

Parenthood: Ready or Not

by Delayed Poet

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Parenthood: Ready or Not

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Chapter One

"You very well know I cannot adopt a child!" Severus Snape's cold voice echoed furiously in the stillness of the Minister's office, and his glare was more prominent than the Minister could remember seeing for a long time.

"Now, now, Severus, I know how much of an inconvenience this is to you, but we really can make no exceptions." There was no bite in the words, only hint of sympathy that was almost worse in his opinion.

Severus got up from his chair and walked to the window, his body stiff and tingling with frustrated anger.

"I cannot do it, Arthur. *You know* me, raising children was never on my list of priorities," his voice came out as a whisper.

"You have a list of the children and their profiles. You should be happy to even be getting a choice in the matter; everyone else will be assigned a child. I expect your choice to be on my desk tomorrow morning at nine sharp. If it isn't, a child will be chosen for you," Arthur's voice turned businesslike.

Turning sharply, Severus glared at the Minister, then stalked out of the office. He should have known better than expect Arthur Weasley to leave him out of the ridiculous law.

"Albus, there must be something I can do. I cannot teach my students and continue my private research if I am to care for a child," Severus said wearily. He knew it was a weak argument, but he was quickly running out of them. Albus was his last chance; if he couldn't help him out of this, then there probably wasn't a way out of it at all.

He looked up to see the aging Headmaster's eyes twinkling with mischief. He hated that damned twinkle; it never bode well for him.

"Albus, what is it you know that I don't?"

"Well, dear boy, we will be adding on to our staff this coming school year. A very nice young woman has agreed to return to apprentice with Minerva, and in addition to doing so, she will help with the running of a day care."

Severus mentally groaned. "And who, may I ask, is this young woman you seem so enthused about?"

Albus tried unsuccessfully to hide a chuckle. "One Miss Granger. Surely you remember her?"

Glaring heavily at the old man, Severus mumbled distastefully, "As if I could I forget the know-it-all."

"Come now, Severus. She really has grown into a wonderful young woman, and you should realize that she is not exempt from this law either. As she has completed her university classes, she will be required to take in a child as well." He clapped his hands together lightly, once. "Now, it is my suggestion to you that you read through those profiles. I know there are quite a few remarkable little girls in that file."

Glaring profusely in Albus' direction, Severus got up grumpily and swept to the door. "Good day, Albus."

"Good day, Severus"

* * *

Severus slowly traveled to his office in the dungeons, wanting to put his decision off as long as he could. He had never wanted children. He had never had a desire to marry and have a family, no matter how much his parents pressured him to continue the Snape line when he was younger.

Well, at least this way I won't have to worry about a hormonal, pregnant woman Severus rolled his eyes at his mental optimism. He reached his office sooner than he would have liked and opened the door. A very large file sat on his desk, holding the profiles of all the children he would have to consider taking in. Next to the file sat the *Daily Prophet*, opened to the first page article describing the new law.

Ignoring the matter at hand, Severus went to his fireplace and lit a fire in it. He took off his outer robe and hung it on the coat rack just inside his office. He wandered to a wall next to the painting behind his chair and muttered an incantation. The wall faded into a cabinet, and Severus opened it. He pulled out a jar of amber liquid and a glass, then went to his desk. He poured himself a drink, put the jar back, and charmed the cabinet hidden again.

Sighing, he sat at his desk and picked the *Daily Prophet* up. Scanning the dreadful article again, he snorted.

"Of course Albus finds all this amusing; *he's* exempt from the blasted law," he grumbled.

Feeling the beginnings of a headache, Severus drank the amber liquid quickly, then lifted the cover from the file. Picking up the first profile, he scanned it.

Name: Maria Kay Augustus

Age: Two years

Birthday: 19 June 1998

Parents: Jason and Sarah Augustus - Deceased

Blood: Half

Severus stopped reading her profile and glanced at the young toddler's picture, raising an eyebrow. The child obviously loved pictures. The little girl was smiling big and waving at the camera. Her blonde hair was pulled in pigtails, and she was wearing pink robes with a bow on the front.

Sighing, he put that profile aside. Deciding to eliminate all children under the age of five years, he quickly separated the profiles into two piles. Putting all the files of children under the age of five away, he picked up the other pile, noticeably lighter. He then separated this pile into two others; one for boys and one for girls. Picking the boys' pile up first, he read through them, setting aside those he would consider further while putting those who he would not back into the file. He did the same to the girls' file and noticed that there were now only approximately ten profiles.

"Jarred Parker, Michael Austin, Lisa Simons, Fiona Curtis, Jessica Augustus," he mumbled the names as he scanned them. "Hmm. Jessica Augustus, seven years of age, born on January the fourth, parents were Jason and Sarah Augustus, half-blood."

Severus set Jessica Augustus' profile aside and continued to scan through the rest. After he finished scanning them, he only had four profiles he was willing to consider. Jessica Augustus being the first, followed by Carolyn Sanchez, Shane Peterson, and Galahad Wildsmith.

Reading through each of the children's profiles carefully, Severus tossed Carolyn Sanchez and Shane Peterson and was trying to decide between Jessica Augustus and Galahad Wildsmith. Jessica was only a half blood, whereas Galahad's blood was said to be pure. Not wanting to seem biased on account of blood, Severus finally decided on Jessica Augustus. Lifting her picture, he examined it. The blonde haired, green-eyed little girl looked up at him curiously, a small smile on her face.

Picking up the file of dismissed profiles, with Jessica's on the outside, Severus went to his fireplace, got a pinch of Floo powder and Flooed to the Minister's home.

* * *

A/N: Reviews fuel the muse.

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption

Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Two

Severus landed in the living room of the Minister's home gracefully. He did, after all, have an image to keep.

"Severus! What a pleasant surprise!"

Severus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. This was just what he needed—Molly Weasley.

"Good evening, Molly," he said politely. "If I may please speak with Arthur."

"Oh!" She glanced at the clock, which was completely useless if one was looking to tell time. "He's just on his way now. I suspect he'll be here in just a minute. Would you like some tea?"

Without waiting for a reply, she pulled him into the kitchen. She pushed him into a chair at the table and started bustling around with the teapot.

"I suppose you're here about that new law Arthur's put into effect."

"Yes, and I happened to notice he conveniently excluded himself and you from it," Severus noted bitterly with his customary sneer on his face.

Molly looked at him sharply. "Don't be silly. He didn't write the law, and we are definitely going to be taking in at least one child."

Severus was shocked to say the least. He had thought that Molly and Arthur Weasley would be finished raising children—whether or not they were biological.

"Do shut your mouth. Surely you didn't think I would allow there to be a chance of a young one not having a home!"

"Of course." He recovered easily. "I expect you'll have a flood of adopted grandchildren as well?"

"Well, Bill and Fleur already have two children and are living in France, so they're exempt. Charlie—" she paused and sniffled—"—anyway, Percy and Penelope will, of course, take in at least one. Well, yes, I do expect for my family to grow significantly. I don't mind in the least, though. In fact, Harry and Ginny have decided to adopt two children even though they already have one on the way. It's actually Ron that I'm worried about. He has finally started playing professionally, and now that he and Hermione have split up, I'm not sure he'll handle this very well. I've always said he'd need a woman with a sensible head on her shoulders to put up with him, and I was so looking forward to having Hermione has a daughter-in-law. It's a pity really. She's such a sweet girl."

Severus had tuned her out sometime at the beginning of her ramble, but his head perked up at the news that Granger and Weasley had separated. Wouldn't that be interesting news for the staff at Hogwarts? There had been a bet among many of the teachers about how long it would take for an engagement announcement to be made. It looked like he had won this time. Minerva was going to be quite disappointed that Severus had won, regardless of the fact that she had lost a long time ago. She had thought it would be five months after graduation, whereas Severus had determined that they would not last long enough for an engagement.

"Ah, Severus." Arthur Weasley's voice broke into his mental rambling.

Severus stood up abruptly. He had not heard the Minister's entrance.

"Arthur," he nodded curtly, "I have come to a decision and wanted to deliver it personally."

Arthur nodded and gestured for him to sit, taking the seat across from him. "Molly, a spot of tea, please," he requested, not looking away from Severus.

Severus passed him the file of dismissed children, then Jessica Augustus' profile. "This is the child I have chosen."

Arthur took a look at her profile and then frowned slightly. "You realize she has a younger sister, do you not?"

Severus frowned, trying to remember if he had seen another profile with the last name. He could not. "I'm sorry, I do not recall."

Arthur opened the file and flipped through them. When he reached the final profile, he let out a shout of joy and then passed it to Severus.

Severus looked at the little toddler's profile, immediately recognizing it as the first he had seen. He felt a twinge of emotion at the thought of separating the two, but he did not think he could bring himself to take in both of the girls.

"Surely you don't want to separate those beautiful girls?" Molly's voice broke in, setting a tray of tea on the table.

Severus sent her a half-hearted glare as Arthur thanked her and picked up his glass.

"Arthur, I do not know if I can take in two. And a toddler at that!"

"I cannot force you to take them both in. Part of being an orphan is that there is no promise of remaining with siblings. I do, however, encourage you to consider taking them both in. I knew the Augustus family personally, and they were straight-minded, practical people. I also know that these girls are both well behaved."

"That may be true, but what of my work at Hogwarts? I cannot—"

"Is there not going to be a daycare program?" Molly piped in.

Severus glared once again at the Weasley Matron. "As I was saying, I cannot possibly take care for a toddler while trying to continue my personal research. For one, it would be hazardous—not only to the child, but to my equipment as well—and for two, I do not have the spare time to give a toddler the proper attention she would need."

Arthur nodded. "I understand, but do you really want to separate them?"

At Arthur's pleading gaze, Severus had to shake off his conscience. "I will take in Jessica Augustus and only Jessica."

Arthur seemed disappointed by his resolution, but nodded anyway. He started flipping through Jessica's profile and then appeared to find what he was looking for. He pushed the open profile to Severus.

"Please sign at the bottom, and you will be contacted for arrangements to be made."

Severus read through the document and, after finding it to his satisfaction, signed it, then stood up and nodded to the Weasley couple. "Good night, Arthur, Molly."

With that, Severus swept from the room and to the fireplace, where he flooed directly to his office. He made his way to his private quarters from his office. Once the door was firmly shut and warded behind him, he took off his outer robe and lit a fire to warm the cold, empty room. He wandered to his bookshelves, scanning the titles and choosing one. Relaxing in his favorite armchair, he settled with the book open, attempting to distract himself from his headache.

A few days later, as Severus was taking a morning walk around the lake, Albus approached him, requesting his presence for lunch. Deciding it futile to decline, as he had a good idea why his presence was requested, Severus nodded in response.

Back in his quarters, Severus showered, dressed, and took a good look around. Once Jessica arrived, who knew what would happen to them. Taking a deep breath, Severus savored the peace and quiet, convinced that he would live without it for the next eleven or so years. With resolve, Severus made his way out of his quarters and to the Great Hall.

He opened the door to the Great Hall and was met with a great surprise.

"Ah, Severus! How nice of you to join us!"

To say that the multitude of innocent faces looking up at him shocked him would be an understatement.

A/N: Reviews definitely fuel the muse!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 12

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Chapter Three

Severus had been expecting several children to infiltrate the castle soon, but he hadn't anticipated an ambush all at once. After a moment, the children and staff went back to their previous conversations, and Severus moved into the room.

Severus' eyes glanced from one young child to the next. There had to be at least fifteen, all between the ages of just a few months—to sixteen years old. The children and most of the staff were all sitting around a round table set in the middle of the Great Hall. They were eating lunch and talking much more excitedly than he would have expected the young orphans to be talking. One face stuck out at him and almost made him chuckle. Poppy Pomfrey was looking at the younger children wearily.

Scanning the children's faces, Severus quickly found Jessica's. He noticed that she was not talking to any of the other children or the staff and that the seat next to hers was empty.

Severus sat next to the young girl. Jessica glanced up at him. Resisting the conflicting urges to sneer at her and smile at her, he noted that her eyes were eerily blank. It seemed as though the seven-year-old could feel no emotion. She reminded him painfully of himself.

They stared at each other, neither wanting to break contact.

"Are you Professor Snape?" she asked quietly, something he could not describe momentarily flashing in her eyes.

"Yes." His voice came out scratchy, and he cleared his throat. "Miss Augustus?"

A faint smile appeared on her face.

"I've never been called that before. Mummy always calls me Jessie—unless I'm in trouble—then she calls me Jessica Rae Augustus, but she only called me that once."

Severus hid a small smile. The little girl's eyes were dazed, as though lost in memory.

"Daddy always calls me baby, even after Maria was born." She pouted. "I miss my Maria. Do you know where she is?"

Hopeful eyes turned to his, and he felt a pang of guilt shoot through him. How could he ever have separated this charming little girl from the only family she had left?

He coughed slightly, then said, "No, I do not."

"Oh," she said softly, her eyes downcast. A moment later she looked back up at him. "Can we find her?"

"I do not know," he said uncomfortably. "Are you finished with your lunch?"

