

The Way Home

by morgaine_dulac

He has left it all behind. He does not belong to the Wizarding world anymore. Has he ever? Seven years after the defeat of the Dark Lord, Severus has found a new life in the land of ice and snow. Will he even find love?

I: Anaesthesia and Coffee

Chapter 1 of 22

He has left it all behind. He does not belong to the Wizarding world anymore. Has he ever? Seven years after the defeat of the Dark Lord, Severus has found a new life in the land of ice and snow. Will he even find love?

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter I: Anaesthesia and Coffee

Cassandra Svensson, date of birth October 31, 1963, height 167 cm, weight 63 kilos, car accident, fracture of the thigh bone, head trauma, internal bleedings probable.

Severus put down the chart. Just another patient, he thought and started with the necessary calculations, just as he always did. He was good at his job, the best in the hospital. Some of his colleagues jokingly called him the wizard of anaesthesiology. He couldn't help but grin at that comment. If his colleagues only knew ... if they only knew that he indeed was a wizard. But they did not know, and that was exactly how things were supposed to be.

He arrived in Operation Room Three early enough to prepare his equipment before the patient was rolled in. Normally, he would have introduced himself and made sure that the patient felt safe and relaxed, but as this was an emergency operation, he had no time for small talk.

'There is no need to be anxious,' he simply said. 'You are in good hands.'

Then he looked into the patient's face and almost dropped the anaesthetic mask he had been holding. He knew this woman. He had seen her in the park just a couple of hours ago.

He had been sitting on a bench, reading a book. Yes, in the park, outdoors. He was himself surprised how much he enjoyed being outdoors nowadays. Earlier – in his old life – he had spent his days hiding in the dark, in his dungeon. That had gone so far that people had started wondering if he was a vampire. They had never figured that his preference for the dungeons had less to do with his aversion for the sun than with the fact that he simply didn't like the people around him and hence preferred his privacy.

Anyway, it had been there in the park that he had seen her or heard her. He usually didn't bother too much about the people around him, but kept his nose in his book. But her laughter had made him look up. It had sounded so happy, too genuine to ignore.

She had been sitting on a bench on the other side of the small pond. If Severus had just happened to look in their direction, his eyes would probably have lingered on her

friend – a tall, curvy lass with blond hair. But the woman's laughter had made him look at her instead. She had been all dressed in black despite the relatively warm midsummer weather. She had spiky, raging red hair, a friendly face, blue eyes and was at least two heads shorter than her blond friend. No, not the type of woman he – or most probably any guy for that matter – would turn their heads for. But her laughter and the irresistible smile on her face had made it almost impossible for Severus to take his eyes off her. He had stared at her from behind his book, dreading to be seen staring and at the same time hoping that she would notice him. But she hadn't noticed him, and eventually, he had been forced to go back to the hospital for his afternoon shift.

And there he was now, dressed for surgery, responsible for anaesthesia.

Once more he looked into her eyes. They were not all blue as he had thought. There was a thin line of gold just around the iris. And those eyes were now looking at him, anxiously.

'You are in good hands,' he repeated. 'Now, I need you to count backwards from one hundred. Can you do this for me, Cassandra?'

She was out before she had even reached ninety-seven.

When she was rolled out of the operation room, Severus looked after her, frowning. This had been the first time he had felt nervous about an operation, the first time that he had felt emotionally involved. And he had the feeling that he would not have seen Cassandra for the last time.

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His shift ended before Cassandra's anaesthesia was calculated to wear off, and Severus had to let one of his colleagues take care of Cassandra in recovery. He had seriously considered sticking around and waiting, but eventually he had decided against it. That woman was, after all, just another patient.

He bumped into her about a week after her surgery as he came sweeping around the corner in the cafeteria. He almost knocked her off her crutches, and only his fast reaction time and his firm grip kept her from falling.

'As if one broken leg wasn't enough,' he heard her mumble and couldn't help but smirk at the ironic tone in her voice.

'I am truly sorry. I didn't mean to ...' He broke off his apology and looked straight into her eyes. He had wanted to talk to her ever since that afternoon in the park. Now he had his chance. 'Are you alright, Cassandra?'

'Yeah, I am,' she said and smiled. Then her eyes narrowed, and she gave him a piercing look. 'Why do you know my name?'

'Oh, I'm sorry.' He suddenly realised that he was still holding her shoulders and let go before he cleared his throat. 'I was in charge of the anaesthesia during your surgery.'

'Ah, I see. Well, thanks, you did a great job. Didn't feel a thing.' And then there it was again, that lovely laughter that had made him look into her direction in the first place. And again, he just stared at her, more or less mesmerised.

'Say, do hospital employees have a discount in the cafeteria?' Cassandra suddenly asked. 'Because if they do, then I suggest you invite me to a cup of coffee.'

And Severus was so surprised at her straightforwardness that he could not utter anything smarter than: 'What can I get you?'

'A cup of coffee, milk, no sugar,' she answered and then tilted her head, grinning at him. 'And your name, please.'

'My name is Smythe,' he answered. 'Severus Smythe.'

~ ~ ~

'Smythe?' Cassandra asked as he returned with their coffee. 'Well, if your accent hadn't given you away already, I would suspect that you're not from Iceland.'

'No, I am not,' Severus simply answered. He didn't like it when people asked private questions.

'Oh, the silent type,' Cassandra concluded. 'That must mean you're British.'

Severus cocked an eyebrow at her, and she laughed.

'C'mon, laddie, don't give me that look. I carry the same burden.' Her English accent was so thick that there was no doubt whatsoever about where she came from.

'Northumbria?' he inquired.

'Yes. Born and raised in Alnwick, the place where history lives.' Again she grinned. 'You're from the north as well, aren't you?'

Severus just nodded and then decided to change subject. He wasn't ready to talk about his past.

'Cassandra is a rather unusual name,' he stated.

'Now look who's talking, *Severus*,' she retorted, once more laughing. 'That's not too common a name either, is it?'

He just shrugged.

'Latin origin, meaning severe, strict,' Cassandra went on, tilting her head slightly, narrowing her eyes, scrutinising him. 'Is that the type you are, Severus?'

The look in her eyes told him that she was not really expecting an answer, and Severus decided to hold his peace.

'Might just be,' she stated. Still, she was looking at him with an intense gaze, and Severus instinctively raised his mental shields. He knew what people with gazes like that were capable of.

'I think there was a boy called Severus at my school,' Cassandra went on, the look in her eyes suddenly much softer. 'Not the nicest of blokes, but he turned out to be a good person in the end.'

And once more, she smiled.

A/N: Alnwick Castle in Northumbria is the second largest inhabited castle in England and has been used as film location for – who would have guessed – the Harry Potter films.

II: Subjects Best Untouched

Chapter 2 of 22

Severus asks about Cassandra's past and learns more than he has bargained for.

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Chapter II: Subjects Best Untouched

Severus absentmindedly picked at his dinner with his fork. Meatballs and stewed macaroni, heated in the microwave. It was a sorry excuse for a dinner, he knew that. He also knew that he could do better. A single swish with his wand would be enough to transform this tasteless dinner into a meal fit for kings. But his wand was locked away in the safe in his bedroom. He hadn't done magic for years. Not since he had left Britain and with it, the magical world. He didn't belong there anymore.

Had he ever? Had there ever really been a place in the magical world for him? Had he ever really belonged anywhere? If he was completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he had not. He had always been too light for the Dark Side and too tainted for the Light. No, he had never belonged anywhere, and that was why he had left it all behind, hoping that it would never catch up with him.

But for one moment that afternoon, he had feared that it actually *had*. He had tried to avoid Cassandra's questions about who he was and where he came from. And when she had mentioned having been at school with a boy called Severus, he had almost choked at his coffee. What had she said? *Not the nicest of blokes, but he turned out to be a good person in the end?*

Yes, that had sounded like an accurate description of the man he had once been, and for a terrifying moment, he had thought that his cover had been blown, that she had been talking about him, that she had been talking about Severus Snape. But it couldn't be. It was simply impossible. Cassandra was a Muggle, she knew nothing of his world.

And even if she *were* a witch, it would not matter. Severus Snape had disappeared from the Wizarding world five years ago. Yes, disappeared, vanished. There were those who claimed that he had gone into hiding after the fall of Lord Voldemort. Some said that he was hiding from the Dark Side, others said that he was hiding from the Light. But most people were convinced that Severus Snape was dead, that he had died at the hand of the Dark Lord. After all, that was what the famous Harry Potter had told everyone. The fact that there had never been a funeral didn't seem to bother people too much.

Very few people knew the truth. Minerva McGonagall was one of them. She had been the only one who had even thought of going to look for Severus' body after the final battle. And she had found him on the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, a bare inch from death. She had saved him. How she had done it was still beyond Severus. He remembered that he had been lying in an infirmary bed for three whole months, drifting in and out of consciousness. He remembered Minerva's voice and Poppy's and Dumbledore's. And he thought that he had heard a phoenix sing, now and then. But that might just have been a dream. The phoenix had left Hogwarts the day of Dumbledore's funeral.

After his recuperation, Severus had not known where to go. There had basically been two options. One had been to let the Wizarding world know that he was still alive, and that would have meant that he would have been celebrated as a hero. But as he had never felt like a hero, he had ruled out that option fairly quickly. The other option had been to disappear, and that had been the path he had chosen.

It had been Minerva's idea to hide in the Muggle world. And she had also been the one who had recommended Iceland. 'For its beautiful nature,' she had said. 'And because Iceland has not been involved in the battle against Voldemort.' And Severus had followed her advice.

Creating a new identity had been easy enough. It hadn't taken much more than a forged birth certificate and a few well-placed Memory Charms at the residents' registration office to create Severus Smythe. The surname Smythe had been Minerva's idea, too. 'It has to be a common name,' she had said. 'You have to blend in.' She had also tried to give him a new first name, but however hard she had tried, none of them had seemed to fit. And so they had simply decided on keeping Severus.

Then there had been the matter of employment. Severus had almost fallen off his chair, laughing, when Minerva had suggested that he could teach chemistry. Teach? No, never again. Never! After having taught teenagers for almost two decades, Severus preferred a somewhat quieter profession. That was when Poppy had suggested anaesthesiologist. It would, after all, have been a shame if Severus' vast knowledge of drugs and poisons had gone to waste.

Minerva had taken care of everything: papers, certificates, references. She had worked tirelessly to give Severus a new life. And when he had asked her why, she had wiped a tear from her eye and said: 'Because I need to make amends, Severus. I doubted you in a time when you would have needed my support. I hope you can forgive a foolish old woman.'

They were still in contact, Minerva and he, using Muggle mail instead of owls. Most of the time, they simply exchanged news about the weather, but now and then Minerva would ask him if he ever thought about returning. These were the letters that Severus never replied to. He simply did not know the answer himself.

He put his plate on the counter and made his way to the bedroom where he looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was shorter now, not that greasy anymore, lined with a few grey streaks. He had grown a beard, and it, too, was grey, but just around the chin. He still wore black, jeans and shirts nowadays, not billowing robes, but still black. No, not much of what he saw in the mirror reminded him of Severus Snape. Maybe he really had disappeared.

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Severus wrapped his coat tighter around himself. He had been surprised by a sudden downpour, and as it had been raining more horizontally than vertically as it so often did in Iceland his umbrella had been of little use, and the right side of his body was now totally drenched.

He bought himself a cup of coffee and made his way to the park. The summer holidays were almost over, and there weren't many people spending their afternoons outdoors now. But Severus still hoped that he would catch a glimpse of Cassandra somewhere.

He had come to the park several times every week, hoping he would run into her. He had not seen her once since their encounter in the hospital cafeteria. It would have been easy for him to find out in which hospital room she was lying, but by the time he had gathered the courage, she had already been discharged.

'I sincerely hope that this is not hospital coffee.'

Her voice ripped him out of his thoughts, and he just stared at her, hardly able to believe his luck.

'Because that stuff tasted awful.'

She put her backpack down and then flopped down on the bench beside him.

'Cat got your tongue?' she asked and grinned.

Severus cleared his throat. 'No, not really. It is nice to see you again, Cassandra.'

'You can call me Cassy. Everybody else does.'

Severus frowned. In his opinion, the name Cassy did not fit her at all. Cassandra meant as much as 'shining upon man', and the woman who was now sitting beside him on the bench had certainly lightened up *his* day. He would call her Cassandra, if she liked it or not.

'Oh, yes, I am fine, thank you.' Her voice was once more dripping with irony, and Severus could not help but smirk.

'Is the physical therapy paying off?' he asked.

'Yes, it is actually. But the nurse is a sadist, I tell you. I am convinced that she worked for the Spanish Inquisition in an earlier life. Say, Severus, are you off from work today?'

He nodded. 'Yes, I finished my shift an hour ago.'

'Good. Come on then,' she said, already standing and tugging at his sleeve. 'I'll show you the only place in Reykjavik where they know how to brew a decent cup of coffee.'

~ ~ ~

Half an hour later, Severus was warming his fingers on a cup of coffee in a tiny café which he despite the fact that he had been living in Reykjavik for almost five years had never noticed before. Cassandra had been right. That was the best coffee in town.

'Don't you miss it sometimes?'

'Miss what?' he asked. Once more, his thoughts had drifted off, and he had not heard what she had said.

'Tea, good old English tea. It seems as if people around here are incapable of brewing tea. Sure, they have about a zillion different varieties. Green, red, white, you name it. But a nice cup of Earl Grey, that seems to be impossible to get.'

Severus nodded, suddenly wondering if he dared ask her a personal question. After all, he had so far been very reluctant to answer any of hers.

'Tell me, Cassandra, what is a Northumbrian woman like you doing in Reykjavik?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' she said and smiled. 'I came here to study runes, met a Swedish Viking at the university, fell in love and got married.'

'You are married?' He regretted the question at once and felt terribly stupid all of a sudden. Had he really believed she was in any way interested in him as a man? Of course she was attached.

'I was married,' Cassandra replied. The smile had faltered, and there seemed to be a shadow on her face. 'Do you remember the Brockdale Bridge collapsing in ninety-five?'

Severus nodded. Of course he remembered. It had been one of the Dark Lord's first big attacks during the Second Wizarding War, an attempt to blackmail Fudge and the Ministry. The bridge had been split in two, and a large number of Muggles had been killed.

'Thorbjörn and I were on our way to London to meet my cousin. I got away with this.' She pulled up her left sleeve and revealed an ugly scar on her upper arm. 'Thorbjörn died on his way to the hospital.'

Severus could see how Cassandra's fingers tightened around her coffee mug. He was terribly sorry that he had asked. Tentatively, he reached out and brushed the back of her hand with his fingertips, trying to comfort her.

'I am sorry, Cassandra.'

Then the shadow was gone, and the smile was back on her lips. But it seemed to have lost some of its heartiness.

'Don't be,' she said. 'You couldn't know. And that was ten years ago. Trust me, the world kept spinning.'

Again Severus nodded. Yes, he knew that the world didn't stop spinning after the death of a loved one. But it sure felt like that sometimes.

'Why did you not move back to England?' he wondered.

She cocked an eyebrow and gave a short, dry laugh. 'Let's say that I had married way below family standards. They did not really welcome me back with open arms.'

Severus swore inwardly. Two touchy subjects and he had managed to ask questions about both of them over one cup of coffee. Stupid, extremely stupid.

Thankfully, it seemed to bother Cassandra much less than it bothered him. The piercing look he had noticed before had returned, and she leant back in her chair, eyes fixed upon him.

'Now it's my turn,' she said, the tone of her voice almost insidious. 'What are ~~you~~ you doing here, Severus Smythe?'

'I came here to work,' he simply said. 'The hospital here is one of the best in Europe.'

Cassandra nodded. 'Hm, yeah, I guess it is. They managed to patch me up anyway.'

Then there was silence, and Severus held onto his coffee cup for dear life. The look in Cassandra's eyes made it very clear that he was not off the hook yet. But what more was he supposed to say? That he was not welcome at home either? That he was running away from his past?

After what seemed like hours, the look on her face softened, and now it was her turn to brush the back of Severus' hand with her fingers.

'Tell you what, Severus,' she said. 'Let's say you don't ask me about my past anymore, and I lay off asking you about yours. Deal?'

'Deal.' Never before in his life had Severus accepted a deal so willingly.

III: Similarities

Chapter 3 of 22

Birds of a feather ...

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Chapter III: Similarities

After having put his foot in it twice before either of them had finished their first cup of coffee, Severus decided to stick to more trivial topics like the weather, which proved to be an inexhaustible topic for two former inhabitants of Northern England.

'One thing that makes it very easy to adapt to the Icelandic weather,' he noted, 'is the fact that it only seems to rain horizontally. I have always appreciated this about the Scottish weather as well.'

Bone-dry. That was how he delivered his little comparison, his voice a monotonous drawl. For a moment, Cassandra just stared at him, and he quickly went over his statement once more in his mind, wondering if he had said something stupid. Then he saw the corners of her mouth twitch, and before he knew what was happening, she had burst into peals of laughter. And he was unable to do anything else than stare at her in sheer astonishment. He was used to the nurses' fake giggles when they didn't grasp the irony of his comments, but Cassandra's laughter was completely different: it was genuine, warm. It was the same kind of laughter that had made him notice her in the park, the most adorable sound he had heard in ages. It was infectious, and it crept right into his empty heart.

The hours ticked by, and when they made their way to the bus station, darkness had already fallen over the city. Neither of them had noticed how fast the time had passed.

'I'm at the café almost every day after four, waiting for the bus,' Cassandra said casually as she climbed into the bus. 'I'd love it if you came by to keep me company one day.'

And before Severus could find the words to tell her how much he had enjoyed her company and that he would very much like to spend more time with her, the bus doors had closed, and all he could do was return Cassandra's wave through the dirty window.

The bus rolled out of the station and into the evening traffic, up the road, past the first traffic light and then the second one, and Severus just kept staring after it, Cassandra's laughter still ringing in his ears.

~ ~ ~

He was soaked to the bones when he arrived at his flat. He had no idea how long he had been standing in the rain at the bus station, his thoughts far, far away and his eyes still looking after the bus that had disappeared from sight long ago.

He had actually enjoyed himself that afternoon. As a matter of fact, he could not remember when he last had had such a good time. Ever since he had come to Iceland, he had buried himself in his work, shielding himself off from the people around him. He had not had any desire whatsoever to make friends. He needed to make peace with himself and his past first, before he could let anybody else into his life. And socialising had after all never been one of his most favourite pastimes.

But that afternoon had been different. He had listened to Cassandra's stories, her laughter. And as he was standing in his hallway that evening, wet, cold, and alone, he realised that he for some blissful hours had not once thought about the times that had been, the life he had left behind.

What was it about Cassandra that made him feel that way, he wondered. At first, he had thought that the attraction he felt towards her was due to the fact that they both were British. Birds of a feather flock together, after all. But as the hours had gone by that afternoon, he had noticed that there was something more, something he could not quite put his finger on. It almost seemed to him as if he *knew* her, as if she had always been there, as if she was his oldest friend.

'Pull yourself together, Severus,' he murmured to himself as he pulled off his wet clothes and turned on the shower. 'You are living in a strange country and have consciously avoided any kind of company for the last five years. There is no need to get paranoid just because, all of a sudden, you have taken a liking to another human being.'

After a relaxing shower, he put on his dressing gown and made himself comfortable in his armchair by the window, with a glass of Scotch in one hand and today's mail in the other. Among bills and other unwanted junk, he found a postcard depicting the Jacobite Steam Train on the Glenfinnan viaduct. Of course, it was from Minerva. She had a knack for choosing motives that connected the Muggle and the Wizarding world.

Dear Severus,

The new term has started without any problems, and the students as well as the staff are settling in nicely. Some of the students have already proven to be a handful, and we will have to keep an eye on them. We could use somebody with your scowl to intimidate them. My offer still stands, you know. Should you ever decide to return, there will always be an open position for you.

I very much hope that you are doing alright. Dumbledore tells me not to worry about you. He says that you will make yourself heard, should you ever need any assistance. But please, indulge an old lady, Severus. Drop me a line, if only just to let me know that you are in good health.

Sincerely,

Minerva

PS. Poppy sends her warmest regards.

A smile played around Severus' lips as he turned the postcard around to look at the familiar viaduct once more. The day when he had boarded the train that had brought him to Hogwarts for the first time seemed so long ago. But still he remembered it as clearly as if it had been yesterday.

Putting down the postcard on the table, he rose from the armchair and made his way to his desk to fetch some paper and a pen. For once, he would answer Minerva right away, because this time he actually had something to tell his old friend.

~ ~ ~

The following week was just one long drag. Severus was working double shifts every second day, just as he always did. Ever since he had started working at the hospital in Reykjavik, he had voluntarily signed up for all double shifts available. The more he worked, the less time he had to brood. But that week, he did not want to be at the

hospital. He wanted to be at the little café where he had spent some of the most peaceful hours in his life.

Finally Thursday arrived, the only day of the week when Severus' shift ended at two o'clock. He washed, changed and left the hospital before the clock had even reached a quarter past. He did not have to think about where he was going. His feet seemed to know the way.

When he walked down the cobblestone road that led to the café, he noticed a strange feeling in his stomach, an odd mixture of excitement and nervousness, and he unconsciously slowed down his pace. What if Cassandra was not at the café? Or even worse, what if her invitation had just been an act of politeness, and she did not really want to see him?

He paused at the corner of the café and cautiously peered through the window. There she was, sitting at the same table as the week before, with a big mug and a stack of paper in front of her. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, and she looked concentrated and just a tad annoyed. She was holding a dark green pen in her hand with which she was tapping the table when she wasn't scribbling notes.

Then suddenly, as if she had sensed him, she lifted her head and looked straight at Severus.

Bloody hell, he thought. Now she has seen me staring at her like a schoolboy. She must think that I am utterly pathetic!

But the smile that she gave him made all his anxiety fall from him at once. And as she waved at him, beckoning him to come inside and join her, he did not hesitate for one single moment.

As he approached the table, his eyes were immediately drawn to the stack of paper that was lying there. He noted different handwritings, names in the upper right corner. Those were undoubtedly school papers.

'Don't tell me you teach,' he said as he pulled up a chair, cocking an eyebrow at Cassandra.

'As a matter of fact, I do.'

Severus had a momentary flashback to his classroom at Hogwarts, filled with students who could not tell the difference between a cauldron and a frying pan. He suppressed a shudder and asked: 'And what do you teach?'

'Mostly dunderheads and nincompoops.'

Severus stared at her in utter disbelief. 'Dunderheads and nincompoops?' he repeated, not entirely sure that those really had been her words and not a reflection of his own memories. How often had he called his students by these exact words?

'I believe the correct terminology for them would be teenagers,' Cassandra replied, and this time Severus could not help but grin.

'Why would you?' He just had to ask. Why anyone would teach teenagers *voluntarily* was beyond his understanding.

'From the goodness of my heart?' For a moment the statement had actually sounded genuine, and Severus wondered if Cassandra was one of those people who firmly believed that there actually was hope for today's youth. But when her smile turned into a broad grin, he realised that she was messing with him.

'I love my subjects. That I am teaching teenagers is an inevitable side effect,' she stated dryly.

'I gather that you are not a big fan of teenagers.' He could sympathise.

'Oh, don't get me wrong,' she replied. The grin on her face had once more been replaced with a warm smile. 'I love the little buggers to death, but they don't need to know that.'

Severus frowned slightly at Cassandra's answer, but she elaborated.

'In my opinion, they are not in school to have fun but to learn. And that is not the most popular approach. Some of them actually hate my guts. They say that I am spoiling their fun by making them work.'

Severus nodded. He knew exactly how it was to be the unpopular teacher, the evil slave driver who demanded full attention and hard work. He had taught a dangerous subject, where even the tiniest slip could have had fatal consequences. Therefore, he had ruled his students with an iron hand and always demanded their full attention. They had trembled at the mere sight of him, and he had enjoyed seeing them tremble. But looking at Cassandra's kind face, he had a hard time imagining her intimidating a room full of teenagers.

'How do you do it?' he asked. 'In my experience, teenagers are a rather unruly species.'

She grinned at his choice of words and leaned over the table to whisper into his ear. 'They fear me. I am unpredictable. They never know where they have me. At one moment I let them roam free and in the next I am holding them on a short leash. The element of surprise is my biggest weapon.'

She leant back again with a wicked smirk on her face, and Severus suddenly felt as if he had found his female counterpart.

~ ~ ~

They had left the subject of teenagers rather quickly, and looking back on the afternoon, Severus could not remember what they had been talking about. But once again, it was already dark when he walked Cassandra to the bus station, and once again he was at a loss of words. How bloody hard could it be to admit that he had had a good time?

The bus door had already opened when Cassandra turned to look at him once more and then handed him a scrap of paper. For a moment, Severus just stared at it, not really taking in what was written on it. Then he felt her eyes on his brow and lifted his head to look at her.

'My address and phone number,' she explained. 'In case you should ever feel like a nice cup of Earl Grey.'

~ ~ ~

'Come on, Severus, don't be such a coward. You have stared the Dark Lord in the eyes for years without blinking. Making a phone call will not kill you,' he mumbled to himself as he for the twenty-third time that Friday evening put the little scrap of paper back onto the table in his living room.

Yes, honestly, how hard could it be? Cassandra had *personally* given him her phone number. She obviously *wanted* him to call her. So what was she going to do? Hang up on him? Certainly not.

Resolutely, Severus snatched up the phone and dialled the number. One signal, two. His courage was just about to leave him and his finger was already on the disconnect-button when he heard her voice.

'Hi, it's Cassandra.'

'This is Severus.'

'Well, hi. I was wondering when you would call. Are you off from work?'

'I just came home,' he said. And now what? What was he supposed to say now?

'Yearning for that cup of tea, are you?' she asked, and Severus could imagine the grin on you face. 'How about tomorrow afternoon? Are you free?'

'Yes, I am,' he replied. 'I work only every second weekend.'

'Then it's a date. Around five? You've got the address, right?'

'Yes, I have.'

'Don't bring flowers, alright?'

'I won't.'

'See you tomorrow then.'

When Severus put down the phone, he noticed that his hand was shaking.

IV: Elf Potions

Chapter 4 of 22

... flock together.

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Chapter IV: Elf Potions

The bus ride to Hveragerði took about an hour. Despite the fact that he had lived in Reykjavik for five years, Severus had only left the city on a handful of occasions. Minerva had urged him to explore the beautiful nature of his new home country, but apart from his trips to the most famous tourist attractions, he had spent most of his days somewhere between the hospital and his flat.

What a shame it was, he thought as he let his eyes wander over the moss-clad hills. The black lava rocks made up strange shapes, and the soft light of the evening sun cast mysterious shadows. The Icelandic landscape certainly held a special kind of mystique, and Severus would not have been surprised to see fairies dancing on the hills or dragons flying at the horizon.

The bus arrived at its destination at four thirty. Finding Cassandra's house was easy. It was a small white cottage situated on the far side of the river. But showing up half an hour early would not do, and Severus decided go for a walk. Hveragerði was a lovely place, but Severus did not have the peace of mind to take in its beauty. Because, as much as he hated to admit it, he was extremely nervous. As a matter of fact, he could not remember one single time in his life when his heart had pounded in his chest in such a manner. It was just as unfamiliar as the feeling of butterflies in the pit of his stomach.

He knocked at Cassandra's door at four fifty-five. He figured that arriving five minutes early must be acceptable.

