

An Orphan For Christmas

by Bardsdaughter

Sometimes an unwanted gift becomes the most treasured possession.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 20

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A/N: This story will probably not be finished by the end of the holiday season. I hope this does not deter you from completing the journey with me.

Reviews are always welcome. They are the fuel that feeds the writer's ravenous pen.

Chapter One

Hovels of varying sizes and states of habitability sprouted like drought-ravaged weeds in the empty lots between the abandoned warehouses of Tumbledown Rookery. The broken ampules and other bits of discarded paraphernalia associated with the trades of the red light districts littered the derelict pavement. Some glistened with the essence of the previous night while others were fossilized reminders of the days when the Muggle kingpins started their rise to dominion over all things illegal and illicit.

As those sex and drug industrialists rose in power, their goods becoming more mainstream than deviant, they moved their bases of operations into more fashionable districts nearer London proper. The shacks and tenements left behind were fertile grounds for the dregs of wizarding society. The likes of Mundungus Fletcher and his associates mingled with the Muggles too damaged to follow the opiate gods and scarlet goddesses from the gutters. Together, they formed a cohesive and dangerously vile new species of humanity sharing the dark crevices of squalor and despair.

Severus curled his nose in disgust and neatly sidestepped a used prophylactic indelibly glued to the curb. One would think growing up in such circumstances, as well as the last three years of exposure to such cesspools as part of his joint position with the Ministry and the British government's Department for Children, Schools and Families rendered him immune to these unsanitary conditions. A gust of early October wind tousled his hair and aroused the aroma of putrefaction from the belly of the sewers. A wave of nausea crested near the back of his throat, urging him to swallow vigorously until he could retrieve the scented handkerchief from the interior pocket of his mack. The gentle, familiar perfume of vanilla and herbs slowly infused the stench, constructing a palatable bouquet. Immune, no. A stalwart student of experience, yes.

And experience he had. Tasked with intervening when Muggle-born or the offspring of exogamous unions were endangered by either the Muggle or the wizarding faction, he'd been in palatial mansions where pureblood parents inflicted the most grotesquely antiquated punishments on children thought to be inadequate to carry on the family name and in ramshackle corrugated outbuildings that made a shanty in Mumbai's Dharavi look like the Taj Mahal. Yet nothing seemed to offer immunization for the shock in seeing the continued decay of the dung heap that prompted him to begin the journey along a new tightrope one stretched between the world of Merlin's descendants and those of Arthur's.

He'd been a year from his union with the Department of Witchling and Wizardkin Protection when he first encountered this particular slum. A year from realizing just how deep his desire to protect those whose childhood resembled his own from becoming the errant young man he'd been when he took Voldemort's Mark. The vanilla scent

held prisoner in the weave of the square of fine white lawn slowly gave way to the undertones of lavender, calming him almost as effectively as the wearer's touch. His Anam Cara's touch.

He ran his thumb along the cool smoothness of the platinum band encircling his left ring finger, its surface still unmarred after nearly three years. Anam Cuplach was the more appropriate term for his beloved. At least according to Minerva. The old witch twinkled brighter than Albus bloody Dumbledore each time she reminded him she'd been the first to recognize the link. "Twin souls," she beamed the night the girl materialized out of thin air inside Hogwarts' teacher's lounge. "The rarest of all soul mates, Severus," she said, patting him on the back. "And I can think of no two more deserving of the bond."

Deserving or not, he was grateful for the chance to love and be loved by the most amazing witch of her age. Grateful for the changes loving her had brought to his life. Grateful the Creator of the universe seemed willing to watch over and protect her that Halloween night four years earlier. The one that found Severus stumbling from his recovery bed in Hogwarts' hospital wing just days after a near-fatal encounter with a rogue Auror hellbent on doling out the justice denied the Potions master.

Religion thought long abandoned resurfaced in the hour it took to use the witch's magic stirring in his soul to pinpoint her. Every prayer learned at his mother's knee as well as those from the *Book Of Common Prayer* passed his heart's lips from the moment a frantic Harry Potter stumbled out of the Floo near Poppy's office until the moment he knelt in front of the chair the ginger-haired fool had bound her to and carefully removed the tethers of ordinary rope and grey industrial tape. She'd fallen into his arms, exhausted but unharmed and untouched save a bruised cheek where the boy had manhandled her into one of the fireplaces at number twelve, Grimmauld Place during the abduction. It could have been much worse.

A shiver of gratitude raced down his spine as the memory swirled. He'd found her. Flashes of the other members of the motley crew assisting him filtered through his brain. They'd found her. Before the demented wizard could do more than secure her to the chair and make her watch as he stood across the tiny, dingy room and stroked himself to readiness.

Unharmed and untouched, physical wounds healed quickly. Emotional ones followed more slowly, mending fully only after he followed her back into a mostly Muggle existence the impetus for his current position on the joint task force. His lips twitched as thoughts of their home in London's Belgravia washed over him. Indeed, it could have been so much worse.

An empty glass phial clattered against the side of an ancient wheelie bin in the alleyway to his left. His companion trembled, her gloved fingers clenched against his arm.

Damn.

Severus' brow furrowed of its own accord. Instinct insisted he leave straight from his office. He, however, felt it more prudent to make a quick trip home to change from his suit to something less conspicuous. Something that would offer enough anonymity to keep Rita Skeeter or one of her lackeys from following him into the field. He owed it to Potter to at least attempt to abide by the request to keep this case from the press. And the Ministry. And the Weasley family. Unfortunately, his arrival coincided with the return of his bride from an abbreviated day of classes at King's College.

Once his compassionate witch uncovered the destination and the wizard involved, there was no dissuading her. "I owe it to his family, Severus. And to Harry," she said, buttoning up the coat she'd been ready to discard the moment she crossed the threshold from the garage. "If we truly want to keep Ronald's name from appearing on the Ministry registry again, to give his family a chance to get him the help he needs, then you can't call anyone from the office to provide support. And the place is too dangerous for you to go alone, so..."

Thus, her presence at his side. While he coveted her nearness perpetually, it wasn't worth the nightmares that would plague her for weeks after the day's adventure. The doubts it would stir. The attempt she'd make to keep him at arms length.

"Hermione..."

"I'm fine, Severus."

And so it began.

She was far from fine. He gently disentangled her hand from his arm, then wrapped the long limb around her shoulders, drawing her as close to his warmth as possible given the layers of cotton and wool, offering her as much strength as he could spare.

Severus glanced up at the grimy windows just visible above the roofline of *The Three Dragons Pub*. Behind them, perhaps, another life potentially ruined by young Mr. Weasley's selfishness. A Muggle female resembling Hermione in almost every aspect, according to Harry. Or at least that's what the ginger menace confessed as his best friend committed him to St. Mungo's Addictions unit for the hundredth time since that horrid Halloween. With any luck, the young lady was a figment of the boy's drug-addled imagination and they'd find the apartment empty. Devoid of any life forms beyond those of the cockroaches and other vermin indigenous to such places. And if luck was not on their side...

He tightened his grip on his wife and trudged toward the tenement's decaying stoop. No need to borrow trouble. He drew as deep a breath as he dared given the putrid air swirling about them. They were sure to find it soon enough.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 20

Hermione and Severus step into a former lion's den.

Hermione shrugged out from under the protective embrace of her husband's arm and marched toward the graffitied entrance to the block of flats she'd involuntarily visited four years before. She didn't need him to fight this battle for her. Didn't need him to shield her from the onslaught of memories the rotting landscape of Tumbledown Rookery stirred. What she did need was for him to allow her to hide away behind the damn Granger cowardice masquerading as the touted Gryffindor bravery.

She glanced over her shoulder at the man she loved and cherished beyond all reason. Compassion, concern, and resignation fought for dominance in his midnight gaze, triggering one of the myriad of memories that perpetually weakened her resolve and strengthened her devotion to her amazing wizard. With nothing more than a simple glance, he made her feel safe. Had done since the night he saved the trio from Remus-as-werewolf during third year.

According to Minerva, it was that feeling of safety that pulled her through the whirl of accidental Apparition and landed her, quite literally, at Severus' feet in Hogwarts' staff room. She honestly couldn't remember thinking of the Potions master as she stood in her parents' lounge defending herself from barrage after barrage of condemnation for wiping their memories and sentencing them to continued life safely tucked away in the tropical paradise of Cairns, Australia. She'd simply silently begged for home during

one of the short respites from their verbal hostilities. One minute she was curled in one corner of the Grangers' brown suede sectional; the next, she was on the cool flagstone floor of the staff room with the toes of Severus' dragon hide boots inches from her nose.

And she'd been besotted ever since. So had he, for that matter. He was simply more reserved in the company of others. Except, it seemed, when he was in full protective mode, which irked her need for independence no end. Something, even nearly five years after the incident, she still struggled to quell, though it had gotten considerably easier after the last encounter with her parents.

Three months after Hermione's impromptu Apparition into Hogwarts' staff room, Minerva convinced the elder Grangers it behooved everyone involved to come together and settle things like the calm, rational adults they all were. She agreed to act as arbiter. Surprisingly, Severus offered his London flat as neutral ground, though both Hermione and Minerva knew the man was anything but neutral when it came to his newly discovered soul mate. Still, it was preferable to the private dining room at Rosmerta's or some low-budget room at an establishment somewhere in reasonably close proximity to the midway point between Hogwarts and Ramsgate. Not to mention it gave the wizard in her life a reasonable excuse to be present. One her parents could not possibly protest.

Yet, protest they did. Vehemently. To the point Minerva's attempt to be Switzerland quickly turned into the *Americanization of the Headmistress*. She and Severus swooped in like modern incarnations of Eisenhower and Montgomery, fending off attacks and countering with verbal bombardments so intense the temperature in the room rose by at least ten degrees in the span of five minutes.

While Hermione appreciated the defense by her mentor and her suitor, she was perfectly capable of waging her own battles. She was, after all, a fully grown witch. Or at least that's what she told the Turner landscape hanging in the flat's salon after she fled the war waging on the other side of the wall.

"I know you are, my darling girl." Severus' words from that night caressed her memory as deftly as his hands against her skin. *"But you don't have to. Not any more. Not ever again. I am here beside you. Always."*

And he was. She glanced again at the enigma carefully keeping pace with her. Even when, like now, she was too stubborn to admit how wrong she was not to share her burdens, he was there. She could never outrun him or push him hard enough to drive more than a few inches between them. Then, when she was ready, he reached across the chasm and tethered her to him with nothing more than the light twining of his fingers with hers. Unless she reached first.

The October wind picked up again, its bluster dislodging not only a faded chocolate wrapper from one of the small trenches carved in the concrete by decades of acid rain, but the linchpin of her pride. Spanning the gap between them, she caught his hand, her fingers dovetailing between his. One squeeze offered in apology, one returned in understanding.

And the desolate landscape didn't seem quite so foreboding any more.

SSHGSSHG

A strong cocktail of bleach and stale urine permeated every corridor in the grubby little tenement. Hermione buried her nose in the closest lapel of Severus' coat to quell the urge to retch. For the moment, the gentle scent of nutmeg, cocoa, and herbs overpowered the noxious fumes of neglect and despair.

The familiar contours of her husband's long, shapely fingers rippled beneath her cheek, brushing the wool of his jacket softly against her flesh. She closed her eyes. Despite the thickness of the cloth between them, she relished the serenity offered by his touch. Then it was gone, replaced by the pressure of a soft square of fine lawn against her palm.

"Here." To some, he was as terse as always, but to the trained ears of the ones he loved, his words were a gentle request. "I'm sure you'll find this of more use than my collar."

She grinned, a genuinely happy stretch of her lips that further dissipated the tension between them and bolstered her decision to listen to her heart rather than the stubborn pride urging her to prove she was strong enough to stand on her own. She shook her head enough to emphasize refusal of the proffered handkerchief, but not enough to dislodge her nose from the essence of Snape infusing the fabric of his clothing. "No, thanks." She snuggled as close as she dared given her husband's prickly nature in public environs. "I'm perfectly content right here." She patted his chest, just in case he needed clarification.

His indignant huff did little to cover the amused contentment conveyed by the slight tremor of relaxation in the muscles of his chest and shoulder. "Very well." His arm slipped around her waist and he gently tugged her closer. "If memory serves, the boy's flat is the third one on the left past the southern-most stairwell."

If memory served. Hermione shuddered as the images of that Halloween flashed through her mind. It was to be the first spent at Severus' side at a Ministry-sponsored event instead of the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall with the younger members of her House. Madam Pomfrey had deemed him well enough to leave the infirmary for an hour or two. The feast would be their first foray into society as a couple after making their courtship known at her twentieth birthday party the month before. She had a new set of robes from Twilfitt & Tattings and a grand case of butterflies that left her both giddy and anxious. She'd been on her way to an appointment at Michaeljohn's when a strung out Ron intercepted her and...

Her husband's sudden stop paused the swirl of recollections. A quick glance, and the memories pounded against her consciousness with a vengeance. They were **ahis** door.

With almost physical effort, she shoved the memories behind one of the shields Severus had taught her to build in the early days after the kidnapping. It wouldn't do to relive the event just now. Not if she actually expected herself to cross the threshold.

"Hermione." The black velvet of his voice caressed her as gently as his fingers against the small of her back. "You don't have to do this, love. The corridor is deserted. Just let go and Apparate home. I'll be there as soon as..."

Instinct and familiarity allowed her to find his lips without lifting her head from its niche against his chest and shoulder. "But I do, Severus." She shifted enough to see those obsidian orbs swimming with concern and brimming with adoration. "If I intend to return to our world more fully after graduation, I need to put this behind me." She trailed her fingers from the corner of his mouth to his jaw. "Just...be there for me?"

His smile crinkled beneath her touch. "Always, my darling girl." He grasped her hand and tugged it back towards his lips. Gentle brushes against each knuckle stilled her breath for a moment. "Always."

SSHGSSHG

The hinges creaked as Severus leaned his weight against the door. Wand drawn, but hidden in the natural folds of his overcoat, he maneuvered his way between his wife and the widening crack between the door and the jamb. Following the inward swing of the portal, he stepped inside.

A nearly oppressive dimness assaulted him, the room's only illumination the shaft of light from the hallway and the weak beams wiggling through the rips in the curtains. He raked his gaze from the window to a point beyond the pale daylight's reach, then onward into the shadows.

Slowly, outlines of furnishings emerged from the twilight. Then came the details. Grungy mountains of clothes and other rubbish littered all four corners of the tiny bedsit. There was a dilapidated sofa along one wall. Along another was a ramshackle iron bed covered with filthy...

Something stirred beneath the soiled duvet, and Severus settled into a crouch, wand extended. In the next breath, he was nearly overwhelmed by the pungent, coppery tang of stale blood. A long, low moan drew him toward the shambles. With slow, measured steps, he inched closer until the occupant came into view. "Dear God," he whispered, his knees nearly buckling as he closed the final distance in a panicked jog. "Hermione, send for Poppy."

Lying curled and near motionless on the edge of the mattress was a young girl. A quick Lumos revealed tangled honey brown tresses and brown eyes glassy with fever and fatigue. Her clothes were stained and crusted. Rhythmic tremors coursed along her frail limbs. He could almost feel Death with each rattled breath she drew.

"Ron?" The poor lamb managed to reach toward him before her hand thumped back to the quilt. "Ron." A tired smile flickered against her lips. "I know you're disappointed with me." Her words slurred barely above a whisper; her eyelids fluttered like a sleepy toddler's. "But I made everything all right." She lifted her hand again and pointed to a pile of old pizza boxes and takeaway containers in the corner opposite. "I tossed it in the rubbish bin."

"That's fine, love," Severus soothed, resting a hand beside the girl's head and leaning over her. Experience taught playing along was the best way to keep a victim calm...to keep her from wasting what little strength she had left on a futile fight. He brushed a sweaty lock of hair from the child's forehead. Merlin, she looked so much like his Hermione had after Dolohov cursed her all those years ago. Just as then, his heart lurched toward his throat. Swallowing hard, he gathered the lass' thin hand in his. He brushed another sweaty lock of hair from her forehead. "I'm sure..."

"Oh, my God."

The alarm in Hermione's voice sent a shiver down his spine. He turned in time to see his beloved gently lift a bundle of bloodied rags from the center of the mound of cardboard and polystyrene. In that moment, he had no doubt, time stuttered.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 20

Severus and Hermione find a delicate rose among the rubbish.

"Don't sign a bank draft your wand can't cash." Poppy's words from his first summer under her tutelage tramped through Severus' memory as he looked from the bundle to the ill young witch in the bed. *"You'll save yourself and the one in your care a world of trouble if you remember that."*

Severus sighed and ran a shaking hand through his hair. Merlin, but he'd been so young back then. Fresh from his third year, he had thought he could handle anything the world threw at him. Perhaps that was the reason Hogwarts' matron had felt it imperative to imprint those words on his brain at every turn. It was a lesson he'd learned well.

A soft moan from the girl tugged at his attention. He quickly scanned the pale features and listless limbs. Perspiration dotted her brow, though her skin was cool beneath his fingers. Poorly healed sores marred her face and arms. Although she was covered by a mound of soiled blankets, it was easy to see how concave her belly was by the way the fabric dipped. Obviously, she hadn't been acquainted with a decent meal in quite some time. She was frail, and her body convulsed with each breath. There was little doubt her situation was beyond his abilities. Perhaps she was beyond even Poppy's well-honed skills, but since St. Mungo's was out of the question, she was the only choice. He looked back across the room, a physical ache radiating deep in his chest at the decision he needed to make. If the bundle cradled in Hermione's hands held what he thought it held... Well, he could keep at least one soul this side of the veil today.

