she would have named her. Was my grandmother's name."

It was better than calling her Lily Sirius or some other nonsense. "Marie," he said. The child smiled toothlessly in her sleep.

Snape looked around, preparing to Apparate. "Nobody has seen us here."

"I put up a few glamours. You go first, or my spell will end," Draco said.

Snape nodded and understood Draco's impulse to hold the child closer as he did so himself.

"Take care—" Hermione seemed to choke back anything else she wanted to say, sliding on the cloak and Disapparating.

Draco pulled up the hood of his cloak. "Be safe."

"You too."

The walls around them faded away to fire and dust as Snape Disapparated away.

~*~

The smoke from Snape's dream seemed so real that he still smelled it when he woke.

Only he was proven wrong when Marie ran into his room, coughing in between screams.

"Severus, the house is on fire!"

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Seven.

Chapter 7 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

Snape bolted out of bed as he saw the orange-red flames beyond his room. He reached for Marie's hand, but the girl was already running into the sitting room. Snape let out a curse and cast a Bubble-Head Charm in Marie's direction. Continuing to chase after her, he Summoned the suitcase he had kept for the two of them in case of an emergency.

"What are you doing?" Snape hissed as he staggered through the smoke-filled room, almost blacking out from a lack of oxygen. He silently cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself and ran to Marie, his head still reeling and eyes tearing up. She was reaching for something on the bookshelf, pulling out the volume she had been reading recently.

"I wanted my book!" she mouthed through the bubble of air. Snape picked her up, and she turned her face into Snape's neck. Studying the room, Snape saw the main blaze in the kitchen, spreading out to surround them in the sitting room. The only fire-free part of the house was Snape's bedroom, and conjured jets of water wouldn't be enough to douse the flames.

He cast a light Freezing Charm on their bodies and wrapped his arms around Marie, running into his room with his head turned down. Flames licked painfully at his bare legs, but Snape went on, focusing his energy on the windowpane. The glass thinned into a sheet of water that flooded out of the room. Snape ignored the fatigue in his arms as he hefted Marie up further and stepped through the window.

But the fire wasn't just contained to the cottage. The surrounding woods around him were ablaze, along with other houses closer to the Muggle village Snape's home was near. In the distance he could see robed figures pointing their wands to the sky and at other parts of the village, sending *Incendio* spells in every direction. One, however, had his wand raised to the sky.

Snape's eyes followed the upward path created by the jets of light expelled from the wand until he saw a scarlet phoenix blazing against the stars.

The grass still cool and wet under his feet and Marie clutching his neck, Snape Apparated to the one safe place he knew of other than his now destroyed home.

~*~

Hogwarts had seen death and war, but it was still one of the most secure magical institutions in England. Snape walked from the Apparition point to the castle, still holding Marie to himself even though she was no longer the small baby he had been given years ago.

Snape heard a rattling noise coming from Marie and saw that her teeth were chattering. He cast a Warming Charm, not noticing the extreme changes in temperature on his own person. He was still adjusting from the dream-memory of his Vow for Marie, fresh in his mind with the added panic of his present experience of the fire. Most of Marie's lifetime had taken place in that house, along with scores of books and parchments related to Potter's cure that had been housed in the study. At least some of them would be salvaged in a special Gringotts safe, but the rest of it – her first crayon and paint creations, her old chair, their home...

Sprinting toward the eastern side of the castle, Snape began to count his steps. On his thirty seventh one, he had reached an arch of stone that rested at his eyelevel. It seemed out of place when nothing stood under it, save for the rest of the castle wall. Snape shifted Marie to one arm, lifting the other to feel along the smooth surface of the arch.

His fingers made contact with a rough shape, warm and in the shape of a snake's head. No Parseltongue was needed to use the arch – only the words of a Slytherin in great need.

"*Confugius ara.*" It came out in a coarse whisper.

The stones below the archway shimmered away, and Snape stepped through the doorway to climb down a narrow staircase. A slice of moonlight shone through the shadowy descent until the doorway behind them appeared again as dark stone.

Upon reaching the end of the stairway, Snape was greeted by the sight of a tall, wooden door. Taking in a gulp of breath, Snape then exhaled, *Alohamora*."

The door clicked open, and Snape entered a room he hadn't seen for over a decade.

His bedroom chamber, dusty and undisturbed, looked the same as it had the last time he had slept there, except for almost eleven years of grime and cobwebs. He scanned the room with a cautious eye; no creatures had taken up residence here since his departure.

Snape's arms felt numb from Marie's weight. With a hasty *Scourgify*, ridding the bed of the filth that had settled there, Snape laid the girl down. Her eyes wide and her arms wrapped around the book, Marie spoke for the first time since they'd escaped the fire.

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have run out – I just wanted the book, and—"

"We'll discuss it later. For now... get some rest." Snape tucked her in and sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands.