Nervously he fingered the parcel he was holding. It was wrapped in dark blue paper and contained three scented candles. Cassandra had told him not to bring flowers, and he had been quite glad about that since flowers were not really in his area of expertise. But he had wanted to bring her *something*. It was good manners, after all. Why he had decided to bring scented candles, he did not really know. It had just seemed like the kind of gift she would enjoy.

The first thing Severus heard when the door opened was the angry hissing of a cat. And before he had time to react, the tabby had already attacked the hem of his trousers.

'Nicodemus, stop that!' Cassandra's voice was firm and commanding, and the tabby immediately let go of Severus' trousers and retreated into the hall.

'Bad kitty, bad,' Cassandra chided, and for a moment Severus could have sworn that the animal had a guilty look on its face. But that was of course pure imagination. Cats did not have the ability to look guilty.

'Sorry 'bout that,' Cassandra said with a smile and shooed the cat into the living room. 'He normally only behaves that way with family. Hope you have had a tetanus shot recently.'

Severus cautiously stepped inside, his eyes still on the cat, which in its turn was glaring at him from the living room. He took off his boots and accepted a pair of slippers that Cassandra held out towards him. In exchange, he handed her the parcel he had been holding.

'Thought I told you not to bring anything,' she said in a slightly accusing tone.

'No, you told me not to bring you flowers,' Severus retorted. He noticed that his voice had the same tone he had once used to reprimand students. And he had to admit that he secretly enjoyed seeing Cassandra blush.

Tugging lightly at the wrapping paper, she led him into the living room. 'Now, why don't you make yourself at home while I put on the kettle?'

And then she disappeared in the kitchen, closely followed by the cat.

Severus looked around the living room and soon noticed that bringing candles had been the right choice. There were surely about fifty of them in the room, all of dark colour, some of them scented. Cassandra obviously liked candles.

'Don't be shy,' he heard her call from the kitchen. 'Have a look around.'

He was instantly drawn to the bookshelves. On first sight, they seemed somehow too big to fit the living room, as if they had been magically reduced in size. But of course, that was just an optical illusion.

On the first shelf, Severus found books in several languages: English and Icelandic of course, but also German, Italian, Russian, Romanian, Greek, and Latin.

'How many languages do you speak?' he asked.

'A few,' Cassandra answered, poking her head into the living room. 'I've just started learning Elfish.'

Severus' breath caught in his chest. 'Elf... sorry, what?'

'Elfish,' she repeated in a matter-of-fact tone, as if Elfish were one of the most common languages in the world. 'Haven't you read Tolkien?'

'No, I have not,' Severus answered, trying to hide his confusion. Elfish? Was she kidding him?

He let his fingers trail along the bookshelf, read the titles and frowned. *Den áldre Eddan*, *The Nibelung Saga*, *The Aeneis*, mostly books about old myths and sagas from all around Europe, not the kind of titles he had expected to see in Cassandra's bookshelf. But then again, what had he expected anyway? Horror stories?

The content of the second bookshelf proved to be even more peculiar. *Herbal Medicine*, *Magick Potions*, *The Crone's Book of Charms and Spells*. What the hell? Severus frowned. He did not recognise any of the authors, and those were most certainly *Muggle* books, but why on earth would Cassandra have a bookshelf full of books about magic?

He almost dropped *1000 Herbs and Fungi* when he heard her voice behind him.

'I see you have discovered my little book collection.'

He felt the hair on his neck raise and turned to stare at his host.

'Well, I guess it's time to come clear,' she said, narrowing her eyes and smiling wickedly. 'I am a witch.'

No! No, no, no, she was not! She could not be! She was a Muggle! Not a witch! No, no, no!

Cassandra had obviously noticed the stunned look on his face, and her grin gave way to a kind smile. 'Don't worry, Severus,' she said as she handed him a cup of tea. 'I am not going to turn you into a toad.'

The risk of being turned into a toad was the least of Severus' concerns at the moment. If she ~~was~~ was a witch, she must have recognised him. Or had the details of the Second Wizarding War not reached her here in Iceland? Dared he hope that she did not know about Severus Snape?

He dropped onto the nearest armchair and stared at her. 'A witch?' he repeated, trying to keep his voice steady and his hands from shaking.

Cassandra sat down opposite him, and the grin reappeared. 'Call it what you want: witch, Wicca, Neo-Pagan, crazy woman. Let's just say I know a little bit more about herb lore and divination than normal people do.'

Severus cocked an eyebrow at her. 'Herb lore and divination?' Suddenly he felt really silly. Why was he repeating everything she said?

'Yes. But I guess you as a doctor don't believe in the power of nature.'

'On the contrary,' he explained, relieved that his voice was once more steady and his hands not shaking anymore. 'I am quite familiar with that branch of herbal medicine myself.'

~ ~ ~

Severus was splashing some water on his face in the bathroom, his pulse rate still higher than what was healthy.

Cassandra telling him that she was a witch had completely thrown him off balance and not for the reasons she might have been thinking of. For the second time in only a few weeks, he had feared that his past had caught up with him, that his cover had been blown, that she knew about Severus Snape.

But it could not be. Cassandra wasn't more of a witch than the nurses at the hospital who daily read their horoscopes and drank herbal tea. She was just a Muggle who knew a little bit more about the Old Ways than the average Muggle did. Yes, that was it. There were plenty of those in Reykjavik; Severus knew that. If he remembered correctly, there was even a small store not far from the hospital where they sold crystal balls, joss sticks and love potions. He had absolutely nothing to worry about.

He took one more deep breath and left the bathroom.

When he entered the kitchen, Nicodemus immediately arched its back and started hissing at him, and Severus instinctively made sure that there was a chair standing between him and the bloodthirsty animal. Cats had never taken too kindly to him, but that tabby seemed to hate him.

'What is it with you today, Nicodemus?' Cassandra asked, eyeing her cat suspiciously. 'If you can't play nicely, you'll have to go outside.'

Woman and cat stared at each other for some moments. Then the cat hissed once more in Severus' direction and then trotted out of the kitchen.

'I really apologise for him,' Cassandra said. 'Normally, he's quite sweet.'

She handed Severus another cup of tea, which he accepted gratefully, and they sat down at the table.

'Now, just for your information, Severus,' Cassandra said, fidgeting with her spoon. 'There is a bus leaving for the city in about an hour. That will give you time for another cup of tea and a sandwich. But if you'd rather stay for dinner, I'd be happy to have you. Unless you're afraid of me poisoning you.'

Severus gave a short, dry laugh. There had actually been a time in his life when he had avoided any food that was prepared by somebody else. But those times were long gone, and so he accepted her invitation for dinner. Firstly, because a home-cooked meal was not something he turned down easily nowadays. And secondly, because he really did not want to leave just yet.

'Don't tell me you are a vegetarian.' Cassandra was already heading for the refrigerator, and Severus followed at her heels. He was atypically curious to see what kind of food she was keeping there.

'Were you planning on feeding an army?' he asked as he became aware of the amount of groceries in her refrigerator.

'Nope, just an anaesthesiologist.' She turned around and grinned at him, and Severus felt himself blush. She had obviously counted on him staying for dinner, and he had walked right into her trap.

They agreed on lamb stew, and soon Severus found himself being equipped with an apron and a vegetable peeler.

'We'll need four carrots and eight potatoes,' Cassandra said while she started chopping onions.

Severus couldn't help but smirk. 'Yes, Ma'am.'

He was already done with the carrots when he noticed that Cassandra was watching him. 'Do you cook often?' she asked.

'As a matter of fact, I do not,' he replied truthfully.

'Strange,' she said, frowning slightly. 'You seem to be talented.'

'So are you,' Severus replied, eyeing the onions and chunks of lamb that were lying on her cutting board. The onions looked as if they had been chopped by a machine, and the pieces of meat were all the exact same size. He suppressed a smile. If Cassandra actually were a witch, he would have loved to have had her in one of his Potions classes.

~ ~ ~

They went from dinner to coffee and from coffee to a glass of wine, and when the clock struck eleven, Severus really did not want to leave. But if he wanted to catch the last bus to the city, he would have to.

The occasional hissing of a geyser in the distance was the only sound to be heard when they walked to the bus station, and if it had not been for the lights emitting from all the windows, the village could just as well have been deserted.

'You have picked a lovely place to live, Cassandra,' Severus said in a low voice.

'You are always welcome when you feel like fleeing the city,' she replied, and Severus felt goose bumps erupting on his arms. Had she just asked him to come back?

The rumbling of the arriving bus cut through the silence and kept Severus from replying. There was only one other passenger on the bus, an elderly woman who sat right behind the driver, knitting. Severus was glad for the solitude. He had quite a few things to think about on his ride home.

When he was about to board the bus, he felt Cassandra tug at his sleeve, and he turned once more to face her.

'Are you off on Thursday afternoon?' she asked, and he nodded silently.

Then Cassandra smiled. 'I had a very nice time today, Severus.'

'So did I.'

For a brief moment, their eyes locked, and before Severus knew what was happening, he felt her lips slightly brush his cheek.

'See you Thursday then,' she whispered into his ear. And before he was able to utter a sound, the doors of the bus had closed between them.

A/N:

Places mentioned in this chapter:

Hveragerði: a small town in the south of Iceland located 45 km to the east of Reykjavik. The surrounding area is part of the Hengill central volcano, and is geothermally active and experiences very frequent (usually minor) earthquakes. The town is known for its greenhouses, which are heated by hot water from volcanic hot springs.

Books mentioned in this chapter:

Den äldre Eddan: a collection of Icelandic tales about the Norse Gods, probably written between 900-1200 AD.

Nibelung Saga: The story of Siegfried, Kriemhild, Gunther, Brunhild and Hagen von Tronje. Adapted into an opera by Richard Wagner: "Ring of the Nibelung".

Aeneis The Aeneid: Latin epic poem written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BC that tells the legendary story of Aeneas, a Trojan who travelled to Italy, where he became the ancestor of the Romans.

Magick Potions by Gerina Dunwich: contains magickal infusions, tarot meditation teas, rhyming spells, and mandrake, healing, and love potions.

The Crone's Book of Charms and Spells by Valerie Worth: contains charms, recipes or rituals take their inspiration from nature and folklore.

V: Nerves

Chapter 5 of 22

They are both a little out of practice.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter V: Nerves

Dear Severus

I am happy to read that you are doing well.

Actually, I figure you are doing more than well. Your last letter was filled with a kind of joy I had not expected from you. Reading it made an old lady very happy.

I cannot help but wonder about your sudden change. Might this mysterious lady friend of yours have something to do with it?

Oh, look at me, begging for details like a teenage girl. Forgive an old lady, Severus. It's just that I am unspeakably happy for you.

Sincerely,

Minerva

Severus grinned and turned the postcard around. That time, Minerva had chosen the motive of Alnwick Castle. Wicked old lady, Severus thought. She had surely done that on purpose, just because he had told her that Cassandra had grown up in Alnwick.

It was Wednesday night, and he had just come home from yet another exhausting double shift. He would have to cut down on those. He wasn't twenty anymore, after all.

He sipped on his tea and smiled. Cassandra had been by the hospital the other day. Unfortunately, he had been in surgery at the time, but she had left a package of Earl Grey at the reception desk. 'Looking forward to seeing you on Thursday', she had scribbled on the package.

Severus took another sip of his tea and closed his eyes for a moment. Yes, he too was looking forward to Thursday. In just about fifteen hours, he would be sitting at the café with Cassandra by his side.

Look who is behaving like a teenager now, Minerva, he thought and smirked. Counting the hours. Honestly, Severus, get a grip on yourself.

But who could blame him? Finally, after five long years, he had opened up enough to actually let someone inside his shell. How Cassandra had managed to make him do that, Severus did not know. Because over the last five years, he had done whatever possible to keep people away from him and had if possible led a more secluded life than he had back at Hogwarts. Never would he have dreamt of giving somebody access to him. But all this had changed that afternoon in the park two months ago when Cassandra's laughter had started to melt the ice around his heart.

~ ~ ~

'Would you like to have dinner with me?'

Cassandra cocked her eyebrow at him. 'Normal people just say hi.'

Yes, normal people *did* just say hi. But normal people his age also knew how to ask someone out. Severus didn't.

He had arrived at the café shortly after two, just to find that Cassandra wasn't there yet. He had ordered a cup of coffee and sat down by the window so he could overlook the street and see her coming. She had surely been held up at work, he had thought. But after ten minutes, he had started fidgeting with his mug. Why wasn't she coming? Had he done something wrong last Saturday? But she had given him a kiss. Oh damn, that was it. She had kissed him and he had not returned her kiss. Yes, that was it. He had offended her. She was not going to come.

He had just been about to work himself into a frenzy when he had seen her coming around the corner on a dark blue bike. And when she had approached his table, the first thought on his mind had been to make sure she would spend more time with him. And that was why he had forgotten to say hi.

'Sorry I am late, by the way,' she said as she flopped into the chair opposite Severus. 'I had to hand out a detention or two. Now, what was that about dinner?'

Severus cleared his throat, relieved by the fact that Cassandra didn't seem to find him utterly pathetic. 'I would like to return the favour and invite you to dinner.'

'Ah,' she said, and suddenly there was a wicked grin on her face. 'I thought you didn't cook?'

'Well, I do not.' Severus was slightly taken aback. 'I was thinking in terms of a nice restaurant ...'

'Now that won't do,' Cassandra interrupted him. 'You'll have to cook.'

Yes, he would obviously have to. Because he had the ominous feeling that he would never find a way to talk himself out of it.

~ ~ ~

When he walked up the stairs to his flat, Cassandra at his heels, a wave of insecurity washed over Severus. He had never before brought anyone to his home. Minerva had visited him once when he had just moved in, and that had been it. For the last five years, the walls of his apartment had seen him and him alone. And now he was bringing a *woman*. Suddenly, his mind was filled with trivial but oh so intimidating questions. Had he put the laundry away that morning? Had he cleaned the dishes last night? And was there actually anything edible in the fridge?

He found that his hands were shaking slightly as he put the key into its hole and frowned. *Get yourself together, Severus, he told himself. You are being ridiculous.*

Of course, his flat was in impeccable shape. He *had* put the laundry away. And he *had* cleaned the dishes. After all, Severus Snape had always been a perfectionist, and that was one trait Severus Smythe had inherited.

He led Cassandra into the living room and invited her to sit down in his armchair by the window. To his surprise, she declined.

'I would never sit there,' she said, and Severus frowned. 'Look at this chair. It is so you. How many hours have you spent in that chair?'

Too many to count. That chair had been one of the few items he had brought here from his old life. It was certainly dear to him.

'Shall we go directly into the kitchen then?' he suggested and led the way.

As he had feared, there was not much to be found in his refrigerator. He almost never cooked, so there was no point in having a well-stocked refrigerator. He saw Cassandra eyeing his groceries with an almost professional expression on her face.

'Looks like we are going to have soup,' she stated. And Severus realised that he would once more be peeling carrots and potatoes.

~ ~ ~

Preparing yet another dinner with Cassandra had been quite enjoyable. And despite the limited resources his refrigerator had had to offer, they had managed to throw together a tasty soup.

Cassandra was for a lack of a better word amazing. Severus could barely believe how much he enjoyed spending time with her. She was delightfully straightforward and down-to-earth. She joked and laughed, and to Severus it felt as if he were spending time with an old friend and not with a woman he had met just two months ago.

'I am rather enjoying this,' he told her as he poured her a glass of Scotch.

'Drinking?' she asked, grinning broadly, and Severus cocked an eyebrow at her. She just *had* to make this uncomfortable for him, didn't she?

'No,' he replied, moving his chair closer to the table in order to gain some time. 'I rather enjoy spending time with *you*.'

'Ah.' The grin on Cassandra's face had given way to a warm smile. 'Quite a confession for a cold Englishman.'

You have no idea, Severus thought. But he would take care not to say anything. As much as he liked Cassandra, he was not ready yet to let her know just how hard it had been for him to let anyone come close in the past.

'I am enjoying this too, Severus, very much actually.' She tilted her head slightly and looked at him with her eyes slightly narrowed, as if she were trying to read him. 'Say, what are you doing next weekend?'

'I have no plans yet,' he replied. 'Why?'

'Well, um, it's my birthday on Sunday, and some friends of mine are having a party on Saturday. And, um, I was wondering if you wanted to come with me.'

Her cheeks had become slightly flushed, and Severus couldn't help but smirk. It was reassuring to see that he was not the only one who was feeling nervous.

'I would very much like to join you, Cassandra.'

The smile that lit up her face spoke of endless relief. But almost immediately, she started fidgeting with her glass. 'There's a catch though. There is a certain dress code, and, um, well, I am not really sure you're into this. It's a Goth party.'

'A Goth party?' Severus repeated. 'What dress style would that require?'

'We're talking dark clothes. Elizabethan, Victorian style. Frockcoats and billowing cloaks basically. Can you handle that?'

Severus smirked and leant slightly over the table so he could look straight into her eyes. 'My dear Cassandra,' he said. 'I might just surprise you.'

VI: Creatures of the Dark

Chapter 6 of 22

With darkness comes passion.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Trickie Woo for her advice and to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter VI: Creatures of the Dark

'What have you been thinking, Severus?' he quietly said to himself as he looked upon his reflection in the mirror.

He had agreed to accompany Cassandra to that Goth party, and instead of renting an outfit that surely would not fit, he had decided to wear something that had been lying in the back of his closet for the last seven years, untouched: a black, high-collared robe and over it a black cloak.

He was surprised to see how well they still fitted. And even more surprised when he realised that he had actually missed his Wizarding clothes. The heavy fabric felt wonderfully familiar against his skin, and the swishing sound the cloak made when he was walking was music to his ears. The beard had been wrong though, totally wrong. So he had shaven it off. And there he was now, standing in front of his bedroom mirror, staring at the reflection of a man who had died seven years ago, the reflection of Severus Snape.

He had not been prepared for this. And for a while, he just stared at the man in the mirror and wondered who he was. A spy and traitor? A murderer? A hero? Severus Snape had been so many things that it was hard to decide which one actually defined him. Maybe they all did.

'It is *you*,' he whispered. '*All* of it is you, Severus.'

What had made him think that he could ever bury Severus Snape and let him rest in peace? What had made him think that he could outrun his past? He could run, yes, but he would never be able to hide. No matter how far away from England and the Wizarding world he was, Severus Snape would always be there. And maybe it was time to make peace with him.

~ ~ ~

He knocked at Cassandra's door at seven o'clock. He had chosen his Muggle clothes for the bus ride to Hveragerði: boots, black jeans and a simple black coat. His robe and cloak lay neatly folded in his black sports bag.

The first thing that caught his eye when Cassandra opened the door was her hair.

'Just how much wax did you use?' he asked.

Cassandra grinned and carefully fingered her spiky red hair. 'Enough to spear anyone who gets too close. Come in.'

When he took off his boots, he caught sight of Nicodemus, who came running into the hall, and he prepared himself to be clawed and bitten. But to his surprise, the cat started rubbing its head against his legs, purring loudly.

'Wow, he must like your aftershave,' Cassandra noted dryly. 'So do I, by the way.'

Slightly embarrassed, Severus rubbed his now smooth chin.

'I like you better without the beard,' Cassandra added, and Severus bent to pick up his bag so she wouldn't see him blushing.

She showed him the room where he could change and if he chose to spend the night. Nicodemus followed at their heels.

'We'll be leaving in about half an hour. I'll go and get changed.'

As Cassandra left the room, Severus expected the cat to follow its owner. But it stayed put.

'How come you suddenly like me?' he growled and gave the tabby his best scowl. It meowed and once more rubbed against his leg before it trotted towards the door. And Severus could have sworn that it winked at him before it left the room.

After he had changed into his robe, he left the room and went to the kitchen. Cassandra had obviously anticipated that he would be ready before her and had prepared a cup for tea for him. He almost dropped it when she entered the kitchen. She was wearing a long black skirt in crushed velvet, with a corset top that was laced in the back. Her shoulders were bare, and her pale skin contrasted beautifully with the dark fabric.

'Do you like it?' she asked, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

Severus just nodded. Of course he liked it. But at the moment he was too flabbergasted to utter a single sound.

~ ~ ~

They made their way through the village with their long, black cloaks billowing behind them. At first, it had felt weird to walk through a Muggle village wearing wizard clothes. But nobody seemed to notice. As a matter of fact, Severus soon realised that he and Cassandra were probably the two people in Hveragerði that evening who were dressed the least strangely. Or at least, they were the two people who wore the least make-up.

'I start to feel slightly underdressed,' he whispered to Cassandra as they passed a young man who looked like the crossing of a vampire and an Inferius.

'Don't worry,' Cassandra replied. 'It's dark in the church.'

'Church?' he repeated. 'Are you telling me that there is a Goth party in the church?' He wasn't a god-fearing man, but that seemed like blasphemy even to him.

Cassandra snorted. 'Well, actually the party is under the church, in the crypt.'

Now that felt loads better. Severus resisted the urge to shake his head and continued on his way, wondering how many more surprises that evening would hold.

She had not been kidding. They were indeed approaching the church. But instead of entering through the heavy oak doors, Cassandra led the way around the church. The entrance to the crypt was illuminated by torches, and so were the stairs that led underground. Severus could not help but grin as he walked down the stairs. He had missed the sound of robes swishing over a stone floor.

As they entered the crypt, his breath momentarily caught in his chest. The walls were draped with dark coloured fabrics, the tables were bending under the weight of food, and the air was filled with the heavy scent of spices and incense. It was like walking into one of Horace Slughorn's little gatherings.

Before Severus got a chance to take Cassandra's cloak, she was embraced by a tall man with long, blond hair, who was wearing tailored black pants, a dazzling white shirt and a frockcoat. For the second time in only a couple of minutes, Severus' heart skipped a beat. If he had not known better, he would have sworn that he was looking at Lucius Malfoy, or his brother at least.

'That's just Per,' Cassandra told him as the blond-haired man had left for the buffet. 'Nice bloke. Lawyer. He's a little weird though. He thinks he's a vampire.'

Severus raised an eyebrow and looked after Per. For as much as he knew, the guy *could* have been a vampire. It would not have surprised him at all. Nothing would surprise him anymore that evening.

~ ~ ~

The wine was warm and spiced, and it went straight to his head. And after two hours, Severus felt as if his brain was embedded in cotton. And he was completely unable to think any coherent thought. Slightly disorientated, he wandered around the crypt, looking for Cassandra.

He found her at the edge of the dance floor, arguing with the blond-haired man that reminded him so much of Lucius Malfoy.

'No, I am not going to dance with you, Per.'

'And why not, if I may ask?'

'Because you, sir, have sticky fingers.' The frown on her face turned into a smile when she spotted Severus. 'And besides, I prefer the dark type.'

She extended her hand towards him, and when Severus led her onto the dance floor, he could not help but give Per a condescending look. After all, Cassandra had chosen *him* over the fair-haired aristocrat.

He had not danced in years. The last time had been at the Yule Ball during the Triwizard Tournament, and he had only done it because Minerva had made him. During the first song, he managed to step on Cassandra's feet three times, and he would have paid a lot of money to be let off the hook. But when the song ended, she resolutely kept her hand on his shoulder. She wasn't going to let go of him any time soon, and to be quite honest, Severus did not want to let go of her waist either. So the first dance turned into a second one, and that one turned into a third. And by the time they were dancing to the fourth song, the polite distance between their bodies had become non-existent.

How it had happened, Severus did not know. Perhaps it had been the wine or the candles, or perhaps the spicy scent of musk and honey that was emitting from Cassandra's hair, but suddenly he felt his body pressed up against hers and his hands tracing down over the curve of her hips and up her back again. And before he knew it, his hand was cradling the back of her head and his lips were upon hers. Her lips were soft and warm, and feeling them against his made a shudder go down Severus' spine. He let his hands trail down over her hips again, finding that *her* hands were exploring his torso through his robe.

Encouraged by her touch, he let the tip of his tongue slip over her lips. She tasted of wine and almonds. Softly, carefully, he teased her lips open. He desperately wanted to taste more of her. He heard her moan softly as his tongue entered her mouth and felt her press herself closer towards him.

Almost reluctantly he broke free from her lips and looked into her eyes. There he saw the same thing that was burning inside himself: desire, lust. And as she pulled him off the dance floor, he followed her only too willingly.

In one of the deserted corridors of the crypt, he pressed her up against the wall, his mouth once more crushing hers. Her hands now found their way under his robe, and the touch of her fingers on his bare skin made him shiver. And so did the touch of her lips as she slowly kissed her way down his neck.

He pressed himself against her, hoping the pressure of her thigh against his crotch would give him some momentary relief. And he moaned deeply as she traced his carotid with the tip of her tongue. As her hand found its way between his legs, the breath caught in his chest.

'No, please Cassandra, don't,' he managed to groan while his whole body screamed for her to continue touching him.

'Don't you like it?' Her voice was raspy, barely more than a whisper, and the feeling of her hot breath against the side of his neck made Severus moan again.

'Yes, oh Gods yes, I do. But I cannot do this here.'

How he managed to climb the stairs that led out of the crypt, he did not know. His knees were weak, and he felt unsteady. And Cassandra turning around every few steps to take his face into her hands and kiss him deeply did not help at all.

It seemed to take her hours to unlock her front door, and Severus knew that pressing himself up against her back with his arm around her waist and his lips caressing her neck surely didn't make finding the keyhole any easier. But he just could not let go off her.

As the door finally opened, he swirled her around and kissed her deeply. They stumbled inside, tearing at each other's cloaks, tripping over them as they fell to the floor. Once in her bedroom, Severus found himself tearing at the laces of her corset, clumsy as a teenage boy. If he only had his wand, or at least steady fingers. Cassandra's attempts to remove his robe were much more successful, and soon he was standing naked in her bedroom, with her still fully dressed on her knees in front of him.

Her hot breath on his naked flesh made him moan, and the softness of her lips made his knees go weak. He gripped her shoulder with his right hand while his left held onto the bedpost. If he didn't want the encounter to end before it had properly begun, he would have to stop her.

'Cassandra, please,' he moaned. 'Don't. I can't ... I won't ...'

His arousal rendered him incoherent, and instead of even trying to utter any kind of understandable meaning, he shoved her onto the bed, unceremoniously pushing up her skirt. Her legs parted at the slightest touch of his hand against her inner thigh, and as he let his hand slip into her silken knickers, he found that she was just as ready as he was. He had not the self-discipline to wait any longer but just pulled at the delicate fabric until it tore. Then he launched forward, covering her body with his, and buried himself between her thighs.

He had intended to do this slowly, to relish every single moment, but the smouldering heat of her flesh made him forget his good intentions. He heard her moans echo in his ears but they seemed to come from far, far away. He did not even know if she was urging him to go on or telling him to stop. His lust had completely overpowered his brain. He buried his face at her shoulder and thrust into her, deeper, faster. There was not an ounce of willpower left in his body, and he climaxed with an animalistic cry. As collapsed on top of her, the world went momentarily black.

When the blood supply to his brain was back to normal, Severus felt like slapping himself. This had not just happened. He had not just humped her like a hormone-driven teenage boy. But he had, and the embarrassment he felt was beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Without even looking Cassandra in the eyes, he rolled off her and started grabbing for his clothes.

'Are you leaving already?' she asked, and he grunted. Then he felt her grab his hand and pull him back onto the bed.

'I am sorry,' he said, his eyes still focused on the pair of silken boxers he was holding in his hands. 'It has been a while.'

'That's quite alright, you know. We have all night,' she whispered into his ear.