He brushed his fingers against the girl's cheek. "Rest, little one," he whispered, then stood and crossed the small distance to his wife.

With all the care used with a prized Graphorn horn, he lifted the swaddled lump from Hermione's hands. Cradled against his palms, he held his breath as he peeled back the coarse, filthy burlap. A tiny squeak, not much stronger than a newborn kitten's mew, and a minuscule wiggle as the chilly air of the world touched a crown of dark hair still damp with the fluids of birth restarted not only the creep of time across space but his own heart.

Another gentle tug revealed more of the tiny human. A face still squished by the passage from womb to world. The correct number of appendages from shoulders to the tips of ten petite fingers—five on each perfectly formed miniature hand. A well proportioned, if somewhat undernourished, torso suggested a gestation of less than the standard length of forty weeks. An umbilical cord that had been appropriately severed from the placenta. Distinguishable genitalia appropriate for gender assignment. Two little legs, curled as they had been in the girl's belly with corresponding feet no longer than his index finger and the required five toes on each. All in all, an acceptable specimen, save for the worrisome grayish-blue tint visible beneath the layer of vernix caseosa and just-congealing blood, and the way the lean chest seemed to collapse inward with each inhalation, revealing for a few seconds the quivering pulse of a tiny heart.

"Severus?" Tears rimmed Hermione's voice. "Is it..."

He shook his head. "She's alive, love." He glanced at the fragile newborn girl in his hands. "But she needs a bit of attention at the moment." He thrust his right hip toward his wife. "Retrieve a handkerchief from that pocket and Transfigure it into the warmest blanket you can manage."

While her fingers trembled against his thigh as she delved into his front trouser pocket, he shifted the tiny infant enough to free one of his hands. Each bit of wisdom Poppy had ever imparted filled his mind and commanded his movements. Keep her warm. Clear her airway. Assess her—

"Severus, perhaps we should wait until Poppy—"

"We don't have time to wait for Poppy," he snapped. He could only attribute the sharpening of his tongue in situations such as this to the lingering genetic material of Tobias. Luckily, those who knew him best, like his Hermione, took it all in stride. And it never erupted into the conflagration he'd experienced when dear old Dad was worked into a right snit. He paused the list of procedures running through his brain long enough to reach for his wife and trail apologetic fingers down her cheek. "Besides, I spent all my summers after my third year at Hogwarts as Poppy's assistant. She taught me a fair few lessons about infant care when she was called upon to act as midwife."

Hermione caught his fingers with her own and held them against her skin for a moment. "I have no doubt, dearest." She smiled, a sad sort of upward curl of her lips. "This little rosebud among the rubbish heap is in the very best of hands." Her soul caressed his even as she handed the warmed and enlarged square of flannel to him. "What can I do now?"

"I need a pipette." A quick cataloguing of the contents of the various stacks and piles littering the soiled floor offered another possibility. "Or a syringe, sans needle and sterilized."

Pride swelled as he watched his wife retrieve the needed item with a silent *Accio!* Another shift of magic and the needle vanished. Then came the gentle whoosh of a sterilization spell she'd learned during her earliest days in his Potions class. Before he could blink, the syringe settled into his outstretched palm, as fresh and clean as if he'd taken it from a cupboard in The Princeton Hospital.

Years of training ingrained his motor functions with the techniques needed to cross to the lopsided table with speed while keeping the contents of his arms undisturbed. He motioned for Hermione to take the blanket and spread it on the streaked and gouged laminate surface. Despite the adrenaline pumping through him, his hands were steady

as he turned the baby from back to front, carefully removing the rags her mother had wrapped her in. He Vanished them with a nonverbal flick of his wrist. Once he gently deposited the newborn in the center of the white fabric, he set to work on easing her breathing.

He felt more than saw his wife wince as the baby girl squirmed against the intrusion of the syringe into her left nostril. "Isn't there a spell or charm for this?"

Oh, how he wished there was. "It will be worse for her if we use magic, Hermione." He glanced at the woman whose compassion was as much his undoing as hers. Her dark eyes were sunken and haunted, just as they had been the last time he found her in this damnable flat. His soul lurched against his throat, begging to be released to comfort her. "It's what is best for her, love."

His witch blinked rapidly, but nodded, her chin quivering slightly. "I wish Poppy would hurry."

Severus glanced at the girl barely stirring in the bed across the room, then back to the baby in his care. The lean chest struggled a little less with the next inward draw of air. "So do I, love." He frowned slightly as he inserted the syringe tip as far past the tiny tongue as he dared. A lack of loud, vocal protest from the tiny human unnerved him. "So do I."

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 20

Poppy to the rescue!

Three attempts, and there was little improvement in the tiny girl's respiration. Although her skin now glowed with the peachy blush of the newly born, the walls of her chest still revealed far too much of the underlying bone structure with each inward draw for Severus' satisfaction. What the infant needed was the kind of aggressive, invasive attention he could never bring himself to deliver, despite Poppy's attempts to..."toughen" him up through her kindly worded instruction and gentle nudges.

"What is worse, Mr. Snape?" The midwife moved him aside with her hip. The pale blue streaks of magic from the end of her wand intensified to a shade closer to violet. The baby boy's body arched and convulsed like a first-year Slytherin during initiation. Severus shivered in commiseration with the pitiful creature in the white oak cot. "To allow a child to be in agony for a few paltry moments?" Another quick flick of the wrist and the lightning arcs of magic fused into a single, soft beam of warm green. Almost before one could blink, the babe calmed, his color much improved and his breaths more regular. "Or for hours under the torture of tubes and needles?"

Severus shuddered slightly as the memory faded into the low-level noise found in any active mind. His more senior colleague was right, of course. It was easier in the long run. But after years of servitude to a master who found torture as entertaining as the local pub quiz, he simply couldn't bear casting even the most harmless diagnostic spell on an innocent. Although the pain was exceedingly brief, perhaps not even fully registering in the newly minted nervous system, he could not...

"Merlin's scraggly beard!"

The Healer's favorite expletive was as beautiful as the canonical strains that had accompanied his blushing bride and her bespectacled escort along the flower-strewn tapestry aisle runner chosen to cover the ancient floors of Crathie Kirk on their wedding day. Were it in his nature, he would have pounced on the poor woman and hugged her until her stays creaked. Thankfully, his wife was a Gryffindor. There was little doubt she'd express the relief enough for the both of them.

"Poppy!" Hermione spun around so quickly, Severus felt a twinge of vertigo. "Oh, we're so glad you are here. Severus is doing an amazing job with the baby, but he can't see to the mother, too. And the baby still seems to be having a bit of difficulty, though not as much so as when Severus first unwrapped her..."

If the situation weren't so dire, he would have laughed at the effect Hogwarts' matron still had on his beloved little lioness. The older witch had been in the room all of five seconds, and his normally calm and collected wife was blathering like the eleven-year-old know-it-all she'd been when she had first graced the halls of the celebrated school of witchcraft and wizardry. Then again, Madam Pomfrey's renowned no-nonsense demeanor had that effect on all but those too afflicted by idiocy to recognize its possible malevolence.

"Madam Snape."

The tone was not nearly so sharp as the one Severus used when pushed to the limits of his irritation, but the sternness undergirding Poppy's words had the desired result. Hermione's mouth snapped closed, and she shifted a little further into the shadow of his presence.

"I may be only slightly younger than magic itself, but I assure you my senses are as acute as they ever were." The prim woman bustled across the room. "One doesn't need a set of Omnioculars to see you are in quite a fix this time. No doubt thanks to Mr. Ronald Weasley."

"Poppy," Severus warned. The last thing he needed was for the rumors to start before he had a handle on this case. Although the mediwitch very rarely precipitated the gossip along Hogwarts' network, she could let things slip if she were on one of her rants about the debacle the ginger member of the Golden Trio had made of his life. "To place blame at this point would only be conjecture."

"Conjecture, Albus' arse," she snorted. "More like bloody obvious. I'm not a fool, Severus. I've been to this flat more times than I can count since the boy started down his self-paved road to destruction." She nodded toward the bed. "That girl is not the first and most likely won't be the last." Her eyes softened, modulating the frown into something closer to a relieved smile. "Your wife is the only one to make it out of this place physically unscathed, my darling boy." She leveled a benevolent gaze at the couple she'd counseled and healed numerous times over the years. "You were both very lucky that day, my dears." Her lips completed the upward curl, but it lasted only a moment, then started a rapid descent. The others..." Her voice trailed off, betraying the guilt she still felt over those she saw as personal failures. The slight shake of her head carried the same heavy tone as Westminster's death knell.

Severus winced as his friend's features morphed from grateful, to sad, to the stern mask she favored when in Healer mode. There was no need to remind him of that day. Or of their luck. Or of his need for gratitude to the universe for its charity. He had spent several minutes daily thanking God they had arrived in time. He took Hermione's hand in his and entwined their fingers. *Thank you for her life*, he breathed, hoping a little bit of the grace bestowed on them would spill over onto the current lost souls in the room.

"Now, enough with this nonsense." Poppy brushed them out of the way with a dismissive wave. "Stand aside and let me tend to the infant." Hope, irritation, and doubt fought for dominance in her sigh. "Then I'll see to the girl."

A gentle sweep of the older witch's hand cleared and cleaned another spot on the table. She pulled a few bundles from the deep pockets of her medical robes, then unsheathed a wand. A wand that looked nothing like the one Hermione had seen far too many times to count over the years.

Getting her husband's attention with a touch of her elbow to his side, Hermione widened her eyes, then shifted them to the sliver of wood in the matron's hand. A carefully arched eyebrow asked. A slight dip of his head confirmed it was not the witch's customary rod. An all-but-imperceptible shrug of his shoulders indicated he had no foreknowledge of its existence. Did that mean it was unregistered? And if it were unregistered and the Ministry discovered...

"I can assure you, my dear, this is a legally registered magical device."

Hermione couldn't help but flinch at the unexpected intrusion of the Healer's amusement-laced voice answering the silent question. She glanced at her husband again. Disbelief flitted near the fringes of those near-black orbs. Nearby, the wand in question carried out the unvoiced orders of its mistress with seamless precision. Little spurts of pale-colored spell light from its tip settled on each package, carefully enlarging and organizing the supplies. It was obvious the bit of wood and the woman's magic meshed together perfectly. So, if it were obtained under suspicious circumstances, it had certainly accepted this witch and her magic. Unlike Bellatrix's. The mere thoughts of that bent bit of walnut caused an unpleasant tingle to return to...

"Oh, do stop frowning, Hermione. With tonight's predicted temperatures, those wrinkles are likely to freeze that way if you don't." Clearly finished with the unpacking, the Healer turned her attention to the tiny newborn. Runes of differing shades of greens and yellows appeared in the air above the struggling little body. "This wand was legitimately obtained during a visit to the States a few years back. Since their laws are a bit more relaxed in certain areas of magic, it allows me to perform the diagnostic spells without having to worry about the bloody Ministry sticking its unwelcome nose in the middle of situations those old biddies need not concern themselves with." She looked at Severus briefly, eyebrows furrowed in slight warning. "Am I correct to assume this is one of those situations?"

Most would not have noticed the shakiness of Severus' sigh, but Hermione did. Whether it was because of their bond or her keen observation abilities, she had always been able to discern the tiny nuances that gave away his emotions. Even when she was nothing more than another student to be filleted by his scorn. He was apprehensive about this whole thing, uncertain as to what the best course of action was for all parties involved.

Slowly, he nodded. Just a curt bounce of his head, but it was enough. As far as the magical world was concerned, this baby, and most likely the young mother in the bed across the room, would not exist until he said they did.

"Good." Poppy switched the signature of the spell, concentrating the beam of magic on the infant's chest. Slowly, its rise and fall smoothed out to a healthier rhythm. "Better to keep her out of Molly Weasley's clutches for as long as possible."

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 20

Nothing is ever easy.

Better to keep her out of Molly Weasley's clutches for as long as possible.

Severus groaned inwardly at Poppy's unsolicited opinion. No doubt questions were swirling in his wife's mind. Questions he wasn't certain he had answers to. Or, perhaps, he was simply more concerned over those he could. Like why he would never consider the Weasleys a proper placement for the newborn, despite the suspected familial ties. There was little doubt those answers would weigh heavily on his bride's loyalty to the family she'd adopted as her own during her early years in the wizarding world.

He sighed softly and turned his attention to the little runes surrounding the tiny girl. Cyrillic letters and ancient symbols glowed in vibrant colors ranging from the orangish side of yellow to a green so deep even the summer grasses would be envious. Thankfully, the marginal and better-than-marginal readings outpaced those hovering below normal. All things considered, the little one was doing quite well.

Satisfied Poppy had things well in hand, he glanced at the beautiful witch clutching the hem of his jacket. Her whisky-colored eyes were wide, her brow furrowed as she watched every move the mediwitch made. How she'd managed to ensnare him so completely was a mystery beyond his comprehension. But ensnared he was, loving and being loved more fiercely than any couple in recent wizarding history. Or so Minerva and Poppy claimed at almost every available opportunity. Whether they were blinded by their desire to see their favored cubs happy or spoke with absolute authority, he didn't know. He'd like to believe it was the latter but supposed it closer to the former. No matter: he was Hermione's and Hermione was his. And he would defend her happiness, and her life, to his very death. Which was why he prayed her inquisitive mind would remain unsatisfied on the subject of the Weasley matriarch and her fitness as guardian to anything above one of Crookshanks' fleas.

Merlin, but Hermione would be devastated to learn—

The bleat of an alarm stuttered Severus' thoughts and started a marathon in his chest. Horrified, he watched as the newborn stilled. The tiny, domino-like structures of light swirling around the small body plummeted, their colors racing toward the red end of the spectrum. Even the ones that burned the brightest shade of green dimmed into the sickly yellow of a neglected plant.

In a breath, Poppy's calm fractured. "Severus."

Before his heart made another beat, his wand was in his hand. He stepped to his mentor's side and added his magic to hers. The lightning arcs intensified, splattering the room with fizzling sparks of rainbow fire. The electrical fry of non-verbal spells buzzed in his ears and the incense of ozone flooded his nostrils. *Come on, precious one*, he begged. *Come on. Don't give up on me, damn it.*

He barely drew breath as he tried to will the runes to return to a more normal state. If need be, he would force life back into this little rosebud. He licked his parched lips and tasted the salt of the distress that trickled from his brow. A fine sheen of perspiration welded his shirt to his back. His arm shook and his stomach churned. Still, he wouldn't relent. Not until Poppy declared this pitiful creature a lost cause.

Five seconds ticked into ten, then teetered toward infinity. Still, the infant refused to stir.

Panic swirled and drove his refusal to accept defeat higher. This valuable little soul deserved a life *Breathe. Live. Cry!*

The piercing wail produced only by the functioning lungs of the newly born broke the silence in answer to his plea. She was still there, the broken sobs announced. She was alive, said the flailing limbs. And she fully intended to stay that way, declared the line of brilliant green runes slowly circling above her.

Relief bubbled into a laugh as Severus leaned against the table and tried to calm his adrenaline-drunk pulse. At his side, Poppy panted from the exertion. "Well." The Healer slumped against the edge of the table. "That was certainly exhilarating."

"Indeed," he chuckled. He stowed his wand in the sheath at his belt, then stooped to re-swaddle the protesting baby girl. Once the tiny thing was securely bound in the

blanket, he scooped the whimpering bundle up and cuddled her against his chest. "Let's not do that again, shall we?" he gently instructed his tiny charge, bouncing her a little to quiet the lingering snuffles as he rubbed soothing circles against her back. "I'm quite sure none of us enjoyed the experience. Especially you, my little rosebud."

"Amen," Poppy sighed. She straightened, then summoned parchment and quill from somewhere within the unpacked supplies on the table. "Let's see if we can get this information down before you demand another round of attention." She turned a stern glare on Severus. "And before you ask, Mr. Snape. I did not, nor will I, perform the incantation needed to determine parentage." The feathered end of the quill whipped menacingly near his nose. "That is something you will have to determine the old-fashioned way." The older witch's brow arched in defiance. "I have every intention of buying this little one as much time as possible before the Ministry, or Arthur Weasley, unleash the hounds of hell on her."

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 20

Has saving one life cost that of another?

With the crisis at an end, Poppy pronounced the baby in good health. "She's a little on the small side," the matron said, folding the parchment she'd used to record the diagnostic results. "Just under five pounds." She stuffed the page into a pocket and stood. "But that's to be expected as the babe's between thirty-four and thirty-five weeks gestation." She cast a quick cleansing charm on one of the other rickety dining chairs, then transfigured it into a small bassinet complete with soft, warm bedding. "The lungs are a little weak, and that has me concerned." Another few movements of her wand and the soft glow of monitoring charms enveloped the tiny bed. "Enough so I want you to bring her to Hogwarts for a few days."

"Us?" Severus glided to the transfigured cot and gently lowered the bundle to the cocoon of downy blankets.