The Headmistress should be on her way; the wards must have alerted her as soon as they had entered. So with an ash-streaked face and icy hands, Snape waited for the next nightmare to begin.

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Eight.

Chapter 8 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

When Minerva McGonagall opened the door to Snape's quarters, the former professor woke from his stupor, propping up his head with a weary hand.

He looked at Minerva. She had not changed much – the same forest green robes graced her austere figure, and her eyes were shielded by the same square-framed glasses. There seemed to be more wrinkles etched into her face though, and her jet-black hair now shone as silver in her customary bun. Snape did not know what to expect from her – defensiveness, anger, some toxic mix with hatred added in, perhaps.

He was shocked to feel her arms around him in a warm embrace, his head almost crushed into her bosom.

"Severus, it's been so long. Thank Merlin you're alive."

Snape was overwhelmed by the itchy feel of her wool robe and smell of talcum powder. He pulled away and pushed his lank hair from his eyes, saying nothing.

"I'm sorry about before – none of us knew the truth until the end... Then there was the article in the *Prophet*—"

"What article?"

"Printed in this evening's paper, about your existence and about Potter's girl." Minerva's eyes drifted to Marie's sleeping form. "That's her."

Snape nodded. "The cottage we had been living in – it was set on fire."

Minerva looked at Marie with what had to be fondness for some moments. Then she cleared her throat, and the Professor McGonagall Snape had known for so long stood before him.

"We can't have her in a place like this." Catching Snape's look of indignation, Minerva said, "Severus, the dungeons are no place for a child to recover. We're bringing her to the Hospital Wing, and then you and I will discuss things in my office."

Snape, feeling reduced to the position of an errant first year, muttered, "Yes, ma'am," and followed her instructions.

~*~

"You made quite a sight," Minerva said, seated behind the Headmistress' desk after they had taken Marie to see Madam Pomfrey, who had insisted that Marie stay until morning. "You running in the grass wearing your gray nightshirt, carrying Marie – and then there was that suitcase bouncing behind you..."

"You saw us before the wards alerted you?"

"I was already awake, looking out my window. Some nights I just stay up for hours. Maybe I don't need as much sleep as I am getting older."

Snape was not so sure about that. With the way he had been sleeping lately, he'd end up taking midday naps soon.

"I wonder what spell you had used to enter the school, however."

"Sanctuary Spell. It was created by Salazar Slytherin for members of his House who needed protection within Hogwarts' walls."

"Ah. No one else knows about this?"

Aware that the school's safety relied on this fact, Snape answered, "Only me – Dumbledore, despite being the Gryffindor he was—" Snape enjoyed the way Minerva's eyebrows twitched after his dismissive mention of her House. "He procured it for me when I needed a quick entry into Hogwarts after nights of spying. I moved my rooms to the ones connecting to that entranceway, and that was all."

"I'm glad to hear it." Minerva leaned forward. "You will always have a place here. There's plenty of room for you and the girl, and our current Potions professor leaves much to be desired... the same could be said for Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Thank you, but that is not an option. My stay here must be as temporary as possible, or it will endanger the school."

"Very well. I'll show you to your rooms."

But a loud snore sounding from above them made Snape pause. "Not until I get a look at the boy."

Dumbledore's portrait beamed down at them, the other Headmasters' portraits looking on with interest.

"The old man never ceases to be a nosy bastard." Minerva smiled at Snape and opened the door. "I'll be in the Hospital Wing," she said, leaving the office.

Snape faced the portrait of his mentor, friend, and murder victim, his throat dry.

"Severus, my boy. It has been some time."

"Yes, it has." Snape leaned back in his chair and spoke with Dumbledore's portrait until the sun began arching its way through the sky.

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Nine.

Chapter 9 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

"How is she?"

"Fine, Severus. Poppy said she had some smoke inhalation, but she's in stable condition."

"Let me see her."

"Wait. Have you even seen yourself? Come with me. You need a bath and a change of clothes, maybe something to eat—"

"I need to see her!"

Minerva's face grew stern. "You will go and get cleaned up, and then you will see her. I won't have one of my former professors running about the school in nothing but a nightshirt!" She placed a hand on his shoulder. "At least put on a pair of socks."

Snape tried to peer into the partially open door of the infirmary. He couldn't see more than a row of empty beds.

"Fine. I'll go." Snape whirled around as best he could in only a nightshirt and headed for the dungeons.

~*~

He would never admit it to Minerva, but a hot shower and a change of clothes did him some good. Wearing the robes he had found in his surprisingly moth-free bureau, Snape strode through the corridors of Hogwarts. It almost seemed like he was dressing up as himself for Halloween – no, not as himself, but as Professor Snape, who docked points from both grades and Houses, mercilessly and with satisfaction. The flaring-robed, foul-tempered persona he had held for so many years had begun to shatter the moment he had held an infant Marie in his arms, causing him to exchange potions ingredients for bottles and diapers, his teaching robes for worn jeans and shirts.