He felt her hands on his shoulders and her warm breath on the back of his neck and started to relax as she kneaded his tense muscles. He closed his eyes, savouring the touch of her hands. A shiver went down his spine as she started to place tender kisses on his neck, and he felt goose bumps erupt on his arms. And as her tongue flicked lightly against his earlobe, he noticed that his skin was not the only part of his body that reacted positively to her touch.

'I think we should give this another try,' she whispered and slid down from the bed, unzipping her skirt. It fell to the floor like a pool of black water. She straddled him and lowered herself slowly onto his lap. He felt the urge to buck up against her, but she kept her distance, wouldn't come closer, wouldn't touch. Instead she looked deep into his eyes.

Then she leant slightly forward to brush a streak of hair from his face. The touch of her fingers against his cheek felt like warm summer rain. And the subtle brushing of her lips against his made him shudder once more.

For some moments, they just rested their foreheads against each other, eyes locked, lips barely touching. Then Severus felt her hands softly trail down his back, and he imitated her movements. All of a sudden, the laces of her corset weren't an unconquerable obstacle anymore. And a simple pull was all it took for the silken laces to open and the corset to fall to the floor.

Cassandra's hands were now on his shoulders, slowly gliding downwards to his chest. Again, he copied her movements. She sighed and closed her eyes, letting her head fall back. Severus let his left arm slide around her to keep her from falling, and she leant further backwards, arching up against him. He brought up his right hand to trace her jaw line with his fingers. Then he let his hand slide down her throat, over her chest, softly brushing her breasts with his fingertips.

He had not felt her move her hips. Suddenly he found himself pressed against her, and he brought his left hand to the small of her back to pull her closer towards him. She moaned as he slid inside her, and he himself gave a short growl. Again their eyes locked. Again their lips brushed softly against each other. And again neither of them moved.

Her lips parted slightly, and Severus let his tongue slip in between them. Honey, she tasted of honey. As he explored her mouth, he felt her press her hips against him and pulled her closer, holding her steadily so she would not move. He felt her muscles work around him and groaned into her mouth.

When he loosened his embrace, she rocked slightly backwards, ever so slowly, ever so carefully. And just as slowly she rocked back towards him again, taking him inside her up to the hilt. Her gentle movements were heaven and hell at the same time, and Severus could do nothing but savour the sensation of her hot flesh.

His eyes never left hers, not even when he moved his hand between her legs to pleasure her. He heard her sharp intake of breath as he applied pressure, and he moved his finger just as slowly and carefully as she moved her hips.

She arched backwards as her orgasm hit, and Severus buried his face at her neck as he pulled her hips towards him, thrusting upwards, losing himself in the sensation of her muscles tightening around him.

VII: Revelations

Chapter 7 of 22

And with the daylight comes the truth.

I wish I owned the HP universe, but unfortunately JKR does. I'm just playing around.

Thanks go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter VII: Revelations

Severus jerked awake and looked around, slightly disorientated. What was it that had woken him up? He could have sworn that he had heard a familiar noise. It had sounded like the hooting of an owl and a beak tapping against a window. But he must have dreamt. There were no delivery owls in Iceland.

He turned around to look at the woman who was sleeping right beside him. Her short, red hair was a tangled mess, her make-up was slightly smeared, and her lips were bruised from kissing.

She had driven him to the edge of insanity only hours earlier, teasing him, kissing him, touching him ever so lightly. Every time he had been close to losing control, she had withdrawn, leaving him shaking like a leaf in the wind. And when he had relaxed, she had started again, touching him with fingers that were light as feathers, kissing him with lips that were barely touching his skin, rocking against him with movements almost too delicate to notice. In the end, he had begged her for release. And when she had finally allowed him to peak, the sensation had almost made him pass out.

She was lying close beside him now, with her back towards him, fast asleep. Severus admired the curve of her hips, remembered the feeling of her breasts in his hands and the taste of her lips. His body reacted immediately to the memory. He was thirsting for more.

Careful not to wake her, he snuck up towards her, adjusting his body to the curve of hers, wrapping his arm around her hip to pull her closer. Did he dare wake her? He traced up along her neck with the tip of his nose, exhaling softly. When he reached her earlobe, he nudged it tenderly with the tip of his tongue, just to encircle it with his lips only moments later. He heard her whimper softly and felt her moving in his arms, pressing herself up against him.

'Happy birthday, Cassandra' he whispered into her ear.

'Hm, you remembered,' she murmured with a sleepy voice.

'Of course I did.'

His hand was now cupping her breast, and he felt her nipple harden at his touch. She was still not quite awake, and her movements were slow as she turned her head slightly so the length of her neck was exposed to him. She moaned softly as he continued covering the sensitive flesh with tender kisses.

Slowly, carefully, he turned her around so she came to lie on her back and positioned himself beside her. She had opened her sleepy eyes and was looking straight at him now. The light that was still burning in the hall lit the bedroom just enough for him to see the soft flush on her cheeks and the desire in her eyes.

'Close your eyes again' he whispered as he softly brushed her face with his fingertips. 'I want you to think that this is a dream.'

He started at her collar bone, slowly kissing his way down her body. He covered every inch, his lips barely touching her skin, his kisses just as light as hers had been earlier that night. He enjoyed seeing her shiver with pleasure, relished the sound of her heavy breathing.

The soft skin on the inside of her thigh tasted of honey, and Severus took his time, kissing, licking, tasting. As he let the tip of his tongue brush against her most sensitive spot, he heard her gasp and felt her hips buck up against him. Once more he flicked his tongue, applying a little more pressure as before, and this time Cassandra moaned deeply. Severus grinned. That was exactly how he had wanted her to react.

She gave a disappointed wince as he abandoned her core, but he had it all planned out. He would tease her just as much as she had teased him. He wanted to hear her beg for release the way he had.

He kissed his way up her body again, ever so slowly. He felt the goose bumps under his lips, felt her shiver under his touch. When he had reached her lips, he positioned himself beside her again, letting his hand now glide down the same path his lips had taken only minutes before, while he nibbled softly at her earlobe.

The sound that escaped her throat as he let one finger slip inside her was delightful. And so was the sensation of her muscles tightening around his finger. He moved his hand ever so slowly, and when a second finger joined the first, he had Cassandra exactly where he had wanted her.

'Severus, please. Please.'

When he curled his fingers, starting to make a beckoning movement, she was lost. He saw her clawing at the covers, felt a spasm go through her entire body and heard her calling out names of deities he did not even know. He smiled contentedly. Everything had gone according to his plan.

Her muscles had not relaxed yet when he entered her, and it took him all his self-control to not thrust into her, not to lose control, but to advance slowly, inch by inch.

'Look at me,' he whispered as he had buried himself up to the hilt inside her. The blue eyes met the dark, and the desire he saw in her eyes made him forget the mischievous intentions he had had earlier. This was not about teasing anymore. This was not about control. This was about making love.

His eyes never leaving hers, he started moving his hips, slowly at first, savouring the sensation of her warm flesh. He took time to kiss her, to stroke her tongue with his in the same rhythm their bodies were rocking against each other. This was bliss, he thought. Pure bliss.

As his desire grabbed hold of him, he picked up the speed, started thrusting harder and deeper. He felt her legs encircle his hips, felt her nails scratch his back. And as she called out his name over and over again, he let go of his control, crushed her lips with his, drank the sweetness of her mouth and spilled himself deep inside her.

~ ~ ~

The bed sheets beside him were empty when he awoke in the morning, still warm, still carrying her scent, but nonetheless empty. Severus abruptly sat up, listening. He relaxed as he heard sounds from the kitchen. She had not run out on him then.

'Idiot,' he mumbled to himself as he swung his legs out of the bed. 'This is her house. How could she run out on me?'

He found a terry cloth dressing gown hanging over the armchair by the window and put it on. As intimate as they had been last night, he would not have wanted to run around in Cassandra's house stark naked at half past nine in the morning.

He had already put his hand on the doorknob as he hesitated. What exactly was he supposed to do now? He had never woken up in a woman's bed. He had had his share of women, but he had never stayed until the morning. Most of the time, he had not even bothered to say good-bye. He was completely at a loss. What was Cassandra expecting of him now? Was he supposed to hug her or give her a good morning kiss? Hoping that she would take the lead, he tentatively opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

She was kneeling in front of the window. Nicodemus was meowing loudly, rubbing his head against Cassandra's hands. Obviously, it was time for the cat's breakfast.

'Good morning,' Severus mumbled, leaning against the doorframe, rubbing his neck, simply because he did not know what else to do with his hands.

'Good morning.' Cassandra got up and gave him a radiant smile. She was wearing a black dress, with a neckline so low that Severus had difficulties taking his eyes off her breast and looking at her face instead. Her hair was still a mess, but she had managed to get her make-up off.

'I see the dressing gown fits you,' she said, smiling, and started walking towards him.

Oh, Gods, what now? Should he kiss her? Or just hug her? Or just shove up her dress and take her right there on the kitchen table?

A loud crash saved Severus from making a decision.

'Nicodemus, you infernal nuisance!'

The obscenities that escaped from Cassandra's mouth as she cleaned up the mess that Nicodemus had created by knocking over the milk bottles could have made a troll blush. And instead of helping her, Severus stood still in the door, an amused expression on his face.

'I do not fancy milk in my coffee anyway,' he said jokingly as Cassandra rinsed out the dish rag.

'Well, I do,' she replied, scowling slightly. 'Tell you what, I put out a towel for you. So why don't you have a shower while I go and buy some milk.'

~ ~ ~

Cassandra hadn't returned yet when Severus had finished his shower and gotten dressed, so he decided to make himself a cup of tea and wait for her in the living room. He had just made himself comfortable when Nicodemus came strolling in.

'Now, you troublesome little beast, what are you up to now?'

The tabby brushed against his leg and looked up towards him as innocently as if butter wouldn't melt in its mouth. And before Severus even had time to react, it had leaped onto the third shelf of the bookshelf.

'I would come down from there if I were you,' Severus said in a warning tone, but the cat ignored him and continued balancing on the shelf. Two books landed on the floor with a dull thud.

'Nicodemus,' Severus said, his voice almost threatening now.

A third book came flying, then a fourth and then a candle. When a small wooden casket hit the floor with a loud crash, Nicodemus jumped down from the shelf and fled the room.

'Infernal nuisance indeed,' Severus mumbled and made to pick up the contents of the casket: a necklace, some earrings and a simple golden ring. Cassandra's wedding ring, he thought. He had all but forgotten about her having been married. It had been ten years since she had become a widow. Was it presumptuous to think that he was the first man she had let into her life after the death of her husband?

As he opened the casket to put its contents back inside, he noticed a second ring. It was forged of silver, three snakes encircling a black crystal. With trembling fingers, Severus picked it up, his heart pounding in his chest. He had the uncanny feeling that he knew this ring. But he sincerely wished that he was mistaken. He had to be mistaken. This could simply not be. For some moments, he considered putting the ring back into the casket, forgetting that he had ever seen it.

The palms of his hands were sweaty; his heart was racing. One part of his brain was telling him not to look. But how could he not? He had to know.

He did not even notice that he was turning the ring around. Suddenly, he was staring at the engraving, reading the words which he desperately wished weren't there:
Toujours Pur Always Pure.

VIII: The Truth

Chapter 8 of 22

Sometimes the past comes back to haunt you.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter VIII: The Truth

Severus was still kneeling on the floor, clutching the silver ring as a rapping on the front door cut through the silence. Who could that be? Cassandra wouldn't knock. Hastily, he threw the ring into the casket and put it back onto the shelf. He might as well go and open the door.

Standing in the cold was Per, the blond-haired guy that had reminded Severus so much of Lucius Malfoy. He was carrying a bouquet of black roses.

'Seeing as the sun is up, I understand that you are not a vampire,' Severus stated dryly.

The other man laughed. 'And who says that I am not using some sort of spell or potion that makes it possible for me to endure the sun?'

Severus raised an eyebrow. Nothing would surprise him any more this morning.

'I'm joking, of course,' Per said, misinterpreting Severus' scowl. 'Say, mate, is Cassy home? I'd like to deliver my best birthday wishes before I head back into town.'

'If you don't go inside at once, the roses will freeze to ice.' Cassandra had just turned around the corner and was now beaming at her friend, who caught her in an affectionate embrace.

'Severus and I were just about to have breakfast,' she said, pointing at the carton of milk in her hand. 'Do you want to join us?'

'I'd love to,' Per replied. 'But I have to get back to Reykjavik. I need to get some work done today.'

'Are you going there by car?' Severus enquired, suddenly seeing a chance to escape. 'Can I get a ride?'

'I thought you were staying for breakfast.' Cassandra sounded surprised, but Severus had neither the patience nor the desire to explain himself at the moment.

'I, too, have work to do,' he said, his voice cold and his face an inscrutable mask.

He went inside to get his bag and coat, shot Nicodemus a last vicious look, murmured a goodbye and stomped after Per towards the dark green car that was parked on the street. He just wanted to run, to flee. Where to, he did not know. He just needed to get away.

He never looked back, and he never saw the puzzled look on Cassandra's face. Nor did he see the owl that took flight from the kitchen window only about three minutes after he had left the house.

~ ~ ~

'How long have you known Cassandra, Per?' Severus asked. This wasn't small talk, he was looking for answers.

'I've literally known her half my life,' Per replied. 'I was friends with Thorbjörn.' He glanced at Severus from the side. 'You know about Thorbjörn, don't you?'

Severus nodded.

'They were so in love, those two, even after they had been married for ten years. They were on their second honeymoon when the accident happened. They had been at Glastonbury and were about to go and see Cassy's cousin in London. She had just graduated from the police academy. Cassy had not wanted to go, but Thorbjörn had persuaded her.' Per angrily hit the steering wheel with his fist. 'Damn it! It was not fair! They were about to have a baby.'

Severus gulped. 'A baby?'

'Yes. They had tried to get pregnant for years. God damn it, they had just found out.' There was a sad look on his face, and for some minutes, he did not say a word. After a deep sigh, he went on: 'Thorbjörn got caught in the car. He was literally crushed to death. Cassy flew through the windshield and got away with some cuts and bruises. But the baby ...'

Per stifled a sob, and when he went on his voice was shaking. 'I was so worried for her when she came back. She locked herself in, didn't answer the phone for days. After a week I simply kicked in her front door. She was a mess, the poor girl. So alone.'

'Doesn't she have any family?' Severus enquired.

Per shook his head. 'You know, I have no idea. She has never talked about her family. I think not even Thorbjörn has ever met them.'

A frown appeared on Per's brow. 'I always found that a little strange, you know. Actually, when she and Thorbjörn had just started going out, I found Cassy to be quite weird as well. I mean, she had basically appeared from nowhere, out of thin air ...'

Severus didn't hear the rest of what Per was saying. His mind was racing. She had come from nowhere, Per had said. People didn't just appear out of thin air. Everybody had a history, even those people who desperately tried to hide it.

And *his* history had now definitely caught up with him.

~ ~ ~

Back in his flat, Severus started pacing. The initial shock over his discovery had started to wear off, and the rational part of his brain was taking over. Facts, he had to analyse the facts. What of all the things he knew about Cassandra could prove that she was a witch. And what could possibly contradict it?

There was her bookshelf, full of books about herb lore, potions and spells. But that did not prove anything. Many Muggles were into what they referred to as *witchcraft*. Any Muggle could brew herbal teas against headache and indigestion. And so-called love spells had been used by Muggles for centuries. No, the books didn't prove anything.

Then there was Cassandra's remark about her learning Elfish. Now, that was just ridiculous! She was probably just obsessed with Tolkien. Hell, there were some Trekkies at the hospital who spoke Klingon fluently. No, craziness did not make anyone a witch.

But then there was that ill-fated ring: the serpents, the black crystal. She could of course have gotten that ring from one of her weird Goth friends. Those people at the party had worn jewellery that Severus had not known even existed in the Muggle world. Yes, it could just be a coincidence.

Severus gave a short, dry laugh. Who was he trying to delude? He had seen the engraving. No Muggle ring would bear those words. No, there was no doubt. As much as he tried not to see it, all the clues led to one conclusion: Cassandra was indeed a witch. And even worse, she was a Black.

He stared at the box of Floo Powder that was standing on his bookshelf. Minerva had insisted that his fireplace was connected to the Floo Network. In case there was an emergency, she had argued. If there had ever been an emergency, *this* was it. He needed access to the school's student records, and he needed access *now*.

He had already taken a handful of the Floo Powder when he paused. He could not just barge into the Headmistress' office. Minerva would want to know his reasons, and he was certainly not ready to give her any. First, he would have to digest all this himself.

Resolutely, he put the box back onto the shelf. He would have to do this later, at night, when he could be certain that Minerva was not in her office. Yes, he would sneak in later. Nobody would notice. He had, after all, been a spy for many years. If somebody could slink into the office of the Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry without being seen, then it was Severus Snape.

~ ~ ~

He had planned it carefully. He would wait until after midnight. Then he would make sure that Minerva truly had left her office. Then he would Floo into her office, cast a Disillusionment Charm and then check the school records. Nobody would notice.

He was sitting in his armchair by the window, twirling his wand between his fingers. It had felt strange to take the wand out of the safe. It had felt strange to hold it. And it had felt strange to cast a spell. But at the same time, it had felt perfectly normal. That wand had been part of him for most of his life. It still was.

For the third time that night, Severus ventured a peak into the Headmistress' office. It was two thirty in the morning. She just had to have left her office by now.

Yes, finally the light was out, and the only sound that could be heard was the snoring coming from the portraits at the walls. Severus gave a sigh of relief. He had actually started considering the fact that Minerva might spend the whole night behind her desk.

He carefully stepped out of the fireplace. He would have to move silently. The Disillusionment Charm kept him from being seen, but he could still be heard. As he had reached the door that led to the archive, he paused for a second and listened. Yes, the portraits were still asleep. Carefully he opened the door, praying that the hinges would not creak. Again he paused; again there was nothing but snoring. He slipped into the archive and soundlessly closed the door behind him.

Nothing happened. For a moment, Severus was genuinely surprised. He had expected that entering the archive would set off some defensive charm. He was, after all, not the Headmaster anymore, and only the Headmaster should have access to the archive. But then again, in the eyes of the Wizarding world, Severus Snape was dead.

He resisted the temptation to check his own records. He would have loved to see what his personal file had to say about him. Minerva was the keeper of the archive, and she knew the truth. But would she have written down that he was hiding in Iceland? Or had she put down a date of death? And did he actually want to know?

Swiftly he moved three shelves to the right to the year of 1963. If Cassandra was a witch, he would find her name there. Tentatively, Severus raised his wand.

'Cassandra Sv...' No, that was the wrong name.

Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he raised his wand once more and tapped it against the shelf. 'Cassandra Black.'

He was not even surprised when a roll of parchment floated from the shelf and onto the table behind him. He had known. And now there was the proof, written in Albus Dumbledore's handwriting: *Cassandra Black, born on October 31, 1963. Daughter of Orion and Walburga, sister of Sirius and Regulus*

With shaking hands, Severus rolled up the parchment and stuffed it back into his place. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his arms. The temperature in the room seemed to have dropped to sub-zero.

~ ~ ~

He spent the rest of the night sitting by the window, blankly staring into nothingness, thousands of emotions battling in his heart. He felt angry, disappointed, betrayed, hurt, confused. But most of all he had felt scared.

He had found his proof that night. Cassandra the little sister of a man he had hated all his life: And she was a witch, one of his own kind. Severus clenched and unclenched his fists. Had she recognised him, he wondered. Had she recognised Severus Snape?

He feverishly tried to remember if she'd said anything that would point towards that. But he wasn't able to focus. Every time he tried to remember anything she had said, his mind went strangely blank, as if somebody had cast a Memory Charm. Eventually, he dragged himself to bed and fell into a sleep that was filled with strange dreams that involved big black dogs, tabby cats and poisonous snakes.

When he awoke, he felt anything but rested, but he dragged himself out of bed and to the hospital. And that was about all he did for the rest of the week.

It turned out to be one of the emptiest weeks of his life. He got up, went to work, carried out his duties, went home, fell asleep. If somebody had asked him, he could not even have told them what the weather was like or what his last meal had been. It did not matter. He did not care.

Every evening when he returned from work, he saw his answering machine blink. He checked the numbers and found them to be Cassandra's. He wished he could say that he did not care. Instead, he just erased the messages without even listening to them. He did not trust himself. If he heard her voice, he would surely crumble, would call her, would fall for her. He wasn't ready yet.

On Saturday afternoon, the phone rang as he was sitting in his armchair by the window, once more staring blankly out of the window. He let the machine get it. It was her.

'Come on, Severus, I know you're not at work. I checked. Now pick up the phone.'

The sound of her voice had the effect he had feared all week. It felt like a knife was cutting into his very flesh, a knife covered with poison that was now creeping through his veins.

'If this is about the night after the party ... Look, Severus, I'm not expecting anything of you. We're both adults. And yes, we both had a little too much to drink, but we had a good time. No strings attached. I'm not expecting anything from you ...'

He snatched up the phone. He would not have her think that he had shagged her just because he had been drunk and then run out on her when he had sobered up.

'You are a witch,' he simply stated, his voice cold as ice.

'I've told you that months ago.'

'Do not play games with me, woman,' he snapped. 'I am not talking about Wicca or Neo-Paganism or any of this Muggle nonsense. Answer the question, Cassandra: are you or are you not a witch?'

For a moment, there was nothing but silence, and Severus wondered if she had hung up. But she hadn't, and when she answered, her voice was calm and firm.

'I think you need to come over.'

IX: Confessions

Chapter 9 of 22

Some secrets are revealed.

Thanks to JKR for creating the Harry Potter universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter IX: Confessions

Cassandra had hung up the phone quite a while ago, but Severus had not moved. He was still standing by the window, still holding the phone with one hand and slowly clenching and unclenching the other.

She had not sounded as surprised as he had thought she would. Did that mean that she had expected him to find out that she was a witch? And did that in its turn mean that she knew about *his* secrets as well? Of course she must know by now that he was a wizard. Only a wizard could have blown her cover. But did she know *who* he was?

He put down the phone and started pacing. She wanted to see him. But was he ready? Was he ready to hear her telling him who she really was? And was he ready to give her an answer in case she asked who *he* was?

He grabbed his coat and marched towards the door. There was no point in postponing the inevitable. Sooner or later he would have to face Cassandra and with her his past.

~ ~ ~

Severus had not been prepared for the sight that presented itself as Cassandra opened her front door. She was wearing a long dark blue robe embroidered with signs that he had not seen for years. That robe was not made by a Muggle tailor. It was undoubtedly Madam Malkin's handiwork.

Cassandra looked up at him, her face just as inscrutable as his own.

'So you've figured it out,' she stated, her voice neutral. Gone was her smile, gone was the warm tone. And Severus regretted ever having picked up that ill-fated ring, wished that everything could be as it had been the night of the party when he had actually been happy for a while.

She stepped away from the door and beckoned him inside. Nicodemus was sitting in the hall, its yellow eyes fixed on Severus. And as the wizard moved, so did the cat. And as he followed Cassandra into the living room, the cat hurried to keep up, always keeping its place between the witch and the wizard.

Severus accepted Cassandra's offer for tea with a silent nod and settled into the chair she pointed towards. Clutching his tea cup with both hands, he let his eyes wander towards the bookshelves and shook his head. He should have understood when he examined those books for the first time. No ordinary Muggle would own books like these. As he caught sight of *Advanced Potion Making*, he turned to face Cassandra.

'How could you keep this from me?'

She looked straight at him, and her voice was firm and calm as she spoke. 'Despite it being the twenty-first century, people still do not react very positively towards witchcraft.'

'You have been lying to me.'

She put down her tea cup with a clatter. 'I have not.' There was now a defiant tone in her voice. 'I have given you plenty of clues. You just chose not to see them.'

He was just about to open his mouth to deliver a biting retort when a whooshing noise from the fireplace made him jump up from his chair.

'It's not like you have been completely honest with Cassandra either, Severus.'

Slightly perplexed, he stared at the elderly woman who had exited the fireplace and was now brushing ashes off her emerald robe. Minerva McGonagall had been one of the last people he had expected.

He spun around to face Cassandra. She did not look surprised at all but just got up and conjured a third tea cup.

'What is this?' he barked. 'Some kind of set-up?'

'Nobody is trying to set you up in any way, Severus,' McGonagall said in a slightly annoyed tone. 'Now sit down.'

He defiantly kept standing up.

'Severus Snape, have a seat,' McGonagall ordered.

Instead, Cassandra sank onto the nearest chair. 'So it is you,' she whispered.

Severus did not answer. And once more silence settled over the room. Minerva had made herself comfortable on the sofa, and Nicodemus had jumped up onto her lap. For several minutes, the tabby's purring was the only sound to be heard in the house.

It was Minerva who broke the silence. 'For heaven's sake. Severus, open your mouth. Ask Cassandra what you want to know so desperately that you ventured to break into my office.'

Severus stared at the Headmistress, baffled.

'Oh, come on, Severus. Didn't you think that your break-in went a little too smoothly?'

'Did I leave a trace?' he asked. 'Did one of the portraits ...'

'I was expecting you, Severus,' Minerva replied. 'Cassandra informed me that you had found the ring.'

'How could you have known?' he asked, now looking at Cassandra. She just nodded towards Nicodemus, who was now sleeping on Minerva's lap.

'That infernal cat,' Severus growled. 'I should have wrung its neck the first time it attacked me.'

'It was Nicodemus who recognised you in the first place.' Minerva's voice was as patient as if she were talking to a five-year-old.

'He's a Kneazle.' For the first time since Minerva's arrival, Cassandra was speaking. 'He recognised you as a wizard the moment he laid eyes upon you.'

'Is that why he tried to rip me into pieces?'

Cassandra shook her head. 'He noticed that you had a secret.'

'He probably sensed your Dark Mark, Severus,' Minerva added.

Severus' eyes were fixed on Cassandra. She suddenly looked pale, fragile. She had clasped her hands in her lap and resolutely stared down at them.

'Why do you own a Kneazle who is trained to detect the Dark Mark, Cassandra?'

He saw a muscle twitch in her jaw, but she did not answer, did not raise her gaze. So he turned to Minerva. 'Well?'

'I gave the Kneazle to her,' the Headmistress explained. 'For protection.'

'Protection from what?'

Again, there was silence. Minerva was looking at Cassandra, who in her turn was still staring at her hands. And Severus was alternately staring at one of the women, waiting for an answer. Then he got up on his feet and started pacing the room.

'Is either one of you going to tell me what is going on here?' he snapped. 'Why is Sirius Black's little sister hiding in Iceland? Why is she being protected by a Kneazle? And what does she need protection from?'

'My past.' Cassandra's voice was so weak that it was almost inaudible. Severus swirled around to see her stare at him. Her eyes were filled with fear, her hands shaking. What the hell was going on?

From the corner of his eye, he saw Nicodemus jump down from Minerva's knees and run towards his mistress. Cassandra picked the cat up and hugged it towards her chest, as if she was trying to hide behind it.

'You could say that all of it started when Cassandra came to Hogwarts,' Minerva started. 'You know the Black family, Severus. They have always prided themselves with their pure-blood ancestry. Of course, they had made plans to marry off Cassandra to a pure-blood wizard the day she was born. But that plan would have required that she was sorted into Slytherin. When she was sorted into Ravenclaw, the family of her future husband declared that they would not have her. Then Orion and Walburga more or less told her that she needn't bother coming home anymore. They did not want yet another black sheep in the family.'

Once more, Severus looked from Minerva to Cassandra. Nicodemus had now settled in her lap, and she was petting the cat with steady hands. But she was still not looking up, nor was she speaking.