She nodded, but he noticed that she had only taken a few bites of her sandwich. Despite this, they both stood. Severus started toward the door, Jessica following him. He mentally told himself to slow down for the young girl. Jessica caught up to him and slipped her small hand into his larger one.

Shocked, he looked down at her, but did not pull his hand away. She was smiling tentatively at him, and he graced her with a rare—if not slightly forced—smile.

As the door to the Great Hall closed behind them, Severus and Jessica did not see the look that passed between the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress.

Severus could not understand the feelings this little girl caused him to feel. She did not even know him, yet she immediately trusted him, even seemed to like him. He could not understand the tugging at his heart at this realization. Jessica was innocent, and Severus felt as though he would only corrupt her.

He needed help.

His heart—many of his students would be shocked to discover that, yes, he did have one—began beating wildly in his chest at this realization. He almost stopped walking, but managed to only falter in his steps before continuing down the path to his rooms, which he would shortly be showing to the little girl holding his hand.

“Professor, you teach Potions, right?” The young girl looked up at him with surprisingly bright eyes.

“Yes, I do. Are you familiar with them?”

“What’s fa-meel-e-ar?”

Severus sighed. “If you are familiar with something, you really know what it is. Do you like Chocolate Frogs?”

Jessica smiled brightly. “I love ‘em! Wait; that means I am familiar with them?”

“Something like that.”

“But I don’t like potions. One time I had a really bad cough, and Mummy gave me this really yucky potion. I thought I was gunna be even sicker.”

Severus bit back a smirk.

The unusual pair soon reached the hidden entrance to Severus’ chambers (the whereabouts of which shall remain unnamed). Severus muttered the incantation (the words to which cannot be revealed) to expose the entrance door.

Severus stepped aside and motioned for the young girl to go in before him. She smiled and skipped in. Jessica seemed to stop mid-skip as her eyes fell upon his living space.

He watched as her eyes scanned his ceiling-to-floor bookcases filled with books, then the large fireplace, brought to life with roaring flames, and finally his black suede couch and chairs. His living room was simple, colors and all. The parts of the walls not covered with books looked to be ancient stone, but if one was to touch them, they would feel like pillows. Severus had searched for the spell, thinking it could come in handy if he were to ever get into fits—not that he ever had, of course.

Severus’ eyes followed Jessica’s small body as she jumped up on his couch and took off her shoes. She tucked her feet under her and watched the fire.

“I like it here.” Her soft voice surprised him.

“You haven’t seen your room yet.”

Her eyes turned to him, and she slid off the couch. Severus was still standing by the closed entry door. He started walking toward the hall and beckoned for her to follow him. The hallway was short—with three doors that looked like three insides of a cube. He stopped just short of them, and Jessica caught up to him.

“Where do these go?”

Severus pointed to the door on his left. “That one is your room—” then the right, “—and that one is mine.” He pointed to the door directly in front of them. “You are not allowed to go into that one.”

“Why? What’s in it?”

“That’s my private lab. There’s a lot of harmful stuff in there.”

“My daddy has a private lab, too. He lets me go in there with him sometimes.”

Severus’ lips curled in a slight smile.

“Would you like to see your room?” His hand was already turning the doorknob.

He pushed the door open and motioned for her to enter first. The short girl walked right under his arm, went into the room, and gasped. If he could have, Severus would have blushed, but it was a known fact that he couldn’t, so he didn’t.

Jessica ran over to the sleigh bed with a pink and silver canopy and jumped up onto it. She picked up the stuffed unicorn and hugged it to her chest.

“I love it, Professor. Thank you!” As she thanked him, she shot off the bed and ran to him, giving him as big a hug as a seven-year-old could.

A/N: Thank you to everyone who has reviewed this so far! Your comments are so very appreciated!

Chapter was polished up on January 29, 2010. There were so many silly things in this chapter, some of which I adjusted slightly, some which I left as they were. It's good to enjoy a bit of silliness once in a while.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 12

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Chapter Four

The rest of the month of July as well as most of August passed in a blur. Severus slowly began to adjust to having Jessica living with him.

It was an early Monday morning, and Jessica was fast asleep. Severus sat in one of his black armchairs and watched the fire as it glowed purple. A letter spat out of it and

onto his coffee table. He looked at the letter almost suspiciously, curious as to who would correspond this early in the morning. With an eyebrow raised, Severus reached for it and picked it up. He immediately noticed the Weasley family seal on the back and bit back a groan. He opened the envelope and pulled out a folded parchment.

Dear Severus,

Arthur and I are throwing an end of the summer bash this Saturday and would be delighted if you could come. We'd love to meet little Jessica, as well! If you're not too busy, which I'm sure you aren't, as you always have things prepared in advance, we would love to have you visit us.

I'm sure you'd dread coming, but Remus will also be here. I know you and he have come to some sort of agreeable friendship. Honestly, I won't take no for an answer, so please make this easier on everyone involved and come! Besides, Albus has been invited as well.

Thanking you in advance,

Molly and Arthur

Severus read through the letter once more and groaned.

"What's w-w-wrong, Professor?" Jessica asked through a yawn.

Severus turned to look at the young girl and noticed her ruffled blonde hair and tired green eyes with a slight smile. He beckoned her over to him, and she came. She stood next to his chair and pointed at the letter still in his hand.

"What's that?" she asked.

"This? Oh, this is just a letter from the Minister and his wife."

"Oh. Arthur and Molly? They are really nice."

"You've met them?" Severus raised an eyebrow.

"Yep! They are the ones who brought us here. And they know my Mummy and Daddy. Mummy and Daddy like them."

Meet Jessica, indeed! They met the girl before I did!

"They are throwing a party on Saturday and would like us to join them."

Jessica's eyes lit up. "Do you think Arthur would know where Maria is?"

"Possibly."

Jessica looked thoughtful for a moment. "Can we go, please, Professor?"

Severus sighed. "I shall think about it."

* * *

That night found Severus sitting in an armchair in front of the fire, sipping a drink. There was a small, black, leather-bound book and a quill and ink on the table next to him. His eyes stared unblinkingly into the blazing red and orange flames. There was not a single sound throughout his rooms, and he suddenly wished that Jessica was up and bugging him with questions.

Idly, Severus set his drink down and picked up the book. He muttered a spell, and the bindings loosened. He opened the cover and flipped through the pages, finding the first blank one. He picked up his quill, dipped it in the ink, and began to write.

Jessica has been living with me for about a month now, and I'm surprised to say that I actually enjoy her presence. It seems she hadn't heard anything about me and had no preconceptions about who I am. Her innocence is refreshing.

I was not-so-unbelievably pestered today, by a long list of people, to take Jessica to the Weasleys' party this Saturday. I find it rather amusing that they think I might not go. Ah, but watching them trying to convince me is so amusing, so I shall continue to pretend to be undecided until I can stand their pleas no longer. I wonder, is that sadistic?

I told Minerva that Granger and Weasley broke things off, and she couldn't believe it. She sent a note to Molly, requesting the truth, and Molly replied in earnest, saying that my information was, in fact, true. Minerva did me the favor of telling the rest of the staff, and they all paid up. Now, what to do with the money? I wonder if Jessica likes to fly? I could buy her a broom.

My students weren't right about everything they thought about me. Life dealt me a nasty hand, and I dealt with it the way I knew how...survival. I may have made some not-so-wise decisions, but I have paid my debt to society. Is it not my turn for happiness? In all honesty, I was dreading having a child to come live with me, but Jessica isn't like my students. She asks a lot of questions, but they don't irritate me. Maybe I'm just going soft?

One thing about her that really irks me, though, is the fact that she still refers to her parents as though they're still living. It worries me, and I fear she hasn't accepted their deaths. I don't know what to do to help her through that, and I'm not about to ask Albus or Minerva!

Well, the hour is late, and I have potions ingredients to buy tomorrow.

Severus closed the book and set it and the quill down, resting his head against the back of the chair.

* * *

The next few days flew by quickly, and Saturday morning found Severus sleeping soundly in his bed. His mind suddenly filled with a field of grass with a large black trampoline directly in front of him.

"Come on, Professor!" Jessica appeared in front of him. "Let's jump!"

Severus eyed the trampoline warily. "No, I don't think so, Jessica."

"Oh, come on! Please!" She pulled him to the trampoline with surprising strength for a seven-year-old.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Fine, just let me take my shoes off first."

Jessica giggled as Severus looked down and noticed he wasn't wearing any shoes. Jessica climbed onto the trampoline and motioned for Severus to follow suit. He struggled to climb up as Jessica began jumping. As he tried to stand, he toppled over from a particularly big bounce Jessica had just done. She giggled again and stopped

jumping so he could stand up. He stood, then crossed his arms across his chest.

Jessica started rocking on the balls of her feet. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Aren't you going to jump?"

Suddenly, Jessica started jumping with vigor.

"PROFESSOR?!"

Severus jumped out of bed, his eyes wide. Jessica was on his bed, laughing hard and clutching her stomach. His blankets and sheets were all over the place.

Severus forced a cold calm into his voice. "What do you think you are doing?"

Jessica stopped laughing and got off the bed. "I'm sorry, Professor. It's just that it's already ten o'clock, and you weren't up yet." The smile fell from her face as she realized that Severus was not happy with her actions.

"So you decided to come into my room and jump on my bed until I woke up?"

Jessica's eyes were downcast, and she was biting her lip. "I'm really sorry, Professor."

Severus sighed. "Go finish getting ready. I'll be out shortly."

Jessica practically ran past him to get out of the room. Severus closed his door, then got into the shower. He got ready, then went into his sitting room to find Jessica sitting on her legs behind the coffee table with a bit of parchment and crayons in front of her. Severus stood silently in the doorway for a few moments, watching her, already having forgiven her for the way she woke him up.

"What are you doing?" His soft voice surprised him.

Jessica jumped slightly, then turned to look at him. He noticed her tear-stained face immediately. She got up quickly with paper in hand and ran to him, enveloping him in a large hug.

"I'm so sorry! I'll never do it again! I promise! Please don't send me back to the orphanage!"

Severus removed her arms from their tight grip around his waist, then knelt down in front of her. She wouldn't look at him.

"Jessica, look at me."

Slowly her eyes turned to his, fresh tears falling down her face. He held her chin in his hand and looked firmly into her eyes.

"I am not going to send you back; I promise. What were you doing?"

A small, hesitant smile graced her face. "Y-you won't?" She sniffled and wiped away her tears

"No, I won't."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

Her arms were around him in a tight hug once again. This time, Severus hugged her back. After a minute she finally let go and handed him the paper. He looked at the picture drawn on it of him, tall with black robes and long, black hair, and her, short with yellow hair and blue robes.

"Why don't you go wash your face, then we'll go?"

Jessica left the room as Severus went to the couch and sat down, staring at the picture. They were both smiling, and Jessica was holding his hand. Their names were written above their respective portraits.

"I'm ready." He hadn't even noticed Jessica come back into the room.

Severus nodded, then stood and went to the fire. He picked up a jar and opened it. He held it out to Jessica.

"Take a pinch, throw it into the fire, and say clearly, 'The Burrow', all right?"

Jessica nodded, then did as he said. Severus followed soon after.

* * *

A/N: I do realize that things are moving quite slow right now, but please bear with me! Hermione will come into the picture next chapter, then the plot will slowly begin to take form, I promise! Also, a big thanks to everyone who has reviewed this story so far! I greatly appreciate everyone's comments!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 12

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Chapter Five

Severus stepped out of the fire at the Burrow with flawless grace. Jessica was standing next to the fireplace, waiting patiently for him. Just then, a very delighted Molly Weasley bustled into the room, a wide smile on her chubby face.

"Oh! I'm so glad you've finally arrived!" She pulled Jessica into her arms in a motherly hug. "Someone's been asking about you."

Severus looked at Molly suspiciously as Jessica pulled away from her embrace and looked at her with bright eyes.

"Who?" she asked with excited curiosity.

"Oh, I think you'd much rather see who than be told." She then turned to Severus. "May I?"

In a moment of possessiveness, Severus took one of Jessica's small hands into his much larger one, then motioned for Molly to lead the way. Molly gave him a slightly calculating look, though her smile never faltered. She led them through the kitchen, where the once Golden Trio were sitting, the tension in the room palpable, to the back door and out into the back yard.

Molly walked them over to Arthur Weasley, his back to them. Severus caught a snip of the conversation Arthur was having with a seemingly invisible somebody.

"She'd want you to eat them," Arthur said, trying to reason.

"I want my Jessie!"

Jessica's hand slipped quickly from Severus' grasp, and just as the young toddler came into view, Jessica yelled her name.

"Maria!"

The toddler jumped off the chair she was sitting on and ran the few steps into Jessica's arms.

Severus immediately noticed the tears running down Jessica's cheeks.

"After you left, Arthur and I discussed it and decided to take Maria in." Severus had forgotten Molly was even there until her soft voice broke into his thoughts.

"That was *kind* of you, though I don't quite understand what, exactly, that has to do with me."

"I wouldn't worry on it too much, Severus. In due time you will understand."

With that, Molly walked away, leaving Severus to ponder her hidden meaning.

"Ah! Severus," Arthur said to him, drawing him away from Molly's cryptic comment. "How are you?"

"I am well enough, considering," Severus noted wryly.