A sleepy group of what looked like second years made their way past Snape to breakfast at the Great Hall. When they saw Snape's shadowy visage, their early morning stupor disappeared, their eyes melding to the floor and their feet carrying them away in haste.

Snape smiled, his yellow teeth glinting in the light of the torches lining the walls. Eleven years without teaching and he still had it.

~*~

Marie looked so much like her father, but Snape had chosen not to notice the girl's physical quirk until she was lying asleep in the hospital bed. Her black hair was a tangled mess fanning out on the bleached pillow, her red lips slightly parted as she snored. Unlike Potter, who had been fed intravenously for years, Marie ate hearty meals, so her pale limbs that poked out of her hospital nightgown were rounded and fleshy. Snape himself had filled out over time – the tightness in his chest came less from seeing Marie than it did as a result of his tight robes.

Snape touched his palm to her forehead. It felt cool. He took a folded blanket from the bed next to him and placed it on the one already covering her. Tucking Marie in, he looked her over; not a scratch or bruise in sight.

Poppy finally came into the room, a bottle and some linen in hand.

“Minerva had told me you suffered some burns. Let me see them.”

Snape nodded and sat on the edge of the bed adjacent to Marie's. He gingerly rolled up his pant sleeves, not wanting to aggravate the tender flesh there.

The sting from the salve Poppy was applying made Snape hiss in pain and turn away from the nurse's ministrations.

“Buck up, Severus, you've had much worse.”

Snape gritted his teeth. “While that may be true, I have not fared worse than a paper cut for over a decade. Takes some time – ah – getting used to.”

Poppy finished applying the salve and began bandaging Snape's legs. “The girl's quite pretty. Looks just like—”

“Her father. Yes, I know.”

“No need to get so snappy about it.” Poppy tied on the last bandage and murmured some spells to protect the bandages. She patted Snape's leg – which elicited a moan of pain from the wizard – and said, “If you would've let me finish... I just wanted to add that she reminded me of you, too.”

Snape was unable to say anything else as Poppy looked over Marie and went back to her office.

~*~

Marie was still asleep, and Snape was reading in the chair by her bed when he heard voices at the door of the hospital wing.

“Let me see him.”

“It wouldn't be advisable. They're both recovering.”

“I need to see hi-them!”

Recognizing Hermione's voice in a wave of déjà vu, Snape walked to the entrance of the infirmary and opened the door.

“Let her in, Poppy. It's not like we're contagious.”

Poppy bustled into the infirmary. “Very well.” She adjusted her cap, muttered something about “high-strung patients,” and went back to her office.

“Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to come in?”

Hermione frowned and entered the room. “Coming in, actually. How is Marie?”

“Shaken, I suppose, and tired. She hasn't woken up since—”

A yawn from the bed brought Snape and Hermione to Marie's side. The girl's eyes were fluttering open, her arms stretching out to either side of the bed.

“Good morning, Severus. Hermione,” she said with a sleepy smile.

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Ten.

Chapter 10 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

Snape remained silent; Hermione was more than able to remedy his reticence.

“Good morning, love.” Hermione kissed Marie's forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“I'm okay.” With grubby hands, Marie pushed herself up into a sitting position. “How are you, Severus?”

Not admitting the pain he felt in his legs, Snape said, “I'm fine.” He moved to Marie's other side; the close proximity he'd had while standing next to Hermione had been unsettling.

“It's funny,” Hermione said. Furrowing her brow, she continued, “Not funny, actually... It's just that your father always got himself in the hospital wing at least once a year here... and you've managed that before even becoming a student.”

And he was quite good at dragging his friends there with him; Snape mentally added.

Marie giggled, her laughter turning into a fit of coughing. Snape extended a hand to rub her back soothingly. As he did so, he found that Hermione had done the same on Marie's other side. Their fingers brushed against each other, Hermione's lingering on his before she pulled her hand away.

Marie gave Snape a questioning look that Snape responded to with a blank stare. She rolled her eyes and said to Hermione, “Severus has told me stories of how my sleep-

my daddy got here when he was younger.”

Hermione’s head tilted to one side. “And what exactly did Severus say?”

Marie’s lips curved into a grin. “He said that...” Straightening her posture and lifting her chin up, she took on a deeper voice to say, “Potter was impertinent, willful and stubborn, causing him to get into all sorts of trouble. But he cared about doing the right thing and was more than a capable wizard.”

While no one could imitate Snape’s baritone unless they Polyjuiced themselves, Marie had acted her monologue with his usual dry and acerbic tone.

Hermione held a hand to her chest. “Did Severus really say that?”