"You and Hermione, Severus." The Healer turned her attention to the linens, carefully arranging them over and around the newborn. "Or have you forgotten that because you, Severus, are a representative of both Her Majesty's government and the Ministry, this little girl is in your custody until such time as an appropriate placement is found? And as her guardian..."

The rest of her short tirade fell on inattentive ears. He knew perfectly well what his duties to the Crown and to the Ministry were. That, however, did not mean he had to like it.

A quick glance at his wife turned his heart in his chest. Pale cheeks underlined the determination in her chocolate-colored eyes. Although they visited the castle regularly, they rarely spent more than an hour or two in Minerva's company before anxiety rimmed Hermione's gaze. There was no way he would subject her to...

It took a moment for her frown to register on the fringes of his mind and shift his focus from his thoughts. A quirked eyebrow asked. A slight tilt of her head exposed the answer. *I'm going*, the firm set of her jaw telegraphed. *No arguments*, ordered her soft sigh.

But he would be risking his membership in Slytherin if he didn't at least try. Subtly averting his gaze, he quickly laid a plan of action. "Poppy, perhaps it would be more prudent to..."

"Don't, Severus." The blue eyes of the mediwitch glinted in warning as she straightened. "I'm well aware of the potential difficulties." Her frowned softened as the sweep of her gaze included Hermione. "But it is time to face the demons." The smile twitching her lips rivaled Lucius' in its deviousness. "Besides, Minerva will be thrilled to have you and Hermione home again, if only for a few days." She glanced across the room at the restless young woman in the bed. Her shoulders hunched a little as she picked up her wand. "But before any of us can leave, there's one more life to be pulled back from the brink."

If it isn't already too late.

Although the words never breached the gathering silence, Severus knew they blew gently through the coherent minds in the room. How could they not with the specter of death clinging to the very bedposts? Just as it had in another dingy room oh-so-many years ago.

The boil of nausea escalated to near-eruption as the spin of Apparition dropped him into the putridity of his parents' bedroom. The air so thick, the light so dim, he clawed at the collar of his shirt to alleviate the buried-alive feeling permeating his lungs. Finding purchase against the nearest wall, he closed his eyes and tried to gather his wits.

"Severus?"

His mother's voice, though reedy and frail, pierced the din of confusion and calmed its churning in his head. Another gulp of fetid air, and he opened his eyes. Standing there like the scared little boy he had been the last time death lingered in the air wasn't why he'd come. He'd come for her. To offer the strength age-induced cowardice had withheld when he was seven. He was a man now, if twenty-one years of life met the definition. He could do this. He needed to do this. "I'm here."

Eileen Prince Shape lifted her hand from the decaying quilt covering her. It was a wasted lump of flesh and bone, so unlike the strong fingers that had worked needle and thread from dawn until the watches of the night to add a copper or two to the pin money his bastard father grudgingly gave. Severus cringed at the sight of the skeletal fingers beckoning, and couldn't stop the flinch of panic that shifted his foot toward the bedroom's door. "Come. Tell me what knowledge Master St. Germain has bestowed on you since Christmas."

Blinking against the cleansing burn of tears, he crossed the room. He'd learned much from the esteemed Potions master and alchemist. But none of it would give him back what was slowly escaping the room with each of his mother's ragged breaths. No vials of pastel-colored, rarefied liquid would stem the stench oozing from the cells corroded by the cancer raging in her body. No confidently murmured words in Latin or Gaelic or Aramaic would shutter her from the frailty of being mortal and susceptible to the reaper's scythe.

"Surely you don't want me to bore you with such things, Mum." He settled on the edge of the bed, the bulk of blankets helping to disguise the bony protrusion of her hip when his thigh brushed against it. He swallowed to clear the sudden thickness in his throat. "Wouldn't you rather hear the latest gossip..."

She shook her head slowly, her smile strong but a little sad. "I need to know, my boy."

Her fingertips were chilly against his cheek, and he reached up to cover them with his hand, sandwiching them between the warmth of the fire's heat captured in his palm and face. "What do you need to know, Mum?"

"I need to know..." The tremble of her chin and the rush of moisture glistening in her dark eyes worked in tandem against the shields surrounding his emotions. "I just need to know, Severus." She freed her hand and moved a fall of hair from his brow. "So tell me."

And he had, talking the afternoon away about the research his Potions master had entrusted him with. By the time he'd left, there was a look of contented resignation in his mother's eyes. Almost as if—

"Severus."

There was a finality in Poppy's voice that broke through the fog of his thoughts and turned his head toward the girl lying so deathly still on the bed. A piece of his heart broke away as he glanced at the newborn in the conjured cot. "Is it..."

He couldn't finish the question. Not with his wife's brown eyes searching his for the answer.

"Almost." Although the matron's voice was barely more than a whisper, it carried across the room like the wail of a banshee. "There's enough time left for a few answers, though. If you hurry."

Squaring his shoulders, he crossed the room. As much as he hated to recall a tool he'd used so loosely while in Dumbledore and Voldemort's service, it needed to be done. For the girl's sake. For both the girls' sakes.

He pulled his wand from his sleeve, then settled onto the edge of the bed. "Look at me, little one," he gently instructed, using his fingertips to encourage the young woman to turn to him. Eyes clouded by the shadows of the Veil slowly moved to meet his gaze.

Bending closer, he forced all other thoughts from his mind, concentrating only on the black spheres below and the turmoil he could see beyond them. Gently, he touched his wand to the girl's temple and whispered, "*Legilimens!*"

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 20

Hermione comforts a disheartened Severus.

Index finger and thumb compressed the bridge of his nose. Eyes pinched at the corners and shuttered behind exhaustion-bruised eyelids. Shoulders hunched. No light diffused the darkness of the Potions master's former quarters, save for the flickering glow from the embers in the fireplace. All the signs were there, pointing to only one conclusion: Severus Snape was despondent. Just as she had known he would be.

Carefully pocketing the dummy Poppy had charmed to alert her of any change in the baby's status, Hermione slipped into the gloomy confines of the sitting room. The click of her heels against the stone floor seemed to echo like the retort of gunfire in the nearly suffocating silence, yet the man slumped in the corner of the battered sofa didn't so much as flinch.

She sighed. He was worse off than she thought. And there was very little she could do about it except wait as patiently as possible for it to pass.

When she reached the end of the sofa, she slipped off her shoes. Gently, so as not to disturb him too much, she settled beside him, curling her legs beneath her and resting her cheek against the top of his shoulder. The contact was made without resistance. Encouraged, she slowly brushed her fingers down his arm until she reached his wrist. She toyed with the buttons on the sleeve of his Muggle blazer and allowed her mind to drift.

She'd known this man, first as teacher, then suitor, and now husband, for more than ten years...was intimately familiar with his blackest moods as well as his brightest humor. It might have taken the rocky beginnings of their courtship for her to learn the coded messages relayed by his posture, expressions, and the changing light in the darkness of his eyes, but now he was as open to her as the well-worn pages of a beloved book that kept one as intrigued in its millionth reading as it had in its first. In fact, it had been the rumpled pages of a book along with the magic of their bond that had offered her the first clue to decoding the enigma known as Severus Tobias Snape.

Hermione caressed the battered spine of her mother's copy of Jane Eyre. She knew she should return it, but until she convinced her parents her intentions had been innocent, or she accepted there was no hope of reconciliation, it was the only link she had to them. Besides, the illustrations reminded her of a certain acerbic Potions master who had yet to accept his status as her Anam Cuplach.

"Still reading that drivel, I see."

Severus' biting remark attacked her before he'd properly entered the sitting room he shared with Minerva. Although the headmistress had assured the wizard proper repairs took time, Hermione wondered if the older witch was just reluctant to allow the man she looked on as a son out of her sight. She'd come so close to losing him. Tears prickled Hermione's eyes. They both had.

But there he was. Tall, strong, and well on the mend, looking at her with a slight sneer curling the left side of his mouth while the twinkle of something amazingly precious lit his dark eyes. In that moment, the penny dropped. The signs of acceptance, requited love, fragile hope, and chilly fear of rejection exploded into clarity before her eyes. They had been there all along, expressed in the tilt of his head and the arch of his brow for weeks. Only his abrasive exterior had blinded her to them.

Despite the press of sadness permeating the room, Hermione smiled as the memory swam back to the recesses of her mind. She still thanked Miss Bronte on an almost daily basis for the insight her Mr. Rochester provided. From that day, the mystery of Severus' moods had unraveled like the frayed threads of a tapestry. Now, she was attuned to even his slightest sigh.

A sudden surge in her husband's melancholia tickled her mind. She slid her hand over his and entwined their fingers. "Talk to me, dearest."

At first Severus resisted, shaking his head and seeming to withdraw even more. From experience, she knew pushing would only strengthen his resolve to distance himself, so she sat silently, her thumb caressing the side of his hand. He would talk when he was ready. Until then...

"What I saw." Emotions blotted out his voice for a breath. He turned to her, the ebony depths of his eyes so filled with pain it left a physical ache in the middle of her chest. "What I saw," he repeated through gritted teeth.

Hermione pressed her fingers against his lips. "It's all right, Severus. If you can't..."

The strength of his embrace squashed her words into a soft gasp. He trembled against her, the vibrations renewing the sting of tears in her eyes. He very rarely fell apart like this. In fact, it had been almost four years. The memory swam up as silently as a grindylow and overwhelmed her just as powerfully.

Hermione held her breath until Madam Pomfrey's footsteps faded into silence. She listened for a few ticks longer, then slipped out of the hospital cot. Padding softly to the curtain separating her from Severus, she kept a careful watch for the matron's return. Although the witch's usual strict schedule would give several hours without interruption, the nature of Severus' previous injuries as well as the toll the rescue had taken on his recovery might prompt the good nurse to monitor her patient's status a little more closely. And given the Potions master's propensity for propriety, it would never do to allow anyone to catch them alone at this stage of their courtship.

Courtship. Hermione chuckled. As antiquated as the practice was to the modern Muggle world, she found it both romantic and a little humbling. To be respected enough, cherished enough to have a man ask one's parents for permission to date you was... unbelievable.

To say her parents had been positively dumbfounded when Severus had requested a formal meeting at the popular Restaurant Gordon Ramsay was an understatement. And when they'd arrived to find the wizard had bought the entire eight o'clock seating, her mother had nearly swooned. Of course, when Severus had made his request over dessert and coffee, they had acted quite put out, and had given their consent begrudgingly. Merlin help them all if he ever asked them for her hand in marriage.

Although her relationship with her parents remained strained, Severus' actions that night did thaw the ice a little. Made things a little easier on her. Just like he did a few hours ago when he covered her in his cloak before he allowed anyone else into Ron's flat. God, but she loved him. Utterly, completely, and beyond reason.

Sighing, she parted the curtain and step into his makeshift room. Immediately, the cocoon of peace his presence produced wrapped around her like a newborn's swaddling blanket, making her warm and calm. If she did nothing but stand here for the rest of the night...

"Hermione?" Beneath the patented Snape veneer of apathy, there was a ripple of panic. One that tugged her forward as he pushed himself into a more upright position against the infirmary-issued pillows. "Are you all right, my darling girl?"

Every fiber of her being tried to make her smile reassuring and quell the sudden shakiness that rushed to erode the strength in her limbs. The traits that urged the Sorting Hat to ultimately place her in Gryffindor came together in an attempt to bolster her courage. But when she looked at the man who carried her heart alongside his, the wizard whose soul resided inside hers, the what-could-have-beens crushed her.

Stumbling toward the bed and Severus' outstretched arms, the same traitorous thought tumbled over and over in her mind: she could have lost him today. To the wounds reopened by Apparition and the altercation with Ron. To a hex from one of the overly enthusiastic Aurors trying to subdue their former colleague. To her own protective magic. She could have lost him today for no other reason than her own damn stupidity.

"But you didn't," his silky voice murmured in her ear as he gathered her in his arms. She'd forgotten their bond seemed strongest when she was at her weakest. "And even if you had, it would have been worth it to keep you safe."

"Don't say that, Severus," she demanded, snuggling gingerly against his bandaged chest. "Don't ever do so much as think it. To have you taken from me..." She closed her eyes as the emotions of the day strangled her voice. "I'm not worth anything..."

He jerked her up by her arms, his eyes dangerously dark. "You are worth everything, Hermione," he growled. "Everything, you hear me?" With the same ferocity, he brought her back against him, burying his face in her wild tangle of curls. "Without you..."

That night was the first time she'd seen him cry. The first time she'd been able to comfort him the way she was tonight. It was a humbling but heady experience then...and even more so now.

"What are we going to do with her, love?" Severus' voice was as controlled as ever, yet it was tinged with uncertainty. "What are we going to do with that precious little rosebud we rescued from the rubbish heap?"

Easing away far enough to see those midnight orbs and all the mysteries they held, Hermione offered a timid smile. "I've been thinking about that very thing, dearest."

"Have you now?"

Her smile grew at the hint of returning humor in his gaze. She nodded and brushed a silken strand of raven's wing hair from his forehead. "I have indeed." Leaning forward, she pecked his lips. "And the answer is among the simplest I've ever reached."

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 20

Minerva offers advice.

"I think we should keep the baby, Severus."

Hermione's words reverberated through his entire being, shattering his thoughts into a million shards of stained glass. He pinched the bridge of his nose against another wave of exhaustion. Between his unsettled mind and rising every couple of hours to help Hermione tend to his hours-old charge, he'd gotten less sleep than he had since his waning days as Order spy.

Keep the baby. Keep the baby. Keep the... He applied a little more pressure, trying to find a way to switch off the perpetually looping words. How could he possibly take his wife's suggestion seriously? To raise another man's child, one that had no physical connection to the woman he loved...

"Severus Snape." Minerva caught his attention with all the finesse of a textbook slammed against a tabletop. "Have you heard a word I've said?"

He scrubbed his hand down his face. "I'm sorry, Minerva. As you can imagine, I didn't get much sleep last night."

Most women would have credited the remark to the presence of a newborn in the household. Perhaps commiserated over a story or two about their own early experiences

with their offspring. But Minerva McGonagall was no ordinary woman. She looked at him as if she could see through the layers of wool, flesh, and bone directly into his soul. Concern deepened the wrinkles around her eyes. "Tell me, Severus."

He scowled at the witch. "Have you been in Trelawney's sherry?"

As always, Minerva's laughter buoyed his spirits. "Well, there is a certain amount of omnipotence that comes with the job," the headmistress sniggered. "But in this case, it comes from knowing a certain snarky Potions master since he was a toddler and loving him as a son for at least that long." Seriousness grayed her eyes. "It is easy to see there's more on your mind than the usual difficulties that come with having a wee one about the place. And you are far too troubled for it to be the press of the poor young lady's memories." She crossed her arms and shifted forward in the leather club chair she claimed each time she visited his quarters; her eyes softened into the motherly glow that always urged confessions past his lips, despite Unbreakable vows, with little more than a cursory battle. "Tell me what it is, lad."

"Hermione wants us to keep the baby." The information rushed out of his mouth like Crookshanks through the cat door after one of Peter Pettigrew's relatives. Severus ran his fingers through his hair. "Not just keep her, but claim her as our own. Falsify the birth certificate." He rested his elbows and his knees and cradled his pounding head in his hands. "Lie to all but a trusted few."

No doubt Minerva's eyebrows collided with her hairline after hearing such Slytherin tactics from her Gryffindor princess. He could practically hear the skin of her brow crinkling from across the room. "And why would she want to go that far? Surely your position within the government would..."

"She doesn't think that would be enough." He slowly raised his head to search for the peace he always found from the woman who'd stepped in to fill his mother's shoes years before Eileen Snape drew her last breath. "She seems to think this is the best way to keep young Mr. Weasley from ever laying claim to the child."

The wrinkles along Minerva's forehead deepened. "Did you tell her of the suspicions surrounding Molly Weasley?"

He shook his head. A full disclosure was forthcoming, but he'd like to prolong the inevitable as long as possible. "Hermione is still blissfully ignorant, thank God. She merely thinks the child's biological father will never prove to be a fit guardian. If we claim the baby is ours, delivered at home by Poppy, then..."

Minerva nodded. "And with Hermione's sabbatical from the wizarding world, no one would question the validity of the story." The older witch tilted her head thoughtfully. "I suppose, aside from Poppy and myself, Harry would be..."

"He hasn't seen her since Christmas." Severus shuddered a little as the memories of Hermione's nightmares following the young man's visit assaulted the inside of his skull. Even after all these years, sometimes it was two steps forward and a million back. Damn Ronald Weasley to hell and back. "Because of his continued friendship with the family, Hermione thinks it best to keep him in the dark."

Again the older witch nodded. "And the Malfoys?"

Severus sighed. Hermione really had put an enormous amount of thought into this scheme in a very short time. "Lucius and Narcissa would serve as the child's godparents. Both, along with young Draco and his wife, would be made privy to the situation since we visit regularly and they would know the infant could not be biologically ours."

"But Ginevra is..."

"Disavowed, Minerva." He squeezed his temples as the pounding started up again. "Surely you remember that particular Ministry Ball fiasco."

The old witch stared at the dying embers in the fireplace as she bumped her thumb rhythmically against her lips. "And the mother's family? Does Hermione not believe they may wish to be involved once we identify them?"

"Hermione isn't inclined to believe the maternal grandparents will wish to acknowledge the child." He leaned his head against the back of the sofa and sighed. "I'm given to agree, especially since it appears no attempts were made to search for the girl."