"Ah, things not going so well with Jessica, then?"

"No, Jessica is not the problem."

"Oh? May I ask what is, then?"

"You may ask, but I don't have to answer."

Before Arthur could form a response, a weak-looking Remus joined them. Jessica and Maria had run off somewhere; Severus suspected the garden area and convinced himself not to worry. Still looking for his newly adopted daughter out of the corner of his eye, Severus idly sat with Remus and Arthur.

The two men in his company began talking, so Severus gave them his attention.

"Are there any new developments?"

Arthur looked forlornly at Remus. "I'm sorry that there aren't. I am trying, though."

Remus took a steadying breath. "I know you are. I just want to do my part!"

Severus had an idea of what they were talking.

"I'm sorry, Remus, and I'm sure I don't need to explain that they aren't eager to place a child in the care of someone that turns into a werewolf once a month, regardless of how kind, generous, and noble they may be otherwise."

"What of the Wolfsbane?" Severus asked.

Arthur sighed. "They aren't willing to consider because of what could happen should something go wrong."

Severus snorted. "Why am I not surprised? I'm still looking into it, Remus."

"That is encouraging," Remus said sincerely, though there was fire in his eyes.

"You know," Arthur began with a smile in Severus' direction after a few moments of silence, "Ginny has been studying medicinal potions in her spare time."

Severus snorted. "I wasn't aware she had any spare time, what with three children and one on the way."

"What?" Arthur looked confused. "She only has two children."

"No, I definitely consider her husband to still be a child." Severus smirked as Remus chuckled.

"Thank you for your assessment of my husband's maturity, Professor."

Severus turned slightly to see the young Mrs. Ginevra Potter standing there with a small, strawberry-haired girl on her hip.

"On that note, have you adopted a child yet, Professor? I believe the deadline is the first of September." Her lips were quirked in amusement, though there wasn't any accusation or condemnation in her question.

"Why, yes, I have," Severus responded in a seemingly challenging way.

"Charming," a dry voice cut into the conversation. "Who has had the ultimate misfortune of being in your permanent care?"

Severus smirked. Harry Potter had decided to join his wife and newly adopted daughter.

"Her name happens to be Jessica Augustus. She's quite respectful. Must be because of her wonderful upbringing. She had very loving parents." It was a cheap shot, he knew it, but he hadn't been able to resist. Harry Potter brought out the negative in him.

Harry's eyes flashed, and he had just opened his mouth to respond when his red-headed, hot tempered friend, followed closely by his bushy-haired one, ran up to the getting-larger-by-the-second group, interrupting him.

"Ron! Please! Please just hear me out before you jump to conclusions!"

Ron turned to Hermione as the rest of the group looked between the two. Hermione opened her mouth, but Ron beat her to it.

"He betrayed us, Hermione! He betrayed *you!*" Ron spat furiously.

"No, Ron! He did what he had to do to stay alive! He fought with us to the end! He *killed* his best friend to save your sister! I would think you could get over the fact that he joined them, considering he was on *our* side the whole bloody time!"

Severus was curious as to whom they were talking, but listened with the rest of the group.

"Maybe I just still love you." Ron's voice was pathetically soft and full of vulnerable sincerity.

Instead of tearing up, as Severus fully expected her to do, Hermione became furious, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Don't you *dare* throw that in my face, Ronald! In case you forgot, *you* decided to end things! I'm moving on with my life..with Blaise!"

Ron looked ready to blow, Severus noticed amusedly, but before he could, the young Mrs. Potter deftly stepped in.

"Hermione, I have something inside I really need to show you," Ginny said and pulled Hermione away before she could even think to protest.

Ron watched them, fuming.

"Ron?" Harry ventured tentatively.

The ticking bomb exploded. "The nerve of her! We haven't even been separated for four months, and she's already with Blaise Zabini! *ASlytherin!* A *Death Eater*, no less!"

Severus felt the need to interrupt his misguided rant.

"Blaise Zabini was a spy for Professor Dumbledore. It would do you well to remember that."

Ron glared resentfully, then stormed off. Harry followed dutifully.

Arthur sighed, and Severus turned back to see him rub his forehead.

"You were telling me about your daughter's venture into medicinal potions?" Severus offered softly.

"Yes, yes. It turns out she was helping to find a cure for Hermione's newly adopted boy."

"What is the problem?" Remus asked curiously.

"Well, it seems he has severe allergies to the sun, not too different from those of a vampire."

"Does the Zonlicht Serum not help?" Severus asked, his attention focusing on the conversation now that the trio had disappeared.

"It does, but only for a very limited time. Mark, that's his name, can only be in the sunlight for a few minutes, even under the influence of the Serum."

"And is Mrs. Potter attempting to enhance it?"

"Something along those lines. When she found out she was pregnant, she stopped going to the lab, so I'm not sure where she is in her research."

"As a matter of fact," Ginny had returned, once again alone, "I may have finally had a breakthrough in my research. I have to run things by the team still, and there are many tests to be run, but the research looks very positive."

"Is there anyone else with that condition?" Remus asked, his eyes slightly cloudy.

Ginny frowned. "Not alive. This condition is extremely rare, and those who get it only have an expected lifespan of seven, maybe eight years."

"And how old is Miss Granger's charge?"

Ginny looked gloomy. "He's already six years old."

"Did Hermione know him beforehand?"

"Yes. Mark's a half-blood, and his mom was a good friend of her family."

"How does it look for him?" Severus asked, trying to get a full understanding of the situation.

"Well, compared to the files from previous cases, his is really bad, and it's amazing he's still alive." Ginny sat down and sighed. "I just wish there was more I could do!"

The group grew quiet, and Severus' mind was reeling. He was happy. His newly adopted daughter was more than bearable, and he now had a project...two things he could look forward to after a long, dreadful day of teaching. This feeling was foreign to him, but he decided not to worry about it. He wondered if he should feel guilty for being happy.

Severus looked up to see a young girl covered in mud running to him, crying.

"Professor!" Jessica cried. "Davey pushed me and was laughing about it!"

Severus stood, his wand already out. With a flick of it, the mud covering Jessica disappeared. He walked to the sniffing girl and picked her up easily. She clung to his neck and wrapped her short legs around him as best she could.

"Where is he?" Severus asked softly, wiping her tears softly with his thumb.

Jessica pointed toward the back garden, and Severus walked in that direction, balancing Jessica on his hip. He turned the corner to find a rather amusing scene.

A young boy, Severus guessed about ten years old, was glaring defiantly at an irate Percy Weasley.

"There are rules that you *must* follow, David Saunders!"

"You aren't my father, you traitor!"

Mr. Saunders proceeded to step on Percy's foot, causing Percy to howl in pain, and then he ran off. Jessica was giggling softly in his ear, her tears finally receding.

"Oh! Professor! I'm terribly sorry about him! We've tried so hard to get him to come to terms with everything that has happened and all the change!" Percy's wife, Penelope, cried out.

"Be sure this does not happen again, Mrs. Weasley."

Penelope nodded furiously. "Yes, sir."

Severus nodded slightly at her, then turned, with Jessica still hanging onto him, to head back to the group.

* * *

A/N: Reviews, as always, are loved and appreciated!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Six

As Severus approached the group, he noticed the amazed stares they were giving him. He glared, not liking the attention his relationship with Jessica was getting him. An oblivious Jessica struggled out of his arms and went looking for Maria again. Still glaring, Severus sat back down in his seat.

Suddenly, Ginny started giggling. Eventually she was laughing so hard, she was clutching the sides of her protruding belly.

Severus glared more profusely. "What, pray tell, is so amusing?" he asked, his voice holding a deadly tone.

"She c-calls y-you Prof-fessor!" Ginny managed to get out between her laughs.

Though embarrassed, Severus showed no outward sign he cared.

"Your point?" Severus asked coldly.

Ginny tried to sober up, though it took a moment for it to happen.

"It really shouldn't surprise me," she said after a moment. "You know, Severus, at first the thought of you being a parent made me nervous, but after seeing you with Jessica..." Ginny paused and smiled at him. "It just surprises me that you and she get on so well, yet she still only calls you Professor."

Severus didn't know what to say to that, so he kept quiet, his face blank.

"We can never truly replace the children's families, but we can try," Arthur said in a quiet voice, breaking the silence.

"Too right, Minister Weasley!" a cheerful voice said, and Severus jumped ever-so-slightly.

Severus had not noticed the twinkling Headmaster arrive with Minerva. It was a wonder he had made it all those years as a spy when he couldn't even sense when someone was approaching. Arthur stood up, a wide smile on his face. They shook hands.

"I was wondering when you would get here," Arthur noted as they sat down.

Albus smiled. "We were held back by several trivial issues," he explained with a wave of his hand.

Severus raised an eyebrow, but did not say anything.

* * *

As the night continued on, Severus found the company to be tolerable. While he would not willingly put himself through the torture of socializing with said tolerable company, he found that he did not mind it as much as he had expected he would.

Dinner had been a loud affair, and Severus made sure to stay out of the limelight, preferring to sit back and observe those around him. It was a skill he valued above most others and had been an important part of his previous role as Dumbledore's spy. It did not take him long to recognize those who were tense and those who were relaxed...those who wanted attention and those who, like him, preferred to stay in the background. He immediately mentally filed them into each category, for lack of anything better to do.

After dinner, Severus felt obligated to stay, but managed to slip away as soon as he could. He promised Jessica that she would be able to see Maria when the older sister seemed very melancholic at the thought of leaving. He felt justified in telling her as much, knowing that he intended to allow her to do so anyway. He deftly ignored the irritable pang he felt in his chest at the girls' teary good bye and glared at the look he knew the Headmaster was giving him.

If there were one thing the Headmaster could not be if he wanted to, it was subtle. And the not-so-subtle hints that he should have taken Maria in as well were really beginning to grate on his nerves. While Jessica wasn't a complete terror, Severus had a nasty feeling that Maria would be a nightmare and detrimental to his health and the state of his rooms.

No, it was bad enough he'd had to take one child in; he would not succumb to taking in the girl's sister as well.

Now if that bloody pang would leave him be...

* * *

Severus considered himself to be a reasonable man. While he knew he was short-tempered and impatient by nature, he liked to think he'd developed a certain amount of control over the years...which was why he was currently very frustrated with the direction things were going in the situation he now found himself unable to avoid.

It was three days before the start of term, and Miss Granger had come to prepare for her impending occupation, if it could be called that. He was not sure baby-sitting was an acceptable job for someone who was renowned for being an over-achieving know-it-all. Unfortunately for him, it seemed, two other former students of his returned for a visit with Miss Granger.

Severus resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in irritation at the conversation he certainly did not care to hear, as he would prefer to be in the near-solitude of his private rooms. Unfortunately for him, when he heard his name being spoken amongst his three former students, he had to fight for control over his actions. It would have been much easier had the context in which they were talking of him been different.

After taking a moment to compose himself and plaster his usual sneer upon his face, he turned to the small group of former students. The glare he sent them rivaled those he usually reserved for Mr. Longbottom. He stalked toward them, his air exuding power and authority.

"Is there a problem?" his silky voice asked, laced with venom.

Miss Granger paled slightly while the young man just glared back at him, and the other young woman looked up at him with an eerily thoughtful look on her face.

"Yes, *Professor*, there most cert..."

Whatever his former student had been about to utter was cut off from a barely concealed elbow to the ribs. He raised an eyebrow at Miss Granger, then turned back to the young man. If Blaise Zabini had something to say to him, then far be it for him to stop the former Slytherin.

He noticed the look of warning Miss Granger sent Mr. Zabini, but also knew that if a Slytherin had set their mind to do or say something, no Gryffindor could stop him or her. Unless, of course, they were Tom Riddle and looking to take over the world. Never mind the technicalities, though.

"Yes, Mr. Zabini?"

The young man sneered at Severus. "You," he began, a finger pointing toward Severus' chest. "You took in a child. An innocent. The things you have done, seen. How could you even think you are fit to care for a child? You will only taint the poor girl."

Miss Granger looked aghast, and the other young woman frowned slightly.

"Blaise! You promised you wouldn't do this!"

Severus kept his face skillfully blank.

"I can't stand back and allow this to happen, Hermione! You know that! It's bad enough the poor child lost her parents and is separated from her sister! Why should she have to be stuck with *Professor* Snape? Can you tell me that, Hermione?"

Mr. Zabini's eyes were blazing, and the normally quiet Slytherin seemed ready to explode.

"You promised, Blaise." Miss Granger's voice was soft in the aftermath of Mr. Zabini's outburst.

A slightly eerie voice broke in, saying, "I happen to think the Professor would be excellent with little Jessica. I knew her parents, and they kept her well disciplined. I'm sure Professor Snape will have no problem keeping her disciplined, and I have faith that she will show him how to care. I think they are good for each other."

Severus raised an eyebrow at the very unexpected defense to his ability to care for Jessica. He always knew that Ravenclaws were renowned for their intelligence, but he had never put much merit to this one's ability. Not only did she always seem a bit out there, but whenever she spoke, she sounded as though the words were coming from another world entirely. In any event, he was mildly grateful for her confidence in him, not that he needed people's confidence, but it was nice to know *someone* thought him capable.