Marie nodded. “Word for word.”

It was amazing and somewhat scary how Marie was able to remember things so well, including the exact words Snape had said years ago when Marie had wanted to know more about her father.

Hermione looked as if she was going to say something, but Snape beat her to it.

“While I’m not... fond of the boy, I can acknowledge his good points upon occasion.”

Both Marie and Hermione smiled.

~*~

After eating a breakfast sent up by the house-elves, Snape, Hermione and Marie discussed their options on where he and the child could live. Snape hadn’t wanted to include Marie in the discussion, but the girl had remained insistent, so Snape grudgingly let her be a silent spectator in what was turning into another argument.

“Minerva had suggested Hogwarts.”

“And I already said no.”

“It’s safe!”

“We’d be a danger to the students.”

“You could stay at Grimmauld Place.”

“I will never again enter that...” Snape held back a curse, “disgusting house.”

“Severus, you’ve rejected every suggestion I have given you. What do you want?”

For you to stay quiet for more than a second. “Someplace safe that can’t be easily opened for attack. Space enough for Marie and me to live comfortably and magically. Indoor plumbing would be a plus.”

Hermione glared at him. “That just about excludes every home in the United Kingdom! Unless...”

Snape would have rather seen Hermione’s furious expression instead of the thoughtful smile that crossed her face.

“You can come and live with me.”

“Yes!”

“No!”

Marie gave Snape a pleading look. “I’d be good there, and it sounds wonderful... Please?”

Snape rubbed his nose in thought. “Are you still living with...”

“No. Ron and I have been divorced for years now, you know that.”

“Can there be separate rooms for us?”

“Of course there can.”

“I’m going to need another room to do my research.”

“Done.”

Damn. “And you’re still fine with the idea of me as a houseguest?”

“This isn’t about you. It’s all for Marie.”

Hermione wore the same hopeful expression as Marie, and Snape was forced to do what any man would when being manipulated by two women.

“Fine. But only as a temporary measure.”

As Marie hugged him tightly, Snape thought of the misery his new residence would bring.

~*~

Author’s Note: Beta’d by Southern_Witch_69.

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

As with most people who travel, Snape found that he had left Hogwarts with much more than he had arrived with. *And I only stayed there for a day,* Snape thought ruefully as he felt in his pocket for the shrunken items Minerva had given him before he had left.

"Feel free to take whatever books you need from your library."

"Thank you." Despite the fact those books had been his to begin with.

"And please owl me regularly. I want to know how you and Marie are faring."

"Only if you owl me back and notify me about the Slytherins winning both the House and Quidditch Cups."

"Hmmp." Minerva had taken Snape's hands in hers and had said, "Please be careful, Severus. Things are changing again after Potter woke up, and..." She had looked away.

"Why, Minerva, I didn't know you cared."

"Oh, shut up, you arse. Can never take concern when it's right in front of you." She looked up at Severus sternly. "Hermione is sacrificing quite a bit to provide you a home. I don't want to hear any nonsense about your behavior there. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I used to be your professor, and this is the disrespect I get." But the upturned wrinkles around her eyes had indicated her hidden smile. "Take care of yourself, Severus."

"You too." After a final squeeze of her hands, Snape had released them and had left Minerva's office in search of a newly discharged Marie and Hermione.

~*~

"Ready to go, then?" Floo powder jar in hand, Hermione gestured to the fireplace in the infirmary.

Snape reached into the jar and pulled out a pinch of the powder. "I'll go in first – to make sure the place is habitable as you say it is." Caustic barbs aside, Snape wanted to be the first to defend themselves if there were any unexpected attackers within the house. He threw the powder into the fire, watching the flames brighten into green.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I suppose you might be surprised in what you find."

Snape had already stepped into the fire and had murmured the words granting him entry into Hermione's home, so he had no way of knowing what she had meant as the Floo brought him into her fireplace.

When Snape walked out of the fireplace, disoriented from the dizzying swirl of Floo powder-green flames, he almost tripped over a small boy staring out into the fireplace.

"Good Merlin, boy! What are you doing in front of the fireplace?"

The boy flinched away from Snape, as if he had been hit. "Waiting for... M-Mum," he muttered.

Snape stepped forward and gave the boy a cursory glance. Julius Byron Weasley looked like he still had to grow into his name, standing up to a height that was puny when compared to other boys his age. Like a plant trying to grow without enough sunlight, the boy was stunted and thin, reaching for some wayward ray of light.

Snape hadn't seen him in person before, though Hermione had shown him pictures of her son before, the last one being at the boy's eighth birthday party. He barely looked any different then, almost swallowed up by the cake and his cousins and half siblings. His coloring was also nondescript. He was freckled with a mop of curly brown hair – probably the first Weasley in several generations born without red hair – and a timid expression. The only startling feature the boy possessed was a pair of eyes so blue they almost glowed.