'Her brothers didn't care about her,' Minerva went on. 'Sirius was too busy cooking up mischief with his friends, and Regulus did his parents' bidding and distanced himself from his sister. Very few people even knew that the Blacks had three children.'

Severus nodded. That explained why he had not known about Cassandra, despite him having spent a fair bit of time with Regulus.

'The year Cassandra took her N.E.W.T.s, Voldemort was at the peak of his reign, and she had nowhere to go. She was certainly not welcomed at home. And although she was not in any way involved with Voldemort or the Death Eaters, she did not find any employment. Her family name brought her nothing but trouble. And since some Death Eaters still had some unfinished business with the Blacks, she was in danger. That was when Professor Flitwick suggested that she went abroad, at least for a while. When she found the love of her life, she decided to stay in the Muggle world. And we all thought it was for the best.'

Minerva got up and crossed the room, coming to a halt in front of Cassandra. She cupped the younger woman's chin in her hand and made her look at her. 'I think you should tell him the rest yourself, kitten,' she whispered.

Cassandra nodded tentatively, and Minerva patted her cheek. Then she turned to Severus. 'Do I have to put a spell on the door, or will you voluntarily stay to listen, Severus?'

'I will stay,' he promised.

Before stepping into the fireplace, Minerva turned once more to face her two charges. 'You know where to find me, both of you.' And then she was gone.

For a while, Severus stared at the empty grate. Then he felt something brush against his legs. It was Nicodemus.

'You want me to talk to your mistress, don't you?'

As if to say yes, Nicodemus bumped its head once more against Severus' leg and then jumped onto Cassandra's lap again.

'Please don't think badly of me, Severus.' Her voice sounded strange, endlessly tired, thick with tears. 'I never meant to deceive you in any way.'

'When did you figure out who I was?' He just had to ask. He needed to know.

Cassandra shrugged. 'You presented me with just as many clues as I did, although you did not mean to. There was your first name, your accent. There was the fact that you are three years older than me and could very well be the Severus I remembered from school from Hogwarts.'

'A proper analysis,' Severus stated. 'But then again, that is what can be expected of a Ravenclaw.'

Cassandra nodded. 'And then there was the way Nicodemus reacted towards you, of course.'

'You said he behaved like that with family.'

'Yes, family. Wizards, Severus.'

'Why did you not say anything?'

'I wanted to be sure. I needed proof. That was why I let you see parts of the bookshelf. I normally don't let my Muggle friends see those books.'

Of course not. She had even told him that she was a witch that day. And he had chosen not to believe and instead bought her silly explanation about being a Wiccan. All of a sudden, Severus felt rather stupid.

'I figured that if you were a wizard, you did not want to reveal it,' Cassandra went on. 'And so I decided not to ask. We had made a deal, you and I. Remember? We said we wouldn't dig in each other's pasts.'

Severus nodded. He remembered that afternoon at the tiny café. He had enjoyed himself tremendously then. For some blissful hours, Cassandra had made him forget his past. And now it was all crashing down on him like a tidal wave.

'I thought we would both come clean eventually. And then Nicodemus knocked over the casket.' She sighed heavily. 'I didn't want you to find out that way.'

Again, Severus nodded. 'I can imagine better ways as well. But maybe it was for the best.'

'I'm sorry, Severus.'

'So am I, Cassandra.' Then he rose from his chair. 'I need to catch the last bus into town. I have to work tomorrow.'

'Please don't leave, Severus.' There was a look of sheer desperation on her face. But Severus wasn't ready to respond to her emotions. He had to sort out his own first.

'Please don't leave,' she repeated.

He looked down at her, his heart heavy in his chest. 'What do you want me to do, Cassandra?' he asked. 'What are you hoping for if I stay here tonight?'

He saw her shoulders droop. But she was still looking straight at him. And he thought that there were tears shining in her eyes.

'I'm not hoping for anything, Severus. But I'm afraid that you'll walk through this door and never have the courage to come back.'

'Are you calling me a coward?' The tone of his voice was much harsher than he had intended it to be, and he regretted it immediately as Cassandra flinched.

'No,' she replied, shaking her head. 'You are not a coward, Severus. You are a survivor. And survivors do not tempt fate. Your Slytherin self-perseverance will keep you

from coming back.'

Severus nodded. Yes, maybe it would. Maybe he would walk out on her now and never see her again. The thought made his heart ache.

He resisted the urge to touch her. Had he touched her, his determination would have crumbled and he would have stayed. But he could not. He mustn't. Not tonight.

'Goodbye, Cassandra,' he whispered softly. Then he turned on his heels and left without looking back.

X: The Start of a New Beginning

Chapter 10 of 22

To start over one has to make peace with one's past.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter X: The Start of a New Beginning

'Minerva?' he called into the fire. 'Minerva, are you there?'

'Ah, Severus, my dear boy. I was wondering when you would visit again.'

Severus raised his head to look at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard was looking down at him with his ever-so-twinkling eyes, smiling.

'Nice of you to knock this time, by the way,' Dumbledore continued. 'Minerva is at dinner. She should be back shortly. Why don't you come in?'

Severus stepped into the green flames, and moments later he arrived at the Headmistress' office. There he started pacing, from the desk to the window, from the window to the bookshelf, from the bookshelf back to the desk. He knew that the portrait of Albus Dumbledore was following him with his eyes, but he knew better than to look up. He had no desire whatsoever to discuss the situation at hand with Dumbledore.

'You will wear out your shoes,' Minerva said in a kind tone as she entered the office.

'Since when do you have dinner that late?' Severus snapped. 'I have been waiting for twenty-seven minutes.'

Minerva gave him a kind, motherly smile. 'I was hoping you would stay at Cassandra's a little longer.' Then her smile faltered and she narrowed her eyes. 'You did not walk out on her, did you?'

'I most certainly did not,' Severus replied, turning away from Minerva. He suddenly felt uneasy under her scrutinising gaze. How come she could still make him feel like a schoolboy who had been caught after curfew? Once more he strode towards the window.

'Then you talked?' Minerva inquired.

He gave a curt nod, still pacing.

'For goodness' sake, Severus. Have a seat.'

It was the second time that day that Minerva told him to sit down. And that time he did as he was told. As he sank onto the seat in front of her desk he suddenly realised how tired he was.

'Did you ask her?' The kind tone was back in Minerva's voice, and she was looking at him very much in the same way as she had when he had been a boy and she had been interrogating him about who had caused the bruises on his body.

'Did you ask her all those questions that are burning a hole into you mind, Severus?'

He didn't answer.

'You *did* walk out on her then.' She sat down behind her desk and shook her head. 'Some things obviously never change. You've always been a proud man, Severus, and stubborn as a donkey.'

He opened his mouth to retort, but a gesture of Minerva's hand made him hold his peace.

'I should send you right back to her, you know,' she said. 'But I am afraid that you will just hide in your flat and miss out on your chance to make up with her.'

He didn't reply. Minerva was right, of course. If she sent him away now, he would probably never go to see Cassandra again, simply because he was afraid. And the worst thing was that he wasn't really sure what the hell it was that he was so afraid of.

'Fire away then, Severus,' Minerva said, peering at him over the rim of her glasses. 'What do you want to know?'

'What happened the day Cassandra's husband died? Why was she not injured when the Brockdale Bridge collapsed?'

'Someone knew that she was there,' Minerva replied in a strained tone. 'We never found out how the Death Eaters knew that she and Thorbjörn were about to cross the bridge at the moment of the attack. But somehow they knew, and they got her out of the car.'

Minerva took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. 'They made her watch, Severus. They made her watch how the bridge collapsed. They made her watch her husband die.'

'Why?' he asked. 'Why did they get her out? Why did they spare her?'

Minerva shrugged and put her glasses back on. 'I am not sure they meant to spare her. I rather think they wanted her to know who was responsible before they killed her. Someone wanted her to suffer.'

Severus clenched his fists. 'Who? Who wanted her to suffer?'

Minerva shrugged. 'I don't know, Severus. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but Yaxley was there.'

Severus frowned. What did Yaxley have to do with anything?

'Cassandra had been promised to him,' Minerva explained. 'I suppose he would have taken her just for her name and her dowry, and he would not have cared that she had been sorted into Ravenclaw. But as her parents disowned her, he too was left standing in the rain. He sure had some unfinished business with her.'

Minerva broke off and once more brought her hand towards her brow. Severus noticed that she was shaking.

For the first time since their conversation had started, Dumbledore spoke: 'Yaxley cast the curse that killed the baby.'

Severus felt a chill go down his spine. He knew Yaxley. He had been a brutal, sadistic man, the type of person who would have taken it as a personal insult that Cassandra had married a Muggle and gotten pregnant with his baby, the type of person who would have killed her child in the womb just to make a statement. Severus did not even want to imagine what kind of cruelties Cassandra had had to endure by that man.

'How did she get away?' He noticed that his own voice wasn't all too steady. This whole affair affected him more than he had anticipated.

Minerva's face was still buried in her hand, and Severus wondered if she was crying. He turned towards the portrait of Dumbledore and repeated his question.

'We don't know. She has never been able to tell us,' the old man replied. 'One of the Death Eaters' curses might have affected her memory. Or maybe the shock had wiped out the details. She didn't even remember how she got to Grimmauld Place. Suddenly, she was just standing on the yard, shaking and bleeding. It was a lucky coincidence that Kreacher saw her through the window.'

'Grimmauld Place?' Severus repeated. 'Why did she go there?'

'It had once been her home,' Minerva had found her voice again, but it was still shaky. 'And she had nowhere else to go.'

'The poor girl was in a ragged state,' Dumbledore went on. 'We immediately rushed her off to St. Mungo's where they treated her wounds. But she wouldn't stay.'

'Sirius wanted her to stay in Britain, and so did Albus and I,' Minerva continued. 'We thought we could protect her here.'

'You feared that Yaxley was not done with her?' Severus inquired.

Minerva nodded. 'But she would not have it. She insisted on returning to Iceland.'

'And you just let her go?' He couldn't believe it. 'You let her go, and the only protection you gave her was a Kneazle?'

'Give us some credit, Severus,' Minerva replied, sounding insulted. 'The Kneazle was only one link in the protective chain. As you know, Nicodemus recognises the Dark Mark.'

'A lot of good that did,' Severus stated dryly. 'What would have happened if I had had bad intentions the first time I visited?'

'Cassandra's house has been well protected since the day she returned,' Dumbledore explained. 'Firstly, no one can enter the house unless they have been invited. And secondly, no one can enter the house carrying a wand.'

'Why are the wards still intact?' Severus wondered. 'The Dark Lord had been dead for more than seven years. So has Yaxley.'

Minerva nodded. 'Yes, the threats are gone. But Cassandra's fears aren't. She had seen her husband die. Her child had died in her womb. There are still days when she does nothing else but cry. She has never forgiven herself.'

Severus stared at the Headmistress, a look of utter disbelief on his face. How could Cassandra blame herself for any of this? She had not asked to be born a Black. She had not asked to be involved in that war. She had had no part in any of this.

As if she had read his mind, Minerva nodded. 'Yes, Severus, you are right. Cassandra is just one of those many victims of Voldemort's reign, one of those who never had a choice.'

Severus nodded. He knew exactly how it was to not have a choice. The last choice he had made in his old life had been the day he had turned from Voldemort and become a spy. And since then, he had been nothing but a pawn.

For a second he closed his eyes, trying to block out the images that were forming in his mind. He did not want to think about his past, not now.

'Has she never considered coming back, returning to the Wizarding world?' he wondered.

Minerva shook her head. 'Never. She has nothing to return to.'

Once more Severus nodded. He knew *that* feeling, too. He had never had any desire to return to the Wizarding world either. Neither had he anything to return to. Birds of a feather, indeed.

They sat silently for a while. Minerva was shuffling around papers on her desk, Dumbledore was looking down at her, and Severus was staring at the flickering light of the candles, his mind racing: only a couple of months ago, he had been living a quiet Muggle life, far away from the Wizarding world, far away from his dark past. And now he was back at Hogwarts, facing all that he had left behind, not for his own sake but for her.

'What are you going to do now, Severus?' Minerva's voice ripped him out of his thoughts. 'You cannot just ignore everything you have learnt over the last couple of days. The ghosts of your past have been awakened, and you cannot just send them back to sleep.'

'I am aware of that, Minerva.'

'Go and see her, Severus. Please talk to her. I think there is a possibility that you two can heal each other's wounds like no one else can.'

'I do not know if I can do that, Minerva.' He rose and walked towards the fireplace.

'What is it you are afraid of, Severus?' Minerva called after him, but he pretended not to hear and Flooed back to his flat in Reykjavik.

~ ~ ~

Once more, Severus was pacing his living room. He had tried to go to sleep, but it had been in vain. He could not find any peace. Now the sun was rising in the east, and he had still not found any answers.

Why had he not understood? Why had he chosen not to see?

Cassandra had dropped plenty of hints: her remarks about dunderheads and nincompoops had been spot on, the Potions books had been solid proof, and she had even plain-out confessed being a witch. She had not concealed anything. But he had been too busy running from his past, had closed his eyes and pretended not to see.

What are you afraid of, Severus?

Minerva's words were still ringing in his ears. Only an hour ago, back at her office, he had chosen to ignore her question. He had had an answer, but he had not wanted to admit it, not even to himself: he was afraid of his past. He was afraid to look back and be reminded of all the things he had left behind, the mistakes he had made, the friends he had lost.

Seven years ago he had been given the chance to run. And he had taken it without thinking twice. It had been so easy to just turn his back on everything and walk away, swipe everything under the carpet and pretend it wasn't there.

Maybe he was a coward after all.

You are not a coward, Severus. You are a survivor. And survivors do not tempt fate.

He smirked at the memory of Cassandra's words. What did she know? What did she know about the man who had once been Severus Snape?

Severus Snape had been a liar, a traitor, a murderer. From the day he had taken the Dark Mark, he had lived his life in the shadows of his wrongdoings. And for a while, he had gladly hidden in those shadows and transformed into a creature of the dark.

He had tried to return to the Light. He had trusted Dumbledore and followed orders, hoping for redemption. But the way to salvation had been plastered with new lies, new deception and more blood on his hands.

Eventually, he had accepted that he would never be able to step out of the shadows. But he had gone on fighting. If there was no hope for him, maybe there was at least hope for wizardkind.

There were those who said that the actions of Severus Snape had made it possible for Harry Potter to defeat the Dark Lord in the end. When Severus had heard about that statement for the first time, he had smirked at it. It had seemed ridiculous. What good had he ever done? And even if he had done anything good, how could anybody ever see it in the mass of all his wrongdoings? How could anybody see it if he himself was unable to?

~ ~ ~

The days dragged by. Severus barely spoke to anyone. He went to work, carried out his tasks and then disappeared from sight. He had no energy for collegial chatting or questions about how his weekend had been. He needed to be alone, needed to sort things out.

His eyes darted immediately to his answering machine every time he stepped inside his flat. He desperately wished that Cassandra had called, that she had taken the first step and said: 'Hey, let's start over.' But she had not called, and the silence of the phone seemed to be mocking him.

What was he expecting? The first step was not hers to make. He was the one who had walked out on her. He was the one who could not accept his past. He was the one who had to beg for forgiveness. But as much as he wanted to call her, as much as he wanted to apologise, he did not dare. What if she didn't pick up the phone? Or even worse, what if she told him to leave her alone?

By Thursday, the uncertainty became too much to bear. If he ever wanted to sleep peacefully again, he would have to talk to her. He had to take the risk that she would tell him to go to hell. At least, he would know then.

He stood some minutes outside the café, peering through the window. She was sitting at their table, a stack of paper in front of her. If it hadn't been for the tired look on her face and the feeling of guilt in the pit of his stomach, everything would have been just as the first time he had come to the café to meet her. It had been a blissful afternoon, free of memories, free of dark thoughts.

He had already placed his hand on the doorknob when he considered turning away and leaving her alone. What right did he have to ask anything of her? He should set her free. She would forget him eventually and find happiness with someone else.

But he could not just walk away. Over the last couple of days, he had come to terms with the fact that he had to leave his hiding place, that he had to open his eyes and accept his past. But he couldn't do it alone. He needed help. He needed her.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside the café. Cassandra didn't stir, and he approached her table without her noticing him.

'Is this seat taken?' he asked in a low voice.

He saw her place her pen on the table, saw her chest rise as she took one deep breath. Then she lifted her head and looked up at him. He didn't need Legilimency to read her. She was relieved to see him, but at the same time she was confused and scared. He understood her feelings. He felt the same.

She nodded towards the chair opposite her, and as he took his seat, he stretched out his hand towards her:

'Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Severus, Severus Snape.'

XI: Healing

Chapter 11 of 22

Wounds break open, and tears are dried off.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XI: Healing

This was a truly awkward situation, and Severus felt more nervous than he had in years. He ordered a cup of coffee just to have something to hold on to, and that was what he was doing now, his palms hurting from the heat of the cup and his knuckles white. Cassandra had stuffed the essays she had been grading into her backpack and was clutching a cup of her own. She, too, seemed nervous, uneasy, and Severus could only sympathise.

'How have you been?' he ventured to ask after what had seemed an eternity.

'Fine,' she answered, raising her gaze from her cup and looking at him for just a split second before lowering her eyes to stare at her coffee again.

Severus needn't use Legilimency to know that she was lying. If her pale face and the dark shadows under her eyes hadn't given her away, the state of her fingernails and cuticles surely had. She must have been chewing them extensively over the last couple of days. She was definitely not fine.

'Are your dunderheads giving you any grief?' he inquired, desperately trying to get some sort of conversation going.

She shrugged. 'No, they're actually behaving quite nicely.' Her voice sounded strained, and she raised her hand to rub her neck, as if she were in pain. When she lowered her hand again, it stopped at her mouth, and her thumbnail fell victim to her eye-teeth.

Severus shifted on his chair. He hated small talk, he hated apologies, and he hated the feeling of helplessness. And now he had to go through all of it at once. He was just contemplating about leaving when Cassandra put down her cup with a thud.

'This is ridiculous,' she stated. She was looking straight at him now, and there was a look in her eyes which he could not quite define. It wasn't anger. Frustration maybe?

'You came here for a reason,' she continued. 'Spit it out.'

'I came ... I want to ...' He had come to apologise, but her straightforwardness had caught him off guard and rendered him speechless.

'Well?' He recognised the tone in her voice. He had himself used it many times on his students and had scared the living daylight out of them. The fact that someone was using it on him was amusing and annoying at the same time.

'Not here,' he said and suppressed a smirk. 'What I have to tell you is not for strangers' ears. I would like you to come to my flat.' He paused. 'If you want to, that is.'

To his relief, Cassandra had already grabbed her mittens and was about to get up. It seemed that she was ready to listen to him.

~ ~ ~

Back at his flat, Cassandra settled onto the sofa, clutching the cup of hot tea Severus had offered her. He himself had remained standing and was in his turn holding a glass of Scotch. He was not expecting to get any help from the alcohol, but holding on to the glass felt somehow reassuring.

They hadn't spoken a word since they had left the café, and the silence was becoming overwhelming. Why was this so hard? He had prepared for this all week. He knew exactly what he wanted to tell her.

Finally, he took a hearty gulp of Scotch and opened his mouth. 'I apologise for having snapped at you,' he said. 'I had no right to accuse you of having lied to me.'

Cassandra put down her cup on the coffee table and looked at him, narrowing her eyes slightly.

'And I apologise for beating about the bush. I should have asked you straight out if you were a wizard the day Nicodemus hissed at you.'

Severus cocked an eyebrow at her. 'I would not have told you.'

She tilted her head slightly and gave him a timid smile. 'We don't know that.'

He gave a short, dry laugh. 'I would *not* have told you. Trust me, Cassandra.'

'Trust you?' Now it was her turn to cock an eyebrow. 'I do not even know who you are.'

He put down his glass and took a step towards her. 'Do you want me to tell you who I am?'

She held his gaze and nodded slowly, and Severus swallowed dryly. Obviously, she was ready to listen to him. The question was, was he really ready to talk?

'I am Severus Snape,' he started. 'Former Potions master at Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, Head of Slytherin House, Death Eater and Member of the Order of the Phoenix, double agent and murderer of Albus Dumbledore.'

Cassandra leant back on the sofa, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her eyes still locked onto his. 'You are also the most loyal man Dumbledore has ever met, and the bravest man Harry Potter has ever known. It was thanks to your deeds that Voldemort was defeated.'

Severus snorted. 'You have been reading too many bad biographies.'

'Are you telling me that any of this is not true?' She was still looking at him with those blue eyes that were calling for him like the depths of the Dark Lake, depths in which he could submerge, drown, and never surface again. They seemed to be able to look right into his very soul. And if Cassandra had wanted to, she could have made him reveal his deepest secrets, and he would not have been able to resist.

Slowly, he averted his eyes and turned towards the window. It was dark outside, and he could see Cassandra's reflection in the glass.

'I have done what was asked of me,' he stated.

He saw her nod, pensively. 'It seems to me as if Severus Snape has been a selfless man.'

He almost laughed. Severus Snape had been many things, but he had never been selfless. He had risked his life in order to protect the Boy Who Lived, but he had not done it for the boy, and certainly not for the good of wizardkind. Dumbledore had thought that he had done it all for Lily. But Lily had turned from him many years ago. She would not have cared about what *he* had done. She would only have cared that *someone* had protected her son.

No, he had done it all for selfish reasons. He had done it to brush off the Darkness and be admitted into the Light. But he had failed. There was still no place for him in the Light. He was still hiding in the shadows.

'Whatever you think that you know about me, Cassandra, is not true,' he said, his voice detached. 'I am not a hero. I have done despicable things. I have spied, lied, killed. I have betrayed those who trusted me. And I have done it all simply to clear my conscience.'

'Was that so wrong?' Cassandra asked. 'The side-effects of your selfish acts, as you call them, have saved the Wizarding world. Why can't you be happy about that?'

He just shrugged and kept staring out of the window. He had an answer to that question, but it was private. Cassandra had no right to know. Not yet.

He had not even heard her approach, nor had he seen her reflection, so he flinched as he felt her hand on his shoulder and her breath on his neck.

'Is this why you left it all behind, Severus?' she asked softly. 'Because you blamed yourself so much that you couldn't bear people calling you a hero? Because you thought that you didn't deserve being happy?'

Her voice wasn't much more than a whisper, but her words rang in his ears as if she had been shouting.

'You do not understand this, Cassandra.' There was a bitter tone in his voice, and he wondered where it had come from. He had not heard it for years.

The sudden coldness on his shoulder made him realise that Cassandra had removed her hand, and he saw her reflection backing away from him.

'You have no idea how much I understand, Severus Snape. You have no idea.'

Her voice suddenly sounded choked, panic-struck. And when Severus swirled around to face her, he felt his breath catch in his chest. Her face was chalky white, and there were tears shining in her eyes.

'Cassandra?' What the hell was happening?

As he reached out for her she shrank away, walking backwards until her back hit the wall and she had nowhere to go. She stared blankly at him, and Severus wondered if she even saw him.

'I failed them.' Her voice was shaky, thick with tears. 'My husband and my unborn child became casualties of a war in which they were not even involved. They died because I was part of that war. And they died because I couldn't protect them. I failed them.'

Then the tears started streaming down her face, and she sank to the floor, sobbing. Severus reached her with four swift strides and knelt down close to her, wrapping his arms around her shaking body. He felt her fingers dig into his upper arm as she clung to him for support, and all he could do was hold her against his chest, hoping that the closeness would give her some comfort.

How long had it been since she had cried like that, he wondered? Had she, too, managed to lock up her dark memories in the back of her mind for so many years, just to find them break free now as she had met another refugee of the Wizarding world?

He himself had not cried for years. He had cried the night Lily had died and then just once more, the night he had been sitting in Sirius Black's old bedroom clutching Lily's picture and the letter that was carrying her love. He, too, had failed protecting the one he once had loved.

Cassandra's sobs subsided, but her tears were still soaking his shirt. Carefully, tenderly, Severus started stroking her hair, her shoulders, waiting for her to relax again.

'The people who led that war were more powerful than any of us,' he whispered. 'We never stood a chance to protect the ones we loved.'

For a while, they just knelt on the floor with their shoulders against the wall and their arms around each other. Neither one spoke, neither one moved.

Why he started kissing her, Severus did not know. It just felt right. Her lips were still quivering, and he could taste the salt of her tears. The fervour with which she responded to his kiss surprised him. And as she teased open his lips with the tip of her tongue, he granted her access to his mouth only too willingly. He pressed his hands against the small of her back as she shifted her position to sit in his lap. But as she started fumbling with his belt, he grabbed her wrists to stop her.

'This is not what you want right now, Cassandra.'

She didn't look at him. Instead she let the tip of her tongue slip over his jaw line, covered the sensitive skin on the side of his neck with sensuous kisses.

This was not right. She was vulnerable right now, and touching her seemed like taking advantage of her. Severus' brain told him no, told him to resist. But his treacherous body reacted to the tiniest of her touches, and he soon released her wrists to let his hands slip under her skirt. The skin of her thighs felt hot against his hands, just as hot as her breath felt against his neck.

She shifted slightly on his lap to unbuckle his belt and open his fly, and as her hand closed around his shaft, he involuntarily thrust upwards. No, this was not right, but it felt too good to stop.

Her kisses rendered him senseless. And he had not the faintest idea how or when she had removed the fabric between them, but suddenly he found himself pressed up against her core, begging for entrance. As she lowered herself down onto him, an odd sound escaped her throat, a strange mixture of a stifled sob and a groan of pleasure. And Severus took her head between his hands, trying to make her look at him. He needed to see her eyes, needed to know her thoughts. But she jerked free from his grip and instead kissed him with a passion that made him forget his good intentions.

It still didn't feel right. He felt guilty for enjoying her touch, for hugging her close towards him, for bucking up against her. But it was too late stop. He grabbed her hips and pushed upwards, hard and fast, the back of his head thumped into the wall, and he cursed loudly as the pain mixed with the sweet sensation of his release.

Shaking and gasping for air, he wrapped his arms around Cassandra's waist and pulled her close, burying his face at her neck. He could feel her pulse against his lips, steady and slow, while his own pulse was racing. He wanted to hold her, just hold her, nothing else, but she stiffened in his arms.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I shouldn't have ... This wasn't right. I need to go.'

She broke free from his embrace, slid from his lap and got up from the floor. She would have run away if he hadn't managed to snatch her wrist in the last moment. He pushed himself off the floor, grimacing at the pain that shot into his back and buckled his belt with his free hand.

'Look at me.'

He pulled her arm so she was forced to turn towards him. Finally he got to see her face. She was still pale and her mascara was running. But the look in her eyes had changed. She was looking at him with a silent plea not to send her away.

'Stay,' he whispered, tenderly brushing her cheek with the tips of his fingers.

He saw her teeth gnawing at her lip, saw her eyes narrow slightly. When he let go of her wrist, she didn't move. Good, he thought. At least she would not run.

He let his thumb trail over her lips, cupped her chin in his hand and tenderly placed a kiss on her lips. Her lips quivered, but she didn't shrink away. He ventured moving his hand to the back of her head and carefully pulled her closer as their kiss deepened.

As he pulled away, Cassandra let her head fall against him and rested her forehead against his shoulder. Severus wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close, cradling her against his chest.

'Do you still want to leave?' he whispered into her ear.

To his relief, she shook her head.

'Good,' he said, softly nudging her neck with his nose. 'Because I do not want you to go.'