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the whirl of the old Stirling longcase clock in the corner. He glanced at Minerva. Her eyes seemed distant and unfocused. Finally, with a slight nod to herself, she turned back to him. "Well, it certainly seems a sound plan, all things considered."

"Seems a sound plan!" Severus vaulted from the sofa as if her words had set fire to the cushions. "Sound plan? Harry Let's-Get-Myself-And-My-Friends-Killed-As-Messily-As-Possible Potter's schemes weren't as harebrained as this one." He paced the length of the handwoven rug, irritation crushing the weave beneath his heel. "She wants to raise another man's baby. And not just any man, but the red-headed menace whose threats of finding a way to make her his have kept her from this world for nearly four and a half years." His chest tightened as the truth slowly bubbled to the surface. "Do you have any idea how difficult this could prove to be?"

"Severus..."

Memories of his own childhood slammed into the back of his eyes with enough force to spur a stinging surge of moisture. Of course she knew. He was proof of that. Still, doubt churned the words forward like the crashing waves of a winter storm, shredding his usual reticence. "How hard it will be to stare at the bastard's offspring day after day? To love this precious little girl the way she deserves to be loved?" He'd almost lapped the room once before a bit of his true fear reared its head. "What if she can't, Minerva? What if we try this, and a few months in she realizes she can't cope?" The weight of his history crashed down on him, almost forcing him to his knees. He grasped the edge of the mantel, his heart pounding like a stallion against his ribs. Air struggled in his lungs as he rested his forehead against his fist. In the orange glow of the dying fire, his worst fear shimmered. "What if I can't?" he whispered.

"Severus..."

The newborn's cry interrupted the headmistress, offering the reprieve Severus needed to compose himself. Straightening, he avoided Minerva as he swept his hand across his eyes. "Hermione's gone home to pack a few things we may need for our stay." He started toward his old bedroom. "If you'll excuse me for a moment."

SSHGSSHG

Severus moved aside the gauzy canopy suspended over the elf-carved cradle. The little one's cries had softened to whimpers the moment he stepped into the room. It was almost as if...

Don't think it, his logical mind ordered. She is under your care as a ward of the Crown. Nothing more.

But there could be. Severus sighed as he bent to lift the bundle into his arms. *She could easily become yours. And Hermione's. All it would take is a few swipes of a quill.* Merlin, when had his heart become so disloyal?

The tiny body wiggled and stretched in his hands, seemingly completely confident in the gentle strength of his fingers and palms. "Here now, little one," he crooned, drawing the newborn against his chest. "What's all the fuss?" He started the swaying rhythm and accompanying bum pat that had proved a miracle at dawn. Her whimpers faded into soft grunts of contentment as she curled against his chest, her tiny hands fisting the soft linen of his shirt. "Is this your Gryffindor attempt at garnering attention?" Ignoring the protest of rational thought, he kissed the crown of downy soft fuzz as dark as his own. "Or is it your Slytherin cunning meant to lure me into keeping you company until Hermione returns?"

He nuzzled the top of her head, inhaling the exotic perfume exclusive to newborns. A long-forgotten lullaby rumbled softly in his throat. "Neither will work on me, you know," he murmured between the chorus and bridge.

"Funny, from where I'm standing, the wee lass has you right where she wants you."

Severus flinched at the unexpected intrusion of Minerva's voice, rousing the tiny girl asleep against his chest. Another few pats to the diapered bottom, and she settled, gripping the front of his clothes impossibly tighter. "Minerva..."

She waved off any protest and glided across the room. "I know what you are worried about, my boy." Smiling gently, she placed one hand on his back and the other on the newborn's, rubbing both in a soothing rhythm. "And you needn't be." She smiled sadly. "You are not, and never will be, anything like your father."

Risking a glance at the woman whose acceptance of him was as unconditional as Albus' had been knotted with strings, Severus found confidence burning in her gaze...a confidence that flowed toward him in warm waves, filling his heart and buoying his soul. Unwilling to risk the effect hidden emotions might have on his voice, he simply nodded.

Minerva's smile brightened, the twinkle returning to the sapphire irises. "Good." She eased around him, then carefully lifted the sleeping child from his arms. Cradling the infant in the crook of her elbow, she placed her hand against his chest. "As for being able to love her despite her genealogy, she took up residence in there the moment you and Hermione laid eyes on her." She patted the spot above where his heart thrummed.

"You really think so?" Severus winced at how childlike and vulnerable he sounded. He hadn't meant to say anything. Then again, his confessions to the headmistress were rarely given intentionally.

Tears welled in her eyes. Or was the moisture gathering in his own merely distorting his view? "Of course I do, son." Her smile, though tremulous, was as firm as her gaze, feeding the hope swelling in his chest. "Now, what say we take my granddaughter on a tour of the castle before we resume our work?"

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 20

Decisions, decisions, decisions.

Despite his nervousness, Severus managed not to pounce on Hermione the moment she stepped out of the Floo. He'd given her time to unpack the essentials they would need until Poppy deemed the baby strong enough to go home, allowed her to visit with Minerva while he put the little one down for a nap. But now he had her all to himself, with no distractions, and at least an hour before lunch. Plenty of time to discuss the situation and put both their minds at ease...if only he could find the words to begin.

"You know, dearest." His wife's gentle touch against his hand spread warmth through him. "It is usually best to start as you mean to go on."

He glanced at her, finding strength in her soft smile and compassionate eyes. With a determined sigh, he shifted into the corner of the sofa, turning so neither would have to strain to see or hear the other. "I've been thinking about your suggestion concerning the baby."

Hermione brushed a lock of hair from his forehead, her molten chocolate eyes filled with such expectancy, his resolve nearly crumbled. "I thought as much."

He picked up her hand, interlocking their fingers, and brought it to his lips. He closed his eyes, relishing the softness of her skin. Merlin, how he wished he could give in. Let go and agree to her solution. But he couldn't. Not until every doubt had been erased. Until Minerva's assurances had corroborating evidence of some kind, offered in his wife's honest voice. "Why, love? Why do you want this little girl?"

Cupping her husband's face, Hermione weighed the question with more care than any asked by the members of the Wizarding Examinations Authority on the dastardly Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Test. The words had to be perfect, the answer going as deep as the emotions swirling inside the man. He deserved the truth. The twining of their souls demanded honesty. And while the reply was as simple and clear as the instructions for brewing a first-year's Forgetfulness Potion, he would need all the proof carefully strung syllables could offer.

"Because." She brushed her thumb back and forth across the apple of his cheek. "I want to give her the kind of childhood I couldn't give you."

He blinked, confusion settling like cataracts against the midnight depths of his eyes. "The kind of childhood you couldn't give me? Hermione, you weren't even born when my parents married, much less..."

She stoppered his words with a press of her fingertips to his lips. "But if I could, I would go back and erase every scar, every hurt, every horrifying nightmare." She fought to keep her chin from quivering as understanding backlit his ebony gaze. "However, since such time travel is not only forbidden but extremely illogical, rescuing this baby...loving her the way Ronald and her mother never could...is the next best thing. It's a way to honor your sacrifice, love." Despite her best efforts, her lips trembled and her voice caught. "It's a way to help you heal, to help us both heal from the ravages of the past."

"Hermione."

An upward quirk of her mouth silenced him. "I want to do this, Severus." She searched his face, looking for any hint of agreement, but all she found was the lingering shadow of skepticism. "We need to do this." She leaned closer, breathing in the exotic aroma of his cologne mixed with the tang of his uncertainty. "For her." She pressed a kiss to his forehead. "For us." She brushed her lips across the bridge of his nose. "For our other children." She swallowed his gasp of relief. *So that was what he was worried about*, her brain registered as he deepened the kiss. *That I wouldn't want more children*, his children. She smiled against his lips. "Silly man," she whispered, then assured him silently that nothing could be farther from the truth.

For the longest moment, they were the only two beings in the universe. Lips touching. Tongues tasting. Minds uniting. Finally, the basic need for air nudged them apart, but only far enough for the much needed exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen to occur.

"I'll contact Poppy and Minerva," Severus breathed. He kissed the tip of his bride's nose. "Thanks to a minor mishap in Hooch's flying class last evening, Poppy hasn't had a chance to send the paperwork to the Ministry."

Hermione smiled as she shifted enough to rest her head against his chest, the rhythmic thrum of his heart soothing the frayed nerves that came with her sudden re-emersion into the magical world. "Good. The less extraneous forms needed, the better."

The hum of her husband's agreement vibrated her senses in the most delicious way. "Less questions raised than if she were required to send an addendum." His breath stirred her curls. "As far as the Ministry and Her Majesty's government is concerned, the dear little one is ours."

"She was ours the minute we lifted her from the rubbish heap, Severus."

She could hear his smile in his soft intake of air and the slight tightening of his embrace. "Indeed she was."

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"I, for one, think you've made the right decision." Poppy removed the stack of forms from in front of Hermione and Severus. "That child deserves the chance you two are giving her."

"Hear, hear." Minerva kissed the tiny infant's forehead and adjusted her to a more comfortable position in her arms. "It's been quite some time since we've had a wee one to spoil." She settled into the rocking chair a few of the house-elves had wrestled into their former quarters. "House-elves are already plotting for her next visit, if we fail to persuade her parents to go ahead and return to Hogwarts a few months early."

"Minerva," Severus sighed. "We've been over this before. Hermione and I are perfectly happy in London. She's in the middle of her final round of clinicals. We are only half-way through the Ministry requirements to have our Floo connected to the network; therefore..."

Hermione laid her hand on her husband's arm, amused that he was using the very arguments she given him not six weeks before. "We'll consider it, Minerva. Thank you for the offer."

The headmistress grinned, a small twinkle bordering on triumph sparked in her eyes. "That's all anyone can ask, m'dear." She started a soft melodic hum, the creak of the rocker carrying the background rhythm gently.

Idyllic didn't begin to describe the picture the elderly witch and newborn painted. Serene, honest, and filled with unconditional love, it was the perfect portrayal of grandmother and beloved grandchild.

And it absolutely pierced a raw wound in Hermione's heart.

This wonderful little girl would never know that kind of acceptance from her Muggle relations. The tethers between Hermione and her parents remained tenuous, fragile. To suddenly present them with a grandchild they weren't expecting might just sever the cord completely. Especially since she knew she could never trust them with the truth despite Severus' willingness to tell them the whole story. Most likely, explaining the circumstances surrounding their daughter's birth and discovery would only widen the chasm anyway.

Whether it was the repercussions of the Memory Charms and their reversal or their refusal to accept she could never respect their wishes and return fully to the their world, they had changed. In some ways they were just as prejudiced as the most stereotypical Slytherin she'd ever encountered. No, it was better to leave them in the dark as long as possible, then deal with the consequences after.

Another glance at her former Head of House cuddling her daughter, and Hermione's spirit tipped a little more toward the melancholy. She wanted her children to have the kind of relationship with their grandparents that she'd had with hers before they passed on. *I guess that isn't something we'll be able to give her.*

"Yes, it is, love." She shivered slightly as her husband's breath tickled the shell of her ear. "Just look at the two of them, Hermione. Our little one, and those to follow, have all the love any child could ever need right here in this room."

Hermione sniffed softly and wiped discreetly at the tears clinging precariously to her lower lashes. "You're right, dearest." She leaned over and touched her lips to his. "You are positively right."

"Of course he is." Poppy patted her shoulder, then placed one more document on the table in front of them. "And now that we've established that, the little lady is lacking only one thing."

Severus' brow furrowed into a familiar scowl. "What is that, madam?"

Poppy smirked. "Why, a name, of course."

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 20

Welcome to the family.

Hermione withdrew her head from the Floo, ending her call to her advisor. Thankfully, working diligently for the last two and a half years had paid off. Not only was her degree being conferred during the December commencement, but she'd accumulated enough clinical hours to complete the required internship working part-time at both her magical and non-magical sites. With that kind of schedule, and Severus' office hours even more flexible, then...

The thought stumbled and died when she found her husband snuggled into the corner of the sofa feeding their daughter. Yet it wasn't the gentle way he cradled the well-bundled infant in the crook of his arm that stole her breath. Nor was it his mumbled words, meant only for tiny ears. Or the way two sets of dark eyes focused so intently on each other, both countenances filled with such overwhelming calm Hermione doubted the chaos of Voldemort's Dark magic would cause the slightest ripple. It was, as always, Severus' hands that held her attention.

His hands had fascinated her from the very first time his long, elegant fingers had curled around the edges of his teaching robes, cocooning the wool around him like a dark moth's chrysalis. The way they'd seemed to caress the ingredients as he'd slowly added them to a steaming cauldron. The graceful movements they had made as he lectured. Every single thing about them had endlessly fascinated her.

And still did.

But in this moment...with one of their daughter's tiny hands wrapped around his pinky as he held the bottle steady so she could eat her fill...it was the quiet confidence in the sinewy appendages that completely ensnared her. A confidence which was at once familiar yet completely foreign to the kind exuded as he clutched a stirring rod or guided a knife through a fleshy root. A confidence that seemed to shout 'I am absolutely sure about this'. Just as they had the day he proposed.

Hermione tilted her head and studied the terraced house. Its white stucco facade seemed no different than the neighboring buildings around Belgrave Square. "This doesn't look much like The Grenadier."

"Perhaps not." Severus smirked and tightened his grip on her hand. "But I assure you a scrumptious selection of luncheon items are available." He started up the front steps, pausing when she hesitated. "Coming?"

When he held out his hand, she noticed a slight trembling in his fingers. Given the chill in the spring air, she wasn't surprised. Then when he touched her... the gentle electricity of his touch sizzled through her skin from the five points of contact, rousing the butterflies in her stomach. They, combined with the slight tug of the man who carried her heart alongside his, urged her to follow.

And follow she did. Through the midnight blue front door and into an impressive foyer with polished marble floors gleaming beneath a crystal chandelier. Just to the right of center was a grand staircase that spiraled as high as those at Hogwarts, the treads worn to a high shine by nearly two centuries of traffic and meticulous cleaning. A hint of lemon oil tinged the air with the pungent freshness of a well-cared for home. "Severus." She scanned the rooms they strolled past, taking in as much of the spaces, all seemingly devoid of furnishings, as Severus' speed allowed. "Does anyone live here?"

Her beloved glanced at her, an unfamiliar emotion flickering in his ebony eyes. "Not at the moment."

A sudden surge of concern drowned her curiosity. "Then we shouldn't be here." Panic boiled in her belly, subduing the butterflies. Each time she'd entered an unoccupied building while she, Harry and Ron were on the run, it had ended in near-disaster. Even though it was more than two years ago, the unease refused to abate. "At the very least this is trespassing, Severus. At the worst it's..."

"Only if one doesn't have permission, Hermione." His lips quirked into a half-smile, and he drew her hand to his lips. The kiss he pressed against her knuckles sent another delightful jolt through her, shoving her panic to the dull, low-level roar in the background. "And we most assuredly have permission." His fingers quivered a little more when he wrapped them around hers and gave a little tug. "Come," he whispered. "What I want to show you is just in the next room."

Ten steps, perhaps twelve, and she crossed the threshold into nirvana. The room was ringed with built-in bookcases. From floor to ceiling, save for one along a shorter wall where the shelves stopped midway down, allowing for a bank of cabinets beneath. On the far wall, between two sets of French doors leading to the back garden, was a marble fireplace.

Closing her eyes, Hermione imagined spending cold winter nights in front of a warming blaze, a classic novel on her lap and her legs tucked beneath her in an ancient wing chair. In the matching chair to her left was Severus. Perhaps he was perusing a book of his own, or a case file, or one of the day's newspapers. It really didn't matter as long as he was there, the companionable silence broken by occasional conversation and the whisper of turning pages.

"Do you like it?"

Severus' gentle baritone dispersed her daydream, and Hermione opened her eyes. "Like it?" She smiled, noting the uncertainty in his dark eyes. If his ebony hair still brushed his shoulders as it had during his Hogwarts' days, he would most likely be hiding behind the silky curtain it had offered. "It's...It's." She searched through the card file of adjectives in her mind, but could only come up with something that paled in comparison to her awe. "Magnificent." She scanned the room again, jealousy making a slow climb from the well of emotions. "Whoever lives here must be the luckiest person alive."

"He is."

Hermione turned to find Severus on bended knee.

"Or will be. If the witch who lives inside his soul agrees to spend the rest of her life with him." He drew her hand into his. The fingers that had tapped a tarantella against her hand not five minutes before were still and strong against it now. "Marry me, Hermione."

The greedy grunts of her daughter lured Hermione from her thoughts. Even from across the room, it was easy to see the irritation on the tiny face as her father pulled the rubber nipple from between those perfect cupid's bow lips to inspect the contents of the bottle. "Better watch out, dearest," Hermione chuckled. "Looks like an explosion is looming."

"Explosion or not," Severus crooned softly, "she's finished." He deftly re-capped the baby bottle with one hand, his gaze never leaving that of his daughter's. "And you, little one." He smiled at the scowl creeping across her tiny features. "You heard what Poppy said as clearly as I did. Two ounces at a time and not a smidgen more." He carefully maneuvered the complaining bundle to his burp cloth covered shoulder and began a pattern of efficient, but gentle, thumps to her back. "The sooner you learn to follow her orders to the letter, the less likely you are to encounter her anything-but-sweet bedside manner."