Those eyes stared up at Snape now with an intense curiosity. "You're S-Severus," he said in recognition. "Mummy's friend."

A flash of green flames interrupted Snape's refuting the idea of him and Hermione as... friends.

"Severus!" Marie ran to Snape as if he hadn't seen him moments earlier. When she saw the boy, she surprised Snape by stepping in front of him to address the boy. "Who are *you*?"

The boy seemed as surprised as Snape. "I'm Julius Byron Weasley," he said, the utterance of his name giving him some kind of confidence – or at least an inability to stutter. "And you must be Harry Potter's daughter."

Hermione had entered during the exchange and shook her head. "She has a name, and it's Marie."

"It's okay," Marie said cheerfully. "I forgot Hermione had a son anyway."

"Marie!" If Snape had been surprised with her entrance, he was gobsmacked with her most recent words. Hermione shot him a look as if to say, "She's been living alone with you for far too long."

Marie looked at the floor. "Sorry."

Hermione nudged her son, who said, "Not a problem, Miss *Potter*."

Marie's face reddened, and Snape was glad he hadn't purchased her wand yet.

"Come on, Marie," he said to avoid any outlets of pre-Hogwarts magic from the two children. "Let's have a look around the house."

Hermione put up a protesting hand. "Wait, Severus. I still have to—"

Snape cut her off with a wordless message of his own. *You take care of your own child; I'll take care of mine.* "I wonder where this hall leads to," he said aloud, guiding Marie away from the boy. He went along the hallway, which led into the kitchen, filled with cauldrons and cooking ware.

And one Harry James Potter.

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Twelve.

Chapter 12 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

"Snape." There was no malice behind the name, just an emotionless acknowledgement.

"Potter." With Marie there, it was best to respond in kind.

"Daddy!" Still cautious, even with her enthusiastic greeting, Marie remained at Snape's side.

"Hi... Marie." Potter managed a smile for his daughter.

"So everyone's caught up then," Hermione said from another doorway into the kitchen, her son right behind her.

Potter nodded. "I guess you could say that."

"Great. I could always make tea for everyone... and biscuits."

"Fresh from the oven, Hermione? I didn't know you had such a flair for domesticity."

"More like fresh from the tin. Julie can show you and Marie into the dining room. Why don't you join them, Harry?"

Potter pushed up his glasses and stood. "Right."

"The dining room's right here," Julius said, pointing to the doorway he had just came out from.

The dining room was excessively large for a home that had previously only housed two people. The oval-shaped table seated twelve, and there seemed to be space for additional tables and chairs should the occasion warrant it. A chandelier even hung in the middle of the ceiling, shining gold and crystal that reflected prisms of light throughout the room.

"Wow," Marie whispered.

"Wow is right," Snape said, guiding her to a seat in the middle of the table.

"I love Hermione's house, and I haven't even seen my room yet."

"Don't get attached. You won't stay here for very long."

"Julius Byron!" Hermione entered with the tray of tea and biscuits hovering dangerously behind her. "Apologize to your cousin immediately!"

Snape spelled the tea to land on the table without a spill or fall as Julius mumbled an apology.

"Much better. The biscuits are peanut butter. I hope that's alright."

"My favorite!" Marie reached for one, nearly knocking hands with Potter.

"Me too."

They shared a smile that made Snape's stomach churn. He tried to soothe it with a cup of tea and the memory of testing Marie's food allergies and discovering that not only was she not allergic, but she loved the stuff.

"The hospital released you early," Snape said after a sip of tea had warmed his throat.

Potter swallowed his biscuit. "Thanks to Hermione. She pulled out her Order of Merlin and demanded that they release me."

"You keep your medal with you at all times, Hermione?"

"Of course not, Severus, I just thought that it might be an effective reminder of what I could've done had my wishes not been met."

"And what exactly were you planning to do after releasing Mr. Potter from his hospital hell?"

"Live here, of course."

Snape almost dropped his cup. "Pardon?"

"It sounds like a good idea. If you will excuse us—" She threw a sharp glance at Snape and headed for the kitchen.

Snape followed her, almost slamming the door behind him. "I agree to bring Marie here, and this is how you repay me?"

"I was going to tell you, Severus."

"When? Certainly not before I agreed to live here."

"You're being unfair."

"I lost my house!"

"That wasn't my fault."

"How did the attackers know about the village? They were wizards, Hermione. I saw them cast a bloody Dark Mark into the sky."

"The Dark Mark? But the reports said—"

"It was a phoenix, not a snake. But Muggle attacks and strange marks can only mean Dark activity. I've seen enough to recognize it."

"But your house... how? I hadn't given away your location to anyone."