~ ~ ~

He was awoken by the creak of the floorboard beside his bed.

'Are you sneaking out on me?' he asked in a sleepy voice.

'No,' Cassandra replied, and although it was too dark to see, he knew that she was smiling. 'But unlike you, I have to be at work in an hour. And I am still wearing yesterday's clothes and haven't even brushed my teeth.'

'You are welcome to use my toothbrush,' Severus mumbled as he turned onto his back and held out his arms towards her.

He was relieved to see that she didn't hesitate but sank into his arms without any doubts.

'I am glad that you stayed,' he whispered and pulled her close towards his chest, inhaling her scent.

'So am I.' She placed a tender kiss on his forehead before she slipped from his embrace. 'Go back to sleep now, Severus Snape. It's still early.'

'Will you come back tonight?' he asked as she had reached the door.

She turned to look at him once more. 'Do you want me to come back?'

'Yes,' he replied, his voice strangely hoarse. 'I want you to come back.'

'Then I will.'

As he heard the front door close, he turned onto his stomach and pressed his face into the pillow she had been sleeping on. It was still warm and still carried the scent of honey.

This had been a strange night. After he had managed to persuade Cassandra to stay, they had shared tea and toast on the living room floor and watched a silly Muggle film. The film had made her laugh, and Severus had smiled at her, relishing the sound of her laughter, the sound that had made him notice her in the first place that sunny afternoon in the park.

During the news she had fallen asleep, and he had scooped her up into his arms and carried her to his bed. He had just grabbed a pillow and a blanket and had been on his way to the sofa when her drowsy voice had made him turn back.

'Don't leave me,' she had said. And the begging tone in her voice had made his heart ache.

He had snuck up behind her, pulling a blanket over them both. They had slept in that position the whole night, and he had been glad to be able to hold her close, hold her safe.

'I will always be there, my love,' he whispered into the now empty pillow. 'As long as you want me to.'

XII: Christmas Wishes

Chapter 12 of 22

Christmas is a time to be spent with friends and family.

Thanks to JKR for letting us play around in the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XII: Christmas Wishes

'Say, how many years were you Potions master at Hogwarts?'

Severus put down the chopping knife and looked up at Cassandra, who was leaning casually against the doorframe, a broad grin on her face.

There had been a time when he could have answered that question with the exact amount of days, hours, even minutes, but nowadays he was content with saying: 'Almost two decades. Why do you ask?'

'I was just wondering if I can really leave you alone with that stew. Wouldn't want you to poison anyone the day before Christmas.'

The grin on her face grew if possible even broader as Severus shot her a poisonous look. How dared she have a stab at his cooking skills? Hadn't he, over the last two months, proven that he could cook if he wanted to?

He cocked an eyebrow at her and decided to play along and play dumb. 'Now, my dear, the recipe says that I have to add one chopped onion. Would that be with the peel or without?'

His voice was dripping with irony, and Cassandra burst into laughter before she threw the dishrag at him. He caught it in midair, and it took him only two swift strides to reach her and press her up against the doorframe with his body.

'Is that all you have got, witch?' he growled into her ear only a split second before he let the tip of his tongue slip over the sensitive skin just under her earlobe. He heard her moan softly and moved his hands to cup her breasts. He felt his body react to the warmth of her body, and he would have taken her right there against the doorframe

had not the front door burst open at that exact moment.

'Tsk, tsk, tsk, you two. No snogging in the kitchen,' sounded Per's cheerful voice from the hall. 'Firstly, you shouldn't do it because it is not very hygienic. And secondly, you can't do it because there isn't any mistletoe in sight. I'd know, because they are still lying in a box in my car.'

Cassandra laughed loud enough for Per to miss the curses Severus was muttering under his breath. Did this Muggle copy of Lucius Malfoy have to show up half an hour early?

'I'll go get that box,' Cassandra said, still laughing. 'I have to go pick up Aunt Minerva at the bus station anyway. You,' she pointed at Per, 'make sure that Severus doesn't burn down the kitchen while I'm out.'

She dodged the dishrag that came flying in her direction and left, her laughter still hanging in the air.

'What are you making?' Per wondered, eyeing Severus' cutting board with interest.

'Venison stew,' Severus replied and went back to chopping vegetables.

'Sweet.' Per seemed overjoyed. 'Will this be the Scottish dish on our Christmas potluck? I brought pickled herring.'

Severus raised an eyebrow at the blond man. Was he expecting praise now?

'Nice of Cassy to invite us lonely souls for an early Christmas dinner,' Per continued. He didn't seem to notice Severus' disinterest in making small talk. 'I mean, since my wife walked out on me, I have nowhere else to go. And Cassy's aunt doesn't seem to have too much company either.'

Severus gave a noncommittal grunt and pulled open a drawer to take out a ladle.

'Looks like you find your way around Cassy's kitchen quite well nowadays,' Per went on, and Severus sighed inaudibly. Did that man never shut up?

'You've been spending a lot of time here lately, haven't you, Severus?'

'Do you have any problem with that?' Severus snapped, slamming the drawer shut.

'God forbid, no,' Per exclaimed, raising his hands in a defensive gesture. 'On the contrary. You have no idea how glad I am that you two have found each other. You're good for Cassy, you know. I don't think I have seen her that happy in years. Not since Thorbjörn and the baby ...'

Severus put down his knife to look at the other man. 'How did Cassandra handle the death of her husband?'

'Not well, not well at all.' Per was rubbing his hands. He was obviously not comfortable talking about that specific topic. 'The day I kicked in her front door, she had neither slept nor eaten for days. And if I hadn't come ... it was awful. She had already written a note and laid out Thorbjörn's shaving knife in the bathroom. I think she had just been waiting for the right time.'

Severus swallowed dryly. He had not anticipated this. He knew that Cassandra had grieved deeply for her husband and her child. But over the six months he had known her, she had seemed so strong to him, so confident. He could not believe that she had even considered taking her life.

'How did she go on?' he asked.

Per shrugged. 'There were good periods and there were bad ones. She could go for weeks without showing any signs of depression, even months. And then suddenly it would hit her again, and she would just lose it, sink to the floor and cry.'

Severus nodded. He had seen one of those anxiety attacks in his flat in the beginning of November.

'You are good for Cassy, Severus,' Per repeated. 'I haven't seen her that carefree and happy in years.'

Severus let the blond man pat his shoulder without really noticing it. There was a strange feeling in his heart, a feeling he didn't recognise. It was a warm and cosy feeling, and he had no idea what it was.

Once more, Per patted his shoulder. 'You're a good man, Severus. A really good man.'

Per poured himself a glass of wine, and Severus went on chopping the ingredients for the stew. Neither of them spoke, and the only sound that could be heard in the kitchen was Nicodemus' soft purring.

And then Severus recognised the feeling that was warming his heart: he was proud, proud of that fact that he had been able to do something good for another person. And that knowledge was the best Christmas gift he had ever received.

~ ~ ~

They ate their Christmas dinner in the living room and shared many hearty laughs. The stew had been to everyone's liking, but the only one who had taken seconds of Per's pickled herrings had been Nicodemus. Minerva's contribution to the potluck on the other hand, a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky, had been a big success. And the bottle was half-empty by the time desert was served.

Poor Per never stood a chance against that magic toxin. His eyes became continuously blearier, and he would surely have passed out on the sofa if Severus hadn't taken pity on him and carried him to the guest room.

'You're a good man, Sev'us,' Per blabbered as Severus dumped him on the bed.

'You have told me that already,' Severus replied. 'Now go to sleep.'

He turned on his heels and was just about to close the door, when Per came up with another revelation:

'Cassy's in love with you, Sev'us. An' you should tell 'er that you love 'er, too.'

For a second, Severus paused. Could it be true? Was Cassandra really in love with him, with Severus Snape?

He carefully closed the door from the outside but did not return to the living room. Instead, he let his hand rest on the doorknob, contemplating Per's words. *Tell her that you love her, too.*

Did he love her? Was that what he was feeling?

Every day he didn't spend with her felt like a day wasted. And when he held her in his arms, he never wanted to let go of her again. She had coaxed him out of the shadows and was now the light of his life. Was this love? Was he, Severus Snape, finally experiencing what Dumbledore once had called the greatest magic of them all?

Quietly he made his way back to the living room where Minerva and Cassandra were laughing at Nicodemus, who was trying to catch the snow that was falling on the other

side of the window glass.

Cassandra's smile froze on her face as she caught sight of him. 'What's the matter, Severus?'

He gave her a faint smile. It was amazing how well she was able to read him. 'Nothing,' he lied, avoiding her gaze as he sat down on the sofa, pretending to be watching Nicodemus. 'I think Per is not the only one who is feeling the magic of Ogden's.'

'It has been a long day,' Minerva said and rose from her chair. 'I should be getting back to Hogwarts to make sure all the students are in bed. You know what they say: when the cat is away...'

She patted Cassandra on the cheek. 'Try to persuade him, will you, dear.'

'Persuade me to do what?' Severus asked, convinced that Minerva had been talking about him.

'Minerva has invited us to join the Christmas celebrations at Hogwarts tomorrow evening,' Cassandra explained.

'Hogwarts?' What a stupid suggestion. 'We cannot just go to Hogwarts.'

'I wasn't talking about the Christmas dinner in the Great Hall, of course,' Minerva chided him. 'I am hosting a private gathering at my office after the feast. There will only be some close friends there, Severus. Poppy, Filius, Pomona, only people who know about you being alive.'

Severus narrowed his eyes and scowled at the Headmistress. He still found the idea preposterous.

'Do try to persuade him, Cassandra,' Minerva repeated. 'It would be delightful to have you two there with us. After all, we are all one big family.'

~ ~ ~

'Are you really sure you want to go?' Cassandra asked.

They were already standing in front of the fireplace, and Severus was holding a box of Floo Powder in his hand.

Yes, he was sure he wanted to go to Hogwarts. At least, he was now. He had been pacing the living room all night, listing the pros and cons in his head. The people who were invited to Minerva's party all knew that he was still alive. So that was no problem. But only Poppy and Minerva knew that he was living in the Muggle world. And only Minerva knew that he had hooked up with Sirius Black's little sister. Would there be questions? And was he ready to give answers?

But he had to admit to himself that he was longing for Hogwarts, for the Wizarding world. He had done so ever since the night he and Cassandra had talked about why they had left that world.

Seven years ago he had been so sure that leaving everything behind was the right option. He had started a new life and been quite content with it. But now, all of a sudden, he was starting to wonder if it was perhaps time to return. It was as if Cassandra had made him understand that he was still a part of the magical world and magic a part of him, despite how hard he had tried to run.

'Yes, I am sure that I want to go,' he said and held out the box of Floo powder.

Cassandra took a handful of the powder but froze in mid-movement. And when she looked up at him, Severus detected a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. He narrowed his eyes and frowned.

'I haven't been to the Wizarding world for more than ten years,' she answered his unasked question. 'I am not sure I can handle this.'

Severus couldn't help but smile. Sweet little Cassandra. She had been giving him pep-talks all day, and now she was the one having the jitters. He took her hand into his and squeezed it tightly.

'I will be right there with you,' he said. 'If you feel uncomfortable, we will leave. No questions asked.'

~ ~ ~

When Severus stepped out of the fireplace in the Headmistress' office, he saw that Filius Flitwick had already greeted his former protégée and was showering her with questions. Cassandra was smiling warmly at the old wizard, and Severus was glad to see that she for the time being seemed quite comfortable.

'I am glad you could come, Severus.' Poppy Pomfrey was beaming up at him with tears of joy glistering in her eyes. 'Minerva has assured me that you were doing fine, but it feels good to see you in person, my dear boy.'

Severus was quite unprepared for being pulled into a hug by the school matron, but to his own surprise he did not resist. Actually, it felt rather nice to know that somebody had missed him.

'Minerva tells me that you and Cassandra have become friends,' Poppy said after she had released him.

Severus nodded, and Poppy followed his gaze that was now fixed on Cassandra, who was sitting beside Filius, watching an old photo album.

'Judging by the way you are looking at her, I'd say you are more than friends.'

Slowly Severus took his eyes off Cassandra and turned to face Poppy instead, who was looking at him with a knowing smile on her face.

'You know, Poppy,' he began, 'you are the second one to point that out this Christmas.'

~ ~ ~

The party was pleasant enough. It actually felt quite good to see his old colleagues again. But after an hour or two, Severus grew weary. He had always hated staff parties, and all of a sudden he longed for the dungeons, the place which he had once called home. Nobody noticed that he left. His years as a double agent had turned him into an expert of melting away into nothingness.

When he walked down the stairs that led to the dungeons, it felt as if he had never left. The sound of his robes against the stone floor was still the same and so was the damp smell of the dungeons. Even the Potions classroom seemed not to have changed. Of course, there were new jars and bottles on the shelves on the wall, but the workbenches were still arranged in the same order, a cauldron and a cutting board placed on each of them. Severus caressed the smooth surface of the teacher's desk with his fingers. He remembered every stain and the potion that had made it.

A sudden noise behind him made him spin around, his wand drawn, ready to curse whoever had been trying to sneak up on him.

'Easy, Severus, it's just me.'

Minerva lit the torches on the wall with a flick of her wand and sat down at the desk in front of Severus.

'I thought I would find you down here. You have missed this place, haven't you, Severus?'

He nodded. 'I have spent more time here than at any other place during my adult life. It is ...' He broke off. He didn't have the words to describe what this dungeon meant to him.

'Home?' Minerva filled in, her eyes still locked onto his.

Yes, that was it. This dungeon had been his home, his refuge at times when he had had nowhere else to go. Down here he had been able to think, to relax, even to dream at times.

'You are always welcome back,' Minerva continued. 'You know that, don't you, Severus?'

'Is the time ripe, Minerva?'

'The Wizarding world will welcome you back as a hero, Severus Snape, whenever you choose to return. But there is only one person who can decide whether you are ready or not. And that person is you.'

XIII: New Year's Resolutions

Chapter 13 of 22

What are the goals for 2006?

Oh, if JKR knew what we are doing to her characters. Have to thank her for letting us play, though.

Thanks go also to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter XIII: New Year's Resolutions

'Don't you want to have a glass of champagne before you go home?'

Severus shook his head at the nurse. 'No, thank you, Björk. I need to get going.'

'Come on, Severus.' Björk formed her lips into a fake pout. 'It's New Year's Eve. Everyone has a glass of champagne before they go home.'

'Then I will be the exception that proves the rule.'

'Come on. Just one glass.' Björk's voice was becoming quite annoying, and Severus figured that she had already had more than just one glass of champagne.

'This is because that girlfriend of yours, isn't it?' Björk went on. 'You want to get lucky before midnight, that's all.'

He cocked an eyebrow at her. 'If it were so, would there be any problem with that?'

Björk took some steps towards him, swaying slightly, and now Severus was certain that she had had enough to drink already.

'Do you have any idea how many of the nurses have been swooning for you over the last years? You could have shagged every last one of them, you know.'

He couldn't help but smirk. 'I apologise to have disappointed you all. You should go home now, Björk. You have had quite enough champagne.'

Again she pouted. 'Do I not even get a New Year's kiss?'

'No, you do not.'

'Go ahead then,' Björk slurred. 'Go home to your special someone. Tell her she's a happy woman.'

Severus looked after his colleague as she made her way down the corridor towards the nurses' lounge and smiled. 'I might just tell her that, Björk. I just might.'

~ ~ ~

Ever since Christmas, Severus had made it a habit to Apparate directly from his flat to Cassandra's back door. There was no risk that anyone would notice. The back door was only accessible from the garden and surrounded by thick bushes.

The light was on in the kitchen and the living room, but as Severus entered the house, it seemed to be deserted. There was not a single sound to be heard.

He walked through the living room and entered the kitchen where he found a handful of rune stones spread out on the table. Curious, he contemplated the signs. He had never excelled in Divination, but he still recognised most of the signs: *Gifu* promised that dreams would come true, *As* urged to action, and *Tyr* foretold victory. If Cassandra had cast the runes for herself, she had an exciting and successful year ahead of her.

But where was she? It wasn't like her to just leave without tidying up after herself or not turning off the lights. But then again, she had not quite been herself since Christmas. Ever since they had returned from Hogwarts, she had been silent, thoughtful, almost brooding. But he had decided not to pressure her. If she wanted to talk, she would have to open her mouth. And he would listen.

There was a cup of tea standing on the counter. Lukewarm, Severus thought. Cassandra must have abandoned it a while ago. Where the hell was she?

A loud bang from the hall made Severus spin around, his wand drawn. He had been carrying his wand for about a week now and was now ready to cast a spell on the alleged intruder. But it was only Nicodemus.

'One fine day you will get yourself hexed, you silly cat,' Severus growled as he bent to pat the cat on its head. 'Where is your mistress?'

As if Nicodemus had understood the question, he turned and made his way to the hall where he started scratching at the front door, which had blown shut behind him.

'Is she out there?' Severus asked, and Nicodemus meowed.

Cassandra was indeed out there, sitting on the steps that led up to the front door. She did not seem to hear the door open and close again, and she did not seem to notice Severus as he stepped out into the cold night.

'You are going to catch pneumonia,' he pointed out.

Still, she did not react. He laid his coat around her shoulders, and his eyes caught sight of the long, thin object she was twirling between her fingers.

'Is this your wand?' he asked as he bent to sit down beside her on the step.

She nodded. 'Oak and dragon heart-string. I left it at Grimmauld Place ten years ago. I never wanted to see it again. I hated it for being the proof of me being a witch. Filius insisted that I take it with me on Christmas Day.'

'Have you tried it out?' Severus wondered.

Wordlessly, Cassandra pointed the wand at the small heap of snow that was lying at her feet. It glowed faintly for a moment and then turned into a mound of white feathers.

'Once a witch, always a witch,' she murmured. There was a strange tone in her voice, which Severus failed to define. Was she sad? Or just lost in memories?

'Have you ever thought about going back, Cassandra? To return to the Wizarding world?' It felt strange to ask that question, especially as it applied just as much to himself as it did to her. Would she have an answer, Severus wondered.

She sighed deeply and turned the feathers back into snow. The movement seemed natural, as if she had been handling a wand every single day since her eleventh birthday.

'I have nothing to return to,' she finally said. 'My family is dead. And my friends from my school days have certainly forgotten all about me by now. I would be all alone.'

'I would be there,' Severus said calmly, surprised by his own words. Up until this very moment, he had not been sure that he actually wanted to return.

For the first time that night, Cassandra looked at him. Her face was composed, but he could see clearly that there was a question burning in her eyes.

'Are you going back?' Her voice reflected the calmness of her face, but Severus knew her well enough by now to know that she was bluffing. She was anything but calm.

He took her hands into his. They were icy cold, and he started rubbing them gently, his eyes never leaving hers.

'I might,' he answered. 'I am starting to understand that the only thing that has been driving me forth was my own fears. And fears cannot be defeated by running from them.'

Again this was a statement that applied to both of them.

'Is it time to stop running then, Severus?'

He nodded. 'I think it might be.'

She closed her eyes and let her head fall against his shoulder. 'I am not sure I can do this, Severus. I am scared. I am still so scared.'

He laid his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close towards his chest. His chin came to rest on her head, and he inhaled deeply. He loved the smell of her hair. It always smelled of honey.

'You do not need to be scared, Cassandra. You will not be alone. I will be there, right by your side. If you want me to.'

She didn't answer. But the way she wrapped her arms around his torso and the way she snuggled up against his chest made words unnecessary. She would hold on to him and let him protect her. And he would never let her go.

~ ~ ~

The bathwater was warm and smelled of vanilla and roses. Severus was sitting on a wooden stool beside the tub and was gingerly washing Cassandra's arms with a soft sponge. She had been sitting out in the cold winter night far too long, and her lips had been blue when they had come inside and her fingers stiff. And still it had taken him all his persuasion skills to make her take a hot bath.

As he moved behind her to wash her hair, she let her head drop gratefully into his hands, and Severus smiled contently. There had been a time when people didn't dare turn their backs on him, and now he had someone who trusted him. It was a glorious feeling.

He let his hands slip over her neck, her shoulders and down to her breasts. His chin came to rest on her shoulder, and he couldn't resist covering the soft skin of her neck with tender kisses.

'May I make love to you tonight, Cassandra?' he whispered softly into her ear.

He felt her rest her head against his and heard her murmur: 'You have never asked for permission before.'

'No, I have not,' he whispered before he continued kissing her neck and gently massaging her breasts. But then again, this was the first time that he would truly be making love to her.

He dried her off with a fluffy light blue towel, covering her dry skin with kisses. He started at her neck, softly nibbling at her collar bone, and then made his way down to her breasts, his lips barely touching the rosy skin. He heard her moan softly and felt her hands on his shoulders as he encircled one nipple with his lips, suckling gently while cupping the other breast in his hand.

He continued downward over her belly, breathing lightly onto the soft skin, enjoying the goose bumps it created. He stopped shortly under her belly button, taking in her sweet scent. Her most sensitive spot would have to wait until later. For the time being, she would have to be content with the soft kiss that he placed on her red curls.

She shivered as he traced the inside of her thighs with his fingertips, and he felt the grip of her hands tighten around his shoulders. He raised his head to smile at her and found her looking at him with her eyes filled with love and desire.

Slowly he got up, letting his fingers make their way up at either side of her body. As he stood before her, he wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her towards him, while his free hand supported her head as he leaned in to kiss her. Her lips were soft and warm and still tasted of the honey cake she had had for desert and the sweet wine she had drunken afterwards.

He wrapped a bathrobe around her body and took her by the hand to lead her to the bedroom, his dark eyes never leaving hers. Her blue eyes made it impossible to look away. It felt as if he could drown in those eyes.

Softly, he pushed her against the bed so she came to sit on the edge of the mattress. He positioned himself between her legs and started to unbutton his shirt at the top

while her fingers busied themselves with the bottom buttons. When all the buttons were undone, he felt Cassandra tug at the soft fabric, and he let it glide down over his shoulder and onto the floor. Then he felt her soft lips on his abdomen and her small hands on his buttocks.

Her hands slid upwards over his naked back, over his ribcage and to his chest. He inhaled sharply as her palms made contact with his erect nipples, barely touching them but still sending jolts of pleasure through his body.

Her lips were now exploring the skin right above the waistband of his trousers, and he unzipped his fly to give her access to more intimate parts. She let her hands slide down over his chest, his abdomen and his waist and pulled down both his trousers and his underpants with an agonizingly slow movement, while her tongue played around his belly button.

His long fingers slipped under the collar of her bathrobe and slowly pulled the fabric down over her shoulders. Her breasts looked milky white in the dim light of the bedroom, and he sank to his knees to cover her breasts with tender kisses once more. He pushed her down on the bed and slowly made his way down over her belly and towards her core. With his hands firmly placed on the sides of her hips, he pulled her closer towards the edge of the bed. He needed access, because this time, he would not neglect what was hidden beneath her silky red curls.

She tasted sweet and smelled of musk and honey. He barely touched her rosy flesh at first, just breathed on it, softly, teasingly. When he flicked against her clitoris with the tip of his tongue he heard her gasp and felt her hand grab a fistful of his hair. Slowly he lets his tongue explore her wet folds, savouring her sweet taste. Up and down he licked, finding a rhythm that corresponded with her pulse. And with the same rhythm he stroked his erection with just the right pressure, up and down, up and down.

'Severus, please.'

He heard her plea and smiled. He would do anything to hear her call his name in such a manner.

He let his thumb replace his tongue and stood up, his right hand still stroking his erection. Once positioned between her thighs, he slipped in between her folds, just an inch, just a single inch. He felt her tighten around his tip and longed to thrust into her, to feel her hot flesh around his whole length, but he held back. This was not about him, not yet.

'Please, Severus. Please.'

He looked deep into her eyes and saw her plea reflect in them. And this time, he would comply.

He entered her ever so slowly, inch by inch, his thumb still rubbing against her most sensitive spot. One more well-placed movement and she would be lost.

'Come for me, Cassandra. I want to look at you.' He increased the pressure of his thumb, and with one swift movement he buried himself inside her to the hilt. He felt her whole body tremble under his as her orgasm hit, heard her scream his name and felt her muscles contract around him. The sensation was almost enough to drive him over the edge as well, but he resisted the urge to move. His deed was not yet completed. He placed soft kisses on her trembling lips and brushed the tears from her cheeks with tender fingers.

'Are you alright, my love?' he asked.

'You are calling me love,' she replied with a husky voice.

'I know,' he whispered. 'I know.'

He pulled out of her ever so slowly, inch by inch, just to bury himself inside her again moments later. He couldn't explain why, but it had never felt so good before. His whole body seemed to tingle, from his toes to the tips of his hair.

When Cassandra peaked for the second time, she took him with her, and he spilled his seed into her womb, crying out his love for her.

~ ~ ~

Cassandra's pulse had slowed down, and her breathing had become slow and regular. She was fast asleep. But Severus didn't sleep. He did not want to fall asleep, afraid he would miss something. He was holding Cassandra in his arms, close to his chest, enjoying the warmth of her body against his, enjoying being able to look at her. There were still traces of tears on her cheeks, but he resisted the urge to kiss them away, lest he wake her up.

What was it that made him feel that way about her, he wondered. He had known her for only six months, but he felt closer to her than he ever had to anyone. Was it because of the history they shared? Was it because they were both refugees, shipwrecked on a faraway island? Or was it because she insisted on seeing the best in him?

When she shifted in his arms, he tightened his grip. He did not want to let go of her. He had become used to having her close. He needed her by his side, both physically and mentally. She had opened the door to his past, and maybe it was indeed time to step through.

But would she come with him if he decided to return to the Wizarding world? He had been thinking about returning a lot since Christmas. He wanted to return, he really did. He had realised that he could not outrun his past, his fears.

But what if Cassandra would not come with him? What if her fears held her back? Would he dare to return without her? Would he want to? Or would he turn his back on his past and instead build a new future with the woman he loved?

XXIV: Happy Birthday, Severus Snape

Chapter 14 of 22

Blow out the candles and make a wish. But be careful what you wish for.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and leaving a review.

Chapter XIV: Happy Birthday, Severus Snape

'Are you sure about this, Severus?'

Minerva was looking at him over the rim of her glasses, using the scrutinising look that could make the most mischievous students confess their nastiest prank.

'Yes, Minerva, I am sure,' he replied with a steady voice. 'I want to return. I am ready.'

'I've been hoping to hear those words for so many years, Severus. And there were times when I feared that I would never hear them.'

The slightly shaking tone in the Headmistress' voice made it clear that she was deeply moved. And Severus averted his eyes, suddenly feeling uneasy.

'Tell me, Severus,' Minerva went on. 'What brought about this sudden change of mind?'

'I have realised that I cannot outrun something that is part of who I am.'

It felt strange to verbalise that thought. Not so long ago, he had been convinced that running away was the best option. But he did not believe it anymore.

Minerva was still looking at him, her eyes slightly narrowed. 'Have you made plans for your return yet?'

'No, I have not. This decision is quite recent.'

Again, Minerva nodded. 'Have you talked to Cassandra about it?'

He had known that she would ask, but still he was not prepared.

'I have ... *mentioned* the possibility of my return,' he answered, hoping Minerva would not ask any further questions. But of course, she wanted to know more.

'And?' she asked, leaning in slightly and giving him a piercing look.

'And ... nothing,' he replied. 'I have just mentioned the possibility.'

He rose from his chair and started pacing the office. Minerva had sure struck a sensitive spot, and he had to fight hard to keep his emotions under control.