"Why, thank you, Luna," Hermione said in a level voice, her eyes never leaving Mr. Zabini's. "I definitely agree with you. While I do worry about his patience with such a young girl and for her when she matures, I think he's more than able to care for the darling girl."

The other eyebrow rose up to join the first as he observed the group that seemed to have forgotten his presence, but far be it for him to correct that.

"Fine," Mr. Zabini said stiffly, "but when that poor girl comes running to you, crying about how absolutely cruel Snape is, remember that I told you he is unfit!"

And with that, the younger Slytherin stormed away, leaving Hermione fuming behind him, Luna seemingly holding back a chuckle, and Severus with his eyebrows nearing his hairline.

"Thank you," Severus started silkily, "for that wonderful display. If we are finished here, I have some business to attend to. Miss Lovegood, Miss Granger."

Without waiting for a response, Severus stormed off, trademark robes billowing behind him. When he entered his rooms, he found Jessica curled up in a large chair, an open book fallen haphazardly on the ground. He couldn't help but stare at the small form of the innocent child. She was a remarkable young girl, he had to admit, and he found himself wondering if Blaise was right and that, somehow, by taking care of her, he might taint her. Merlin forbid.

* * *

The start of term found Severus watching through a window as the carriages, led by the thestrals he had been able to see most of his life, came up the hill leading to the gates of Hogwarts. There was already chattering in the Great Hall, as most of the staff plus the small children were already situated. They had set up a table in front of the staff table for the young children, making sure there was still room for the first-years to be sorted. He made sure Jessica was sitting so that they could easily see each other. He didn't want her causing any trouble after all. With a sigh, Severus took his usual place at the staff table and waited as the noise of the returning students grew.

Severus watched, amused, at the looks on the faces of the first-years and younger children as the first-years were sorted. Certainly those with older siblings who had already gone to Hogwarts would have told them awful stories of the absolutely impossible tasks one had to do to be sorted into the houses. And those that were Muggle-born, well, they had probably thought up all the horrible things, themselves. The imagination was a crazy thing when it didn't know what to expect.

Albus stood and gave his usual pre-feast nonsense speech. The feast was, as usual, spectacular. It seemed that every year, the house-elves wanted to do better than they had the year previous. He wasn't complaining, though. No, if there was one thing he definitely did not mind at Hogwarts, it was the excellent cuisine. After the food, Albus

gave a slightly more serious speech, during which he explained what most of the students already knew: that there would be younger children present and that they were not to be harassed. Well, those weren't the exact words he used, but that was what he was saying. When Albus excused them to their dormitories, Severus stood, went to Jessica, and led her out of the Great Hall, thinking that this year was definitely going to be a different one.

* * *

A/N: First, I want to give a great big hug, thanks, and cookies to my beta, Soul Bound, who has helped me so much in correcting my pitiful attempt at writing! Also, thanks to everyone who has reviewed! I love it! Please keep reviewing, it fuels the muse!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Seven

Severus woke up to complete silence. He found it a bit odd after the animated conversation he'd had with Jessica the previous night. She had been so excited about the Sorting, wondering which house she would be in. She had matter-of-factly informed him that her father had been a Ravenclaw, which perplexed Severus, as he could not recall ever having taught Jason Augustus. He remembered telling her not to worry about houses, as it would be a fair number of years before she would be sorted. He had, naturally, been sure that she would be sorted into Slytherin when the time came.

Sighing, Severus pushed the covers off him and slipped out of bed. His feet hit the cool stones, and he was thankful, as he was every morning, for the charm he had placed on it that took out most of the bite of the freezing dungeons. The students all thought he thrived in the freezing dungeons, and he always enjoyed a quiet chuckle knowing he was never too cold. He had placed a complete heating charm on Jessica's rooms, though, not wanting her to catch a cold. Groggy for an unknown reason, he went through his normal morning routine: wake up, shower, brush teeth, get dressed, coffee. Even having a seven-year-old living with him had not deterred him from this simple routine.

He sat in his chair near the crackling fire, drinking his usual morning coffee and going over the week's schedule. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw fourth-years first thing. Lovely. At least it wasn't Gryffindor and Slytherin first-years. Last year had been a nightmare, and he'd been positive he'd have a headache until the holidays. He had, of course, Albus to thank for that. Changing the schedule year after year. Could the old man never be consistent? Grumbling slightly, Severus rubbed his eyes. He seemed to be in a foul mood, more so than usual...especially since Jessica arrived...and he couldn't find a reason why.

Well, he did have an inkling. He'd never admit it, but he wasn't looking forward to handing Jessica over to someone else to care for while he was teaching classes. It was embarrassing enough that he'd been seen being *protective* of the girl, but to be moping about because she wouldn't be around...that would be a mistake. He still had a reputation to maintain after all. His thoughts drifted to his impromptu meeting with his old students. With a slight start, he realized that it was, indeed, Miss Granger that would be caring for Jessica while he was teaching and that Miss Granger had, indeed, stood up for his ability to care for Jessica himself. He grudgingly admitted to himself that he might be content leaving Jessica with Miss Granger.

Thinking of Miss Granger sticking up for him led his thoughts to the party the Weasleys' had thrown at the end of the summer and what Mrs. Potter had laughed at him about. Yes, Jessica still called him Professor. It had seemed right...before...more formal. But now, he thought, it might possibly be time for a change in that area. She was staying with him; that much was obvious. And if she was going to be his *daughter*, then she might as well call him by his given name. He mentally gulped, not finding the humour that a little girl could instill such fear in him.

The subject of his thoughts ambled into the room, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. Her blonde hair was all over the place, and she had sleep marks across the right side of her face. Severus grinned as he thought that it was a sight he never, ever expected he would live to see. Honestly, him caring for a young girl. What was the world coming to?

* * *

"Come along, Jessica. Wouldn't want you late, now, would we?" Okay, so he was nervous. He had no reason to be; he knew that logically. He mentally thanked his years as a spy, as he was able to conceal his nervousness and allow it to appear as slight impatience.

"Professor," Jessica said knowingly, "we don't have to be at breakfast for a half hour yet."

The corners of the girl's lips twitched as though she was holding back a laugh. To even think of it! A young girl laughing at the intimidating Professor Snape.

He raised an eyebrow, but let it drop. Instead, he sat across from her and looked at her seriously.

"I think that we need to have a talk, Jessica," he said softly...well, as softly as he could. He was actually proud of himself for keeping his nerves out of his voice.

She looked up at him curiously, abandoning the shoes she was in the process of trying to pull onto her small feet, her head tilted slightly to the side. "All right," she said without any trepidation.

Nodding his head once, Severus looked into the girl's soft, green eyes. "I think that..." He coughed, as though there was something caught in his throat, though he knew there wasn't. "That is to say..." Severus mentally growled at himself. *You could tell fluid and convincing lies to the most vile wizard in your time, but you can't ask a seven-year-old girl to call you by your given name. Despicable.* He coughed once more. "There is something that I would like you to consider doing, Jessica." There, that was a start.

"What is it?" she asked, still curious, though her eyes were amused.

"I think that it would be appropriate if you would use my given name." There, he'd said it. Okay, so he'd meant to kindly ask her to, but she was lucky he hadn't flat out demanded it of her.

"Of course, but..." She looked at him hesitantly.

"Hmm?" he asked absently, still congratulating himself on asking her almost kindly.

"Well, what is it?" That grin was twitching at the corners of her lips again.

"My given name?" he asked, as though it was obvious and she should know.

"Yes, silly," she said, breaking into soft giggles, her eyes sparkling.

Severus chose not to comment on the young girl's teasing. He did, however, send her a glare, and her giggles ceased, though the humour in her eyes remained. It was her fault he was distracted, anyway. "It is Severus."

"Alright, Severus." She tried his name out and nodded, seeming to approve. "I think it's time for breakfast, though."

Severus looked up at the clock above his mantle, noting that she was right. When he looked back at her as she started to walk toward the door, however, he smirked. "I don't think you're quite ready," he said, motioning to her feet. Jessica blushed and hurried back to the couch to put her shoes on.

They left, contentedly walking side by side, entering the Great Hall together and separating to their different tables. Before separating, though, Severus reminded Jessica that Miss Granger would be watching her and the other young children during the day, that she was to be on her best behavior, and that they would return to *their* chambers after dinner.

* * *

The Great Hall was slowly filling with the early risers and their groggy friends. Jessica was sitting next to a little girl, chatting in whispers, and Severus was avoiding conversation with Professor Sinistra (the woman could be quite tactless). There was a towering stack of schedules in front of him that he would pass off to his house Prefects when they got there.

With a sweeping glare across the room, Severus drank his second mug of coffee (black, naturally) that morning. When the doors opened to allow a group of his fifth- and sixth-years, he made eye contact with his Prefects, who wisely went promptly over to him.

"The schedules," he said, motioning to them. The fifth-year Slytherin Prefects looked irritated, but they had accepted the job, so they would just have to get over it. One of the sixth-year Prefects separated the stack, and they went off to hand them out.

As breakfast was slowing down and the students were running to get the supplies they would need for their classes that day, Severus watched as Miss Granger escorted the younger children out of the hall. He resisted the grin that was tugging at his lips when Jessica turned back and waved happily to him, though he did nod his head.

* * *

Severus resisted the urge to growl as the second-year Slytherins and Gryffindors left his classroom at a near run when class was out for lunch. Had he really thought it couldn't get any worse than Longbottom? Or was that just desperation finally creeping through his carefully sealed cracks? There had been no less than six exploded and melted cauldrons and mistakenly made, extremely dangerous potions. He swore that everything he had taught that particular class the year before had completely left their empty minds over the summer holiday. He became more aggravated when he realized he would have to teach them all the information again in the hopes they would retain the knowledge this time around. He had a feeling that they would need more help than he could provide.

Feeling that his mood was far too foul to chance going into the Great Hall for lunch, Severus retired to his private lab to work on some of his projects. The one that had him completely baffled was the variation of the Zonlicht Serum he was working on. He was trying to find a way to completely block the sun's rays from an individual, but every time he thought of a new combination, he realized two or more of the ingredients would have most terrible effects on the drinker.

Of course he was only working on this particular project out of curiosity. He felt in no way indebted to Miss Granger. It wasn't because her charge desperately needed something like this for his life. It was purely for his own knowledge. That was not to say that if he found the solution, he wouldn't pass it on to the child. Of course he would. It just definitely wasn't for Miss Granger's sake.

Or so he tried to convince himself. In reality, he was thinking of the young woman much more than he would have liked. He blamed it on the witch, herself, for defending him to her beau. Though he did wonder what Mr. Zabini's issue with him was. They had both been spies for the Order within Voldemort's ranks. They'd both proven their alliance when the Final Battle had come. They had both murdered and participated in vile activities, so what made Blaise Zabini any more worthy of being a parent than himself?

* * *

The rest of the afternoon passed simply enough. He had a free period, then Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw seventh-years, which went quite well, with essentially no interruption. He actually looked forward to the seventh-years, as those who made it to Advanced Potions usually wanted to be there and were fairly adept at the subject.

After locking up the classroom, Severus headed up to the Great Hall for dinner. By the time he got there, the room was full of chattering children, which caused the headache that had been brewing all day, though lessening in the afternoon, to rise to his temples. He was grouchy as he walked to the Head Table, but seeing the second-years cower as he walked by made him feel just slightly better.

Dinner seemed to pass by too slowly. Then, finally, he was walking down the dungeon corridors to his chambers, Jessica walking alongside him. Once they were settled in the living room, Severus thought it would only be right to ask on her day. Never mind that he actually was curious as to what Miss Granger was doing with the children.

"How was your day, Jessica?" he asked, only feeling slightly less off-balance at being in the position to ask a child in his personal care such a question than he had a month ago.

She looked up at him with big green eyes, her blonde curls a mess around her head. "Oh! It was really fun. Hermione...she said we're not to call her Miss Granger...played a bunch of games with us, and she said that tomorrow, if it's not raining, we'll play outside games. I really like her."

"Well, that's good then," he said, content that he'd done his duty with her. He picked up the book that was on the side table and flipped to where he'd left off.

"Umm, Severus?" he heard Jessica's soft voice next to him a bit later.

Looking up, he cursed himself for not noticing that she'd moved. "Yes?" he asked.

"Can you... Umm... Well, I was wondering if you could brush and braid my hair? Please?" she asked, holding up a brush and hair tie. She continued in a hurry, "It's just that Daddy always brushed and braided my hair before I went to bed, and... I miss it."

Severus raised an eyebrow, wondering why she hadn't brought it up before. "I must confess that I do not know how to braid," he told her honestly, hoping that she would let it go.

"Oh." The sad look in her eyes seemed to pull at his heartstrings in ways he didn't think possible. Something inside of him had changed, and he knew that he couldn't bear to see Jessica so sad.

"I think I can manage a brushing, though. Come here," he said as he motioned to the floor at his feet. She smiled as she sat down and handed him the brush. He just happened to miss the extra sparkle in her eye.