"They were firing *Incendios* everywhere. Fidelius makes you invisible, but it doesn't repel direct attacks, no matter how accidental they may be."

Hermione sighed. "That's why you have to stay here. You'll be safe – the place is almost humming with wards." Snape snorted, but Hermione continued. "Severus, the house is huge; you'll be able not to see him for days if you need to."

"And Marie?"

"That's between you and Harry. All I can do is offer a shoulder, some advice, and tea."

Snape gave her a curt nod. "We'd better go in before those two unconsciously hex each other."

"Good point. I don't know what happened between them."

"The children of the respective members of the Golden Trio disliking each other upon their first meeting. Who knew?" Snape held out the door for Hermione, taking in the sight of the children and Potter finishing the last of the biscuits.

Hermione entered the dining room, letting out a chuckle. "Who knew indeed."

~*~

Author's Note: Beta'd by Southern_Witch_69.

Thirteen.

Chapter 13 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

After finishing his lukewarm tea, Snape had asked Hermione where Marie and he would sleep.

She had shown him through the hallway leading from the kitchen, rounded a corner and climbed a curving staircase. Snape, still walking behind her, had noticed the fine trim on the witch's robes she wore – and the curves accentuated by them. Coughing (a side effect of the smoke inhalation, no doubt), he had turned to his right and looked at the many magical paintings lining the walls.

"Do you like them?"

The autumn leaves in the last landscape had blown across the canvas in a painted breeze. "They are... charming."

Hermione had smiled, holding on to the banister at the top of the stairs. "I painted them."

"All of them?"

"I started out with one of those paint by numbers kits. They were easy enough to do, and I needed something other than N.E.W.T.s to keep me busy after Julie was born. Then I decided – why not do my own? God, I'm rambling again... This is your room."

Snape had opened the door and saw that this room was much larger than the one in the cottage. "Hermione."

"Yes?" She had looked amused.

"This house..." He had stepped out of the room.

"I saved my Sickles and Knuts." She had pointed to the room across the corridor. "This is Marie's room."

"Do you sleep here?" he had asked, gesturing to the room on his right.

"That's Harry's room. I'm at the end of the hall."

"And your son?" There hadn't been any more unclaimed doors in the hallway.

"He sleeps in the bedroom we have downstairs. Was the only one he took a liking to when we moved here... I'll leave you to unpack then." Snape had entered his room and restored his possessions to their original size.

Now he sat on the bed he would have to call his own for only a short amount of time. He started to organize the things littering the floor, but his eyes began to droop, and he was already on the bed...

Snape fell into a dreamless sleep.

~*~

He only woke when Marie shouted for him to do so.

"What is it, girl?" He sat up gingerly, the pain in his lower legs returning.

"It's nighttime. You've been asleep for too long."

"How kind of you to shout as if we were in another fire."

Seeing the hurt look in her eyes, Snape cupped her chin. "I didn't mean it that way... Forget I said it."

She took Snape's hand from her face and held it. "It was my fault, wasn't it? Why our house is gone?"

Snape shook his head. "Of course not. The fire was an accident."

"No, it wasn't; I saw those wizards, too."

It was pointless to try to protect her from the truth. "If the fire was intentional, it wasn't your fault. There are quite a few people who wouldn't mind seeing me dead."

Marie's eyes widened, but before she could ask anything about his last few words, he said, "Was there another reason for you waking me?"

"Yeah. We have guests!"

At least someone is excited about this event. "Who's here?"

"Uncle Ron and his family."

That was too vague a term, either referring to his wife and children or the entire passel of redheads. He hoped for the former. "And I suppose I'm expected to greet them?"

Marie nodded enthusiastically.

I won't be able to go to sleep again now. "Only if you honestly tell me how many peanut butter biscuits you had earlier."

"Three." He rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine. Eight."

He quirked his eyebrow.

"I was hungry!"

"Not if you only had eight."

"Daddy has bigger hands than me – he could take three at a time out of the tin!"

Hurrah for Potter. "Since you answered, I suppose we must go."

He stood, and the two walked hand in hand to the sitting room.

~*~

Hermione sat in the middle of the couch, Julius and Potter sitting awkwardly on either side of her. Snape's hopes were a reality, with Weasley and his wife seated in the loveseat to the side of the couch, their three children fidgeting in the other chairs that Snape hadn't noticed in the room before. All of them had stopped speaking upon Snape's entrance.

"Hi, Severus. We were worried about–"

"I'm alright."

"Okay." Hermione looked at the people in the room. "I don't think I need to make introductions."

"I've told our children about my former Head of House." Weasley's wife did look familiar, and Snape remembered Hermione's telling him the news two years after the war had ended. Her face looked rounder now, and her homely appearance from her teenage years had softened into a more kind and pleasant one. She was almost pretty now.

"Miss Bulstrode."