Yes, he had mentioned the possibility, he had tried to find out how Cassandra felt about it, if she would come with him. But she had not given him an answer. And what was even worse, she had started to change topics every time he tried to talk to her.

'She might not react too positively. You are aware of that, aren't you, Severus?'

He nodded absently. His gaze was wandering over the now empty grounds of Hogwarts. He saw Hagrid's hut in the distance. Its illuminated windows glowed in the dark like the eyes of a mighty dragon.

'What is it that she is so afraid of, Minerva?' His voice seemed to come from far, far away. And he was quite surprised that he had uttered the question.

He heard Minerva sigh and turned around to face his old friend. She had taken off her glasses and was rubbing her eyes.

'I do not know, Severus,' she said and put her glasses back on. The stern look had disappeared from her face and had been replaced by a look of concern. 'She has always had so many reasons to keep away from our world. At first it was all about the Blacks. Cassandra had made a choice and turned her back on the family who had disowned her. And then Voldemort returned, and naturally she wanted to keep out of the war that wasn't any of her concern. And then Thorbjörn got killed ...'

'What happened to her then, Minerva?' Severus asked. 'What did the Death Eaters do to her?'

'I do not know, Severus. I am not even sure I want to know.'

He turned back to stare out of the window once more. Something was wrong, terribly wrong.

'The Dark Lord is gone,' he mused. 'So are all the Death Eaters. Yaxley fell at the Great Battle. There is nothing left for her to fear.'

'Per might know,' Minerva suggested. 'He was the only one she would talk to after she had returned to Iceland. He was the one who made her reply to my letters and keep up at least some contact with her past life, with England. Maybe you should talk to him.'

Severus nodded. Yes, maybe he should. Per had known Cassandra for more than twenty years. He if anyone would know.

'I should be going now,' he said as he looked at the big clock in the corner. 'It is past midnight. And I have to start working at eight. Thank you, Minerva. For everything.'

'You're most welcome, my dear boy,' Minerva replied, looking at him with a motherly look in her eyes.

He had already reached the fireplace when she called his name once more: 'By the way, Severus. Happy birthday.'

~ ~ ~

He was overwhelmed by the amount of noise that assaulted his ears as he entered the school building. Surely the students at Hogwarts had never made such a racket. Or had they? No, they could not have. There would have been no house points left in the hourglass by the end of the first week of term.

He made his way down the right-hand corridor. According to the information chart by the entrance, the main office was at the end of that corridor. He scowled at a group of teenage girls who stood loitering in the middle of the corridor, blocking his way, and they scattered like a flock of birds. Severus allowed himself a smirk as he passed them. He obviously hadn't lost his touch yet.

'How can I help you?' the middle-aged secretary asked the moment he entered the main office. She had reddish-blond hair, freckles and an incredibly kind face.

'I am looking for Cassandra Svensson,' Severus replied politely. 'Could you tell me where I might find her?'

'Just give me a second,' the secretary responded and started flipping through a stack of schedules that was lying in front of her. 'Our computers are down, so I have to do everything manually. Don't you just hate it when that happens?'

'Actually, I prefer paper over computers.'

'You do?' She sounded as shocked as if he had just told her that he was a Martian, or a wizard for that matter.

'Ah, here we are. Cassy is having an English class in classroom thirty-two. That's on the third floor.' She smiled broadly and pointed towards the clock on the wall. 'The lesson's just about to end. If you go up now, you'll meet Cassy on her way to the teachers' lounge. And in case you miss her, you come back here, and I'll help you find her.'

Severus thanked her, braced himself for more yelling teenagers and left the office. The girls were still standing in the corridor, whispering, but fell silent at once as they caught sight of him. He gave them a dark look, and they lowered their heads, blushing.

He heard Cassandra's laughter before he had even reached the third floor. And when he swept around the corner, he found her sitting on a bench outside her classroom with a bunch of students huddled around her. One of them was obviously telling a funny story. And Cassandra was the one who was laughing the hardest.

She was just about to wipe the tears from her eyes when she caught sight of him. 'Severus!'

'Woo, is this your boyfriend, Cassy?' one of the girls asked, and her classmates started giggling and wolf whistling.

Cassandra playfully nudged the girl into the ribs. 'You stay away from him, little lady.'

The laughter that erupted proved that bantering like that was rather common between Cassandra and her students, and Severus observed the scene with an almost wistful feeling. He had never had a student laugh with him. The only reactions he had ever gotten had been fear and disgust, even hatred. But then again, he was not the type of person to joke around with anyway.

Cassandra shooed her students away, and they scattered like a flock of silly hens, laughing and giggling.

'What are you doing here?' she asked as the last of the students had disappeared.

'I came to thank you for these,' he replied, pulling up his right trouser leg and sporting his shiny new snakeskin boots. 'How did you get them into my locker at work?'

'Magic,' she whispered into his ear. And the mischievous grin on her face made it impossible for him to figure out if she had bribed the hospital caretaker to open his locker or if she indeed had used magic.

'But you didn't come here to show off your new boots, did you?' she went on. 'I have seen them, you know.'

'I am here to ask you out to dinner.'

'You are asking me out for dinner?' She cocked an eyebrow at him. 'You do realise that this is your birthday, right? You're not the one who's supposed to do the asking.'

'It is indeed impossible for you to just say yes, isn't it?' he inquired in a tone that would have made a troll shiver. But Cassandra just looked up at him with a grin that was becoming broader by the second.

'Yes,' she said and burst into yet another fit of laughter.

~ ~ ~

Would you return to the Wizarding world with me?

Severus had been burning to ask Cassandra that question all night. But somehow, he had failed to do so.

After the starters he had asked her if she preferred Icelanders over Englishmen. And she had said that she wasn't sure.

After the main course he had asked her if she really enjoyed teaching. And she had said yes.

And after the desert he had asked her if she would like to teach at a British school. And she had said that she would consider the possibility if it offered itself.

But he had not dared to ask her if she would come back to the Wizarding world with him.

It wasn't until they had returned to his flat and he was holding on to a glass of Scotch that he plucked up the courage to take the first step.

'I have applied for a sabbatical year today,' he burst out.

Cassandra looked up at him from the couch she was sitting on. 'A sabbatical? To do what?'

'I am considering returning to the Wizarding world.'

A shadow passed over Cassandra's face, and suddenly Severus was glad that he had not told her at the restaurant. This had the potential of getting ugly.

Her voice was surprisingly cool when she spoke. 'And what are you planning to do there?'

'Minerva has offered me a teaching position at Hogwarts.'

Cassandra snorted. 'You hate teaching.'

'No,' Severus replied in a calm tone. 'I hated teaching Potions.'

'You need to stop drinking, Severus,' Cassandra stated, raising her eyebrows. 'You're talking rubbish. You love Potions.'

'Yes, Potions is my passion,' he explained in a voice so calm that it would have fitted to explain the dangers of a hot cauldron to a four year old. 'I have always loved Potions and have hence been reluctant to share it with anyone, especially with students who do not appreciate the subject.'

'You're out of your mind,' Cassandra said and put down her glass on the coffee table with a loud clank. Instead of holding on to it, she started fidgeting with her cuticles.

Severus just stared down at her. He shouldn't have dropped the bomb on her like that, he thought. He should have prepared her better. Now she was upset, and there was no point in asking her whether she would come with him.

'Why, Severus?' she asked after what had seemed like an eternity. 'Why do you want to go back?'

'I have been running from my past long enough,' he replied. 'You said it yourself, Cassandra. It is time to stop running.'

'But what about all the things you have achieved here, Severus? You're a doctor, for heaven's sake. You're helping people. Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

'Do you mean that I need to be helping people now in order to make up for all the pain I have caused earlier?' he asked. His voice was still calm, but there was now anger bubbling under the surface. How dared she try to make him feel guilty about his decision?

As if she had sensed his emotions, she apologised. 'Forgive me, Severus. Of course that's not what I meant.'

She buried her face in her hands for a moment, and Severus could hear her taking deep, ragged breaths. Was she about to cry?

But when she raised her head to face him again, there were no tears in her eyes. Instead there was that look which had always defined members of Ravenclaw house: analytic, diagnostic, curious. She was not going to let her emotions get in the way now that she had decided to figure out the puzzle that was Severus Snape.

'Why now, Severus?' she asked. 'I thought you were happy here.'

'I am. I am very happy here, Cassandra.'

I am happy with you.

The thought was crystal clear in his mind, but he didn't dare utter it.

'Then why?'

'I have realised that there is no point in regretting what I have done,' he started. 'Believe me, Cassandra. I am not proud of my deeds. I have lied, I have killed, and I have hurt those I had meant to protect. But all that made me into the man I am today. My past is part of me, and me running from it does not make it disappear.'

'No, I guess it won't.'

She was chewing her nails now, and Severus noticed that her breathing had become shallow, her eyes empty. He recognised the signs. He had seen her react like this before. He knew where this was going.

As he approached the sofa, she bounced up and started to stagger away from him.

'Cassandra, look at me.'

He needed her to listen. He needed her to calm down. But the look in her eyes made it very clear that she was in no condition for either of these.

'Cassandra, look at me,' he repeated. 'You need to calm yourself.'

But she kept backing away from him, her eyes darting around the room as if looking for an escape route.

'I'm sorry, Severus,' he heard her whisper. And in a blink of an eye, she was gone.

XV: Blood on My Hands

Chapter 15 of 22

Sometimes old wounds need to be re-opened to heal properly.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Beware, this is a dark chapter containing both rape, violence and murder.

Chapter XV: Blood on My Hands

Severus was pacing his living room, wringing his hands. Minerva had warned him that Cassandra might not react too well to his decision to return to the Wizarding world. And he had thought that he had been prepared for her reaction. But it had gotten out of hand. The mere fact that she had Disapparated, that she had used *magic* proved just how much she had wanted to get away from him.

Where she had gone, he did not know. He had Apparated to her house, just to find the door locked and the lights off. He had even searched the park, but there had been no trace of her.

He was just about to inform Minerva when the doorbell rang. He reached the door with a few swift strides and ripped it open. It just had to be Cassandra. Who else would be ringing his doorbell at two thirty in the morning?

'You selfish bastard!'

If his years as a double agent hadn't taught Severus to dodge unfriendly spells, Per would have punched him right in the face. Instead, the blond man's fist made impact with the doorframe. Howling in pain, he swung back, ready to strike again. But this time Severus grabbed his arm and twisted it around his back.

'What the hell is this about, Per?'

'You ruthless, malicious asshole!' The words that came from Per's mouth were not only obscene but also very loud and would have woken up the entire building had Severus not dragged him inside and slammed the door shut.

'Are you going to tell me what this is about or do I need to break your arm?' Severus growled.

'You know damn well what this is about, you cold-hearted son of a bitch.'

Now Severus had had enough. He twirled Per around and slammed him up against the wall, his right hand at the other man's throat.

'Enlighten me, lawyer boy,' he snarled, his dark eyes glistening dangerously.

'Are you trying to tell me that you have no idea why I am here?' Per's voice was choked, but not reflecting half of the fear that could have been expected, considering that Severus still had his hand around his throat. 'Are you seriously telling me that you have nothing to do with the state Cassy was in when she showed up at my doorstep two hours ago?'

Severus slightly loosened his grip. 'She came to you?' He should have known.

'Of course she came to me, you idiot,' Per spat. 'She always does.'

Severus had now completely let go of Per, and the two men were staring at each other, both breathing heavily.

'What the hell happened here tonight, Severus?' Per asked, his voice suddenly much calmer. 'I haven't seen Cassy like this in years.'

'I mentioned that I am considering returning to Britain.'

'Shit.' Per banged the back of his head against the wall. 'That just about explains everything.'

'What is it that she is so afraid of, Per?' Severus asked. 'Do you know?'

To his disappointment, the blond man shook his head. 'I don't know, Severus. I really don't know.'

'Where is she now?'

'At my place,' Per replied. 'I made her take some Valium. She was sound asleep on the sofa when I left.'

~ ~ ~

Per's house was situated some kilometres outside the city, surrounded by high hedges and far away from any other buildings. If Cassandra had Apparated there, no one would have seen her.

They silently entered the house and tiptoed into the living room so they wouldn't wake her up. But the sofa was empty, and the blanket was lying on the floor. The two men looked at each other, and Severus felt an uneasy feeling creeping into the pit of his stomach.

Per started running from room to room, calling for Cassandra, but received no answer.

'Where the hell is she?'

The panic in Per's voice reflected Severus' emotions, but he was unable to join Per in his search. He felt paralysed, did not know what to do, just wanted her to be there, unharmed.

'Do you hear this?' Per suddenly asked. 'That's water. That's the shower running.'

They darted up the stairs towards the bathroom just to find the door locked.

'Cassy, open up,' Per yelled, hammering against the door.

There was no answer.

'Cassy, for heaven's sake, open the effing door!'

Severus resolutely pushed Per aside. Panic and yelling would not help now. This situation demanded immediate action. Twice he ran shoulder-first against the bathroom door, ignoring the pain the impact created. The third time, the door gave way.

She was crouching down in the shower, fully dressed, with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her gaze was fixed on something Severus couldn't see, and she was slowly rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Severus sank to his knees beside her, pulling her towards his chest. She was cold as ice, her body trembling. Mechanically, he reached up to turn on the warm water, not caring that he got drenched. All that mattered now was Cassandra.

'Cassandra, look at me,' he whispered. 'Do you recognise me? Do you know where you are?'

She slowly raised her head to face him. And the fear he saw reflect in her eyes made him cry out loud.

'I cannot get it off.' Her voice wasn't much more than a whisper, but it cut into Severus' very soul and made the hair on his neck stand up.

'What is it you cannot get off, Cassandra?'

'The blood. There is blood on my hands. And I cannot get it off.'

Severus looked down at her hands, completely at a loss. There was no blood. What was she talking about?

His eyes darted towards Per, who was still lingering at the door, holding onto the doorframe for dear life.

'What blood, Cassandra?' Severus whispered. 'Are you hurt?'

She shook her head in a spastic motion and started rocking again, back and forth, back and forth.

'Shall I call an ambulance?' Per inquired.

Severus shook his head. 'No. Just go get some towels. We need to get her out off these wet clothes.'

He heard Per dart down the hallway, but he did not look up. His eyes were locked on Cassandra's, but he doubted that she actually saw him. Her pupils were dilated as in fear, and she didn't blink. She was still rocking back and forth, and Severus wrapped his arms tighter around her. He desperately wanted her to stop.

When he noticed that Per had returned with the towels, he turned off the water and started removing Cassandra's wet clothes. A flashback of the last time he had dried off her body with a fluffy towel popped up in his mind. They had been happy that night. And he had fallen in love. And now the woman he cherished beyond anything else was shaking in his arms, and he couldn't help but wonder if he was the cause for it.

Reluctantly, he let Per wrap his arms around Cassandra's shoulders and lead her to the wicker chair that was standing in the corner. It felt wrong to let go of her, but he too had been kneeling in the shower and had to get out of his soaking clothes.

When he had put on the bathrobe, he hurried across the room to enfold Cassandra in his arms once more. She had finally stopped rocking, but her eyes were still fixed on something neither he nor Per could see.

'Is there anywhere we can lay her down?' Severus asked.

Per nodded. 'I made up my bed. I'll show you the way.'

Cassandra was like a puppet in Severus' arms as he lead her down the corridor to Per's bedroom. There didn't seem an ounce of will left in her body. She just followed his lead, not once even looking up at him.

When he laid the blanket over her shaking form, she crawled up into a ball at once and buried her face in the pillow. It was a pitiful sight. Where was the smile he adored, the laughter he loved?

'The bed is big enough for the both of you,' Per mumbled. 'I don't think you should leave her alone tonight.'

'Why should I stay?' Severus asked, his eyes still resting on Cassandra. 'She came to you. You are her oldest friend.'

'It is not me she needs now, Severus,' Per replied. And if Severus had turned around he would have seen that there were tears shining in the blond man's eyes. 'I cannot understand her pain. There is something about her past she has never shared with me. And that lack of knowledge makes it impossible for me to comfort her. But I think you might just be able to help her heal.'

~ ~ ~

When Per had closed the door behind him, Severus sank to his knees beside the bed, his fingers softly caressing Cassandra's cheek.

'Talk to me, beloved,' he whispered, not even sure that she was awake and would hear him. 'Please tell me what is hurting you. Let me help you.'

Carefully he lowered his mental barriers and gently reached out for her. He had not used Legilimency for years, and he had sworn never again to use it against anyone's will. But he had to know. He could not stand seeing Cassandra hurting and not know why.

He did not meet any resistance. She opened her mind to him as if she had been waiting for him to enter.

Grimmauld Place was just as dark and gloomy as it had been while it had served as headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. The only difference was that Walburga's piercing voice wasn't coming from her portrait in the hallway but the kitchen.

Regulus was standing by the counter, sulking, and Cassandra was standing in front of her mother, her head bent submissively. She was wearing a set of dark grey robes, and her red hair was held back in a tight bun. There wasn't a trace of the smile Severus knew, and she looked completely plain. No wonder he had never noticed her at school.

'Now don't you dare hang with Sirius and his blood-traitor friends at Hogwarts, Cassandra Black,' Walburga lectured. 'Keep to Regulus. He will introduce you to the right people.'

'What if she doesn't get sorted into Slytherin?' Regulus asked in a malicious tone. And Severus could see Walburga's face turn white with anger.

'She should just dare.'

Cassandra had shifted her head and was now looking at him. The haunted look had gone, and she seemed calmer. And for a moment, Severus considered withdrawing and talking to her instead. But her mind held his close to hers, and thus he continued his journey.

He found himself in the Great Hall. Minerva was just about to place the Sorting Hat on Cassandra's head, and Severus moved closer.

'Ah, another Black,' the Hat whispered into Cassandra's ear. 'Now, where do you think I should put you?'

'Slytherin,' came her reply.

'No, no,' the Hat chided. 'I didn't ask which House your parents would choose. That I know. Where do you want me to put you? Do you really fancy Slytherin?'

'No,' Cassandra answered in a subdued tone.

'Why not?' the Hat enquired. 'You are ambitious, you know your goals. Why would you not want to be in Slytherin?'

'I was raised Slytherin,' Cassandra replied, her voice suddenly firm and steady. 'But I refuse to believe that achieving my goals justifies me trampling on other people.'

'Hm, you certainly have a mind of your own,' the Hat murmured. 'Let me put you in a House that will help you use it: Ravenclaw.'

Severus let his eyes drift over the Great Hall. The moment the Sorting Hat had announced its decision, Regulus had turned his back on his sister. And Sirius seemed not even to have bothered looking up when she had been called forth in the first place.

Then Severus sought out his own face at the Slytherin table. He hadn't paid any attention to the Sorting either. He had been too deeply immersed in a conversation with Lucius Malfoy.

So that was why he had not even known that she existed, he thought. Just like Sirius, he had been too immersed in his own business to even notice her back then. What a shame. Maybe, if he had known her back then, things would have turned out differently.

Again the scene shifted, and Severus found himself in a corridor in the dungeons. Regulus had trapped his sister in a corner and was towering over her, a cruel expression on his face.

'Are you proud of yourself now, little witch?' he snarled. 'Mother was beside herself when she heard that yet another of her children had turned against the family.'

'It was the Sorting Hat's decision, not mine,' Cassandra retorted.

'Sure it was,' Regulus spat. 'Do you even comprehend what kind of shame you have brought over our family? Mother has already contacted the Yaxleys. Seeing what you turned out to be, they cannot be expected to keep their word and let their son marry you. You're nothing more than a blood-traitor.'

'A blood-traitor? There are other purebloods in Ravenclaw. Why am I a blood-traitor?'

'If you were pure at heart, Cassandra Black, you would have been sorted into Slytherin. I have expected better of you, little sister.'

Then he turned his back on her and left her in the dark corridor.

'The same night my parents told me that I had shamed them and that I was just as little welcome in their house as Sirius was.'

Severus was surprised to hear Cassandra's voice.

'Where did you go?' he asked, brushing a streak of hair from her face.

'Oh, I went home,' she said in a bitter tone. 'They had to let me come home over the summer at least. It's the law. They just didn't talk to me.'

'Why did Sirius not take care of you?'

'He never cared about me. To him I was too much of a Slytherin to bother.'

'That self-righteous bastard,' Severus spat. He had never had high thoughts of Sirius Black. But that he would not help his baby-sister was below even that man.

'I did everything I could to distance myself from my family,' Cassandra went on, her voice steady. 'But by the time I graduated, the name Black had become so tainted by the Dark that I had nowhere to go. No one would hire me. No one would even talk to me. In the eyes of the Wizarding world, I was a true Black and with that a follower of the Dark Lord. That was when Filius suggested I went to Iceland to study runes. And that was when I met Thorbjörn.' She sat up against the head board, a sad smile on her face. 'Those were the happiest years of my life. And then my cousin Tonks sent a letter, telling me that she had passed her Auror exams. And I let Thorbjörn persuade me to go and visit her.'

Severus saw tears well up in her eyes and positioned himself beside her on the bed with his arm around her shoulder. And once more, he found her mind wide open.

'We could have flown directly to London.'

'Sure we could have,' Thorbjörn replied with a smile. 'But then we would have missed this beautiful countryside. And I would never have learnt how to drive on the left side of the road.'

Cassandra giggled at her husband's comment and turned back to the map. 'Brockdale Bridge is up ahead.'

She let her gaze wander over the water as they drove up onto the bridge. For a second, she thought she saw dark shadows swishing over the surface, and she shivered.

'Is everything alright, sweetheart?' Thorbjörn inquired, looking over at his wife. 'You look pale.'

'Just let's go off that bridge,' Cassandra mumbled. 'Something up here gives me the creeps.'

Thorbjörn smiled at her and lovingly patted her rounded belly. 'That's just the pregnancy hormones talking, my love.'

He turned his eyes back onto the street, and his smile froze on his face as he saw the car in front of them plummeting into nothingness.

Cassandra was holding on to Severus' hand with clammy fingers. Her breaths had become shallow, and once more her eyes were filled with fear. Should he really go on, Severus wondered. Should he really make her relive those memories once more? He did not want to cause her any more pain. But if he ever wanted to understand her fears, he would have to know.

With a dull thud Cassandra landed on her stomach at the river bank. She tried to get up but found herself unable to. Something kept her firmly pinned to the ground.

'Now look who we've got here,' a deep voice said. 'If it isn't Regulus' little sister. Seems like it indeed was a good idea to put a Detection Spell on the bridge. It would have been a shame if a pure-blood witch had broken her neck in a Muggle car.'

Cassandra couldn't turn her head to see who was talking, but Severus would have recognised the voice anywhere. It belonged to Rowle, the big blond Death Eater who had always proved to be one of the most brutal of Voldemort's followers.

'Oi, Yaxley!' Rowle yelled. 'Come over here. We've got a present for you.'

'Get your foot off my bride, Rowle,' Yaxley growled.

Rowle backed away, laughing. 'Your bride, is it? Guess she'd tell you differently. Look, the little blood-traitor is pregnant.'

Yaxley grabbed a fistful of Cassandra's hair and pulled her up.

'Not enough that you ran off with a Muggle, eh? You just had to let him knock you up as well. But I am not having it. You were promised to me the day you were born. You are mine, remember. Mine!'

He pulled her closer and started licking the side of her neck while he was groping her breasts with his free hand. 'I will take what is mine, princess. I will plant my seed in the noble house of Black.'

Cassandra jerked her head away from Yaxley and spat him right in the face. 'I will never be yours.'

'Let's see if we can't change her mind, shall we, Yaxley?' Rowle suggested, cackling madly. 'Looks like the Carrows have another little present for you.'

When Cassandra caught sight of the mangled body the Carrows were carrying, her knees gave way, and she would have fallen, had Yaxley not had an iron grip around her arm.

'Thorbjörn,' she whispered.

'Do you have any idea how messy it was to drag that one out of his car?' Alecto Carrow complained as they dumped Thorbjörn's body at Cassandra's feet.

'It's amazing he's still breathing,' Yaxley commented as he prodded the body with his foot. 'Why did you let them bring him here, Rowle?'

'So we could make a deal with your little princess,' Rowle replied, a sadistic smile on his face. 'The life of her beloved Muggle husband against the life of her Halfblood child. It's her choice.'

Cassandra paled. And Severus too felt his stomach lurch. He had known that Rowle was a sadist, but this was cruel even for him.

He looked down at Thorbjörn's mangled shape. There weren't many bones that weren't broken in his body, and he was bleeding from every cavity. It was indeed a miracle that he was still breathing. He could die any moment. And Severus could see in Cassandra's face that she had come to the same conclusion.

'I choose our child.'

Rowle gave a hysteric laugh, drew his wand and pointed it at Thorbjörn. 'This is from your loving wife, Muggle! Avada Kedavra.'

Thorbjörn's body did not even twitch. And Severus couldn't help but wonder if he had still been alive the moment the spell hit him.

Rowle smiled cruelly. 'And now she is officially not married anymore. Take what is rightfully yours, Yaxley. But don't forget to wipe away the Muggle filth first.'

To that, Yaxley pulled out his wand and pointed it at Cassandra's rounded belly. 'Decerpo,' he growled.

Nothing seemed to happen, but the little colour that had been left in Cassandra's face had gone, and tears started streaming down her face.

She did not even try to stay on her feet when Yaxley forced her to the ground right beside her dead husband. Nor did she resist when he pulled off her skirt and knickers. And she did not try to fight him off when he forced her legs open and buried himself inside her. In fact, she did not move at all.

As soon as Yaxley had rolled off her, she extended a hand to touch the corpse of her husband. 'Forgive me, my love.'

Severus felt sick to his stomach. He had seen many atrocities in his life, but this scene had shaken his very core.

'Why have you never told anyone, Cassandra?' he whispered. 'Minerva, Per? Anyone?'

'They would not have understood.' There were tears streaming down her cheeks, but her voice was surprisingly steady as she spoke. 'They would not have understood the guilt I felt for having failed to protect the people I loved.'

'Why me?' Severus asked. 'Why do you trust me enough to share this with me?'

'Because you know that guilt as well, Severus Snape.'

Spells used in this chapter: *decerpo* Latin for 'I take away'

XVI: Together We Stand

Chapter 16 of 22

With a friend by your side, you can accomplish just about anything.

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XVI: Together We Stand

Cassandra was finally asleep. Severus had dried off her tears and cradled her in his arms until her breathing had become slow and regular. Then he had carefully put her head onto the pillow and pulled the blanket over her shoulders. And he himself had remained sitting with his back resting against the headboard.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep. His mind was too busy processing what he had learnt over the last couple of hours. So he decided to just sit there and look at Cassandra for a while, hoping sleep would overcome him eventually.

Her hair was dry now and messier than ever. Severus wondered when she had decided to cut it short. He couldn't remember if it had still been long in the memories he had witnessed. Not that it mattered. He loved her hair the way it was now. It was just as wild as her temper. And he loved that, too.

He let his gaze wander down over her neck to her shoulder. The bathrobe had slipped down slightly, and he could see the ugly scar on her upper left arm. She had told him that she had gotten it in the car crash where Thorbjörn had died. Now he knew that it had probably been Yaxley's doing. If this scar was the result of a Dark curse, it would explain why it had healed so badly. Wounds from Dark curses never healed properly. Was this why he had never seen Cassandra wear short sleeves, not even in the height of summer? Was it yet another way for her to cover up her past?