"Says the man who never takes his own advice," Hermione sniggered.

One elegant, dark eyebrow arched in unison with a healthy burp from their little girl as he swung his attention to his wife. "Is that not what parenting is, my darling girl? Passing on the lessons learned so that the next generation does not repeat the mistakes?"

A sadness lurked beneath his teasing tone and tugged at her heart. Would he ever forgive himself for the past? "Indeed, darling." She moved to the sofa and settled beside him, her hand coming to join his on their little one's back. "And between you, me, Poppy, and her self-appointed grandmother and namesake, our little one will be well educated in those kinds of lessons."

Severus released his tension in a long, slow breath that stirred tendrils of her hair. She could almost feel his lips twitch into a slight smile as he moved his hand to partially cover hers. "Indeed she will be, love." Another soft breath, this one a sigh of contentment, escaped his lips. "She most assuredly will be."

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Gobsmacked. Hermione hid her smile behind the rim of her china cup as she noticed Lucius Malfoy gaping at her husband. Positively gobsmacked. So was Narcissa for that matter, though she did manage to rein in her surprise with more aplomb than the lord of the manor.

"Let me see if I have this sorted," Lucius managed to drawl. He sat, a little inelegantly, on the footstool in front of his wife's chair. "You want us..."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Narcissa huffed. She swatted Lucius on the shoulder. "I swear there is a troll hidden somewhere in the Malfoy family tree given how thick you and Draco can be. How much clearer do they need to make it?"

"Obviously, I left a little too much to the imagination while explaining my dear wife's plan." Severus leaned forward and settled his cup into the saucer on the low table in front of the sofa. "Perhaps a little more bluntness is in order." He winked at Hermione, then reclined into the corner of the couch. "Go ahead, love." A smile wrestled with the bored neutrality of his lips. "Perhaps you might try it in Trollish this time."

Laughter echoed around the chamber. Even Lucius, after a brief pout, joined in, displaying the changes he'd undergone since Voldemort's demise. Hermione was even more convinced she'd been right to suggest they stand as godparents to the little girl sleeping in her surrogate grandmother's arms, for the former Death Eater and his wife, along with the headmistress and the school matron, were her family. She glanced at her husband. They were their family. And there was no doubt each would embrace the newest addition just as fiercely. "She's your goddaughter, Lucius. What more do you need to know?"

The man shook his head, his regal blond hair cascading over his shoulders. He still seemed quite dumbfounded. Until the mischief sparked in his gray eyes. "A name, perhaps?"

"Gladly."

Hermione smiled at the pride in her husband's voice as he stood and strode across the small space between the sofa and where Minerva sat. Carefully, he took his daughter from the headmistress' arms and settled their treasure against his chest. "May I present Rose Gwyneth Snape. Named for the loveliest flower to spring from a dung heap and in honor of her grandmother, Minerva Gwyneth McGonagall." Tears coated his words and glistened, unshed, in his dark eyes, making Hermione's throat constrict in shared emotion. "The grandest lady in the entire British Isles."

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 20

Sometimes, memories are a blessing. Sometimes, they are a burden.

With the women cooing over little Rose and Lucius entertaining the image of Phineas and a few of the other former headmasters who'd wandered over to enjoy the impromptu celebration from one of the frames in the sitting room, Severus allowed his mind to wander to the poor girl they'd left behind in the dingy Tumbledown flat. She was probably lying on a medical examiner's cold slab somewhere in Muggle London by now. Just another unnamed and unclaimed youth overdosed on the latest chemist's concoction. Another number added to the staggering statistics that filled the police blotter on a daily basis. Damn and blast it all! Life could be so devastatingly unfair.

"You can't save them all, Severus." Kingsley's eyes dulled for a moment as he stared out the enchanted window of the Minister of Magic's office. "If you don't accept that now, you'll go mad before the end of the first month."

"With such an enthusiastic endorsement for the job, one does wonder why the queue isn't halfway to the Thames," Severus drawled, returning his focus to the contract in front of him.

The Minister's deep chuckle tugged at the corner of Severus' lips. "I'm afraid you are the only candidate I'm willing to consider for the post, my friend." Spy instincts picked up on the man's movement back toward his desk without Severus employing the first ocular muscle. "Not even the Prime Minister's brother-in-law made the cut. With either of us."

"Then I should be flattered." Severus parked the document in his lap and leaned back in his chair, taking in the seriousness circling the amusement in his compatriot's dark eyes. "Of course, I don't remember poor Clive making the cut for anything. In either world."

Kingsley laughed, his tall frame shaking slightly from the power of the contrabass vibration. "Indeed he hasn't."

A full smile erupted on Severus' lips for a moment. Then the seriousness of the offer settled in and arched his eyebrow. "Why me, Kingsley?"

The elder wizard sighed softly, his face placid with sincerity. "Because you have a good heart, Severus. It's time you were given the opportunity to use it without the shadow of life debts and Machiavellian masters muddying the accomplishments. Besides"—the man's eyes sparked with mischief—"I think that witch of yours would appreciate you being in a shiny new office just around the corner instead of sequestered in a dank castle hundreds of miles away. Especially since the wedding is in—"

"Eighty-nine days, ten hours, and thirty-two minutes," Severus sighed. And he was counting down each and every one of them with the same excitement as a child numbering the days until Christmas. "Now give me a ruddy quill so I can sign this damnable parchment before my senses return from their obvious sabbatical."

And for the most part, he'd taken the job in stride. Having experienced the worst society had to offer during his tenure in Voldemort's ranks had taken some of the edge off. Sharing the burden with Hermione helped soothe the rest. Still, there were some, like the poor young thing he'd abandoned in order to save her child, that rankled his sensibilities.

Fear.

It permeated every corner of the child's dying mind and shimmered around the memories encased in bubbles meant to protect them from the chaos. The chill from the dimming life force collided with the arctic landscape of her damaged psyche and caused the temperature to plummet to nearly unbearable. Pulling his cloak a little more tightly about him, he reached out for the earliest memories she was willing to offer.

The little capsule nudged him with all the excitement of a child meeting a new friend. Careful not to damage it, he picked it up and peered inside. It was a party of some sort. Birthday? Christmas, perhaps? Whatever the gathering celebrated, the girl seemed to be at the center of it, peering around at the others with a charming snaggletoothed grin. And while the crystals of methamphetamine obscured the images, he felt the familial connection. Parents, siblings, an aunt and uncle, they were all there. And, for that moment, she was loved. He gently set the container aside and waited.

The next memory hurtled toward him at dizzying speed. He caught it deftly, but the force of impact nearly knocked him off his feet. Unsettled, he peeked inside. Once again, the drugs muted the faces to indistinguishable blobs of flesh tones. There were only three this time, two with a familial tether and one not quite a stranger, but almost. A deal of some sort was being brokered. Hands clasped forearms and the light of oath-linked magic filled the room. Once it dimmed, the unfamiliar member of the group turned and took the girl by the hand. A moment later, she was standing in the middle of the dingy flat, completely alone.

Another memory rolled toward him like a tidal wave; growing larger and larger through the chemically induced psychedelic haze until it swamped him. He struggled against the undertow until the surge calmed and the images cleared.

This time, there was no distortion of features. Ronald Weasley's freckled face was as clear as if he'd been standing inside the girl's mind with Severus. His blue eyes were bloodshot and half-lidded with lust. His lips were pulled taut against his teeth in a lecherous grin that turned Severus' stomach. "My, you are a pretty little thing." He slid a calloused finger down the girl's cheek; her shudder at the contact vibrated through Severus as he watched from the sidelines. "What say we get to know each other a little better?"

The girl swallowed hard, but acquiesced. What other choice was there? "All right." She took his proffered hand and he led her to the bed.

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Ever been kissed?"

"No."

The questions and answers churned around Severus in the narrowing tunnel of perception. Fear and disgust whipped around him like the winds of a cyclone, tearing at his cloak. He was disoriented and nauseous as the girl's emotions overwhelmed him.

The temperature dipped as the sound of rending cloth echoed in the still room. He wanted nothing more than to add his strength to hers. To wrap her in his robes and prevent the perverted wizard looming above her from touching her. But this was a memory. All he could do was stand by and watch the girl's torment.

Severus grimaced when the girl screeched in pain as the young Weasley thrust into her unprepared flesh. The boy was too impatient to revere her first time as the gift it was. His pounding was fierce and unrelenting as he selfishly searched for his own pleasure without regard to hers. It was nothing more than the frenzied rutting of a male beast hellbent on fulfilling the instinct to procreate: a far cry from the beautiful experience it should have been for one so innocent. Nothing at all like the amazing moment when Hermione gave herself to him, her husband, on their wedding night.

"Dearest?"

He gasped like a drowning man just rescued when the warmth of Hermione's touch pulled him from his thoughts. He opened his eyes to find the worried brown of hers only inches away. "I'm all right," he panted, struggling to regain his composure.

She simply nodded, then took his hand and held it against her chest. "When you are ready," she whispered.

And when he was ready, he would share. She would listen. They would bear the burden of the girl's memories together and heal. But until then...

"Care to snag Narcissa away from her goddaughter?" Severus glanced over at the grand society matron who seemed as adept at diaper changes as she was at organizing a debutante's ball, and smiled. "I'll get Lucius. I think one of them may be able to help identify Rose's biological mother." He gathered his wife into his arms for a moment, enjoying a last bit of peace before re-entering the poor girl's nightmares. She snuggled close, their bond communicating his need for her closeness better than words ever could. "After all, returning her name is the least we can do for the one who gave us a most unexpected treasure."

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 20

Sometimes an unwanted gift becomes the most treasured possession.

She'd known the moment he insisted on accompanying the Malfoys into the Pensieve they'd wind up here: him kneeling in supplication to the porcelain god of bathroom fixtures and her trying desperately not to berate him for foolishly believing he had the stomach for returning to such traumatizing memories so soon after experiencing them firsthand. Thankfully, he'd managed to hold himself together until he'd regained their quarters. With Minerva and Poppy to care for the Malfoys, she could focus all her energies on comforting her husband.

Hermione gently rubbed Severus' back and pressed a cool flannel against the back of his neck, reluctantly grateful he'd chosen to relinquish his longer ebony locks for the more conservative cut preferred by the staff members on the Muggle side of his department. Her heart ached with each contraction of his muscles as he retched. God, she hated seeing him like this. Perhaps it was time to discuss job options with him again.

"There's an emotional toll with most jobs, love," he reminded her once her panic over finding him heaving behind one of her mother's prized Semperflorens subsided. "And the fee for this one isn't nearly as bad as the lost appetite and knotted intestines that accompany teaching a classroom of Longbottoms whilst attempting to placate a Dark wizard and his Light counterpart."

"But now that your spy days are behind you, the cost of simply teaching Potions might not seem so high." Hermione slipped her hand from his, a fresh wave of tears stinging her tired eyes as she diverted her gaze to a clump of dandelions missed by the man her father hired to tend the lawns. "And if it weren't for my silly fears—"

The pressure of his fingers against her chin was gentle but persistent. When she relented and looked at him again, the compassion-laced desire in the inky depths of his eyes stole her breath. "Your fears aren't silly, Hermione. Nor are they unfounded. And if occasionally sacrificing the remnants of a meal is the price for your safety—" he brushed a curling tendril of hair behind her ear "—then it is a paltry sum indeed."

"But—"

He pressed the pad of his index finger against her lips. "There are no 'buts', my darling girl." She shivered at the exciting tingle his touch urged through her. "This case only affected me this way because I wasn't allowed time to assimilate to the events before I was plunged back into them." He tilted his head and offered her a sincere half-smile. "I happen to like my job, Hermione. I am finally able to make a difference, save a life because I want to, not because I've been coerced into doing so by a ruddy Unbreakable Vow. It's my chance to offer redemption instead of seek it." He cradled her face in his hands, his thumbs caressing her cheeks. "Allow me to do this, love, and I promise if it becomes too much, we'll discuss other options."

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, allowing his words to war with her worry. Drawing in a shaky breath, she nodded. "All right." She looked at him fiercely. "But if you think I won't badger you into the next dimension if—"

Severus' lips were firmly gentle against her own, damming the rest of her threat behind her passion. He sipped casually at her mouth, tongue teasing and tasting until she was too breathless and too unbalanced to remember anything but the way she loved him. Finally, he eased away. "You have my word, my darling girl." He gave her a crooked little grin. "Now let's return to this puerile wedding shower before your parents determine our rude treatment of their friends is cause for another six month sentence in the Siberian wilderness of communication."

Her husband shifted, and her memories dissipated beneath a brush of concern. Was there another wave to come? She glanced at him, studied the bruising hues left

beneath his eyes by the storm, watched for any telltale twitch warning of another round with the porcelain bowl. He lifted his eyes to hers, embarrassment warring with an apology in the dark depths. She smiled and gently wiped his face with the flannel. "Better?"

He nodded, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth to cast a freshening charm. "I will be."

Standing, he swayed slightly as he straightened. She reached for him, but he waved her off, staggering toward the sink. With a single flick of his wand, the toilet flushed and water poured from the pewter taps, filling the black marble basin. Hermione waited until the assurance he sent through their bond flooded her soul. He'd been coddled quite enough, thank you very much.

"Well, if that's the case." Hermione stood. "I'll just leave you to it and go check on—"

"Before you do." She glanced in the mirror, his dark eyes as alive in the reflection as they were when gazing directly at her. It was easy to see the flicker of an uneasy tension in them, and in the deepening crease between his eyebrows. "There is something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you quite some time ago." His sigh was deep enough to lift his shoulders perceptibly. "Something that may at least partially explain not only Ron's addictions, but Molly's unsuitability as Rose's guardian."

A band of worry tightened around her heart. Knowing how important blood bonds were in the wizarding world, she'd questioned why Poppy had adamantly refused to determine paternity. Wondered why the matron refused to be party to reporting the circumstances of Rose's birth to the Ministry—a Ministry who had a history of putting family before the actual welfare of the child. But now that the answer was within reach... Well, there were times Hermione wished her curiosity would resist and allow her to remain blissfully ignorant. "What exactly did you see in that girl's memories, Severus?"

Her husband's shields veiled his gaze for only a moment. And when they lifted, Hermione could see into the very depths of his heart. "I will tell you, my darling girl." A sad smile touched his lips. "I will tell you everything."

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 20

A secret is revealed.

Hermione swallowed visibly, increasing the guilt tugging at Severus' heart. He ran his thumb back and forth across her knuckles, offering as much comfort as his brave girl was willing to accept while she processed everything he'd told her—while she processed the betrayal by the woman she'd turned to when her own mother had distanced herself. A woman who'd fooled even him... for a time.

The Floo flared, interrupting the nightly private recital of his favorite classical piano works. "Severus!"

Poppy's panicked voice startled Severus. His robes' sleeve caught the corner of the fall board, slamming it shut as he nearly tumbled off the padded bench. Scrambling to keep his footing, he skidded into the reception room and nearly collided with the school's matron. "Poppy?!"

"It's young Mr. Weasley," she announced, grabbing Severus' hand and tugging him toward the still-green flames on the hearth. "He's been poisoned." Anger edged her words as she manhandled the Potions master into the fireplace. "Most likely because his bloody mother can't control the compunction to continually dose him with that witch's brew of hers."

Before Severus could ask what the devil the woman was babbling about, the Floo's suction squeezed the breath from his lungs.

"Why?" Hermione's voice trembled with the tears refusing to relinquish their hold on her lashes. "Why would she do something like that? She was so understanding when things ended between Ron and me." His darling girl drew a shaky breath and inched her gaze toward his. "She was the first to acknowledge that a Snape-Granger match wasn't such a..." The first tears fell, splashing down her cheeks like the raindrops that herald a coming deluge.

Severus abandoned his wife's hands and pulled her into his arms. Her shuddering sobs invaded his very core, wringing tears from his soul. Ignoring the moisture on his own cheeks, he held her close, letting the familiarity of her scent soothe his guilt. She had to know. She had to know everything in case Molly Weasley did attempt to lay claim to their little rosebud. She needed to be prepared, to be wary. They all did.

"Why, Severus?" she whispered against his chest. "Why?"

He'd asked that very same question over and over again as Albus tried to explain the reason Molly Weasley was giving her youngest son a potion even the Dark Lord would never consider administering.

"It's quite simple, my boy." Few would notice the slight dimming of the twinkle in the old wizard's eyes, but Severus knew it carried far more information than the words falling from the headmaster's lips. "The Affectus Stabilitas Potion is the only thing that will calm the young man's emotional distress."

"Bullshit, Albus," Severus spat. He could almost taste the soap flakes his mother conjured in his mouth when he mimicked his father's propensity towards the more vulgar constructs of the Queen's English favored by his milltown father. "If every Empath in the country turned to such—"

Albus' eyes hardened. "Ronald Weasley isn't your average Empath, Severus. And neither is his mother."

Severus' rage kept him from hearing the underlying message of the headmaster's statement. "That boy could have very well died tonight. The interaction between Miss Brown's brew and the elixir could have, at the very least, left the boy comatose." He ran his hands through his hair, tugging on the strands as he once again thanked providence for Harry Potter's attentiveness in at least one Potions class. "This has to stop, Albus. It is far too dangerous to allow Molly Weasley to—"

"It is far too dangerous to stop Molly's interference, Severus!"