* * *

A/N: Many thanks to my beta, Soul Bound, who has been a great help in improving my writing! Thank you, sweetie! I hope you all enjoy this chapter! Remember, reviews fuel the muse!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Eight

She sat a bit away from the others, distractedly tapping the feather end of her quill against her cheek. She had to find a way to bring them together. Severus had been making such an effort to be kind to her; she wanted to help him find some happiness. She had an idea, but how to make it work out the way she wanted? She supposed she would have to start by getting closer to them both, then go from there...

* * *

Severus sat in his chair by the fire, the book he'd sought out in the library propped open by his hand, his other hand holding a steaming mug of tea. Jessica had fallen asleep in the other chair; the book she'd been reading had fallen to the floor. Looking over at her small form curled up in his large chair, making her look even smaller, a war was waging in his mind.

Jessica's head had fallen forward at an odd angle, and he knew that she should go to bed. He didn't want to wake her, though, and he wasn't sure he was entirely comfortable playing 'Daddy' and carrying her to her bed. The only time he had carried her before had been completely by instinct, and he hadn't thought about it until she'd been out of his arms and running off to play with Maria. All he'd known was that someone had hurt her and he, therefore, needed to protect her.

Finally, he set his book aside, stood, went to her, and picked her light frame up easily. She mumbled softly and turned her face toward him without waking. Breathing a sigh of relief, Severus made his way to her room and laid her in her bed, pulling the covers up over her torso. Standing, he looked down at her small, innocent form for a moment, then turned to leave. Feeling a pull at his carefully guarded heart, Severus turned, his hand reaching down to brush her hair away from her cheek. Moments before his hand brushed her skin, though, he pulled back, turned, and left.

Whatever my subconscious thinks I should have done, he thought as he sat down with his book once more, *I certainly am not ready for.* Shaking his head slightly, refusing to think on it anymore, he turned back to his book.

The Zonlicht Serum has two means of usage, which, when used in conjunction with one another, create a block against the sun's rays. The first aspect of the serum is a potion that, when ingested, quickly spreads through the bloodstream. This protects the internal organs and eyes from the sun, but leaves the skin vulnerable. To protect the skin, murtlap essence needs to be added to thicken the potion into the salve that is to be spread over the skin. This salve protects the skin by both creating a barrier over it and pulling the potion from the bloodstream through the skin. The Serum is then in the bloodstream, skin, and the surface of the skin, thus creating a nearly impenetrable block of the sun's rays.

The Zonlicht Serum is reported to work in ninety-nine percent of mild and intermediate allergies to the sun. Unfortunately, in severe cases, there is a chemical in the individual's body that weakens the effect of the Serum so that the person cannot endure more than a few minutes to an hour of sunlight. Any more than one hour would likely be lethal. Research is currently underway to improve the Serum and, ultimately, find a cure.

Sighing, Severus rubbed his forehead and set the book aside. He wasn't going to get any more information out of it anyway. He needed to contact Ginny Potter to see if she'd give him information on where her team was in their research. He really didn't want to cover ground that they already had. Deciding he would pen her a letter in the morning, Severus got up to go to his bedroom. He stopped at Jessica's door, put his hand on the handle, and debated checking in on her. Finally, he quietly pushed the door open.

Jessica was laying on her side, facing the door, curled up with her hands tucked under her chin. Her blonde hair was splayed over the pillow, and her mouth was slightly open. The dungeons were so quiet this time of night that he could hear the quiet sigh of her steady breathing. A burst of emotion coursed through him, and he couldn't help but wonder, yet again, what the Ministry was thinking, letting him take in such an innocent child.

* * *

He heard the footsteps before the firm knocks on his door. Severus looked up from the tests he was grading and called out, "Enter." Ginny Potter walked in, but she wasn't alone.

"Harry Potter: an unexpected and not entirely welcome surprise. Surely your wife is capable of meeting associates on her own?"

Harry glared, but Ginny grinned widely, seemingly refusing to allow Severus's bad mood to be spread. "Calm down, Professor. Harry brought you a notice from the Ministry."

"Aren't those normally delivered by owl?" he asked with no small amount of sarcasm.

"Arthur asked me to bring it to you personally. Apparently this particular notice has raised a few eyebrows around the Ministry, including mine. Did you do something to piss Blaise Zabini off? I thought you Slytherins stick together?"

"Blaise Zabini?" Severus asked with a furrowed brow. What reason could he have to send him a notice through the Ministry? Severus remembered their impromptu meeting

a couple weeks prior and his past student's odd behavior concerning his adoption of Jessica, wondering if it could have anything to do with her.

Harry set a sealed envelope on his desk. Severus picked it up, broke the seal, and pulled out the folded parchment. Unfolding it, he read:

Professor S. Snape,

Under Section Nine of the Adoption Act, any adoption may be contested within ninety (90) days of the adoption by any adult affected by the law. Your legal adoption under the Adoption Act of Miss Jessica Augustus has been contested by Mr. Blaise Zabini under the grounds of:

___ the adopter is unfit to parent and has shown as much.

X there is a living relative of the adoptee.

___ the adoptee has special needs that cannot and/or are not being met by the adopter.

___ Other reason (please describe) _____

Please report to the Ministry of Magic on the 18th of September 2000 at 10 o'clock in the morning for a hearing on this matter. If you or a representative on your behalf neglects to arrive for this hearing, your rights as caregiver will be immediately revoked, and your charge will be reassigned.

Yours Sincerely,

Melinda Bathalda

Frowning, Severus looked up at the couple. "This makes no sense, but I appreciate you delivering the letter. Now, if you don't mind, it seems I've a hearing to prepare for."

"All right, all right," Harry said, holding his arms up in defense. "We'll leave you to prepare. Come on, Ginny."

"No, wait. Severus, you forgot, the Zonlicht Serum."

"Oh, right," Severus said, noticing the folder in Ginny's hands for the first time.

Ginny moved to his desk and set the folder on it, a contract sitting on top. "Because it is a privately funded project, I'm not supposed to even share this information with you. However, I convinced my team to let me, as long as you sign this contract. It just says that any new developments you uncover are to be forfeited to my team. You will, of course, get credit for any discoveries you make; it will just be part of the credit the whole team will get if we can make some headway!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Potter, for that long and drawn out explanation. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to read it for myself," he said with barely concealed sarcasm.

He read carefully through the contract to ensure everything in it was agreeable. Finding everything in order, Severus dipped his quill into his ink and signed the contract.

"Severus!" Jessica came running into the room, tears in her eyes and panic in her voice.

Severus jumped to his feet, toppling a stack of third-year essays to the floor. "Jessica! Are you alright? Have you been hurt?"

"Severus! Are they taking me away?" Jessica asked, waving a piece of parchment at him, the tears threatening to fall.

"You're not hurt?" Severus asked as he knelt in front of her, relief pouring through him. He took her chin in his hand and looked into her eyes. "Now, what's this about someone taking you away?"

Jessica sniffled, handing him the piece of parchment she'd been holding. "I was looking for a book in your office, and I saw this on your desk. I swear I didn't mean to find it; it was just out in the open! Are they really going to take me away?"

Severus looked at the parchment, mentally berating himself for leaving the letter from the Ministry out where she could find it.

"No, no one's going to take you away." Not if he had anything to say about it.

"But...but it says there's to be a hearing, that I still have family out there. I..."

"Do you still have family...other than Maria?"

"No, Mum and Dad, Maria and I, we were all we had. You-Know-Who... He killed everyone else," she told him quietly, her eyes downcast.

Pushing back a twinge of guilt from his days as a Death Eater, Severus pulled her chin up to look at him. "Jessica, look at me. It will be fine. Don't worry about it. I'm going to work it out."

He wondered why he was going to so much trouble to reassure her when, not too long ago, he'd been dead-set against taking a child in? Had she, in just a few short months, grown on him so much? He thought back to the other night, when he had carried her to her bed. He had felt something completely foreign to him, something he wasn't quite ready to name...not yet.

"Can I go?" Jessica's small voice broke through his thoughts.

"Go where?" he asked.

"With you to the hearing."

"Absolutely not," he said in a voice that warned against argument.

"But I can tell them I don't want to leave, that I want to stay here with you. Please!"

"No, you'll stay here and let me take care of it." *Of you.*

"But..."

"No. Now, drop it."

She let her head fall forward in defeat. "Yes, Severus."

Severus was glad that she let the subject drop. The Ministry was no place for children. He couldn't deny that it might help for her to say she actually wanted to stay in his care, but he would find a way through the hearing, keeping Jessica's involvement at a minimum.

"Severus?" Jessica posed timidly. "What will you do? I mean, if I have family out there that I don't even know about?"

"We will worry about it if and only if it does come to pass. Now, though, you need to go to bed."

"All right," Jessica said, nodding, then turned and walked down the hallway. When she reached the bathroom, she turned back to look at Severus, her hand still on the handle. "Severus, you are my family now."

* * *

Author's Notes: I want to give a huge thank you to my beta, Soul Bound. She has been a great help in making this story a better read for you all! Thank you all so much for reviewing this, it truly does inspire me to write more.

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Nine

There was something wrong in the Great Hall on September the thirteenth. The enchanted ceiling showed a clear sky just exposing signs of the night sky. The Great Hall was full of people talking to one another in blissful ignorance of that which was dreadfully wrong. It took all of his self-control for Severus to not storm out of the Great Hall and search the entire castle for those two people who were so discreetly missing.

Just then, the doors quietly swung open, and the two people whom he had just been thinking of walked in. The older of the two was bent slightly, holding the younger one's hand. They were whispering, and then the older looked up in laughter as they walked toward the children's table. Jessica was dropped off at her seat, which was one of the empty ones that had been taunting Severus moments before. Hermione Granger's eyes seemed to seek his after she left Jessica, and he raised his eyebrow in curiosity as she walked toward him.

With her eyes locked on his, he was able to discern a calm determination in her stance. She walked with her head held high and a slight smile on her face. She walked around the table and slipped into the empty seat next to his.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," she said lightly, glancing at him as she poured herself a spot of tea. She pulled a small vial from her robes and tipped the contents into her drink. Severus watched her movements curiously, ignoring the itch to ask her just what she'd slipped into her own drink. As if sensing his gaze, she answered his unasked question. "I put a spot of firewhisky in my tea after a long day...surely I'm not the first staff member to do so?"

Her tone was light, and he couldn't help the quiet snort of laughter from escaping his lips. "You'd be surprised, Miss Granger. I happen to know for fact that Professor McGonagall requested years ago that the elves add a spot of scotch to her evening tea. Professor Flitwick prefers brandy."

"And you?" she asked flippantly.

"Before Jessica, I would wait until returning to my personal quarters, at which point I would settle down with a glass of firewhisky and a book or papers." He wasn't sure why he had revealed such a personal thing of himself to her, but shrugged it off as one of the many changes in his life since Jessica had found herself a part of it.

"And now, do you not indulge yourself?" Her eyebrow had risen in a weak but amusing imitation of him.

"Only on occasion...after Jessica has gone to bed."

"You are far more responsible than we ever gave you credit for, aren't you?" she asked rhetorically and went on without waiting for an answer. "I'm sure you're wondering why Jessica and I were late to dinner."

"I was," he agreed.

"Well, as we were cleaning up to prepare for dinner, Jessica approached me with an unusual request. She had her brush in her bag and asked me if I knew how to braid. I do, so I sent the other children along with a Prefect and brushed and braided her hair for her. I hope you don't mind?" Hermione bit her lower lip as though worried what his reaction would be.

Severus looked over to Jessica and saw what he hadn't noticed when they had walked in. Her hair was done in two neat braids. A sharp pain pierced his heart, and he had to work to school his features to remain indifferent. "I do not mind," he said after a moment, "but in the future I would appreciate being made aware if Jessica will not be at a meal on time."

Hermione nodded, and he noticed the relief in her eyes at having escaped any kind of anger from him. It nearly made him laugh, but remembering where he was prevented any show of outright delight. Turning back to her firewhisky-laced tea, she pulled a Cornish Pasty from the platter onto her plate moments before dinner was removed from the table and desserts came in their absence.

"You know," she spoke up after a few minutes, "I could teach you how to braid. It would mean a lot to Jessica, I'm sure."

Severus coughed once, raising his eyebrow more out of habit than anything else. "And what would Mr. Zabini think of that?" he asked, trying to mask his curiosity.

"Blaise... Well, Blaise is not an issue, but I thank you for your concern." Her voice was certainly not one of gratitude, but Severus let the subject of his ex-student go. After a few moments passed, she said, "The offer is on the table, though, should you ever wish to accept it."

They finished their meals in silence, though there was no tension between them. Severus thought back to her defense of him to Mr. Zabini and considered that perhaps there was more to Miss Granger than he had given her credit for. He decided then and there that he wanted to learn more about the witch, sensing that there was a growing fondness between her and Jessica.

* * *

Five days later found Jessica Augustus sitting cross-legged in front of the door to the dungeon hallway leading from Severus' and her personal quarters. Severus would be attending the hearing today, and she was so desperately confused at why it was even taking place. She and Maria had been orphaned in the war against Voldemort...it was a fact. They had no family, but she couldn't help her curiosity about why Mr. Blaise Zabini seemed to think otherwise.