He reached out and carefully pulled the bathrobe back over her shoulder. Her skin was warm now, soft like silk. He let his fingertips slide up her neck and over her jaw line; let his thumb caress her lower lip. He loved her lips, the way they curled into a smile when she looked at him, the way they felt against his.

He saw the corners of her eyes twitch. She was probably dreaming. Severus hoped it wasn't an unpleasant dream. She deserved nothing but sweet dreams.

He mused over the fine lines around her eyes. Laughter lines, he figured. She had been upset quite a few times over the last months, but no matter how many tears she shed, he would never forget her laughter. After all, it had been her laughter that had made him raise his eyes from his book that afternoon in the park.

Earlier that night, he had feared that he might never hear her laughter again. Cassandra had seemed to be enwrapped in darkness, and Severus had not been sure if he would be able to coax her into the light again. But then she had opened up to him. She had trusted him enough to share the memories no one else knew about.

How had he deserved her trust, he wondered. If anything, she should blame him for taking away her security. If it hadn't been for him, she would have been able to go on ignoring the Wizarding world like she had done for the last ten years. When he had stepped into her life, he had brought the Magic with him and had opened the door to her past, which she had kept firmly locked for all those years. He had awakened the ghosts of her past.

But surprisingly enough, she did not blame him for anything. On the contrary: she trusted him, just as much as he trusted her. It had been because of her that Magic had re-entered his life as well. Without even having meant to, Cassandra had given him the key to unlock the door to his own past.

In the beginning, he had been terrified. He had not wanted to be reminded of the world he had left behind, had not wanted to remember who he had been. But then he had started to understand that he could not live without his past. It was a part of him.

He let his head fall back against the headboard and closed his eyes. Yes, his past was filled with shadows and darkness. But they didn't seem threatening anymore. He had finally understood that he had done enough good to be allowed into the Light.

'Will the pain ever go away?'

He opened his eyes to find Cassandra looking at him. He hadn't noticed her move, hadn't heard her sit up. It had first been her whispered question that had made him become aware of her. And now she was looking at him with her blue eyes, asking him the very question he himself had been pondering for the good deal of two decades.

He felt it, too. He knew the pain she was talking of only too well. He, too, had lost the people he had loved the most. He had failed to protect them. They had slipped away,

and he had seen them disappear, unable to reach out his hand and make them stay.

He wrapped his arm around Cassandra's shoulder and pulled her towards his chest. 'No, my love,' he whispered. 'The pain will never go away. But one learns to live with it.'

~ ~ ~

A soft knock on the door made Severus wake up from his slumber. He had fallen into an uneasy sleep shortly before dawn, a sleep filled of strange dreams: he had seen his parents, Lily, Dumbledore, the Dark Lord. He hadn't had those dreams for years, and he was glad to be woken from them.

Gently he freed himself from Cassandra's embrace and slipped out of the bed, hoping that he would not wake her. He looked back at her as he put on the bathrobe he had hung over the chair by the bed a couple of hours ago. She was sleeping peacefully now. She had faced her demons last night. They did not haunt her now.

He silently opened the bedroom door and came face to face with Per. The blond man was dressed in a tailored black suit, his shoes were polished, and his hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He looked like he could take the whole world by storm. But his pale skin and the shadows under his eyes bore witness to an ill spent night.

'Is Cassy okay?' he asked in a hoarse voice.

Severus nodded. 'She has been asleep for a couple of hours now. I apologise for not having informed you.'

'That's alright,' Per answered, rubbing his neck. 'I figured you would call me if you needed help. Eventually I fell asleep on the couch.'

He pointed towards the bathroom. 'Your clothes are dry. And I have already called Cassy's school and informed them that she won't be coming in today. They were quite understanding. I, however, have to go to the office. Can you stay here with her?'

Severus nodded. He wouldn't have to be at the hospital before four o'clock. And if necessary, he would take the day off.

'Good, good,' Per said. He was nervous, Severus could sense that clearly. And his eyes kept darting towards the bedroom door Severus had closed behind him. 'Is she really alright?'

Again, Severus nodded. 'We have talked. She has cried. And, for the time being, I believe that she is alright.'

He saw Per chewing his lower lip. The look on his face was that of a concerned brother, a devoted friend. 'Would you mind coming downstairs for a cup of coffee, Severus? And a chat maybe?'

The coffee was warm and strong and tasted slightly of cinnamon. Severus sat down at the kitchen table and closed his eyes for a moment. He had slept a few hours, but he did not feel rested at all. What he had seen last night was hard to digest.

'I want to apologise to you, Severus,' Per began. 'When Cassy showed up here yesterday night, crying, I immediately assumed that you had hurt her in some way. That was not fair of me.'

Severus raised his hand in an absolving gesture. 'You care deeply for Cassandra. It is only natural that you wanted to protect her.'

'I've taken care of her before, you know. After Thorbjörn died ...'

Severus nodded. He knew.

'The look she had in her eyes last night,' Per went on, 'it was the same look she had that day when I found her in her bathroom. It scared the shit out of me. I was afraid she was going to hurt herself.'

'What did Cassandra say when she came here?' Severus wondered.

'She didn't make much sense, to be honest. Something about you going back to England.'

Severus sighed and clutched his cup a little harder. 'I had planned to ask her if she would come with me. But I never got the chance.'

He looked up, and his dark eyes met Per's grey ones. 'You know her well, Per. Do you think she will ever go back?'

'You know, Severus,' Per replied. 'Only a couple of months ago I would have said no. I was convinced that Cassy would never return to England. Something had happened there, something worse than the death of Thorbjörn. And it had terrified her. But now ...' He paused, evidently looking for the right words. 'Severus, I do not know what it is about you, but you make Cassy feel safe. And I think she needs you. So, yes, if you decide to return, I think she will come with you.'

Severus frowned at Per's last words. 'She would do it for my sake?'

'Cassy loves you, Severus. I think the love she feels for you might outshine what she once felt for Thorbjörn. It feels like you *twobelong* together somehow, as if you were two of a kind.'

He shrugged and put his cup into the sink. He didn't look at Severus anymore, and there was a hint of sadness in his voice when he spoke again. 'I think she would go to the gates of hell and beyond with you, Severus. And even back to England.'

~ ~ ~

Severus stayed seated at the kitchen table after Per had left for work, contemplating the situation at hand.

Was it true? Would Cassandra really face her fears and return to the Wizarding world because ~~he~~ wanted to return? Could he ask that of her? Could he really make her face her demons just because he had finally slain his own? Was it right? Or was he just acting selfishly?

And what if she decided that she did not want to return, that she couldn't? What would he do? Would he make a sacrifice for her and continue his life as a Muggle, for her sake? Or would he pursue his plans and return to the Wizarding world alone? Would he ever be happy again if he left her behind?

He sighed and buried his face in his hands. One of them would have to make a sacrifice. One of them would have to make a decision. And he did not want to be the one to make it. For the time being, he even regretted ever having considered going back.

'Glad to see you are still here.'

He spun around to face Cassandra. He had not heard her enter the kitchen. Moving soundlessly was one of her most uncanny habits.

Her voice was croaky, as if she were suffering from a severe cold. Her hair was a mess, and there was still some smudged mascara under her puffy eyes. And like Severus, she was still wearing one of Per's bathrobes, which was at least three sizes too big for her. She looked a mess, and at the same time adorable.

'Per has left for work,' Severus explained. 'And he has informed your school that you will not be coming in today.'

Cassandra smiled faintly. 'Thought he might. He always does.'

She moved to the kitchen cabinet and grabbed a cup, poured herself some coffee and then opened a drawer to take out a spoon.

'You seem quite at home in Per's kitchen,' Severus stated dryly. He was himself surprised to notice how much that bothered him.

'Hm,' Cassandra replied. 'I've been here once or twice before.'

She settled on a chair on the opposite side of the table, holding her coffee cup against her chest as if to warm herself. For some minutes, neither of them spoke. Severus resolutely stared at his coffee, and Cassandra seemed to be looking at something only she could see.

Finally Severus found the courage to address the matter. 'You and Per are very good friends,' he started.

Cassandra nodded, her gaze still lingering on something invisible. 'He was there for me when I needed him the most. He was the only one I would let in. And he was just there, comforted me when I cried and kept me from doing anything stupid. And he never asked for anything in return.'

'Have you two ever ... I mean, have you ...' Severus wanted to know. He wanted to know if there had ever been anything more than friendship between the blond man and the red-haired witch, but he didn't dare to phrase the question. Thankfully, Cassandra had understood anyway.

'We tried,' she explained. 'About a year after Thorbjörn had died, we actually tried. But it didn't work out. There was always something *.missing*. It felt as if we didn't belong together.'

She had turned her head and was looking straight at Severus now. Her blue eyes locked onto his dark ones, and although she didn't move her lips, it was almost as if he could hear her thoughts.

I have found the missing ingredient now. In you.

He should have said something then. He should have run to her, embraced her and told her just how much he loved her. But he couldn't. He didn't dare. There was a possibility that they would soon make decisions that would separate them. Telling her that he loved her now didn't seem fair. So although his heart seemed to burst, Severus held his peace. And so did Cassandra.

She got up from her chair and put her cup onto the counter. 'I'm going upstairs to get dressed,' she said. 'And then I want to go home. Would you like to come with me, Severus?'

He nodded. 'I will check out when there is a bus leaving for Hveragerði.'

She brushed his shoulder on her way out and smiled. 'No need to bother. I was thinking about Apparating.'

Severus just stared after her as she left the kitchen, too staggered to utter a single word. Cassandra suggesting using magic was the last thing he had expected.

He rinsed his coffee cup and put it beside the one she had used. Hers was blue with bronze flowers, and his was green with a silver rim. It might just have been a coincidence, but Severus couldn't help but smile. Blue and green, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, there was a chance that magic would not divide them after all.

XVII: Anything For Love

Chapter 17 of 22

Love is the greatest gift of all. A gift worth dying for.

Thanks go to JKR for letting us play around in the HP universe.

Thanks go to Apple Blossom for beta reading and toyou for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XVII: Anything for Love

Cassandra was trying to comb her unruly hair when Severus entered the bathroom. She had already put her clothes back on, and the dark fabric clashed violently with her still pale face.

Severus kept glancing at her while he got dressed. She was indeed awfully pale, but at least the haunted look had disappeared from her face. Hopefully, the lack of colour was just a result from lack of sleep.

'How long since you have practised Side-Along Apparition?' she suddenly asked, looking at him in the mirror.

Severus stared at her, puzzled. 'Side-Along Apparition?'

'Yeah, I wonder if I can trust your skills,' she replied with an uncertain smile.

'Why would you need to?'

'Because I'd like to get home as fast as possible, and I haven't got my wand on me,' she explained in a tone that suggested that she considered her statement to be the most logical one in the world.

'What do you mean, you do not have your wand on you?' Severus was confused. 'You Apparated here last night.'

'I did what?'

Severus cocked his eyebrow at her. She had turned around and was looking straight at him now. And under normal circumstances, he would have interpreted her question as a joke. But the way she was clutching the comb in her hand told him that she was not in a joking mood.

'You Disapparated from my flat shortly after midnight,' he explained in a soft tone. 'Do you not remember it?'

She put down the comb and started fidgeting with her fingernails and cuticles. This was not a good sign; Severus knew that. He stepped closer and took her hands in his. They were icy cold.

'This has happened before,' he stated. 'This is how you got away from Yaxley. This is how you ended up at Grimmauld Place. You Disapparated.'

He felt her hands shake in his and saw her chew her lip. And he sensed clearly that she was upset.

'It is alright, Cassandra,' he whispered as he pulled her trembling body towards his chest. 'I will take care of everything.'

~ ~ ~

Once back at her house, Severus sent Cassandra to take a hot shower and busied himself making breakfast, strong herbal tea and toast with butter and honey. Nicodemus was meowing piteously at his feet, rubbing its head against his legs.

'I know, Nicodemus. I know,' Severus whispered and knelt down to pat the tabby on its head. 'I am worried about your mistress, too.'

He certainly was. The breakdown he had witnessed the night before had scared the living daylights out of him. So had the memories Cassandra had shared with him later. She had been through a lot, too much maybe. And the fact that she had basically run away from her past without ever talking about what had happened had certainly not made things better.

And now she was performing magic again, without her wand.

That kind of magic was not unheard of. It normally occurred with Wizard children. They often produced magic without a wand. When confronted with strong emotions, they could move objects, perform Transfiguration, even Disapparate. Could this be the case for Cassandra? Had she twice been able to Disapparate without her wand when she had been in severe emotional distress?

But why could she not remember it?

Severus sighed. This was not his area of expertise, and he would have to consult somebody else about it. The sooner, the better. But for the time being, he would take care of Cassandra's physical well-being.

He picked up the breakfast tray and followed Nicodemus to the bedroom. As he opened the door, his nostrils filled with the sweet scent of musk and honey and just a hint of vanilla. Obviously, Cassandra had used her favourite soap. It was his favourite as well.

She lay curled up under a dark blue blanket. Her hair was still wet, and there was a rosy colour on her cheeks. Severus wasn't fast enough to hinder Nicodemus from jumping up onto the bed, and he was afraid that Cassandra would wake up. But the tabby landed on soft paws and cuddled up against its mistress' shoulder. A soft smile appeared on her lips, and Severus stood like hypnotised, unable to do anything than stare at her for a while.

'Take care of her now,' he whispered as he patted the cat on its head. 'I will not be long.'

He placed the most tender of kisses on Cassandra's forehead, inhaled her sweet scent. He would have loved to slip under the covers with her, hold her and make love to her until she called out his name, but there were more urgent matters he had to attend to. For one, he had to get to Hogwarts.

~ ~ ~

'Severus, dear boy. We weren't expecting to see you so soon again,' sounded Dumbledore's cheerful voice from the portrait on the wall. 'Minerva is in the Great Hall for lunch. We could ...'

Severus cut the old Headmaster short. 'There has been an incident. And I actually came here to talk to you.'

Dumbledore was eyeing him over the rim of his glasses. The twinkle was still there, but at the same time, he looked very serious.

'What do you know about involuntary magic?' Severus pressed on.

'You mean the kind Wizard children perform when they find themselves in danger?'

'No, I mean with adults,' Severus interrupted. 'Is an adult witch or wizard capable of performing involuntary magic without a wand?'

Dumbledore frowned slightly. 'It is possible, however rare. Once a witch or wizard is magically trained, they tend to lose the abilities they had as a child and depend on their wand to perform magic. Nevertheless, when faced with threatening situations or severe emotional stress, it is possible that they might perform involuntary, wandless magic in order to save themselves. One could call it survival instinct.'

Severus nodded. He had figured out that much himself already. And that was not the bit that was bothering him. 'Is it possible that the witch or wizard would not remember their magic afterwards?' he went on.

'It is Cassandra, isn't it? She is doing it again.'

Severus spun around to see Minerva standing in the door. The old witch looked concerned.

'What exactly do you mean?' Severus snapped. He hated it when people kept secrets from him, especially when it resulted in somebody getting hurt.

'We knew that Cassandra had used magic to get to Grimmauld Place after the Death Eater attack. We did not, however, find out how she had done it,' Minerva explained. 'Her wand had been safely packed away in her suitcase at the time.'

'Why does she not remember having performed magic?' Severus asked.

'This kind of magic requires a great deal of strength, physical, mental and magical strength,' Dumbledore explained. 'It drains the body of most of its energy and can leave the witch or wizard in a very confused and vulnerable state.'

Severus took a deep breath. He had seen that. Cassandra had been a mess when he and Per had found her in the shower. They had been afraid that she would hurt herself. Per had said that she had tried to before.

'What can be done to prevent this from happening?' he inquired, desperately hoping that Dumbledore would have an answer.

'Is Cassandra performing any other magic? With her wand?' the old Headmaster asked.

Severus shook his head. 'She played around with her wand on New Year's Eve, but that was it. As far as I know, she has not touched it since.'

Dumbledore nodded pensively. 'You see, Severus, Wizard children are able to perform involuntary magic because they have not been properly trained yet and do not know how to handle their magic.'

Severus frowned. 'You mean Cassandra has forgotten how to channel her powers?'

'She hasn't done proper magic in twenty years,' Minerva mused. 'It is highly possible that she indeed has forgotten.'

'And what are the consequences of this?' Severus wondered, once more turning towards Dumbledore.

'Eventually she might just lose all her magic. And you know what that means.'

A shudder went down Severus' spine. Yes, he knew. He had seen it. Losing one's magic meant losing a part of one's soul. His mother had lost her magic. After that she had changed. She had started to neglect the house, herself. And one day, she had killed herself.

'What can be done to prevent this?' he asked, his voice suddenly shaky.

'Teach her,' Dumbledore said. 'Train her.'

Severus sank onto the nearest chair. Making Cassandra use magic again might just be beyond his powers.

Minerva thrust a glass of Odgen's into his shaking hands and sat down beside him. But Severus did not drink. For several minutes, he did not even look up. His mind was racing. How the hell was he supposed to make Cassandra use magic again?

'She is afraid of performing magic,' he mumbled. 'That is why she has not done it for so long. She is afraid that her magic will hurt her and the ones she loves. I cannot make her ...' His voice broke off.

'Is there another option, Albus?' Minerva asked. Severus heard her, but her voice seemed to come from far, far away.

'Yes, there is,' the old Headmaster replied. 'She can renounce magic, destroy her wand and break her contact to the Wizarding world for ever.'

Severus snatched his head up. That was indeed an option, but it would mean ...

Minerva took up the thread before him. 'This would mean that she would never return to the Wizarding world with you, Severus.'

Her voice was thick with tears, and Severus felt a lump forming in his own throat. He knew that Minerva had hoped that he and Cassandra would return together. So had he. And now the chance for this to happen seemed less than slim.

He inhaled deeply, forcing the lump in his throat to disappear and rose from his chair. 'In that case I will stay in Reykjavik with her.'

For some moments, Dumbledore and Minerva stared at him, both of them speechless. Severus, too, was surprised at his words. Just twenty-four hours ago, he had been sitting here in this very office, discussing his plans about returning to the Wizarding world. Minerva had even offered him a teaching position. And now he had just said that he would stay in Iceland, in the Muggle world.

When Minerva placed her hand on his shoulder, he shrank away and started pacing the room.

Why was this happening? Why did he never get a break?

He had planned it so nicely: he would return to Hogwarts, he would take Cassandra with him, and they would be together in the world where they both belonged. And now all his hopes had been shattered into smithereens.

It couldn't be. It mustn't. There had to be another option. He must have missed something. He was sure of it. But what? What?

Then there it was: a straw of hope, brittle, frail, but still a straw of hope. 'Cassandra suggested that/ used magic,' he exclaimed.

'She did what?' Dumbledore asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

'This morning,' Severus explained. 'She suggested that we should use Side-Along Apparition to get back to her house. She wanted ~~me~~ to use magic.'

Dumbledore leant back in his chair with a contented smile on his face. 'It looks like our problem child is not beyond hope after all.'

Severus exhaled audibly and rubbed his tired eyes with both his hands, a wave of relief washing over him. If she had asked him to use magic, then maybe there was a chance that she would slowly but surely face her fears and start using magic herself. Then maybe there was a chance that she would return with him.

When Minerva reached out for him this time, he did not shrink away. The warmth of the older woman's hand on his shoulder actually felt rather comforting.

'You would really do that for Cassandra, wouldn't you, Severus?' Minerva asked, tears welling up in her eyes. 'If she were unable to take up magic again, you would really give up everything for her.'

Severus nodded. 'I have once turned my back on the woman I loved. And I have regretted that step for the greatest part of my life. I am not going to make that same mistake again.'

'You love her,' Minerva stated in a soft voice. 'You really love her.'

Again, Severus nodded.

Minerva looked straight at him, narrowing her eyes. 'Have you told her?'

To that question, Severus shook his head. He had told her while making love to her, but he had never actually looked into her eyes and said ~~love~~ *love you*

~ ~ ~

There wasn't a sound to be heard in the house when he exited the fireplace. Cassandra was probably still asleep.

He went to her bedroom and silently pushed open the door. She was lying on her side with Nicodemus curled up on her hip. One piece of toast was missing, and the tea cup was half empty. She must have woken up while he was gone, Severus thought, and wondered if she had missed him.

When he approached the bed, Nicodemus stretched his legs and swiftly jumped to the floor. He rubbed once against Severus' legs and then left, and Severus stared after the tabby, slightly taken aback. He had asked Nicodemus to take care of Cassandra until he came back. But surely the cat could not have understood this. Or could it?

He stripped off his shirt and jeans and slipped under the blanket behind Cassandra. The sweet scent of musk and honey encircled him, and he gingerly put his arm around her waist and pulled her sleeping form towards his body. He was just about to nestle his head against her neck when she stirred beneath his arm.

'Glad you came back,' she murmured, her voice sleepy.

'I hope you never doubted that,' he whispered, softly nudging her neck with his nose.

She shifted slightly, pressing her body closer towards his, giving him access to the side of her neck.

'No, I haven't.'

He started placing tender kisses on her neck, enjoying the soft moans that escaped from her lips. His hand had found the hem of her nightie and was slowly making its way up her thigh when he stopped in mid-movement, gasping in surprise. He had not noticed that Cassandra had moved her hand behind her back and into his boxers.

Her hand was soft and warm, and the gentle touch it offered made Severus shiver. Instinctively, he thrust forward and found her fingers tighten around his length. He groaned and started rocking his hips in a steady rhythm, burying his face at her neck. Her fingers tightened and loosened with the rhythm of his thrusts, and soon Severus found himself close to losing control, close to the edge.

'No,' he breathed into her ear. 'Not like that.'

With a swift movement he turned her over and pulled her on top of him. She lowered herself slowly onto him, so slowly, so agonising slowly. But it gave him a chance to regain control.

He let his hands slip over her thighs, her hips, up under her nightie, and she leaned slightly forward to give him access to her breasts. The sudden coldness around his balls made Severus hiss, but he soon forgot about it when he felt Cassadnra's nipples harden under his touch and saw her look down at him, her eyes heavy with need.

He pulled her down towards him, coaxing open her lips with the tip of his tongue, and she started rocking her hips in the same rhythm his tongue darted in and out of her mouth. Honey, he thought. She always tasted of honey.

She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him up into a sitting position. Tightly enwrapped in his arms, she started circling her hips in a slow, barely noticeable movement that made Severus gasp. The new angle had made him slide up into her to the hilt, and her muscles were clutching him tightly.

He placed his right hand on the small of her back and pushed her backwards, letting his left hand trail down from her neck, over her chest and belly down to her core. He heard her gasp his name as he pressed his thumb against her nub and smiled. He would do anything to hear her call his name in such a manner. Her muscles tightened around him as he increased the pressure of his thumb, and he found himself bucking up against her, trying to bury himself even deeper inside her. He heard her moan and saw her claw at the bed sheets. She was close, he knew that. Her muscles were pulsating around him, and he too was nearing climax.

She gave a small whimper as he abandoned her core, but he needed both his hands to pull her up against him again. Neither of them would last much longer, and he wanted to look into her eyes when they drove each other over the edge.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck to keep her balance while he grabbed her hips to pull her closer towards him. She moved in the perfect rhythm, steadily increasing the pace. She would ride him to heaven if he let her. Her nails scratched his back as she peaked, but he ignored the pain, his own orgasm too close for him to care about anything. Once more he bucked up against her, burying himself inside completely inside her, and tumbled over the edge with her name on his lips.

Breathing heavily, he rested his forehead against hers, feeling her fingers trailing down over the sides of his torso. Her touch made him shiver, and he wrapped his arms tighter around her. If it had been up to him, he would never have let go of her again.

Then his eyes darted towards the clock on the nightstand, and his heart dropped. 'I have to go,' he groaned regretfully. 'I have to go to work.'

He took her face between both his hands and looked into her eyes. Gone were the ghosts from last night, gone were the tears. And all he could see in her eyes now was the same happiness he felt in his own chest.

'I love you, Cassandra,' he whispered.

She smiled and brushed a strand of hair from his face. 'I love you, too, Severus Snape. I love you more than life itself.'

XVIII: Step By Step

Chapter 18 of 22

Sometimes one has to take one step backwards to be able to move on.

Thanks go to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And I also want to thank you for reading and - hopefully - reviewing.

Chapter XVIII: Step By Step

February brought windy weather, sleet and too many night shifts to be any fun. Severus had been given the graveyard shift at least four times a week for the last month. And he had been working for three weekends in a row. He tried not to blame anyone for this. But still he couldn't help but wonder if him having turned down Nurse Björk for both champagne and a New Year's kiss had something to do with his ridiculous work schedule. After all, she was the one who put them together.

Up until eight months ago, he had never minded the night shifts. He had actually enjoyed them. They had meant that he had to meet fewer people than during the day, and that had suited him perfectly back then. Because back then, he had not only preferred his solitude but had, in fact, not had anybody he had wanted to spend time with.

But that had changed. Now there was somebody whom he longed for every moment his mind was not occupied with his work. And he hated the fact that he had not seen Cassandra for more than a few minutes at a time over the last three weeks. It had gone so far that he ventured to Apparate directly from the hospital garage to her house after his shift ended in the mornings, just to sneak to her bedroom and slip under the blanket with her for a few precious minutes before she had to get up and go to work. And then he would stay snuggled up in her bed, inhaling her scent and wishing that she would be there.

It was on one of those mornings that he found her wand.

He had fallen asleep after Cassandra had left for work. And if Nicodemus hadn't started clawing at the covers, he would surely have slept until after lunch. Groaning, he got out of bed and made his way to the living room, cursing his age and the night shifts. And there he had found it, lying on the bookshelf on top of the casket that contained

the Black family ring.

Oak and dragon heart-string, a truly magnificent wand, engraved with symbols Severus didn't recognise. No wonder Cassandra had developed a knack for Magical languages. The wand that had chosen her had also foretold that ability.

Dared he hope that she had used it? He had not seen her wand since New Year's Eve when she had turned snow into feathers, and he had thought that she had locked it away. But now it was lying in the bookshelf, out in the open, in plain sight, ready to be used.

He sank onto the nearest chair and pressed his hands against his forehead. How he hoped that Cassandra had used her wand, even if it had only been for a minuscule task like removing dust from the bookshelf. At least she would have used it then. At least she would have performed magic.

Suddenly, memories which he had long since hidden away in his subconscious came crushing down on him. He remembered that his mother had frequently used magic when he was a little boy. She used to make his toy cars drive around on their own. And once she had even made his teddy bear talk. And then Father had caught her. The sound of Father's fist making impact with Mother's jaw was still the most horrible sound Severus could imagine. He had been too little then to understand why Father had been so angry. Later he had learnt that Father had made Mother renounce magic when they had gotten married. And Mother had kept her promise until the day she had discovered that Severus was a wizard.

After the beating, she had tried using magic for a while. But Severus' toy cars wouldn't move, and his teddy kept silent. And one day she had simply stopped trying. Severus still did not know if she had stopped out of fear of Father or because she wanted to keep the promise she had given him on their wedding day. But she had stopped. And she had started to wither. One day, he had found her wand, snapped in two, hidden away in a closet. Some weeks later, she had killed herself.

A chill went down Severus' spine. He had not thought about his mother's suicide in years. He was not even sure that it had anything to do with her losing her magic. But now he was confronted with a similar situation once more. And it terrified him.

He bent down to pat Nicodemus, who was rubbing its head against his legs.

'Is she using magic, your mistress?' he asked, hoping for an answer but at the same time perfectly aware that the tabby would not be able to give him any.

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'Good day to you, Severus,' Minerva said in a cheerful voice as she stepped out of the fireplace. She had already popped in the day before, but Severus had not had time to speak to her then. Hence, they had made an appointment for tea the next morning.