For the first time tonight, Severus looked at the man who held his other set of puppet strings. And what he saw—the naked concern wrinkling the old wizard's face—chilled him to his very marrow. He could see the fight going out of the headmaster with a single exchange of air. "The part the Weasley family, Ron in particular, will play in young Harry's quest to vanquish Voldemort, is paramount to his success." Albus lifted his watery blue eyes to meet Severus' gaze. "And to your safety." A sad smile tugged at the wizard's lips. "I refuse to let Molly's affliction—re-manifested in her youngest son—or your damnable sense of justice stand in the way of that."

He tightened his hold on his wife. "I wish the answer was simple, my darling girl," he whispered, pressing a kiss to the curls atop her head. "But like most things in this world of ours, it isn't."

Hermione lifted her head and peered at him with the same scrutiny she gave to most of the puzzles in her life. "There's an answer to this madness?" She pulled away slightly, her red-rimmed eyes searching his face. "There's a reason Molly Weasley would place a tracking spell on me during MY birthday party, then use it to inform Ron of my whereabouts the night of the Halloween Ball." She sat even straighter, her cheeks tinted with the same outrage flashing in those amber depths. "There is a reason she stayed silent while you, fresh from your hospital bed, and Harry and Minerva and Neville and all the rest of MY friends searched frantically for me." She crossed her arms and glowered at him with such intensity, he cringed. "There is a reason." The prove-me-wrong tilt to her head completed the picture of controlled rage. "Really?"

"Indeed," Severus managed. She was quite the fearsome lioness when she was riled. Terrifyingly so, at times.

"And what, beloved," she hissed through gritted teeth, "is that reason?"

"You expect me to keep this secret?" Severus was incensed. While he'd never admit to the magnetic pull he felt from the know-it-all known as Hermione Granger, he wouldn't stand idly by and allow harm to come to her. He needed to protect her from the boy. Needed to keep them apart. Needed to prune the love beginning to blossom between those two before it became the mother and son's next twisted obsession. "Even if it costs a life?"

Albus smiled softly, the twinkle of omnipotence reigniting in his blue eyes. "The vow I'm asking you to take, the vow I've required of every person to learn their secret, cannot be broken." The headmaster's smile saddened slightly. "Even by death."

The silence between them was momentary, but weighted by another vow made months before. Another vow Severus wished desperately to have never made.

"However," Albus conceded. "Should there come a time when circumstances necessitate the sharing of this information, the vow will lift enough for you to utter the word."

Severus prayed this was the circumstance the headmaster foresaw all those years ago. Taking his bride's hands again, he drew a breath and closed his eyes. "Molly Weasley and her youngest son are changelings, Hermione. At times, they simply cannot help themselves."

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 20

Some fears are relieved; others only worsen.

Author's Note: *I apologize for the delay: Real life, a promptfest piece, and a bit of writer's block all combined to cause this slight hiatus. Hopefully, this story will be finished without any more delays.*

Chapter Fourteen

Hermione smiled as she smoothed the cream-colored satin skirt of the antique christening gown. While most thread, lace and cloth would have started a slow disintegration by a century and a half on, this looked as pristine as the day it left the dressmaker's. Stasis spells certainly had more staying power than Muggle forms of preservation. "Must be magic," she giggled, her apprehensiveness abating for just a moment only to return with a renewed heaviness in her chest a heartbeat later. "God knows we need all the magic we can get. And perhaps a little divine intervention."

"I thought divine intervention was inherent at such events."

Hermione flinched at the unexpected intrusion of her husband's velvety baritone upon her monologue. Simultaneously, the familiar shiver that lazily caressed her spine as her soul responded to its mate's presence soothed her frayed nerves. Turning, she couldn't resist the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Severus stood in the doorway, bare feet poking from beneath the hem of his midnight blue sleep pants. Their precious rosebud was curled against his chest, her tiny fist clutching the soft cotton of his white t-shirt. The naturalness of the scene made it hard to believe the baby girl had only been in their lives almost three weeks—in their home for a little over two. "Indeed it is, dearest," she sighed, "but there isn't any harm in making an additional request for benevolence as well." She trailed her fingers down the silken skirt again. "We may need all the help we can get."

"Oh, my darling girl," he exhaled. "Will you ever cease your needless worrying?"

Moving with the same grace he used when he strode the halls of Hogwarts, Severus moved to the ornate cradle Lucius and Narcissa had gifted them. It was a perfect counterpoint to the other, more adult furnishings in the master suite of the Snapes' Belgravian home. Carefully, he disentangled the minute digits from his shirt and laid the precious bundle on the downy softness of the bedding.

"Perhaps one of these days there will be no evil left in the world to worry over. Until then..." She shrugged and abandoned the Ross family christening gown to help put their little angel to bed.

Still too small to trust to the massive cot—another present from the overly indulgent godparents—installed in the nursery across the hall, Rose seemed perfectly content to share her parents' quarters. Which was for the best since they both refused to let her out of their sight... despite Severus' blusterings to the contrary. Her hands shook a little as she smoothed a tiny, rebellious ebony curl against her daughter's head, then pulled the coverlet over the newborn. Warmth infused her fingers from bottom to top when Severus covered them with his own.

"Hermione." She looked up and into the calm fierceness of his kohl eyes. "I will not let anything happen to either of you." He curled his fingers around hers and lifted them to his lips. "I swear to you."

While her heart trusted he would never betray his promise, her brain was all too aware of the risks not even a wizard of her beloved's strength could defend against. "If we could only be sure the Parkinsons—"

The calloused pad of his index finger pressed against her lips. Deep in the dark depths of his eyes, the light of assurance flamed brighter. "The Parkinsons relinquished any rights they had the moment they entered into contract with Molly Weasley." Tightly controlled fury flared in his voice. "They sold her, Hermione. As surely as they sold their youngest daughter to that... fiend. They have no claim to her." She could feel the tension spiraling through him, constricting his muscles and accelerating his pulse. "If they so much as darken the churchyard—"

It was her turn to offer comfort. Turning, she embraced him. "Her death isn't your fault, Severus." She rubbed her hands along his back until he reluctantly relaxed and brought his arms around her. "None of this is your fault," she murmured. Then, like mist across a lake, the memory of Lucius' disclosure from nearly three weeks ago pressed upon her consciousness.

Despite a Calming Draught and two glass of Ogden's Old, Lucius still looked decidedly unsteady as he related the information to the group gathered in the Potions master's sitting room. "The girl—Rose's biological mother—is Periwinkle Parkinson."

"Parkinson?" Minerva gasped. "As in Pansy Parkinson's family."

Lucius nodded wearily. "The youngest sister, yes."

A stunned, chilly silence curtained the room, and Hermione shivered. A Parkinson? How in Merlin's name did a member of the pureblooded elite wind up in Ron's Tumbledown Rookery flat? How did he even meet the younger—"

Severus' fist impacted the warm of the sofa, sounding like a clap of thunder in the quiet. "I should have known," he growled. "I should have recognized—"

"How could you?" The words cascaded from Hermione's lips before she could stop them. While she might still harbor a bit of leftover annoyance at him for keeping Ron and Molly's status from her, she wouldn't stand for him berating himself for something so far beyond his control. It was one of his worst traits... and one of his most endearing as it showed the true heart that beat beneath his unaffected facade. She rested her hand on his knee, then squeezed gently. "Given the state she was in, I dare say not even the most senior Parkinson house-elf could have recognized her."

Her husband sighed. "Perhaps."

He relaxed against the back of the sofa and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, attempting to pull her against him. And for the first time since they'd exited the bedroom, she went willingly—any lingering irritation dissipated by the compassionate grief that darkened Severus' eyes. After all, his sense of honor was one of the admirable traits that had first sparked her interest in him back when she'd only seen him as a teacher to impress. And since it was that sense of honor that bound him to Dumbledore's vow, how could she remain angry with him? "It's not your fault, dearest," she whispered as she rested her head against his shoulder. "None of this is your fault."

Hermione burrowed deeper into Severus' embrace and released her greatest fear against his chest with a soft sigh. "The Parkinsons aren't the only ones with a claim to Rose, Severus. And if Molly ever suspects the connection..." She drew a shuddering breath, her tears warm and wet against her cheeks before his t-shirt absorbed them one by one. Once again, she was living her nightmare.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 20

Nightmares are the plague of a nervous mind.

The fog curled around her like smoke and soaked into her woolen cloak, weighting it against her shoulders. Cold dampness seeped into her skin, her shivering doing little to shed its touch. The ground was a wet sponge beneath her feet. It clutched at the soles of her shoes and slowed her steps. In the dark distance, a predator snarled and its prey screeched for mercy. The hairs along her neck prickled in response to the million eyes peering at her from the forest's depths.

And somewhere in the night were her husband and their rosebud. Kidnapped. Taken. Stolen from her in the cock-crowing hours.

She carefully sidestepped a fallen tree then struggled to maintain her balance when the gravel shifted beneath her feet. Straightening, she drew a shaky breath. They were out there, and she would find them. Bring them home safe and sound. And woe be unto the ones who had pirated her greatest treasures.

A stiff breeze, filled with ice shards, whipped around her, swirling her cloak about her ankles. She blinked against the sting of her hair as it twirled around her face. They were here, close. She could smell the sweet pungency of her husband's cologne mixed with his own unique, masculine fragrance and mingled with the new odor of baby powder. If the wind would only settle a little, perhaps she could...

Rose's distressed cry rent the night air. Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she bolted toward the sound. She struggled to see through the fog, tripping over the debris-strewn path. They were here. They were here. They were...

As if parted by Moses' staff, the mist cleared. Under the suddenly clear moonlit sky, she reached the clearing in less than a dozen steps, but the scene in front of her froze her feet to the ground.

Severus was chained to a granite slab, Rose lying exposed across his chest. The sinews of his arms were stretched taut as he struggled against his restraints. Struggled to comfort their daughter through touch. Although his face was as passive as always, Hermione could see his agitation etched in the deep furrow between his brows. The stirring gusts carried the gentle sound of his soothing lullaby to her ears. Her heart ached at its beauty in the midst of the darkness.

Two figures clad in the familiar tattered, hooded robes of Dementors hovered above her beloveds, their malignancy fouling the atmosphere. As Hermione watched, the two soul stealers angled toward Severus and Rose, the tension of imminent attack thickening the air. If she didn't move now...

"Take me!" She rushed forward, Gryffindor courage churning her legs. "Leave them alone and take me!"

Both dark figments of death turned toward her. Ron's familiar cerulean eyes shone from beneath one of the hoods. Soundlessly, he swept toward her, a lecherous smile curling what remained of his humanlike lips. His hand, bony and disfigured reached...

"Hermione?"

Fear whitened her complexion to near translucent in the pale moonlight streaming through the cottage's guest room window. The mottled silver beams illuminated the tears

leaking from beneath her closed eyes and seemed to dance on the glistening trails bisecting her cheeks. Ragged breaths expanded then shrank her chest as if she were a marathoner mid-race. Unintelligible syllables with the rhythm of pleas tumbled from her sleep-slackened lips and tugged at Severus' heartstrings.

With Rose's christening tomorrow, and Hermione's pent-up nerves over the Weasleys attending the reception afterwards, he should have expected this. Of course, he thought the sleep deprivation that frequented the lives of a newborn's parents coupled with the long drive to the small village near Edinburgh would render them both too exhausted to dream. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

"Hermione," he whispered. He leaned over her but allowed only his breath to caress her skin... He'd learned early on she didn't respond positively to touch whilst in the clutches of a nightmare. Wandlessly he cast Muffliato around them, cocooning them in their own little world while protecting the peaceful sleep of their newborn daughter sequestered in the bassinet at the end of their bed as well as the other inhabitants of the small cottage. "Wake up my darling girl."

She whimpered in her sleep, her back arching as if fighting against some invisible restraint tethering her to her dream world. Carefully, he brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek willing to risk a nightmare-induced retaliation to break the hold it had on his wife. "Hermione."

"Take me instead," she screamed, bolting upright and clawing at the sheets. "Please."

"Hermione." He caught her from behind, pinning her arms to her side to keep them both safe as he attempted to rouse her further. "Come on, love." He nuzzled her wild curls, easing them away from cheeks with his nose, inhaling as he went the intoxicating citrus sweetness that clung to her hair after her nightly shower. "Your safe," he soothed against her ear. "Open those beautiful eyes and see." He shifted enough to hold her captive against his chest with only one arm. He trailed the fingers of his now free hand along her jaw. "I've got you, darling girl. Always."

Her eyelids twitched, and he held his breath. Gently, he brushed his thumb across her lips. "That's it, love. Come back to me."

With a sharp gasp, Hermione woke. Her eyes darted, searching and filled with confusion. He released her enough to shift into her peripheral vision. Although they'd spent enough time in this guest room over the last few years, the nightmare would leave her disoriented, frightened. "I'm right here," he murmured. He brushed his hand against her back. "I'm always right here."

"Severus."

Without warning, his witch launched herself at him. Reflexes honed to razor-sharp precision by years of servitude to two equally manic despots reacted before his mind actually registered the movement and kept them from tumbling off the bed. Her quiet sobs rattled through him as if they came from his own chest. "It's all right, love," he cooed, enfolding her in an embrace so tight air was barely able to infiltrate their lungs with every breath. "It's all right."

"I couldn't save you," she whimpered, her voice muffled against his chest. "But Ron and Molly..." She shivered, and Severus held her closer still. "They were hideous, hovering over you and Rose in those ragged robes. I tried to..."

Dementors. He groaned softly. Why in hell had Minerva included that little detail during her explanation of Molly and Ron's affliction? Probably because, at the end of the day, she was still a bloody Gryffindor who too often spoke without first engaging mind.

"Changelings, once their souls have reached saturation with the dark magic they absorb, must either find a pure soul to cleanse their own, or they become Dementors." The headmistress' voice strolled around his memory while Hermione's ramblings blunted to the soft sniffles of slowly recovering composure. Reclining against the antique headboard with his witch still in his arms, he once again cursed the day he learned the depths to which Albus Dumbledore would sink for his damnable 'Greater Good'.

Severus spun to face his one-time mentor. "You can't honestly consider it safe for the boy to remain here, Albus. At the least he's unstable, at the most, he's a danger to both Potter and Miss Granger. If he were to turn on one of them once they leave the safety of Hogwarts..."

"He won't, Severus."

The confidence in the old wizard's blue eyes grated on Severus' nerves. He stalked toward the desk, his anger rising with every step. "You aren't omnipotent, old man."

"True." Albus took off his glasses and polished them as if he didn't have a care in the world. "But young Mr. Weasley has Miss Granger just as Molly has Arthur. Her innocence will cleanse his soul when the time comes."

Something tingled in Severus' chest. Something strange, yet familiar. A warning of sorts. "Only if Miss Granger stays with him." He fought to keep the anger from nudging the volume of his voice towards a shout. "They are bloody sixteen years old, Albus. There is no guarantee..."

"I don't need a guarantee, Severus." The normal warmth in those blue eyes chilled. "As a Changeling, Ron will clarify the darkness for Harry, and Hermione will cleanse the darkness from Ron's soul. Just as Arthur does for Molly."

The tingle in his chest intensified. "And if Miss Granger is meant for another?" The question slipped from his lips before he realized the thought had formed.

Albus' eyes narrowed dangerously. "Do not be so foolish as to think such destinies can be overcome, Severus. Ask Poppy if you do not believe me."

Severus slid down in the bed, taking Hermione with him. For all Albus' plotting, his death thankfully ended whatever control he'd exerted over that relationship. Plus, the plot to allow Severus to die 'like the good pawn he was' failed. Thank God the plot failed.

And thank God his Hermione had been meant for him and not the redheaded Changeling that was still the stuff of her nightmares. Now all he had to do was keep those nightmares from coming true.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 20

We are family.

Thwack!

Severus peered over the top edge of the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet* in time to catch the young man surreptitiously rub his offended knuckles and glower at his grandmother. Isobel Ross McGonagall presided over the pre-service gathering like a warrior queen, wielding an ancient work-worn wooden spoon with the prowess of an expert swordsman. "Your aunt may allow you such liberties at that school of hers, Crispin Malcolm McGonagall," the elderly witch warned shaking the spoon within inches of the young man's nose, "but you have no such privileges here." She nodded that curt nod Minerva must have learned at her knee. "You'll wait like the rest of us."

"But Gran, I'm hungry."

Merlin, but Severus hoped his rosebud never learned to pitch her voice in such a nerve-curdling way.

"Be that as it may," Isobel warned, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Touch those tattie scones before we've all gathered round the table and your grandda' has said grace, and you'll draw back a nub." She wagged the spoon at him one more time. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Nursing his injured pride and hiding his abused hand in his pocket, the boy retreated from the kitchen. Severus hoped the wizardkin's fingers would recover in time for him to properly grasp the hilt of his wand come Monday morning. Of course, the rescue of a favorite pastry was certainly worth the sacrifice of a few days of silly wand waving.

"Severus."

Like one of Pavlov's famous lab mutts, Severus' spine straightened at the sound of the matriarch's voice. While family rank alone awarded her his respect, she was not a witch to be trifled with. Young Crispin's recently bruised knuckles were proof of that. "Yes, Gran?"

"Go fetch Hermione, lad." Compassion softened Isobel's blue-eyed gaze. "While she needs the rest, 'tis time to get this day started."