She heard Severus leave his bedroom and watched as he checked that he had his wand concealed in his robes and the copies of the adoption papers in a small folder that he was taking along with him when he finally noticed her sitting Indian style in front of the door.

"I have to leave now," he said softly.

"I know." Her voice was soft as well, and when she looked up at him, her eyes were clear. "I just wanted to walk out with you." She paused and then added, "I really, really want to go to the hearing."

"We've already had this discussion, and I trust you will not suffer me to have it again," he said firmly, discouraging any argument. "However, you can walk with me to the grounds, and then you are to return here and stay here until I return."

Nodding, Jessica stood and pulled down her cloak from the rack next to the door. Wrapping it over her shoulders, she opened the door and stepped out, waiting for him to join her. They walked through the dungeon corridors in silence until they finally reached the somewhat warmer Entrance Hall. Once at the doors leading out to the grounds, the odd pair stopped, and Jessica looked up at Severus with wide eyes.

"Promise you won't let them take me away? I meant it when I said you are my family now." Her voice was every soft, and her eyes were filling with tears. "Please tell them that. I want to tell them myself, but I trust you." And suddenly her arms were around his waist in a display of affection that she had refrained from since coming to live with him, but had been craving.

She felt his hand on the top of her head, and she took a deep breath to rein in the tears. She would wait until she was back in her room to cry.

"Promise?" she earnestly pleaded with him.

Severus knelt down in front of her, took her chin in his hand, and looked straight into her eyes. "I promise," he whispered, a touch of emotion coloring his voice.

She watched him leave and sent out a prayer that everything would work out the way she hoped for it to. She didn't care if she had blood relatives out there. Severus had adopted her, and she was happy with him. All she wanted was for Maria to come live with them, and then she felt her life would be perfect. With a resigned sigh, Jessica turned to go back through the dungeon maze to her room when she saw Hermione walking down the stairs into the Entrance Hall.

"Hermione!" Jessica said, walking to meet her. Jessica noticed that Hermione's eyes seemed to light up at the sound of her name, and her frown became a small smile. Jessica's heart swelled just a bit, knowing that that smile was for her.

"Hey, Jessie. What are you doing here? I thought the hearing was today?"

"Severus said I'm not allowed to go," Jessica answered simply.

Hermione's brows furrowed, and she asked, "He does know you're supposed to be there, right? If they find that your adoption status needs to change, it will have to be done immediately."

"I... Well, I don't think he knew that. But it doesn't matter because I'm not leaving him! He may not be my dad, but he's been really nice to me. And he hasn't even tried to make me talk about what happened." There was passion in her eyes and her voice.

"What if you have family still alive?" Hermione asked her softly, moving to sit on the steps and motioning for Jessica to sit with her.

"The only family I have left is Maria and now Severus," she answered as she sat down. "Even if I might have other family, I don't know them. I mean, I know Severus now, and I just really don't want to have to get to know a new family." Her eyes were downcast, and she took a deep breath in the hopes of steadying herself. "Sometimes I just wish my mum and dad would have hid with me and Maria." It came out as an unmistakable whisper, and she felt a tear fall down her cheek. She hadn't told anyone what had happened the night her parents had been murdered...it was just too difficult to think about. Jessie felt an arm slip around her shoulders.

"I know, sweetheart. You know, Jessie, it's really important that you go to this hearing. I think they need to see that you want to stay with Severus. I know he said you're not to attend, but I would like to take you. I'll talk to him afterward."

Jessie shook her head adamantly. "No, I can't go. I told him I trusted him. If I go, it will mean I don't trust him, but I do, so I can't go." She looked at Hermione with tear-filled eyes. "Would you stay with me, though?"

"If you would like me to," Hermione said with a nod.

"I would."

Jessica watched Hermione stand up, dusting off the back of her robes, and reach a hand out to her. "What would you like to do?"

"Hmm." She accepted the outstretched hand and stood as well. "Could we go to the kitchens and get some ice cream?"

Hermione chuckled. "How do you know about the kitchens?"

"Daddy told me about them," she said simply. "He said all you have to do is tickle the pear and the house-elves are more than happy to give you whatever sweets you want. I always thought he was just making up stories, but then when I came to Hogwarts for the first time, I remembered everything he told me about the castle, and I realized it was all true. It sounds silly, but it was really magical the first time I saw it."

"Not silly at all," Hermione said reassuringly with a grin and a small shake of her head. "You know, I was raised in the Muggle world, so when I found out I was a witch, I read as much as I could about Hogwarts before coming here. But reading about it all in *Hogwarts, A History* and seeing it are two very different things. It was, and still is sometimes, a magical experience for me too."

Jessie's eyes grew wider. "You were raised in the Muggle world, too?" she asked in disbelief.

"I was. My mum and dad were so excited when we found out I was a witch," Hermione said, remembering with a fond smile. They were almost to the kitchens, and Jessica was chattering away.

"Wow. You know, my mum was a Muggle, but my dad was a wizard. When You-Know-Who came back to power, Dad took us into hiding because he was scared for Mum and me. I was just a baby, and Maria wasn't born yet. But Daddy always told us stories about magic and Hogwarts. He never hid his magic from us. But even his magic couldn't save us when the masked men came." Her voice had slowly dropped off.

She felt Hermione's hand lightly rest on her shoulder as they stopped in front of the portrait of the bowl of fruit. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but if you do, I'm here for you, okay?"

Jessica merely nodded, then reached up to tickle the pear, a small grin gracing her features when a handle appeared on the portrait. Almost immediately after the portrait swung shut behind them, they were ambushed by a horde of house-elves all scurrying about trying to be the one to serve them.

"We would like two ice cream sundaes, please," Hermione said after a moment. She motioned over to a small table in the corner, and Jessica moved to sit with her.

Once the house-elves burdened the table with two bowls of ice cream and all the fixings for sundaes, Jessica asked Hermione if she had had a chance to talk to Severus about learning to braid hair.

"I did, but he didn't say anything either way."

"Oh." Jessica's face fell slightly, and her voice held a trace of disappointment. "I was hoping he'd want to learn. It would mean so much to me."

"I could mention it to him again," Hermione offered.

Jessie's eyes sparkled. "Really?"

Hermione nodded, and Jessica smiled brightly, thinking that her plan was working out perfectly. She would have to remember to owl Molly the details of the progress of their plan.

* * *

A/N: I hope you all liked this chapter. It was such a joy to write it! I hope you all liked that Jessica is now having her POV shown, as she demanded it for the next chapter as well!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010. (Though there really wasn't much to polish! Just a few small alterations.)

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Ten

By the time Severus reached the Ministry, he was furious...not only at the fact that he had to deal with this ridiculous hearing, but at himself. His instinct had been to give in and let Jessica go with him to the hearing, and it was so difficult for him to stick to his word. He wouldn't allow himself to be the type of parent that would change his mind just because his children didn't like the rules set before them. Jessica deserved better than that, not to mention the fact that it was completely against his personality to give in. He was stubborn, and he wasn't so arrogant as to deny it.

He checked in with the security wizard at the front desk, then made his way to the elevator that would take him to the courtrooms. The stone walls surrounding him after he left the elevator looked as though they had been there for thousands of years. Reaching the courtroom where the hearing was to be held, Severus opened the door and entered. There were two aging wizards, a young wizard he didn't recognize, and Minister Weasley. Blaise Zabini hadn't arrived, but Arthur walked over to him and held out his hand.

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Severus. I'm doing all I can on my end. He contested Molly's and my adoption of Maria as well. Did you know?"

Severus shook the Minister's hand.. "I did not, though it makes sense. Will Molly be here?"

"Oh, no, no. Maria, bless her, has a bit of a cold. Molly's coddling her as she does."

The woman can't live without coddling. Severus thought, though he resisted the urge to say as much. Severus felt a sense of security knowing that the Minister's adoption was being contested as well. Surely Blaise would not be able to get away with this going against the Minister.

"Will we be standing this hearing together, then?" Severus asked.

"Yes, we will. And, ah, I notice you didn't bring Jessica along." Arthur raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"I hardly think a Ministry courtroom is the place for a little girl," Severus bit back defensively.

Raising a hand in surrender, Arthur said, "I absolutely agree."

"It's not as though the notice said to bring her along anyhow."

Hearing the door open, Severus turned to see Blaise Zabini walk in. Though he did not throw angry words around in attack, Blaise didn't even look at the two men already present. He walked straight to the desk provided for any paperwork he had brought along. Following suit, Severus and Arthur made their way to the other desk. After a couple minutes, one of the wizards noticed that all parties were present and clapped his hands together once.

"Shall we begin?" His voice rang out clearly and firmly in a way that defied his apparent age. "We are here today on the 18th day of September in the year 2000 to rule on the matter of Zabini, Blaise versus Snape, Severus and Weasley, Arthur. Mr. Zabini, you have sent a letter of contest on the adoptions of Augustus, Jessica and Augustus, Maria. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir." Blaise spoke in clear, clipped tones, never looking away from the wizards sitting elevated from them.

"Professor Snape, Minister Weasley, do you have your copies of the final adoption forms?" The second wizard addressed them. Severus and Arthur both located their respective adoption papers and handed them to the younger wizard who then took them to the wizards who were to determine the fate of the two young sisters. He looked at the papers, handed them to the other, and then addressed the men before him.

"They seem to be in order. Mr. Zabini, your letter of contest stated that these adoptions are illegal and therefore void because the children in question still have living relatives. Please present your case now."

Blaise removed an old-looking parchment from his folder and handed it to the young wizard. "This is a copy of my family tree. On it you will see the name Jason Zabini highlighted as well as his wife, Sarah Zabini, nee Murphy. Jason Zabini was my cousin; therefore his children, Jessica and Maria, are my relations and belong in my care."

The first wizard cleared his throat. "Mr. Zabini, we are here in question of the Augustus family," he pointed out.

"When You-Know-Who was gaining power the second time around, Jason had already married Sarah, a Muggle, and had already had Jessica. Out of fear for his wife and child, Jason changed their surname and went into hiding."

"Have you any proof that Jason Augustus is the same as Jason Zabini?"

Severus noticed Blaise's clenched jaw as a sign of his frustration. Relief was slowly spreading through Severus, as it seemed that the representatives from the Wizengamot were inclined to side with him and Arthur already.

"With all due respect," Blaise said through clenched teeth, "when people went into hiding from You-Know-Who, they made sure they left no proof behind."

"That is understandable, but regrettable. Do you have any other evidence to present, Mr. Zabini?"

"I would think that my family tree is proof enough," he spat out.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Zabini, that it is not. Even if you and the children were second cousins, that would not be enough to remove them from the homes they have been adopted into. However, as there is no proof of relation between you and the Misses Augustus, we will have to rule in favor of Professor Snape and Minister Weasley." He looked to the other for confirmation. He nodded. "This case is dismissed, and the adoptions of Jessica and Maria Augustus will remain as they are. Good day."

The wizards signed on their ruling, handing the document to the younger wizard to be placed in records, and then they left. Raising an eyebrow, Severus wondered at how one could win a case without speaking a word of defense. Marveling at his luck, Severus had an undeniable urge to hurry home and tell Jessica the good news. Stifling the urge, he turned to Arthur as Blaise stormed out of the courtroom.

"That went well," he said with a smirk.

"Definitely." Arthur clapped him on the shoulder, and Severus fought not to cringe at the touch. "Sorry to cut this short, but I've got piles of paperwork to sort through up in my office. It was good seeing you again. Do try to bring Jessie by sometime...you know how Molly gets."

Nodding, the men walked out of the courtroom together. Severus was feeling happy in a way he hadn't felt since his childhood friendship with a young redhead. Arthur left Severus, feeling relieved that his wife's meddling would not be interfered with by this inconvenience.

* * *

Severus walked down the dungeon corridors wondering how Jessica would react when she heard that she was going to be able to stay with him. He knew that she wanted to, but there was a nagging voice in the back of his head telling him that she would grow to resent him, that she would be better off without him. Pushing the thought out of his head, he almost didn't notice Hermione Granger heading his way.

"What brings you to the dungeons, Miss Granger?" he asked as she smiled up at him.

"Professor." She nodded her head in greeting. "I was simply walking Jessie back to your rooms. I hope that's all right?"

She bit her lower lip, and his eyes flickered at the movement. "She was to return after I left. What detained her?" He couldn't keep the worry and slight irritation that she had not followed his directions out of his voice.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Professor. It was me. I was walking into the Entrance Hall just as you were leaving and happened upon Jessie. We were talking when she asked if we could go to the kitchens for a treat. Afterward, I brought her straight back home," she assured him. He did not look very assured, so she went on. "I offered to take her to the Ministry..."

His eyes flashed. "You had..."

"No right, I know. She told me no. She said that she wasn't to go, and that she'd promised not to. Professor, she refused to break her promise to you."

Though he was still angry at Miss Granger's intrusion, Severus couldn't help the burst of pride in Jessica. "If that's all..." Severus began walking past her.

"Wait!" She made to reach out to him, but pulled her hand back before it found him. "...I was wondering how it went."

Frowning, Severus looked into her eyes. "It went well." After a moment, he added, "Thank you for asking."

Severus frowned even more as the smile spread across her lips. "Oh, that's wonderful! Jessie will be delighted to hear it!"