She smiled gently. "It's Mrs. Weasley now, but you can call me by my first name."

"Millicent. Mr. Weasley." He nodded to both of them. Weasley inclined his head in return.

"Oh, I forgot about chairs." She conjured only one as the youngest child left her chair to wedge herself in between her parents.

"This is our youngest, Quiessa," Weasley said, putting his arm around the girl. "Then we have Ginevra Ann and Arthur, our firstborn."

Snape noticed that only the boy had red hair, the girls carrying their mother's dark brown hair. He sat in the chair recently vacated so that Marie could sit in the newly conjured chair next to him. Hermione glared at Snape, but he paid her no mind. He didn't know those children and preferred to be a buffer between them and Marie. That and he didn't want to sit too close to Potter.

"Would anyone like some tea?" Hermione asked.

~*~

Author's Note: This chapter was beta'd by the amazing Southern_Witch_69.

I try not to make my author's notes too long, but I just wanted to say that I might not be able to write another chapter for another two weeks because of RL and such, and that I apologize for being so slow with my mini-chapters when I post them normally.

Fourteen.

Chapter 14 of 15

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~*~

As soon as the Weasleys left, Marie and Julie marched off to their separate rooms without saying a single word to each other. Hermione had shown it to the girl during her visit, and in their absence, Weasley and Potter stuttered their sentences and eventually began holding a conversation on their own without Hermione acting as a mediator.

"All things considered, this wasn't a total disaster," she now said as she cleaned the sitting room, Snape arranging furniture close by.

"I agree," Snape said, adjusting a seat cushion that one of the Weasley children had moved – and managed to stain. As he cast a Cleaning Charm on the spot, he still wondered how they had all been able to coexist for a few hours without chaos occurring.

Potter, who had been looking out into the fire that Weasley and his family had departed from, spoke. "He's been married. He has a family."

Hermione, who had been Vanishing the chairs she had conjured, faltered in her spell, making a chair disappear with a loud BANG and a puff of yellow smoke. "I was carrying Julie during the war, Harry."

Potter sensed that Hermione's temper was flaring, and he stared at his shoes. "I remember that, but... you two weren't all that happy together... in that time."

Snape brushed off nonexistent dust from the couch's arm as he listened further to their conversation. *So Potter did notice the obvious all those years ago.*

Hermione Vanished the last chair with a sizzling crack this time, sending green sparks into the air. "It doesn't matter. We were married—"

"Because he got you pregnant!"

"Like you and Ginny were any different."

"At least we didn't go and get rings and pretend like we were the happiest couple on earth." Potter was standing now, his fist clenched at his sides.

There was silence. Hermione pocketed her wand and made her way toward the hall. "I have to go tuck Julie in."

Once she left, Potter addressed Snape. "I really bollixed that up, didn't I?"

"Quite." A half smile crossed Snape's face.

Potter scratched the back of his neck. "Marie should be asleep by now."

"Come on, Potter. Surely you're not that incapable of putting a blanket over the child."

Instead of rising to Snape's bait, Potter smiled. "If she hasn't gone to bed by now, you could give her a Potions lecture. That would get her snoring fast enough."

Snape nodded in Potter's direction. *He's probably still giddy from seeing Weasley.* "Best leave the job to Binns."

Potter laughed a little, and the pair climbed the stairs for Marie's room.

~*~

Snape closed the door to his bedroom, a sigh escaping his lips.

Marie had already been asleep, sprawled on her bed. He and Potter had sorted her out with the pillows and blanket before adjourning to their own beds for the night.

Snape couldn't help but notice when, as Snape had ruffled Marie's hair, Potter had followed suit, his hand trembling.

He shook his head and began to unfasten his robes. The best thing to do now would be to change into his nightshirt and get some sleep, even when he was feeling awake from his nap.

Snape had finished hanging up his robes in the closet and was searching for his nightshirt on the piles of unpacked things on his bed when he heard a knock on the door, a creak, and a gasp.

"Severus! I'm so sorry for intruding—"

Hermione stood in the doorway her face flushed and her hands clutching a newspaper.

Protestations of modesty danced about in his mind, but as Snape stood there in only his boxers, he decided that he didn't care.

"Either say what you will or get out." Snape faced the bed and still could not find a spare grey shirt.

Damn.

He began the process of putting away the things he had unpacked earlier, wondering if he had ever packed a nightshirt in the first place.

"It just that the *Evening Prophet* came in with a report about the fire."

"Did they actually get the facts right?"

"They got most of it – including the fact that you and Marie lived there."

Snape paled.

"Well," Hermione added, "it was only speculation on the part of the reporter. They also have guesses on who the attackers were."

"Reactionaries perhaps. Those who never stood with the Dark Lord but shared his pureblood madness."

"Why the phoenix mark? Everyone knows about the Order now – and about Dumbledore."