Although he'd not said a word about Hermione's restless night, he suspected the McGonagall matriarch knew. Call it a highly developed intuition, or, perhaps, a legitimate gift...unlike Trelawney and the other crackpots with their 'well developed third eye'...but she knew. Despite the advanced silencing charms and his unaffected demeanor when he entered the kitchen, she knew. Just as she seemed to sense *everything* well in advance of the need. Like the necessity of welcoming him into the family fold just hours after his marking at Voldemort's hand.

The McGonagall matriarch held the slender blade just above the juncture of his wrist and hand. The crimson stains from the cuts she'd inflicted on the others gathered in the room slowly oozed toward the deadly tip. "Do you, Severus Tobias Snape, wish to become blood kin to the McGonagall clan? Will you become the descendent of Robert Malcolm and Isobel Ross McGonagall? Will you bond with Minerva Gwyneth as your mother and allow Robert William and Malcolm Crispin to claim you as their nephew? Will you accept the McGonagall blood into your veins?"

Guilt constricted his throat to the point it ached to force the words through it. "I..."

Heart pounding against his ribs, he closed his eyes as bile raced toward his mouth, his stomach undulating like one of the cars on the twisting tracks of a roller coaster. Images from the night before assailed him behind his closed lids. The smell of burnt flesh filled his nostrils while the words of the vow he'd taken echoed in his ears. The things he'd promised... "I can't," he whispered.

The elder Robert's hand closed around his arm, the gnarled knuckles and age-discolored skin belying its strength. "Severus, lad..."

"I can't!"

The cottage's electrics surged in response to the unconscious lashing out of his magic as his emotions surged. Afraid of causing irreparable damage, he stormed from the room to hopefully find solace in the back garden.

The echo of the door's resounding slam had barely dissipated when the soothing presence of Isobel McGonagall washed over him. Embarrassed by the inner turmoil, he refused to acknowledge her, focusing instead on the Nottingham catchfly blooming beneath the quarter moon.

"Severus?" Her warm hand against his back brought tears to a boil in his eyes. "Why can't you do this, lad?"

Swallowing the knot of guilt, he forced his answer through his roughened throat. "I don't deserve this." He closed his eyes, his Adam's apple convulsing in his neck. "I don't deserve to accept your generous offer of familial comfort. Not after..." Grief choked his words, urging him to shake his head in an attempt to clear it.

Another gentle pat to his shoulder did little to help. "Look at me, Severus."

His inborn stubbornness added to his sense of self-preservation, and he turn away farther still.

"Severus." The blasted witch not only tugged on his chin with such force that he had no choice but to swivel in his direction, she also insinuated herself between him and any distraction the flowering borders could provide. "Oh, my dear lad, you deserve so much more than this humble..."

"But I don't!" He jerked away from her, pacing nearly the full length of the garden before he spun on his heels and stalked back towards the family matriarch. When he was close enough for her to see the details but no touch, he shoved his left shirtsleeve to his elbow and clenched his fist to highlight the brand on the inside of his forearm. "This keeps me from deserving anything but to wallow with the swine and await the devil's pleasure! Can't you see that?!"

Isobel's aged, but fine-boned hand rested easily over the mark. "What I see is a young man who made a terrible mistake." The warmth from her fingers eased the sting of the newly marked skin. "A mistake that is not beyond rectifying."

"A mistake that has cost me my soul," he ground out through gritted teeth.

"No, lad." Isobel tightened her grip, the pressure of her fingertips gentle but insistent against his flesh. "Perhaps it cost you this patch of sinew and muscle, but never your soul. And definitely not your heart."

She sounded so sure, so confident, he was almost persuaded. "How do you know?"

The old witch patted his arm, then ambled to a nearby bench. Her body language beckoned him to follow. "Tell me Severus, were you christened?"

Severus sighed, his heart pinching in his chest. "Yes."

"Confirmed?"

Tears welled again as memories surged. "Yes."

"And did you mean the vows you gave the good rector?"

"Every word," Severus whispered, a niggle of hope fighting against the tide of despair.

Isobel took his hand and tugged him toward the vacant seat beside her. For the first time since entering the cottage, he complied willingly. "Then that is how I know, love." She smiled gently, her blue eyes flashing with confidence. "Your soul is already owned, Severus, and will not be easily relinquished."

Severus blinked, the desire to believe her assurance quickly overtaking his shame. "But..."

She tightened her grip on his fingers. "Your soul is owned, lad. Never doubt it. Now let us bargain for your heart. Hold it in trust so it will be whole when a witch worthy of it stakes her claim."

Visions of Lily filtered through the fog of despondency. Despite her choices, he loved her. Always. "There will never be another," he whispered.

Isobel chuckled warmly, a note of quiet smugness in her gaze. "Oh, there is a lass, lad. Trust me on that. There is a lass...and she will be perfect for you."

And there it was. The young witch currently hold up in the room they shared whenever they visited his blood-bonded family was the lass Isobel assured him was in his future that night so long ago. And she was absolutely perfect.

"Severus."

The sharpness in the matriarch's tone pierced Severus' thoughts and pulled him back to the present. He turned to find her glaring daggers at him, her aged hands fisted on her matronly hips. "Are you going to rouse the lass or do I need to set Agnes and her bagpipes on her?"

"For the love of all things holy, Severus," Robert McGonagall the elder groaned, his voice still strong despite decades in the pulpit, "go get your wife and spare our ears." The old man shivered slightly. "The way that girl plays *Scotland, the Brave*... 'Tis enough to chill even the most patriotic Scotsman's blood."

Shaking with laughter, Severus strode down the hall to awaken his wife and remind her there was nothing to fret about. With a family such as his by their side, they could take on the world and all the evil in it.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 20

There's nothing like a McGonagall family breakfast.

The heat of the McGonagall matriarch's intense gaze touched Hermione the moment she and Severus entered the family dining room. Fortright, demanding respect, yet unquestionably gentle, those blue eyes followed her even as their owner commanded the movement of the food down the refractory table like Wellington at Waterloo. They widened in approval when she accepted a dish, then narrowed if she didn't heap a healthy portion onto her plate. They challenged her to disagree while holding her in a soft, accepting embrace...just as they had the first time Severus brought her to this cottage.

"So tell me, lass. Do you think you belong on there?"

Hermione started at the stern alto invasion of her silent investigation of the family tree hovering between them. "Honestly," she sighed, "no." She traced the name Severus Tobias Prince-McGonagall Snape where it hung beneath the name Minerva McGonagall. "But, I do love him. With all my heart."

A slightly arthritic hand punched through the image, urging the names to disappear in a swirl of golden smoke. Isobel McGonagall's fingers were warm and strong as they settled just about Hermione's wrist. A warm smile shifted her wrinkles toward benevolence and welcome. "That's all it takes, m'dear." With the subtlest of gestures, the lineage reappeared with Hermione's name indelibly linked to Robert McGonagall's oldest grandson.

"Gran's tattie scones are magic, aren't they?"

The bright, cherubic voice drew Hermione from the memory. She turned to the five-year-old seated at her left elbow. Young Elspeth McGonagall was all big blue eyes, honey-brown curls, and innocent earnestness. Just as Hermione had been before...

Dark memories tried to follow the fleeting thought through the small breach in her composed mind, pushing firmly to widen the gap. She quickly clamped down on the melancholy, refusing to allow it to steal the tranquility Severus and this family instilled. "Indeed," she murmured. The child's giggles managed to restore the more positive side of her nature. She slid a forkful of the breakfast delicacy between her lips, then winked at the imp. She chewed slowly, the savory flavor fortifying her flagging courage. Just as, she was sure, Isobel McGonagall intended.

Spearing the final bit of egg that would clean her plate, Hermione contemplated the elderly witch anchoring one end of the table. While Elspeth's observation was somewhat accurate, it didn't reflect the whole truth. It wasn't the food that was magic; it was the chef who imbued each morsel she prepared with that most mystical of powers. And Hermione was sure the deep, abiding vein of the stuff running through the McGonagall matriarch was what gave her the kind of insight Sybil Trelawney only dreamed of. The kind of insight that gave Severus a family to cling to when the rest of the world turned its back. That gave them the assurance that Rose Gwyneth Snape was completely accepted as the newest beloved great-grandchild.

"Let's get a good look at this little lass, shall we?" Isobel settled Rose in the cradle of her lap. With practiced fingers, the old witch gently peeled away the blanket. "There's Severus' eyes and hair, only with your curls." She touched one of the ebony ringlets lining the top of the tiny scalp. "Your nose and the lad's..."

Hermione fought to keep her smile from faltering as her stomach swooped beneath the weight of the secret. Her mind screamed she wasn't theirs. They'd talked about this, Severus and she. Held lengthy discussion on whom to place "in the know" and whom to keep out. Considered the consequences of keeping the group to the minimum few who saw them consistently enough to realize the physical changes that accompanied pregnancy never happened to her body. And although the elder McGonagalls were included in the list, the majority of the extended family gathered round the cottage's expanded lounge were not. So in a sense, the revered matriarch was playing a role... and playing it quite well. Still, to hear her make those comparisons of Rose's looks to their own, comparisons she wished with her very soul were real...

"She's a fine specimen," Isobel announced, efficiently re-swaddling the newborn. "In fact." She carefully settled Rose into the crook of her elbow. The twinkle in her blue eyes seemed eerily reminiscent of the one that still visited the painted eyes of Hogwarts' former formidable headmaster. "There's only one thing keeping the wee lass from

absolute perfection." She shifted the baby into Severus' arms. Determination that left little room for argument invaded the unwavering gaze boring into the man. "She needs an official welcome into the family."

Hermione ran the pad of her thumb across the tiny scar bisecting the juncture of her left ring finger and palm. The thin mark left from Rose's welcoming tingled slightly as the memory swam forward.

Once the younger members of the clan retired to their own homes for the evening, they gathered in the garden. Bundled against the October chill, Hermione waited as Isobel unwrapped the ceremonial blade. "Why are we doing this?" she whispered to her husband, garnering heat where she leaned against his shoulder. "It wasn't necessary when we married. Why is it necessary now?"

"Because the circumstances are different, m'dear." The firmness in the matriarch's voice brooked no further discussion. "The marriage bonds linked you to this family through Severus."

"Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone." Robert McGonagall winked, his brogue thick with amusement. "Ring any bells for ye, lass?"

Heat flooded Hermione's cheeks. Had she been standing closer to the pile of leaves young Crispin had been forced to rake as punishment from an infringement against the McGonagall family evening meal protocol, she was certain to have sparked an inferno. "Perhaps," she hedged.

"And that's quite enough from you, Robert McGonagall," Isobel admonished over the rumble of his laughter. "No need to traumatize your grandchildren." Clearing her throat, she turned her attention back to the young family. "Hermione, Severus, if you would remove the gloves from your left hands and uncover the wee lass' left foot..."

"Hermione."

Malcolm's voice torpedoed the memory, submerging Hermione back into the present. Something unsettling lurked beneath the calm tenor and urged the turn of her head toward the dining room's door. Like the first split second after an ice bath, the shiver stalled her heart, gooseflesh marring her skin. Her sharp gasp pierced the sudden silence in the room, and then the words scrambled from her throat. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 20

The Grangers arrive.

Despite the trembling in her fingers, Hermione deftly knotted the navy-colored silk tie into the perfect Windsor at the base of her husband's throat. Just as she'd done every time he'd donned a three-piece suit since they had returned from their honeymoon.

"Three weeks in Greece hasn't dulled my senses that much, witch." Severus' fingers tried to nudge her's aside, but her Gryffindor tenacity edged his Slytherin resolve, but only slightly. "I am still capable of dressing myself." The warmth in his eyes belied the slight bite of his tone.

Hermione grinned. "I never implied that you'd lost the skill, dearest," she soothed. She gave the knot one final tug to center it against the placket of his crisp blue dress shirt, then smoothed her hand down the length of dark blue silk to relish in his heat before he added the layer of wool that was his waistcoat. "I'm merely providing my husband with the same service I remember my gran gave my gramps."

Severus' chuckle was as rich, dark and comforting as a mug of the finest cocoa. "And here I thought I'd married a modern witch."

"You have, you git." She shoved his shoulder. "And don't you forget it." Scenes from the mornings spent in her grandparents' care swirled in her mind. Watching Gran knot Gramps' tie. Catching them canoodling in the moments just after the perfect Windsor appeared under his Adam's apple. The way their eyes sparked when they looked at each other—just like Severus' did when he looked at her. Her grandparents' love made her believe in magic long before she ever held her first wand.

Melancholy replaced those thoughts as the heaviness of their absence from this world settled in. It had been nearly four years since they disappeared in a boating accident Presumed drowned the police said, though no bodies had been recovered. So her parents had planned the memorial service, without her input as usual. But she'd been too numb to care about anything, save Severus' presence and support. It had been the first family crisis—

Warmth invaded her hands, drawing her from the past. She found then gently encased in his. His eyes were dark and filled with curious worry. "Hermione?"

She smiled softly, her heart overflowing with love. "My grandmother did this for my grandfather." Hermione gave Severus' fingers a gentle squeeze. "When I asked her why, she said, 'Tis the little things that make love strong, m'dear. Remember that, no matter how independent you think you need to be.'" Hermione shrugged slightly, her cheeks starting to heat. "Considering how cool my parents are with each other and how warm my grandparents were, I figured Gran must have been on to something." She eased one hand from his so she could touch his cheek and run her thumb along his lower lip. "In that moment, I vowed to follow my Gran's example when the time came. Right down to tying my husband's tie every morning." She lifted her eyebrows and offered her most sultry grin. "And helping him out of it every night."

Severus' warm breath ghosted over the pad of her thumb, his teeth following a fraction of a second later. Heat curled and flickered low in her belly. Had she been tying the length of silk around his neck, or loosening it? "Then I shall take pleasure in these little things, madam, be honored to be the one upon whom they are bestowed, and pursue the discovery of my own small tokens to heap upon you in returning measure." He drew both of her hands to his mouth and pressed soft kisses to her knuckles.

Hermione shivered at the seductiveness wrapping his voice and the touch of his velvet lips. Whether his intention or not, that tone never failed to reduce her insides to a quivering pile of anticipation and desire. God, but if he could only bottle that voice, the demand for Amortentia would drop by half. Of their own free will, her fingers reached for the russet silk again, intent on unknitting it. Surely he didn't need to return to the office today. After all, he did work from home from time to time. Perhaps—

"Hermione."

Their bond snapped tighter around her soul, holding it with the same safe strength his arms provided. Drawing a deep breath in an attempt to calm the thudding beneath her breastbone, she slid her arms around his waist and rested her head against his chest. "We asked them not to come."

Severus wrapped his arms around her, pulling her impossibly closer. "Perhaps we should have worded the request more strongly," he gently advised in his soft baritone.

"Oh, it was worded strongly enough," Hermione sighed. "They simply chose to ignore our feelings on the subject." She pushed away from him and stalked across the room to the bureau to retrieve the diamond studs he'd presented to her as a wedding gift into her ears. "It's just farther proof that my parents are determined to have a relationship with us on their terms, not ours." A myriad of scenarios regarding the coming event swam in her mind. And none of them had positive outcomes. An overwhelming dread threatened to drive her to her knees, causing her to grasp the edges of the bureau's marble top. "They could ruin everything," she whispered, unable to stem the tears.

"I doubt it is as dire as all that," her husband soothed. He wrapped his arms around her again, and she pressed herself against his solidness. "After all, they only know what we've told them." He breathed a kiss to the top of her head, his voice sounding confident. Yet the trembling she felt at her back betrayed his own uncertainty. "You were not pregnant when we saw them at Christmas. Once we discovered that you were expecting, they had cut off all communication with us again—"

"And we thought it more prudent to my health, and that of the baby's, to refrain from contacting them until after the birth." The disappointed shadows in her parents' eyes from that night a few weeks earlier still haunted her thoughts. She closed her eyes against the image and swallowed the self-loathing that accompanied it. This was the way it needed to be to keep Rose safe. "What if they say something to Molly?"

"From what I've witnessed, your parents will not want to remain for the reception." Severus assured. One more gentle squeeze, the brush of his velvet lips across hers, and he returned to the task of dressing, his long, elegant fingers making quick work of the buttons on his waistcoat. "Therefore, the chances their paths will cross the Weasleys is less than ten percent." He smirked at her over his shoulder, his dark eyes sparking with humor. "Give or take a two percent margin of error of course."

Hermione laughed for the first time in days. Truly laughed. And it felt wonderful, lifting the veil of depression from her shoulders. "You really are a bloody git. You know that, right?"

Severus winked. His bright, confident smile acted as a buoy to her soul. They would do this. Despite the setback of her parents' arrival. Despite the potential danger Molly Weasley embodied. Despite the circumstances and the risks and everything else, they would do this. They would survive this day.

And so would Rose.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 20

Rose is christened.

On most Sundays, the McGonagall family inhabited a pew six rows back on the epistle side of St. James' sanctuary. But this wasn't most Sundays.

Trailing her family toward the front row of seats, Hermione tried to focus on Severus's warm touch in the hollow of her spine and the welcome weight of their daughter in her arms instead of the pressing gazes of the rest of the congregation. Despite the way reporters like Rita Skeeter portrayed her, Hermione preferred life outside the limelight. It was one of the things that still made thoughts of returning more fully to the wizarding world turbulent at best. She was certain the minute her return to Hogwarts was publicized, as was required by the Board of Governors, the speculation over her extended absence from all things magical would expand like Fiendfyre until another controversy dispersed it. Her greatest fear was that she and Severus would be devoured by it before another target was found.