Raising his eyebrows, Severus nodded in agreement. "Oh, right, I'll see you later, then," she said as a light blush graced her cheeks.

Leaving her, Severus continued down the corridor until he reached the entrance to his rooms. Muttering the password, he went inside to find Jessie sitting at the coffee table, writing on a small piece of parchment. She looked up as he pulled his traveling cloak off and put it onto the rack inside the door. Her eyes lit up in a combination of excitement and fear. Quickly folding the parchment she had been writing on, Jessie jumped up, stuffing it into her pocket.

"What happened?" she asked quickly, seeming to resist the urge to rush to him.

Giving her a rare smile, Severus told her, "We won. You get to stay with me."

Jessie let a squeak of joy out as she ran to him and jumped up into his arms. "Yes! Oh yes, thank you!" Her arms wrapped tightly around his neck, and his arms instinctively held her tight. Her lips pressed against his cheek, and he noticed that they felt wet, as though she was crying. Closing his eyes, Severus let all the doubts and worries flood out of him. Slowly, he lowered Jessie to the ground, though she didn't let go of him, her face still pressed against his stomach. Sliding a hand over her hair, Severus noticed that it was braided again.

Frowning slightly, he asked, "Did Miss Granger braid your hair again?"

Jessie pulled back from him, confused. "Um, yes. That's all right, isn't it?"

Shaking his head, Severus said, "Yes, it's all right."

"Hermione could teach you, you know. She's really good at it. Please," she added.

"As I told Hermi...Miss Granger, I will think about it." Did he really want to spend time with Miss Granger? He didn't really have an answer to that, but a small part of him decided that if it meant making Jessie happy, then he would definitely consider spending any necessary time with her.

* * *

Jessica was thrilled with the way things were turning out in her life. Everything had been so confusing, and she hadn't been sure how she'd get through not having her parents with her anymore, then being separated from Maria. Then Severus had adopted her; she understood what that meant. Severus was her dad now...or, at least, he would be once he realized that he already was. She loved being around Hermione, and she was sure that Severus would too. All she had to do was make the two of them realize that they were perfect for each other. Molly was going to be so excited when she read the letter Jessica was writing her.

Pulling the letter out of her pocket, Jessica read it over.

Dear Molly,

I miss you so much! Tell Maria that I love her and I miss her. I'm gunna ask Severus if I can visit soon. I don't wanna wait to visit her until Christmas. I really like Hermione a lot. She's so fun! Today, we went to the kitchens together and had ice cream sundaes.

She sat down, picked up a quill, and hurried to finish writing the letter.

Severus won the hearing! I get to stay with him! I was really scared I wouldn't be able to stay with him. Hermione is gunna teach him how to braid my hair. He hasn't said he will yet, but I can tell he's going to. I don't know how much Severus is working on the potion for Mark, but I think he is working on it. I really am working on getting them to talk more. I have to go now, though.

Love,

Jessie

Jessica sat inside her bedroom door that night, waiting for Severus to go to his room. She knew that once he went into his room, he would be asleep within minutes. She had to get up to the owlry to send the letter to Molly. She knew Severus would be really upset if he knew that she was planning to go up there by herself, but she didn't want him to know about this particular letter. It would not be good for her plan for him to find out that she and Molly were working together to get him to find friendship and love in the hopes that it would bring him to adopting Maria. He was a stubborn man, but she was determined to be twice as stubborn.

* * *

A/N: Reviews keep a lonely writer warm at night *wink*

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010. (Though, again, there wasn't much to polish!)

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Eleven

Jessica heard the door across from hers close and knew that it would only be a few more minutes before she was on her way to the Owlery. She knew that she probably shouldn't go alone at night, but she didn't want anyone to know that she was sending an owl to Molly. If anyone found out, they would tell Severus. Then Severus would want to know why she was sending an owl to Molly, and Jessie couldn't possibly tell him about *that*, not if she and Molly were to succeed in their plan.

Finally, Jessie tiptoed out of her room, through the living room, and out the door leading to the dungeon corridors. Pulling her dressing gown tighter around her small frame, walking as quietly as she could along the walls, she made it to the Entrance Hall without running into anyone and couldn't believe her luck. She stopped just before the Entrance Hall, her heart speeding up as she wondered if she would be so lucky to make it through the open area without getting caught.

Nibbling on her lower lip, Jessie decided to just hurry as quickly as she could and get up the stairs as fast as possible, hoping that no one would hear her. She made it up to the first floor and hesitantly smiled at her continuing luck. As she was walking through the second floor, she was sure she heard Peeves teasing someone inside the bathroom and sent out a prayer that he would not hear her, for if he did, she would undoubtedly be caught.

Still staying as much in the shadows and along the walls as possible, Jessica felt her heart jump up into her throat as Mrs. Norris came from around the next corner, her small yellow eyes searching the corridor. Sucking in her breath, Jessie slipped back into a small alcove to wait for the cat to pass her by. Her breathing sounded so loud that she was sure that Mrs. Norris would be able to hear her, so she tried to hold her breath as long as possible. Finally, Mrs. Norris turned to go search another corridor, and Jessie climbed out of the alcove, hoping that Mr. Filch wasn't following his cat around.

Shaking in fear of being caught, she was filled with relief when she finally reached the staircase leading up to the Owlery. Shivering against the cold air, she ran up the steps and into the large, circular room where the owls lived. As she crossed over to the school owls, careful not to slip on the owl droppings, Jessie pulled out her letter to Molly and tied it to an owl's leg with a piece of string.

"Please, would you get this to Molly Weasley in the morning?" she asked in a whisper.

The owl hooted in response and went back to preening its feathers. Satisfied with the success of her journey, Jessie turned to leave the Owlery, a small smile on her face. She climbed back down the staircase, her hand reaching up to lightly trail along the banister. As she made her way back into the castle, Jessica thought about how much she wanted Molly's and her plan to succeed. If they could just get Severus to be friends with Hermione, she could convince him to adopt Maria. She didn't understand why Molly was so insistent that it had to be Hermione, but she liked Hermione just fine and knew that Severus would, too, once he got to know her.

As she turned the corner, someone stepped out of the shadows, blocking her path. At the sight of a wand pointed at her by someone she couldn't recognize, Jessie screamed as loudly as she could.

A flash of light hit her and everything went black.

* * *

Severus shot up in a bed as a scream echoed throughout the castle. Cursing, he pulled on his cloak, grabbed his wand, and made to seek out the cause of the scream. Just as he reached the door leading to the corridor, he doubled back to check in on Jessica. He pushed her bedroom door open, cursing as he immediately noticed that her bed was empty, looking as though she hadn't even slept in it that night. Instinct left no room for fear as he tore through the castle searching for his charge. If anything happened to her, he didn't know what he would do.

As he reached the third floor, Albus and Minerva joined him, wands out.

"Jessica's missing," he said simply as he continued searching through the corridors.

Albus turned to the nearest portrait, one of a medieval couple engaged in a dance. "Find the girl." The man in the portrait nodded and was off in a hurry.

"Headmaster, a young girl passed by about thirty minutes ago. She was heading toward the west towers," the lady supplied helpfully.

"Thank you." Albus caught up with Severus. "She was seen heading toward the west towers. Perhaps the Owlery?"

"Who in the bloody hell would she need to owl at this hour?" Severus muttered as he changed direction to make his way to the Owlery.

The three professors searched the castle, but could not find the missing girl anywhere. They questioned the portraits, but could not find out what had happened to her. Severus was sure that there was only one person who could have screamed and was quite uncomfortable with the worry for Jessica's safety that began to cloud his mind.

He could not deny it any longer now that he was faced with losing her to an unknown danger. In the three months since she had come to live with him, he had grown to love that little girl. Realizing this only made losing her all the more difficult, and Severus slammed his fist into the wall in frustration.

Minerva transfigured a wrap for his bleeding knuckles and handed it to him.

"Strange how easy it comes, isn't it?" she asked softly, understanding in her eyes.

"What?" His voice sounded foreign to him.

"Worrying."

In a moment of open vulnerability, Severus asked, "Does it ever go away?"

Minerva shook her head, a small, sad smile on her face. "We'll find her, Severus."

"We have to find her," he said simply.

* * *

Jessica woke up to an unfamiliar face hovering above her own. She tried to scream again, but no sound came out. Fear had her scurrying away from the man, whose wand was still pointed at her. Her eyes frantically searched the room to find that there was only a table, two chairs, and one door. If she could just get to the door, perhaps she could run and find Severus. He would be angry with her, but at least she would be safe. The unknown man advanced toward her, stopping just a couple feet away from her.

"Jessica." Her eyes widened as he said her name, but she knew that she didn't know who he was, so she wondered how he knew her name. She was shaking in fear of what he would do to her, wondering if she would ever get to see Severus and Maria again.

"I looked for you for a long time, but I never could find you. Then, I found out that Professor Snape had adopted you. I found you, but you were still out of reach. You look so much like your mother, you know." She flinched as his hand reached out to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

"My cousin picked a beautiful woman to marry, and he was blessed with two beautiful girls. You should be with family, Jessie, not with Professor Snape. If you were with me, you and Maria would be together; you would be able to learn all about your family. Snape can't teach you about your family, our family."

Jessie's eyes widened in understanding as she realized that this must be Blaise Zabini, the man who had tried to take her away from Severus. She couldn't believe that he was still lying about being her relative. She was happy with Severus, and she didn't want anyone to take her away from him. Blaise moved a bit closer to her, and in a moment of rage, Jessie flung her arm out at him, and he was thrown across the room to slam against the other wall.

She hurriedly stumbled toward the door, tugging and turning the handle, trying to leave the room, but it would not let her leave. Tears started rolling down her cheeks and she wished desperately that Severus would come and find her. She was so scared that Blaise was going to hurt her or take her away.

"*Petrificus Totalus*." Jessie's arms and legs locked together, and she fell forward with a dull thud. Blaise turned her over and spoke quietly. "Look, I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk, okay? I just want to talk," he repeated in a whisper. Now that she had no other choice, as her eyes were stuck open, Jessie noticed that Blaise didn't look angry or mean.

"I'm going to do the counter-curse, but you'd better not pull another stunt like that again, all right?" She couldn't nod, but he seemed to think she was agreeable because a moment later he performed the counter-curse and Jessica was able to move away from him and curl up into a ball.

Blaise stood up and sat at the table, motioning for her to do the same. After a few moments, Jessica decided that she should do what he wanted so that he wouldn't hurt her. She was still so scared, even though he said that he wasn't going to hurt her, but he was the one with a wand, and she knew that she couldn't control her magic yet. Sliding into the empty chair, she crossed her arms over her chest and waited for him to speak again.

"You probably don't remember me," he started, "but I'm your cousin, Blaise. I remember that when you were born, Jason and Sarah had a party a few days later to show you off. You were so tiny and your eyes were so big. You were so curious right from the start."

She was listening to him, wondering if what he was saying could possibly be true. Was he really her cousin? Had he really known her when she was just a baby? She suddenly felt like she was betraying Severus by wanting to know, but she couldn't help it.

"You've heard of You-Know-Who, right?" She nodded. "Well, when he came back to power when I was at Hogwarts, your mum and dad disappeared. We thought that maybe You-Know-Who had got to them, but there wasn't any trace of them. I figured they must have gone into hiding, and I kept hoping that you all were safe. After You-Know-Who was defeated, I tried so hard to find you, but I couldn't. I didn't know about Maria at the time, but when the Adoption Act was filed, I found a list of all the children that had been orphaned, but it didn't have a Jessica Zabini on it.

"I was relieved because I had thought that your parents were all right and it would only be a matter of time before they came back out into the open again. A week later Hermione was going through the orphans' files, trying to find her neighbor's file so that she could request that he become her charge, when I saw your file. You had grown up so much from the last time I had seen you, but you looked more and more like your mother. I recognized you right away and tried to request you as my charge, only to find out that Professor Snape had already adopted you."

Jessica interrupted him by waving her arms and pointing at her throat. She had so many questions, and it was so difficult to not be able to talk when she so badly wanted to talk. She watched as he pointed his wand at her and flinched when the soft ray of light hit her, unblocking her voice.

"Sorry about that...I just didn't want you to scream again," he explained.

"Where are we?" she blurted out. *That was not the question I wanted to ask!*

"The Room of Requirement. Don't worry; we're still at Hogwarts. This is a room that changes into whatever you might need at the time if you pass by its entrance thinking about what you want."

They sat in silence for what seemed like hours before he finally spoke again.

"I was so upset that I had finally found you, only to have you snatched up before I could claim you as family. I was angry with Professor Snape for being the one to take you away from me before I even could get you back in my life. Hermione didn't understand. She thought that Snape would do a fine job with you and that if I just cooperated, perhaps he would let me still be a part of your life. We argued about it a lot until she decided that it was just too much and broke things off with me."

"But she was right...Severus is really good with me," Jessie pointed out.

Blaise frowned. "I didn't want him to be in that position, though. I even went so far as to contest Maria's and your adoptions with the Ministry, but that didn't work, either, as they thought I didn't prove that you are my family."

"But how do you know we are?"