Snape rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. Will you show me the paper, or will you just stand there and ogle my arse all evening?"

Hermione didn't even have the grace to blush this time as she handed Snape the paper and left the room, calling out one last remark as she did so.

"I've seen better."

~*~

Author's Note: This chapter was beta'd by the supercalifragilisticexpialidocious Southern_Witch_69.

Fifteen.

Chapter 15 of 15

It had started off as an ordinary night for the girl and him, until he received the news that threatened to erase ten years of quiet joy.

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~*~

Another morning began with Marie waking Snape with her cheery voice.

"What now?" Snape gritted out, bringing his forearm to his eyes to block the sunlight that streamed into the room.

"I'm hungry."

"Is anyone else awake?"

"Just us and Julie – but he doesn't count."

"And you and the boy are both incapable for producing some toast."

Marie brought her hands together in a pleading gesture, which Snape ignored. She scrunched her nose and said, "This house is *snew* to me, and I wouldn't want to break anything valuable or endanger anyone—"

"I suppose I must, given your reasoning."

Marie grinned. "Thanks, Severus."

"Go downstairs. I'll be there soon." He accepted a kiss on the cheek and, once Marie left, dressed in some Muggle clothes.

Several minutes of silent swearing later, Snape found all he needed to produce an adequate breakfast for Marie and the boy. Once he served the children and made sure they weren't trying to harm each other, he went upstairs to shower.

Only, he realized at the landing, holding a ratty towel and a dusty bag of toiletries, that Hermione had never shown him to the loo and that there were no other doors besides ones leading to the various bedrooms she had pointed out to him.

"It's downstairs."

Hermione, her hair disheveled from sleep, pushed back the wayward locks halfheartedly from her face and pointed to the stairs.

Snape made no move, distracted by the movement of her arm, bringing him to glance down toward the rise of her breasts under her sensible cotton nightgown.

"I was just going there. I'll show you the way." Seemingly unaware of his stares, Hermione went down the stairs and led Snape to the only bathroom in the house.

"I'll only be a minute," Hermione said.

Upon her shutting the door, Snape decided to check on the children again. He knew what they could get up to when left unsupervised, and with these two...

They were eating peaceably, though they were almost unnaturally quiet. Both children looked up from their breakfast, Marie ready to ask a question if it weren't for the food in her mouth.

"Swallow and ask."

Marie did as told. "My book. Where is it?"

"In my room. You can get it when you finish."

At the mention of a book, Julie's eyes brightened. "What are you reading?"

"*Little Women*."

Julie sneered. "That's a girl's book."

"You're one to talk. You have a girl's name."

Julie stood quickly, knocking down his chair. Marie stood with him in response, her face pale and pinched.

"I'll handle this," Hermione said from behind Snape.

"Perfect timing," Snape muttered just as Julie cried out "Mum" and Marie "Hermione."

He left the dining room for the bathroom, only to see a closed door and hear the shower running, accompanied by some off-key humming.

Snape resigned himself to wait, but not before knocking on the door sharply and telling Potter to hurry the hell up.

~*~

After toweling himself dry, Snape dressed and was midway through shaving when the door opened.

"Aren't there charms for that?"

Snape ran the blade under the faucet. "Isn't there something called knocking before entering? I'm starting to wonder, Hermione, if your reasoning for getting me to stay here was to attempt to catch me naked."

"I thought you would like to see the lab."

Snape finished shaving and rinsed his blade. "You thought right."

The lab, located in the basement, was more than adequate for his work. Many shelves of ingredients and instruments lined the walls while two long worktables topped by cauldrons of different metals and sizes took up most of the lab's floor space. A small desk and chair standing on the right hand wall and a sink on the wall opposite were the only other furniture in the room.

"It's... fitting," Snape said.

"Thank you for your approval. Now, if you will excuse me, I have more than a few Floo calls to make. I'll have Marie send down the *Daily Prophet*."

"Who do you need to contact?"

Hermione stiffened. "Not that it's any of your business, but I need to call off from work today, ask Ron about the attacks--"

"What would he know?"

"Auror. Level C, if I'm not mistaken. He'll know something about this fire business, more than what we could figure out on our own. And then I need to invite Molly over. She wants to meet her granddaughter, you know."

"She must have a whole brood of grandchildren by now. What more would one make?"

"The child of her only, now deceased, daughter and the man she took in as her own son? Quite a bit."

Snape grunted.

"I'm done here. I'll watch Marie and Julie upstairs, and you can be a mad scientist in here for as long as you please.

Hermione left Snape alone in the lab with only the buzz of silence to accompany him.

~*~

Author's Note: This chapter was beta'd by the amazing Southern_Witch_69.

There's really no excuse for why it took so long to write this chapter - I apologize for my writer's block.