Whispers and murmured commentaries on her dress, Rose's diminutive size, and Severus' dignified stride trailed behind them like streamers on the fins of a kite. Hermione sighed, wishing she could somehow dissolve into the woodwork. At least here the scrutiny was curiosity-based instead of malicious. And it was to be expected given the positions foisted upon her at marriage—granddaughter of the kirk's pastor emeritus and niece of the currently serving minister. It was second nature for congregants to be a bit nosy when it came to the family of their shepherd... even those who were semi-regular visitors.

Reaching their assigned seats, Hermione handed Rose to Severus and slid in next to Minerva. She sat gingerly, wondering once again if she were overdoing the recovering mother routine. With only Narcissa's experience to draw from, and knowing every woman's experience differed, she worried she would slip up somehow—make some faux pas that would expose her duplicity and alert the Weasleys.

The Weasleys. Hermione involuntarily glanced across the aisle where Ginny and Draco were seated with Harry and Luna. Although Ginny had no contact with her family—and hadn't since she chose her love for the Malfoy heir over loyalty to the feud that had raged for decades—there was always a chance for reconciliation. Would blood ties prove stronger than the vow Severus had extracted from her when Rose's existence was revealed? Would she inadvertently allow something to slip in conversation with Harry or Luna that would cause one of them to question the validity of...

"We didn't have a choice, love," Severus murmured as he moved Rose to his shoulder.

Hermione groaned, and heat touched her cheeks. The bond they shared was such a gentle, constant shadow, she often forgot it existed—until Severus' thoughts breezed across her mind, hinting at his emotions. Given her state, hers were most likely shouting at him. "I know," she sighed. "I simply wish things were different."

The warmth from his hand against hers brought instantaneous comfort. His darkened irises offered hope and assurance as he held her gaze gently. "Draco and Ginevra are simply too entwined with our lives to exclude them from the circumstances surrounding this little rosebud's entrance into the family." He glanced over his shoulder at the couple seated behind them, his scowl deepening. "Much like his meddling parents."

Hermione chuckled as she placed a bit of white linen over her husband's shoulder. "And you wouldn't have them any other way."

"Sometimes I think I might like to try," he groused as he repositioned their daughter so any accidental discharge was caught by the flannel and not his best suit.

"Which is why you refuse to let anything, save the threat of world annihilation, interfere with the weekly gossip session disguised as a chess match."

He leaned close—his arched eyebrow the only warning offered—and assaulted her senses with his subtly delicious scent. Then his breath ghosted a path to her ear as he intensified his attack. "It's a good thing we are in church, my darling wife," he growled. "For if we were anywhere other than this holy sanctuary, I can assure you, witch, you would pay dearly for your cheek. As it stands..."

Ill-prepared as she was for the sensory blitz Severus employed in retribution for the remark, her brain attempted to form the words of protest, but her heart refused to lodge them. When it came to her husband, she was simply a lost cause. He pressed his lips to hers, lingering long enough to further quell her resolve without being inappropriate for the setting. Still, it made her shiver and wish for the privacy of their bedroom at the cottage. Or better yet, their own residence in London.

She cupped his cheek as he drew away. Gazing into the endless blackness of his eyes, she caught sight of his eternal devotion shimmering amongst the strands of amusement in their depths. The intensity slammed into her gut and urged the words past her lips without conscious thought to time, place, or company. "I love you, Severus Snape." She dragged the pad of her thumb slowly across his lips, removing the faint dusty pink stain of her lipstick. "Beyond all reason."

His mouth curled into the gentle smile reserved only for her. "Beyond all measure," he murmured, then pressed a kiss to her thumb. "Always."

Around them, the world chugged on., but in the cocoon of their bond, surrounded by its strength, nothing existed. No congregation of well-wishers. No friends or family. No threats. Only the two of them, safe from—

A tiny whimper of protest intruded, shattering the moment. Hermione chuckled and dropped her hand to the curve of her daughter's head. "Do I detect the fragrance of jealousy from our little rosebud?"

Severus grinned. "Never." He shifted his grip on the tiny girl, freeing his right arm. Settling a little more comfortably into corner of the worn wooden pew, he stretched it along the rounded top behind Hermione and casually curled his fingers toward her upper arm. "There is no room for such emotion when one is confident she is loved and treasured above all things." The tips of his fingers started a subtle glide against the burnished orange fabric of her autumn-inspired dress, extracting a delicious pucker from the flesh beneath and a heated shiver from her spine. "And in this, I will make sure my girls suffer no doubts."

"How very reassuring."

Lucius' cultured drawl, delivered as it was from the space directly over their shoulders, startled Hermione. She flinched and discreetly attempted to distance herself slightly from her husband. But Severus would have none of it. He tightened his grip on her upper arm until she stilled. Only once she was settled back against his side did he turn his glare on Rose's godfather. "So glad you approve, Lucius."

The blond aristocrat smirked and reached to retrieve the precious bundle resting on Severus' shoulder. "Of course I approve, man." He settled the infant into the crook of his arm and grinned at her contented gurgles. The Malfoy patriarch was clearly as besotted with the tiny girl as they were. "And I would gladly extol the virtues of your protective nature ad nauseum if our attention was not needed elsewhere." He nodded toward the front where old Mrs. MacTavish was approaching the lectern. "It appears we are beginning."

Whether we are ready or not, Hermione mused, swallowing against the sudden surge of nausea. Dear God, let us be ready.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 20

Severus inspects the security of the marquee before the celebration begins

Thanks to the atmospheric charms Malcolm and his wife weaved into its interior, the marquee erected within the sheltering circle of a grove of Scots pines provided a comfortable oasis from the chilly late October afternoon for guests invited to share in the celebration following Rose's christening. Severus carefully folded his coat, laid it over the back of one of the chairs, and breathed in the muted smells of autumn mingled with the odors coming from the warming trays on the refreshment tables. Soon, he would join the others in the cottage to enjoy an intimate lunch before the chaos of the reception began. But for now, he had a more pressing task to attend to.

Carefully, he prowled the perimeter of the tent, searching for undetected entry points and plotting observation points that would allow surveillance without calling attention to those entrusted with the task. Nothing could be taken for granted. He would do everything in his power to ensure Molly Weasley left the event completely ignorant of his baby girl's true heritage.

While he searched for any possible oversight in security, he numbered the favorable outcomes of the day. The service went off without a hitch. Rose was a trooper, cooing gently and offering gurgling smiles to her uncle as he held her in the crook of his arm and poured the water from his cupped palm to the top of her delicate ebony curls. Lucius and Narcissa looked as proud as the peacocks that adorned the lawns of Malfoy Manor when they took their place as the child's godparents. The McGonagall clan looked appropriately delighted over their newest member...Minerva's smile almost blinding bright. In fact, the young Miss Snape seemed to cast an enchantment over the entire congregation, wrapping them almost as tightly around her tiny finger as she had her parents.

The only dark spot, so far, was the appearance of Hermione's parents in the midst of the assembly. His beloved cringed as they attempted to play the doting grandparents to a child they'd barely acknowledged a few days before.

"Why did you come?" The sadness edging Hermione's glare as she eyed her parents warily nearly broke his heart. Of all the things he'd seen and experienced in his forty-odd years of life, the rending of his wife's relationship with her parents was the hardest to witness...as there was no cause for it beyond the elder Grangers' ability to hold a grudge against actions meant to spare their lives. "After the way you accused us..." Seeing Hermione draw her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes brimming, he stepped closer, wrapping her in his strength by settling his hand against the small of her back. The breath she drew was shaky, but her voice was steady when the words came. "We asked you specifically to stay away and not spoil our daughter's..."

"We aren't here to spoil anything, Hermione."

His father-in-law's voice had an edge to it that made Severus' spine straighten to an even more magnificent height. He'd promised Hermione he would not allow anyone...family, friend, or foe...to infringe on the day's joy. His little rosebud's head bobbed against his shoulder as she tried to snuggle into her favorite spot against his neck, and his resolve soared. There was more at stake now than just the two of them. "Yet you are here," he growled in his most quietly deadly tone. He patted the baby's back and purposeful kept his voice at a near-whisper in deference to her comfort and the quietude of this holy place. "And you expect us accept you didn't mean to spoil things?" He glared at Hermione's mother then turned the full intensity of his displeasure on her father. "What is the Muggle saying?" He slid his hand from his beloved's back to her hip and urged her closer to his side. "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck..."

"Now see here, young man." Mr. Granger took a step forward, but Severus didn't flinch. He handed Rose over to Hermione and nudge them behind him slightly, but he stood his ground. He had, after all, been intimidated by stronger men than the middle-aged dentist. "How dare you accuse us..."

"You mean the way you accused your daughter?" Severus stalked forward until he towered over his short, squat adversary. "Have you not accused her of your exact sin?" He slid his gaze to his mother-in-law. "Of spoiling things for you? Of making appearances at gatherings in order to bring attention to herself? Of only contacting you when it was convenient to show her concern for the benefit of her friends and colleagues?" He shifted his body slightly to encompass both elder Grangers within the shadow of his

displeasure. "Shall I continue to list the transgressions you choose to lay at your daughter's feet to justify your continued need to keep her at arm's length unless it is to your advantage to portray the doting parents, or would you prefer I extol the virtues of your perpetual desire to keep Hermione tethered to her guilt despite knowing she intended nothing more sinister than to protect the two people she loved most in the world at the time from a psychopathic wizard with the humanity of a cobra?" he spat, his patience thinning by the second. How these two spitefully vindictive people could begat such a kind, compassionate being as his beloved... "Now you will..."

"Severus." Even through the layers of wool and cotton, he could feel her warmth where her hand laid against his arm. She wanted to handle this. She needed to handle this. Nodding slightly, he withdrew far enough to give the illusion of acquiescence while remaining close enough to intervene. A small smile was thanks enough as she turned her attention to the couple who'd given her life. "Why are you here?"

It was his mother-in-law who spoke...the tears in her eyes genuine instead of the crocodile kind she usually employed. "Because we have finally realized what our actions have denied us." She lifted her hand as if to reach out and touch her daughter and granddaughter, hesitated, then dropped it back to her side, her shoulders slumping slightly as she did. "We missed your entire pregnancy with Rose, do you realize that? There were no shopping trips to help prepare for her arrival. No baby showers where we could surprise you and Severus with the perfect cot or cradle..."

"Those items have been provided," Severus interjected, unwilling to allow his wife to bear another slathering of guilt applied by her ungrateful family. "By dear friends and my family."

"But not by us."

His father-in-law's voice was gruff and stormy, but Severus would not be dissuaded. "By your choice." Irritation climbed until his hand twitched toward his wand. "By your actions, not ours."

"Don't you think we bloody well know that?" Hermione's father rounded on him, his mouth tense and the lines around his eyes pinched and drawn. "Don't you think we went away from your home the night we discovered Rose's existence berating ourselves for allowing our damnable pride, our misplaced prejudices to open such a wide chasm between us?"

"Severus?"

The voice that used to send a shiver of revulsion down his spine brought his attention back to the interior of the marquee. He turned to find James Potter's son standing just inside the curtained opening. Although their association with Hermione forced them into civility, he still found the friendship that evolved surprising. While the messy-haired wizard wasn't as close a confidant as Lucius or his adoptive uncles, he trusted the boy on a level far above most. "Harry." An aura of apprehension shrouded the young man, awakening Severus' dormant level of perception perpetually employed in his career as spy for the Order. He tugged his usual calm more firmly about him. No reason he should alert the Chosen One to his heightened level of anxiety. "The ladies' cooing over young Rose prove too much for you?"

The young wizard chuckled and shook his head. "Not really." He stepped around a few chairs and tables as he made his way closer to Severus' position. "Though I am afraid Luna may become even more clucky after today."

"Urging you to get on with it, is she?"

Although not as resonant as his, Harry's laughter joined with his own struck a calming note. The boy was a trusted ally. Another protector of those Severus held most dear...whether the younger wizard learned the truth or not.

"Not really," Harry shrugged. His cheeks colored slightly. "Though I did see a flicker of something in her eyes when she held your daughter."

Severus chuckled again. He knew exactly the flame his friend spoke of. He'd seen it in his beloved's eyes the moment she laid eyes on the tiny bundle in the rubbish heap in Weasley's filthy bedsit. And, in that moment, he'd known resistance was futile. "Just be sure to send your Patronus in nine months' time to announce the arrival of the first little Potter."

"You mean like you and Hermione did when Rose arrived?"

He flinched at the undertone of bitterness in the young Auror's voice. "Harry..."

With a shake of his head, the boy-who-lived waved off the apology. "Hermione explained. Things happened so fast..."

Flashes of that day and the weeks following rapidly fired through Severus' brain with such ferocity, his knees nearly buckled. "Indeed it did." He turned to more fully address his friend. "But that does not excuse the lack of communication regarding the blessed event." He bowed slightly. "For that, I am sorry."

Harry nodded. "We've all done the best we can to move on since Ron..." He shook his head slightly, sighed, then silent for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. "I wish I knew why Ron can't seem to keep his demons at bay like the rest of us do." He glanced toward the house in the distance where Luna was holding court with Ginevra and Hermione. "I know we all have our days when we wonder how we survived, but with him..."

Despite all the darkness the whelp seemed to leave in his wake, Severus couldn't stop the pity that rose. The redheaded menace had, at one time, meant a great deal to his beloved bride and remained a treasured friend to Harry. For those reasons alone, the boy deserved a modicum of sympathy. "He is doing well, is he not?"

Another damnable shrug, and Severus shook his head. Some habits seemed impossible for a Potter to break.

"He seems to be," Harry sighed. "But then again, he always does." He sank into a nearby chair, the world resting heavily on his shoulders, if the way they hunched inward was any indication. "In fact, he usually does really well for at least the first few months after he's released. Then he starts to slide." He looked up, the sadness in his eyes tugging at Severus' heart.

Merlin, but he wanted to tell the young wizard. To explain it was the taint of darkness those of Weasley's species attracted. To take away the guilt Harry felt at failing his friend. But the sour tingle on Severus' tongue indicated the attempt would hold deadly consequences for him. Instead, he offered the only comfort he could afford. "Some questions have no answers, Harry." He sighed and looked out over the sea of chairs that would soon be filled with their friends and family in celebration of Rose's birth. Once again, he was struck by the irony. In cleaning up the mess that was Ronald Weasley's life, he and Hermione had found their greatest treasure. For that, he would be forever thankful. "Just be grateful you have the chance to fight alongside."

"I suppose," Harry sighed. Another long silence that left Severus fighting the urge to fidget. Finally, the young wizard asked, "Are you sure you didn't uncover anything at his flat?"

His blood chilled almost to the point of coagulation in his veins. He'd expected the boy to ask, even going so far as to formulate the answer. Yet now that it hung in the air between them... "I can assure you there was nothing of significance to discover." Worry paused him for a fraction of a second. Hopefully the young Auror still lacked the perception he sorely needed when a student. "Does young Mr. Weasley still insist he left something precious behind?"

The other man shook his head, and relief extinguished the fire of uncertainty in his belly. "To be honest, Ron doesn't remember much." He shrugged again, his shoulders sagging under the weight of his dejection. "He never does."

Severus fought to keep the relief from his voice. "Perhaps it is for the best."

"I suppose."

Severus urged the rather sheepish wizard to continue with an arch of his brow. "If I had known Hermione was so close to delivery, I would never have..."

"You couldn't have known." Severus leaned against the back of a chair and regarded the member of the Golden Trio his wife still regarded as family. Regret surged, but he bit it back with the mantra he and his wife repeated on an almost daily basis: The fewer who know, the safer for all. "We chose to keep the pregnancy a secret. Hermione has had her fill of being in the spotlight, and I..." He closed his eyes against the pressure building behind them from the memories' bombardment. "I never relished the idea of publicity in the first place. To have announced the pending arrival would have courted..."

"Disaster in the form of a beetle?"

Regarding the smile widening his companion's mouth, Severus allowed his own lips to lift slightly. "Precisely." He once again searched the interior of the tent for any sign of the Daily Prophet's notorious Animagus. "I only wanted to keep Hermione out of Rita Skeeter's line of fire to keep the stress level manageable."

"And yet I added to it by asking you to check into Ron's drug-induced rantings." Harry glanced at him from behind eyes filled with remorse. "That was the day Hermione delivered, wasn't it?"

Severus nodded. "But one event had nothing to do with the other." He lied as smoothly as he had under Voldemort's glare despite the rush of anxiety through his veins. "And both ended as well as could be expected."

"It did, didn't it?" Harry grinned. "Especially for you and Hermione."

"The very best way," Severus agreed, thankful the boy didn't appear to have noticed anything amiss during their conversation. Ready to escape any further interrogation, he turned, took his jacket from the back of the chair, and started toward the house, ignoring the urge to scan the interior of the marquee for a final time. "Care to join me in the kitchen for a little refreshment? I happen to know where Narcissa stashed the extra strawberry scones."

He strolled from the tent and across the lawn with the other wizard in tow, his spirits lifted by Harry's overeager reaction to the idea of the tasty treat. Never once did he look back or notice the redhead lurking in the shadows near the caterer's entrance.