"I told you, you look just like your mother. I recognized you from your picture immediately. After I lost the hearing, I did some more research and found out that your great-grandmother's maiden name was Augustus, which would have gone even further to proving that we are related."

There was another long pause, during which Jessie thought about everything he was saying. It seemed as though he might be telling the truth, but it didn't change how she felt. She loved Severus and she didn't want to leave him. She was happy and wanted him to be her dad. It didn't matter to her if Blaise was related; she wanted to stay with Severus.

"How did you know I'd be out in the corridors tonight?" she wondered aloud.

"I didn't. I was actually leaving Hermione's rooms when I happened to see you walking toward the Owlery. I decided to wait until you came back to get you somewhere to talk."

"I thought Hermione broke up with you?" Jessie asked.

"Yeah, she did, but her birthday's tomorrow and I wanted to give her a gift, see if maybe she'd forgive me."

"Did she forgive you?"

"Yes, but she just wants to be friends. Mark's not doing well, and she's really busy here, so she really doesn't have a lot of spare time," Blaise explained.

"Who's Mark?"

"He's Hermione's charge. He was her neighbor that she wanted as her charge. He's very ill, but Hermione's hoping that they'll find something to help him soon."

An uncomfortable feeling filled the young girl. "Can I go? Severus is probably really mad at me."

"He didn't know you'd gone to the Owlery, did he?" She shook her head. "He'll probably have heard you scream. You've a good set of lungs." He paused. "I suppose so, but, Jessie, I really don't want to lose you. I know you don't know me, but you are my cousin, and I'd like to be a part of your life."

"You'll have to talk to Severus, I guess, because I'm not leaving him," she said stubbornly.

A/N: 50 house points to whoever is first to tell me where Minerva's comforting words came from. Many thanks to my wonderful beta, Soul Bound. Please review, for they fuel the muse!

Chapter polished up on January 29, 2010. (Again, not much changed.)

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 12

The new Minister of Magic has a major issue on his hands: orphans from the Great War. He has enacted the Adoption Act and Severus isn't exempt. Follow Severus down his path into parenthood and those who (attempt to) help him along his way.

Chapter Twelve

Severus paced the Entrance Hall impatiently. They had searched the grounds, but still had found no sign of Jessica. He silently prayed to whatever gods were listening that whomever had taken his daughter had not left the castle.

He hadn't thought it possible to care about someone as much as he had grown to care for Jessica. She was his whole world now, and he didn't know how he felt about that. He knew that in many ways, he was still the same that he had always been. He didn't like the students, and he barely tolerated his fellow staff members; yet, somehow, Jessica had found her way into his heart.

He only hoped that she was all right, that he would have a chance to tell her how much she meant to him.

"Professor Snape," someone called his name. He knew that voice. His eyes narrowed to angry slits as he turned to see his daughter walking merrily hand in hand with Blaise Zabini. His wand was out and pointed at his ex-student before Zabini had taken one more step.

"Severus?" Jessie said softly, a small trace of fear in her voice.

Good, Severus thought, the girl could do with a good dose of fear.

"Jessica," Severus said, his voice clear, too controlled. Fury was radiating off him in angry waves, but he couldn't help the wave of relief that washed through him when he saw that she was unharmed. "Come over here."

The young girl looked nervously between the two wizards before slipping her hand from Zabini's and walking quickly to Severus. She stood just behind him, nibbled on her lip, and wrung her hands nervously. Zabini was looking carefully at Severus, who was trying to remember just why it wouldn't be a good idea to kill Zabini right then and there.

"Get out." There was no mistaking the threat in the command.

Zabini kept his hands in clear view as he walked around Severus and Jessica, never turning his back on the pair. When he slipped through the doors to the outside, Severus grabbed Jessica's hand and led her quickly down to their living quarters.

As the door shut behind them, Severus finally let go of Jessica's hand, refusing to look at her. He was angrier than he'd ever thought he could be. Even with everything that he had lived through, he had never felt the kind of fear that had coursed through him that night.

"Severus?" Jessie called out very softly, her voice trembling slightly. He finally looked at her. She was worrying her bottom lip, and there were tears in her eyes.

"We will not discuss this tonight. You are to go to bed, and we will discuss what happened in the morning." His voice was too calm, too controlled, and he was nearly shaking with anger.

"You're not going to send me back, are you?" she asked in a small voice.

He felt a tug at his heart at her question, but refused to feel guilty. She needed to learn that he would not tolerate such a blatant display of disrespect from her. "No," he answered simply. "Go to bed."

Only after she had gone did Severus realize that his hand was still wrapped around his wand in a death grip.

* * *

Hermione sat next to the bed Mark was sitting up in at St. Mungo's Hospital. It was early in the morning, but Mark did not look rested in the least. She was telling him about the delightful seven-year-old she'd shared sundaes with the day before. Mark tried to laugh but began coughing, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth. Hermione sucked in a breath as she pulled a handkerchief out and wiped the blood away, careful to keep her emotions under control for Mark's sake.

Rubbing a hand over his head, she said, "You're going to get better. I promise." Her voice was soft, and there was more emotion in it than she cared to admit.

"I know," Mark said softly.

"There are a lot of people looking for a cure for you," she told him with a small, sad smile.

"Thank you, H'mione." Mark yawned. There were dark circles under his eyes, harsh against the paleness of his skin.

He had never been able to experience the sunlight. But beyond that, even when the sun was set and the moon high, Mark could not spend more than a handful of minutes outside. He had essentially been deprived of the natural world his entire life. When his parents had been alive and Hermione had been home, she'd baby sit him, and it was so hard for her to have to keep him confined to his room when all he wanted to do was go outside and play like the other children in the neighborhood.

Hermione was drawn from her thoughts and looked over as one of the mediwizards walked into the small room.

"Miss Granger?" he asked as his fingers played over the edge of a file.

She nodded once.

"I'm Healer Summers. May I speak with you?" He glanced over at Mark, who was nearly asleep, and added, "In my office?"

"Yes, all right." Hermione smiled at Mark. "I'll be back next week, I promise." She kissed his forehead and left the room with the mediwizard.

As Hermione followed Healer Summers into his office, her eyes swept across the room. The walls were bare of any pretentious medical awards or certificates; instead there were dozens of drawings of dragons, fairies, and other magical creatures covering most of the space.

There were two pictures on his desk. One was of him and a very pretty blonde witch on what appeared to be their wedding day. They danced around and kissed, and there was a light in their eyes that Hermione found herself immediately jealous of.

The second picture was of three children of varying ages. They nudged each other and laughed, and glared and stuck their tongues out at one another. Hermione thought that they looked like they were very close to one another, the way family should be. Her heart broke a bit because a part of her knew that she would never have that; who would want a bushy-haired know-it-all with too much compassion and brains, but not enough common sense?

"If I may," the Healer interrupted her musings, "I'd like to go over some of the aspects of Mark's case."

Hermione nodded and said, "That's fine, but what happened to Healer Willoughby?"

"Ah, I understand that Healer Willoughby has been Mark's Healer his whole life; however, I specialize in rare illnesses such as the one Mark suffers from. Considering the advanced research you've requested, Healer Willoughby requested that I take over for now, though he is staying apprised."

"I see," Hermione said as she sat down. "And what would you like to discuss with me now?"

Hermione watched the way the Healer seemed hesitant to look her in her eyes, how he rotated the file in his hands almost nervously. It didn't put her at ease, but neither was she ignorant of Mark's condition. She knew his odds of surviving were near to none considering the severity of the disease.

His eyes finally raised, locked on hers. "There's truly no way to put this delicately, Miss Granger. Mark's condition is deteriorating, quickly. I'm terribly sorry."

Hermione shook her head, held back her tears. "No, I understand. I've known it since I first researched his condition."

There was a kind understanding in his eyes. "We both know that grasping the severity of the situation doesn't make it any easier to cope with."

Shrugging a shoulder, Hermione tried to blink the moisture out of her eyes. "I love Mark, dearly, and I'm not going to give up hope. Some of the most brilliant minds are working toward finding a cure, or at least a treatment. There's still time," she said earnestly.

"I don't want you to give up hope," Healer Summers said softly, his eyes downcast as he sifted through some papers. "I want you to be prepared if they're unable to discover it before it's too late for Mark."

He held out a sheet of paper to her. Taking it, her eyes moved over the words on the page with a kind of numbness. Her stomach turned to ice at the list of grief counselors. "Don't you think this is a little premature?" she asked in a cold voice.

Healer Summers held his hands up in defense. "I'm not trying to upset you, Miss Granger. They aren't only for you. Several of them specialize in assisting terminal patients cope with knowing death is around the corner for them. It's tragic, and every time one of my patients dies, I suffer, too. I chose this profession because I truly care about people, about making a difference in their lives. I want a cure for Mark, too, but we can't turn a blind eye to the fact that there might not be one found in time."

A tear fell silently down Hermione's cheek, and she wiped it away stubbornly. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Mark is like a little brother to me. His entire life the Healers told his parents that due to the extent of his illness that he wouldn't live past five years old. He's almost seven now. He's strong; he can beat this."

Her mouth set in a firm line, and she repeated, "He can beat this."

* * *

Severus heard when Jessica got up because he'd been listening for it. He'd had to wait twenty minutes before she finally emerged, looking as though she'd only just rolled out of bed. There were circles under her eyes, and she was biting her thumb nail nervously. It was a bad habit he thought they'd have to work on breaking her of.

"Good morning, Severus," she said tentatively, her eyes and voice full of fear and worry.

There was a twitch in his cheek as he warred with anger, relief, and pure frustration. "Sit down," he ordered, motioning to the chair across from him.

Jessica sat, folding her hands in her lap, though he noticed they didn't stay motionless. She rubbed and pulled at the fingers of her left hand nervously and seemed to be incapable of looking him in the eye. He knew that he could not treat her as he would a student; their relationship was completely different. He just didn't know how he was supposed to handle this situation, and a night of thinking about it hadn't enlightened him, either.

"Why did you leave our rooms last night?" Severus asked, deciding that getting her side of the story before dishing out punishment would be reasonable. Besides, now that he'd had a little bit of time to cool off, he was dreadfully curious.

"I needed to send a letter," Jessica admitted in a small voice, her eyes downcast, a light tint of shame coloring her cheeks.

"To whom?"

Jessica raised her hand to her mouth and bit her nails nervously, though she didn't seem to realize she was doing it at all.

"Stop that right now," Severus demanded, impatience making it sound harsher than he'd intended. Her eyes were wide when they met his, and she dropped her hand immediately. "It's a terrible habit, one you will not continue."

"Yes, Severus," she said meekly. "I was sending a letter to Molly."

Severus raised an eyebrow. He'd had no idea whom Jessica would be sending a letter to, but he hadn't even considered Molly, though she should have been his first thought. She was, after all, taking care of Jessica's little sister. "I see," he said, nodding once. "And what were you writing her about?"

Jessica nibbled on her lower lip for a moment before saying, "To tell Maria that I love her and miss her, and that I don't want to wait till Christmas to see her. And about Hermione, too."

If she was writing to Molly, Severus imagined that was exactly what it would be about...except the Hermione part. "What about Miss Granger?" he asked, unable to ignore his curiosity.

"Well, she told me that I would like Hermione a lot, so I wanted to tell her that she was right and that me and Hermione had ice cream sundaes and that she's really nice," Jessica explained. Severus couldn't detect any dishonesty in her words, but he couldn't help but wonder if she wasn't being entirely truthful. With a mental sigh, he told himself to stop being so paranoid; she was just a seven-year-old little girl.

"I see. Jessica, why did you think you had to sneak out in the middle of the night to post your letter?" Severus asked, trying to lead into the discipline portion of their conversation.

"I didn't think you'd like me writing to Molly," she admitted with a sad look in her eyes.

"Jessica," Severus said, urging her to focus on him. "It is okay for you to write to Molly and Maria. It is not okay for you to do so secretly or to wander the castle alone, especially at night. Do you understand?"

Jessica nodded. "Yes, sir," she said respectfully, and it sounded like she meant it.

"Good. Now, you'll be grounded for the rest of the day."

Her mouth fell open and tears filled her eyes. "But Melanie is having a picnic today! You said I could go!"

"Actions have consequences, Jessica. When you did something you knew was wrong, your privilege was revoked. If you behave, you'll be able to go to the next one," Severus explained calmly.

"Yes, sir," she mumbled, looking down with a pout.

"Now, tell me what happened after you sent your letter off." He needed to know what had transpired between his daughter and Blaise Zabini, and he knew that if Jessica lied to him, he would be able to tell.

"Well, after I sent the letter, I left the Owlery, and that's when I saw the man standing there and screamed..." She launched into a detailed description of her encounter with Blaise Zabini, and Severus only grew more furious with his past student.

Blaise Zabini was a problem that would have to be resolved. Soon.

* * *

A/N: Well, everyone, it's been just over two years since I last updated this, and I'm very sorry it's taken me so long to get back into it. I'd like to reassure all of you that, yes, I am back. Thank you so much to everyone who has commented in the past two years to let me know that there were still people interested in this little story.

Thank you to SW69 for being a wonderful last-minute beta for this chapter!

Review! Let me know what you think of this chapter, what you think might come next!