He did not feel half as cheerful as Minerva sounded. There had been three emergency surgeries last night, and when he had come home at eight thirty in the morning, he had been too wound up to find any sleep.

'I was hoping Cassandra would be joining us,' Minerva went on, pointing at the two tea cups Severus had put out.

'It is eleven thirty on a Friday morning, Minerva,' Severus replied in a tone that sounded much more snappish than he had intended it to. 'Cassandra is, of course, at work.'

He turned his back on Minerva and busied himself pouring tea. He should not have snapped at his old friend. It wasn't her fault he was tired.

'You don't look too good, dear boy,' Minerva pointed out as he handed her a cup. 'Haven't you slept well?'

'I have not slept at all,' he explained, trying to ignore the headache that had started creep through his skull. 'I am getting too old to be working the night shift.'

'Good thing you have applied for a sabbatical then,' Minerva said with a smile. But that smile faltered quickly when she noticed the frown on Severus' brow. 'You *are* going to come back to Hogwarts in September, aren't you, Severus?'

He let himself fall onto a chair and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger. Suddenly he felt beyond tired. He felt exhausted, drained. He wished Minerva would just leave. He wished he were alone. And he wished that he would not have to make that decision.

Minerva extended a hand towards him and laid it hesitantly on his shoulder. To his own surprise, he did not shrink away.

'You haven't discussed the possibility with Cassandra, have you?' the older witch asked in a mild tone. 'Not since your birthday.'

Severus shook his head, his eyes resolutely on his shoes. 'I have barely seen her. By the time she quits work I have to be at the hospital. And when my shift ends, she is already on her way to school.'

'Then you still have no idea if she is able to return with you?' Minerva's voice sounded strained. And Severus wished she had not come. He knew how much she had hoped for him and Cassandra to return together.

'You have to talk to her, Severus,' she continued. 'This suspense is consuming you. Talk to her.'

He just nodded. He knew.

'I think she has taken up magic again,' he said, his voice shaky.

'You *think*?'

'She has moved her wand,' he explained. 'But I have not seen her use it.'

'That is one more reason to ask her now, Severus. Please talk to her.'

He buried his face in his hands. 'What if she says no, Minerva?' he whispered, glad that his voice was muffled by his hands so Minerva could not hear that he was on the verge of tears. 'What if Cassandra says that she cannot return to the Wizarding world?'

'You said you would stay here in Iceland with her then.'

Severus could feel Minerva's eyes on his brow, and he slowly raised his head, just to see tears glistening in the older witch's eyes.

'I know you would stay for her sake,' she said. 'But is this what you really want, Severus? Would you really be content with staying here, as a Muggle? Or will you blame Cassandra for the rest of her life for making you stay?'

He stared at his old friend in utter shock. She had obviously given all this a fair bit of thought over the last weeks, maybe more than he had. For him, the biggest obstacle had been whether Cassandra would be able to find her Magic again. But now he suddenly realised that she simply might not *want* to return of her own accord.

Per had said that she would do anything for him, Severus remembered. Even return to England. She would do it *for him*. Just as he would stay in Iceland *for her*. One of them would have to give in. One of them would have to take farewell of their dream to make the other one happy.

Severus got up and stalked off towards his bedroom, leaving Minerva standing alone in the living room. He slammed the door shut behind him and sank to his knees,

desperately wishing somebody else would make the decision for them.

~ ~ ~

It was the first weekend in March when Severus and Cassandra finally got to spend two whole days together. The Gulf Stream had brought warm weather, and they had decided to go for a walk in the park where they had first met.

'You're being awfully quiet,' Cassandra pointed out after they had been sitting on a bench in silence for a quarter of an hour. 'Are you alright?'

Severus felt her warm hand on his arm and couldn't help but wince slightly. He had known that she would ask him sooner or later. He had known that he eventually would have to open up and talk. He had just hoped that he would not have to do it so soon.

'I went to Hogwarts yesterday,' he started, 'to fill out the required forms.'

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Cassandra nod. 'You are taking your sabbatical then,' she said in a placid tone. 'Will you take up teaching again?'

'Yes, there is a new N.E.W.T. class for students aspiring to become Healers. I will be teaching Healing Charms and Potions.'

'I'm sure you'll like that.' Her voice was still calm. Maybe too calm. Severus started to feel uncomfortable. What if she lost it right here in the park? What if she ran away or worse, Disapparated?

But she stayed put, looking calmly at him. 'Do you have your wand on you?' she asked, her eyes sparkling.

Severus just nodded, uncertain what she was up to.

'Good,' she said, her smile growing wider by the second. 'Your place or mine?'

'I am afraid I do not understand, Cassandra,' he finally admitted.

'Minerva said you'd help me bring my magic up-to-date. Would be a shame if the sixth years at Hogwarts are better at spell work than I am when I start teaching them.'

She grabbed his hand and pulled him up from the bench towards her. And all Severus could do was stare at her, gobsmacked.

~ ~ ~

'Did you just say you were going to teach at Hogwarts?' Severus asked, still out of breath.

Cassandra had pulled him behind a bush in the park, drawn her wand and Apparated directly to her backdoor. And he had been too surprised to resist or even utter one single intelligent word. But now, standing in her living room, he wanted answers.

'Yes, I did say that,' she replied, smiling broadly, and in a tone that suggested that there was absolutely nothing abnormal about her statement. 'Need a drink?'

A drink? Merlin's pants, he would need a whole bottle if she didn't explain herself soon.

'I would rather have a straight answer, Cassandra,' he snapped, hating the way she was playing with him.

'You are not the only one having tea with Minerva, you know.' Cassandra narrowed her eyes slightly and then thrust a book into his hands. *101 Ways to Find Your Magic* Teach me.'

Severus put down the book on the table with a bang. 'I am not going to teach you anything before you explain yourself.' His voice was shaking but not because he was angry. He was terrified.

'Isn't it obvious, Severus?' The smile on her face had turned into a smirk. She was obviously enjoying keeping him on tenterhooks. 'I am coming with you.'

His knees gave way, and he grabbed on to the bookshelf to steady himself. 'Why?' he breathed.

'Because a very smart and very brave man has told me that one's fears cannot be defeated by running from them.'

She was standing close enough now for him to feel the warmth of her body against his. But he didn't dare reach out for her. He was afraid that if he touched her, she might disappear. This had to be a dream. He could not be that lucky. He never was.

'Over the last couple of weeks I had time to think about his words,' Cassandra continued. 'And I think he was right. It is time for me to face my fears.'

She reached out for him and caressed his cheek with the tips of her fingers. And her touch sent shivers down his spine.

'I want to come with you, Severus,' she whispered.

And he shrank away. 'I cannot ask this of you, Cassandra. I cannot make you face your worst fears just because I wish to return.'

To that Cassandra smiled gently and once more reached out for him. 'This decision is not yours to make, Severus Snape. Magic has decided. Look.'

She raised her wand and cast the Patronus Spell. At first, it was nothing more than a silvery mist, but then it took shape: it slithered through the air with languid, fluid movement, its tongue flicking in and out of its mouth, its dark eyes glittering mysteriously. The Snake, the symbol of Slytherin house, the symbol of his rebirth.

'You see.' Cassandra smiled as she watched her Patronus dissolve into thin air. 'Magic has decided. I am irrevocably linked to you.'

XIX: Getting Ready

Chapter 19 of 22

The last obstacles are overcome.

Thanks go to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks go also to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XIX: Getting Ready

The all too familiar pain in his left forearm made Severus sink to his knees.

He stared at his arm, terrified. This couldn't be! The Dark Mark could not be burning! Not after all these years!

He did not want to look, not really. The outline of the dreadful Mark was still etched into his retina, even after all these years.

No, he did not want to look. Every cell in his brain told him not to. But he felt that he had no choice. Ignoring the pain would not make it go away. So he closed his eyes for a moment, gathered his strength, brought his right hand to the hem of his left sleeve and started rolling it up with shaking fingers.

The Mark was as horrid as ever, or even more so. It had started to fade the night the Dark Lord had fallen by the hand of Harry Potter. At least, that was what Minerva and Poppy had told Severus when he had awoken in the infirmary. And by the time he had arrived in Iceland, the vile brand had disappeared almost completely. But now it was back, etched into his very flesh, a dark and hideous scar.

Severus' stomach lurched, and he suppressed the urge to throw up. It just could not be! The Dark Lord had been dead for almost eight years. His own spell had finished him off. He was dead, stone-dead. Gone.

Or was he?

The Dark Lord had been thought dead once before. And he had been resurrected. Was it possible that he had managed to escape Death's clutches once more? Had he once again managed to escape the darkest pits of hell?

Severus felt tears well up in his eyes. Whether this was due to the pain in his arm or due to the sheer horror he felt, he did not know. But he knew that he would have no other choice than to answer the call. If the Dark Lord was back, he would fight him. And that meant that he had to meet him, face to face.

Ignoring the tears in his eyes and the taste of vomit in his mouth, Severus Disapparated. Where to, he did not know. He never had.

Blood-red eyes were the first thing that met him when his feet hit the ground. Lifeless, blood-red eyes in an equally lifeless, pale face. Instinctively, he bent his knees but changed his mind in the last second. No! Never again would he crawl in the dirt in front of that Creature. Never again. And so he stood tall, his face an inscrutable mask.

'I was not sure if you would answer the call, Severus. I was not even sure if you were still alive.'

Cold. The Creature's voice was cold as ice, cold as death itself. It sounded like fingernails scratching over a blackboard, like human bones being crushed by an enormous weight, like the death-cry of a beloved.

Severus felt the strong urge to run away. But his brain told him to stay put, kept his feet rooted to the ground. He must not run away. The Creature had to be defeated.

'My Lord.' He almost choked at the words. 'We thought you dead.'

The Creature nodded. 'Yes, I was dead, Severus. But then again, I was not.'

Severus stared at the Creature, refusing to flinch. Maybe he could not be killed. Maybe both his body and his soul had already been too damaged to be killed by something as earthly as a rebounded Killing Curse.

'I thought you dead as well, Severus,' the Creature went on.

Now Severus did flinch. Of course the Creature would have thought that. After all, it had been the Creature himself who had wanted him to die. The Creature had misinterpreted the situation and had demanded Severus' death to gain control of the Elder Wand. But the Creature's plan had failed.

'I am pleased that you are alive, Severus,' the Creature went on. 'You have been one of my most loyal servants. And I regretted your death.'

To that, Severus almost snorted. Was it possible that Lord Voldemort, the dark wizard whom everybody feared, had still not understood that he, Severus Snape, had been double-crossing him for almost two decades?

'Yes, Severus. You have been one of my most loyal servants in our past life. And you have served me even in our new life. And you might not even have realised it.'

Severus frowned. Whatever did the Creature mean?

'There aren't many of our kind left, Severus. And to become strong again, we need to cut away the disease that has infested our kind. You have located the canker. And I have disposed of it.'

A cruel smile flashed over the Creature's face, and Severus felt a chill going down his spine. From the corner of his eye, he saw a movement and whirled around.

The sight made him sink to his knees and scream in agony: in front of him stood Yaxley, raised from the dead, his face scarred, his left arm crippled and his eyes lifeless. And at his feet lay the mangled body of Cassandra.

~ ~ ~

His eyes flew open. His lungs filled with air.

Coughing, gasping and screaming all at once, Severus shot up from his pillow just to feel himself being pulled back by a pair of warm, soft hands, Cassandra's hands.

'Hush, love,' she whispered. 'It's been a dream. Just a bad dream.'

His nightshirt was sticking to his back. His whole body was shaking. It had been so real. The Creature's voice was still ringing in his ears, and there was a taste of blood and vomit in his mouth.

But Cassandra was there, right beside him, alive. Not dead, not shredded to pieces. He could feel the warmth of her body against his, could smell the comforting mixture of musk and honey. She was there. She was alive. She was holding him in her arms.

Her embrace was comforting, and Severus let himself be pulled back against her chest. But he did not dare close his eyes. The dream had been so real that he was afraid it would return. And for some moments he just stared into the darkness, waiting for his heartbeat to slow down, for his breathing to return to normal.

'I am sorry I woke you up,' he said, surprised how hoarse his voice sounded. So his screaming had not been a dream.

'You didn't wake me up. I've been watching you for quite some time,' Cassandra whispered into his ear. 'That was not just a simple nightmare, was it?'

She tightened her embrace, and Severus let his head fall back against her, hugged her arms against his chest. But he didn't answer. He didn't know what to say.

'I know those sorts of screams, Severus,' she said, her breath tickling the side of his neck. 'Screams like those come from the darkest corner of one's soul. You either let them out or they will tear your heart into pieces.'

How many nights had she woken up screaming, Severus wondered. How many times had she relived the worst moments of her life?

'This is not the first time you're having nightmares,' she went on. 'Something is bothering you, isn't it?'

She was right, of course. He had been suffering from dreams like that for the greater part of his life. There had always been faces hunting him at night: his mother, Lily, Dumbledore. The faces of the people he had held dear and whom he had not been able to protect. And now there was a new face in them.

'I cannot make you do this, Cassandra,' he whispered into the darkness, suddenly very much aware why his nightmares had returned. 'I cannot make you return to the Wizarding world just because I want to return.'

For a moment there was nothing but silence, and Severus was afraid that Cassandra would agree with him, that she would tell him that she could not come with him.

'You are not making me do anything,' she finally said, her voice calm and warm.

'Would you have returned on your own?' He needed to know. He needed to know that she was not just doing this for him.

'No,' she answered, and Severus felt a stab in his heart. So it was as he had feared: she wasn't ready.

He had seen her break down. He had seen what her past had done to her. Returning to the Wizarding world would mean that she had to face her past, her fears. What if she could not handle it? What if it destroyed her? How could he, Severus, ever live with that guilt?

He freed himself from her embrace and turned to face her, acutely aware of how cold he felt now that her arms weren't wrapped around him anymore. It was too dark for him to see her face, but he could feel her eyes upon him.

'Then why have you decided to return, Cassandra?' he asked. 'Formy sake?'

He heard her sigh and reached out for her, pulled her towards his chest. If she told him that she was not coming with him, he wanted at least to feel her body close to his for one last time.

'I have kept away from the Wizarding world because I am afraid, Severus.' Her voice had lost its calm. It was shaky now, filled with tears.

Severus brought her hand to his lips and placed a tender kiss on her palm. He could feel her pulse under his fingers. It was slow and steady.

'The Wizarding world has changed, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'The Light has returned. The shadows are gone. Does it still frighten you?'

'I am terrified. I still see shadows lurking in every corner. And there are still nights when I wake up screaming. But I am tired of running, Severus. So tired. I want to live again.'

He felt her slump against his shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around her, buried his face in her hair.

'I will be there for you, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'If you return with me, I swear that I will never leave your side.'

~ ~ ~

Severus was woken up by Nicodemus, who was trying to creep under the warm blanket.

'Do not even think about it,' he growled. He had never understood why Cassandra allowed the cat into the bedroom, yet alone into the bed. But then again, that cat had been her best friend, her companion during lonely years filled with heartache and despair.

He rolled over to pull Cassandra into his arms but found the pillow beside him empty. Swiftly, he sat up and listened, heard her move around in the kitchen.

'Is she making breakfast, your mistress?' he asked as he absently patted the tabby on its head.

Nicodemus started purring and rubbed its head eagerly against the wizard's hand. And despite himself, Severus picked up the cat and cradled it against his chest.

'Your mistress is a wonderful woman,' he murmured. 'She has brought a joy into my life which I never hoped to experience. She made me live again.'

Nicodemus purred and rubbed its head against Severus' chin before wriggling itself free and jumping to the floor. It looked up at the dark wizard with its intense green eyes, backing slowly towards the door. And for a split second, Severus could have sworn that the tabby was making beckoning movements with its head.

He pulled on his dressing gown and followed the cat out of the bedroom, suddenly realising that talking to the woman herself would be a much smarter move than talking to the cat.

He found Cassandra in the kitchen. She, too, was wearing a dressing gown, and her red hair was as messy as ever. He smiled and remembered the first night he had spent in her bed and how awkward he had felt the next morning when he had entered the kitchen. But the only feeling that filled his chest now was the feeling of endless happiness. He loved the woman in front of him with all his heart. And today he would tell her.

'Have a seat,' she said, smiling, and beckoned towards the kitchen table. 'Breakfast will be ready in a minute.'

Severus settled on the chair that stood closest to the window, enjoyed the warm sunlight that was falling through the glass. Then his eyes fell on a piece of parchment that was lying on the table. He recognised it at once. He had filled out one of those himself a couple of weeks ago. It was the form every teacher had to fill out before starting to teach at Hogwarts.

He eyed the form curiously. 'Magical Languages?' he asked.

Cassandra smiled at him. 'What did you think I was going to teach? Potions?'

Severus couldn't help but grin. 'Then you actually do speak Elfish.'

When the sound of her laughter filled the kitchen, Severus stared at Cassandra in awe. It was back: the carefree, hearty laughter he had fallen in love with that day in the park. It was finally back.

He let his eyes wander over the parchment, admiring Cassandra's handwriting.

'You are aware that you have forgotten to fill in your last name?' he asked.

She settled onto the chair opposite him and took the parchment from his hand. 'Yes, I am aware of that. I didn't know what name to write there.'

He looked at her, confused, and she smiled.

'It doesn't seem right to carry the name Svensson into the Wizarding world. That name is part of my Muggle life. It doesn't belong to me any more.'

Severus reached out to take her hand. So she had taken farewell. She was ready to go home.

'How about Black?' he suggested. 'Both your brothers have played a vital part in the defeat of the Dark Lord. And Harry Potter has seen to it that the name has been cleared.'

Cassandra shrugged. 'I have hated that name for so many years. It's hard to just ... take it back.'

He squeezed her hand, and she raised her eyes to look at him.

'Would you like to carry my name, Cassandra?' he asked.

For a moment, she looked at him, puzzled. Then a mischievous smirk appeared on her face, and she narrowed her eyes.

'Marriage proposals normally involve the man getting down on his knees, Severus Snape,' she stated, her voice dripping with irony.

And Severus felt his heart drop. Damn her! She must know what an effort it had taken him to ask a question of that kind. Why would she ridicule him like that?

When he tried to withdraw his hand, she held on to it. 'I'm sorry, Severus. I shouldn't have ... I'm sorry.'

She pulled his hand closer towards her, wrapped both of hers around it. And when he looked up at her, the smirk had gone, had been replaced by a questioning look.

'Why would you want to marry me, Severus?' she asked.

'I promised you last night that I will always be by your side,' he answered. 'I intend to keep that promise.'

A soft smile appeared on her lips but disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. 'You don't need to marry me to prove that, Severus. You are an honourable man. I know that you will keep your promise.'

He felt his hand shaking and squeezed hers tighter so she wouldn't notice. 'When we return to the Wizarding world, you will be all I have, Cassandra,' he whispered, his dark eyes locked on her blue ones. 'I need you to be by my side.'

Had he just said those words, he wondered. Had he, Severus Snape, just told another human being that he needed her? Had he just confessed his vulnerability?

Then he saw the smile reappear and felt Cassandra place a tender kiss on his palm.

'I will be there, Severus,' she promised. 'I will always be there.'

XX: Coming Home

Chapter 20 of 22

All the bags are packed, and it is time to go home.

Thanks go to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks go also to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XX: Coming Home

'You're really leaving, aren't you?'

Per was looking around in the now almost empty house. Most of Cassandra's possessions had already been Flooed to Hogwarts: the bookshelf with the heavy Muggle tomes had gone and so had the carefully disguised Wizard books. The only thing left in the living room was an armchair and Nicodemus' basket.

That was why Per, Severus and Cassandra were sitting in the kitchen. The men were sitting by the window, Cassandra leaning against the counter. They each held onto a cup of freshly brewed tea, and the mood was somewhat subdued.

Cassandra smiled at her friend. 'Per, sweetheart, you have known for three months.'

'Yeah, but I was still hoping you'd change your mind.'

Per tried to sound amused, but Severus didn't need to use Legilimency to understand that the blond man opposite him was upset. And one look into Cassandra's eyes told him that she had understood as well.

Silently, he stood to leave the room. He wasn't sure if Per even noticed him leaving, but as he swept by Cassandra, he caught a glimpse of her thankful smile.

He settled on the armchair in the living room, listening. Not that he meant to eavesdrop, but somehow he wanted to know how the two friends in the kitchen took farewell.

'You look very happy, Cassandra.' Severus could clearly hear that Per was struggling to keep his voice firm.

'I am happy, Per. I am very happy.' Cassandra's tone was soft and consoling, and it made Per lose control. He was now sobbing silently, and Severus didn't need to be in the kitchen to know that Cassandra was kneeling in front of her best friend, his hands in hers.

'Don't get me wrong, love,' Per brought out between his sobs. 'I am so glad for you. You've been blooming over the last months. There is a happiness in your eyes I haven't seen since ... since ...' He broke off, and Severus heard him take a deep breath. 'Tell me honestly, Cassandra. Have you ever been this happy? Have you ever been this happy with Thorbjörn?'

Severus closed his eyes and imagined Cassandra reaching out and caressing the cheek of her friend.

'I loved Thorbjörn dearly. You know that, Per,' she said. 'But Severus knows where I come from. He is part of the world I thought I could leave behind. He makes me complete.'

'Eg elska tig, Cassandra.' Per's words were almost unintelligible now, as he was sobbing again.

'I love you, too, Per,' she whispered. 'You know I do.'

There was the sound of fabric rubbing against fabric, and Severus knew that Cassandra had now wrapped her arms around her friend and was cradling him against her chest to lend some comfort. And for some minutes, the only sound in the house were Per's muffled sobs.

Then suddenly he was standing in the living room door, his eyes red and puffy, his face pale.

'Thank you, Severus,' he said. 'Thank you for making her smile. Thank you for making her happy.'

And before Severus had even found the words to reply, Per had already reached the front door and left.

Cassandra was standing at the kitchen window, looking after her dearest friend, who was walking towards his car without even once looking back.

'I will miss him,' she whispered, and Severus carefully wrapped his arms around her and placed a tender kiss on her tear-wet cheek.

'I know you will,' he said. 'I know you will.'

~ ~ ~

After a three hours' flight and a terrible tube ride to Charing Cross Road, Severus tried to remember why he had let Cassandra persuade him to travel to England the Muggle way. Some days ago, it had sounded like an amusing idea. But now he was tired and cranky and wanted nothing more than to get to their room at the Leaky Cauldron, lie back on a fluffy pillow and enjoy a nice glass of Ogden's.

The plan was to stay at in London for three days in order to do some shopping in Diagon Alley and acquaint themselves with the Wizarding world before travelling to Hogwarts on August first. Arriving there four weeks prior to the start of term seemed prudent. They would be almost alone in the castle and have enough time to prepare for the coming school year and their shared life in the Wizarding world.

Already during the flight, Severus had noticed a change in Cassandra's demeanour: she was unusually quiet, edgy. And as they were standing outside the shabby-looking door that was the entrance to the Leaky Cauldron and the Wizarding world, he noticed that she was awfully pale. When he took her hand, it felt clammy.

'Are you quite alright?' he inquired.

Cassandra gave him a tiny smile. 'I didn't think I was going to be that nervous.'

'I would be lying if I said that this leaves me completely unmoved,' Severus replied and jokingly stretched out his arm. To his own surprise, his hand was actually shaking.

'Are you quite sure about this, Severus?' Cassandra asked and he felt her fingers tighten around his./can always disappear again. But once *you* step through that door, Severus Snape will have returned from the dead. There will be no turning back for you.'

Severus nodded. He was aware of that. To be honest, he had been contemplating the question of whether he was really ready for all this on the whole flight from Iceland. He had missed the Wizarding world, he had missed Hogwarts. And the day Cassandra had told him that she would come with him had been one of the happiest days in his life. But as much as he was looking forward to coming home with her by his side, he was also terrified.

'How will people react when they see Severus Snape return from the dead?' he'd asked. He had thought about that question a lot over the last couple of months, but he had never actually put it into words.

Cassandra shrugged. 'I think most will thank you for all you have done. Some will hate you, and others will not care. But no matter if they lift you to the skies or wish you to hell, remember that I will be there, right by your side.'

For a moment, Severus just stared at her. 'She would go to the gates of hell and back for you,' Per had once said. And now she had said it herself, and her devotion made Severus gape at her.

A soft tug at his hand made him return to reality. 'I asked if you were ready, Severus.'

He smiled at her and reached for the door handle. 'Yes, my love,' he replied. 'I am ready. I am ready to go home.'

~ ~ ~

There were quite a few people in the Leaky Cauldron, it being eleven o'clock in the morning, and Severus considered it bad timing to be arriving during the lunch rush. Unnoticed by anyone he slipped into a booth at the far end of the dining room while Cassandra went to organise a room for them.

'Would you like to have lunch, sir? Today's special is Shepherd's Pie.'

Severus looked up at the blond-haired witch and swallowed. He had not seen her for over eight years, but he never forgot a face. He had brewed a Calming Draught for her when she had been taking her O.W.L. exams. And he had been the one to inform Dumbledore that her mother had been murdered by Death Eaters.

He cleared his throat and ordered two pies and a jug of water, and Hannah Abbott scurried towards the kitchen without even having given him a second look. Had she not recognised him, Severus wondered. Had she not recognised the evil teacher who had made her tremble in fear for six years? Had his appearance changed so much? Or were the odds of him being still alive so slim that Hannah's brain had not even considered the possibility?

But when she returned a minute later without any pies and her eyes big as saucers, Severus realised that she had recognised him after all.

'Merlin's beard, it *is* you,' the young woman whispered. 'Professor Snape.'

Severus nodded, and Hannah sank onto the bench opposite him.

'But you died,' she blurted out. 'Harry told us. In the Shrieking Shack, Voldemort's snake ...'

'You should not believe everything you hear, Ms Abbott,' Severus interrupted her and saw her flinch. She had obviously not forgotten the tone of his voice and was still afraid of him.

But then she straightened. 'It's Mrs. Longbottom,' she explained.

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'You are married to Neville Longbottom?'

Hannah nodded. 'Yes. Oh I am so excited! He will start teaching at Hogwarts this autumn. Herbology of course. You know he has always had a knack for the subject.'

Severus observed the young woman in front of him as she spoke of her husband, and a relaxed feeling crept into his mind. If meeting the rest of his former students, colleagues and acquaintances went as well as this, then returning to the Wizarding world wouldn't be as hard as he had imagined.

Of course, the landlady chatting animatedly with a customer didn't go unnoticed by the other guests, and before long, Severus was surrounded by witches and wizards who were shaking his hand, patting him on the back and thanking him for everything he had done. It was overwhelming, and there was a voice inside his head that told him to scowl, to scare them away with one of the biting comments Severus Snape had been known for during so many years. But he didn't obey the voice. Instead he shook hands, humbly bowed his head and accepted the kind words.

Then he felt a familiar touch on his shoulder and turned to look into Cassandra's blue eyes. She smiled and beckoned towards the stairs.

'I'll be in our room,' she whispered. 'I don't think I can handle a crowd like this today.'

He nodded as to tell her that he would join her, but she shook her head. 'This is your big moment, Severus Snape. Enjoy it. You have deserved it.'

He felt her fingers softly brush his arm, and then she was gone.

~ ~ ~

It was Hannah who finally scattered the crowd, telling them that Severus Snape was not going to disappear and that they could talk to him another day. It was also Hannah who handed him a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of wine.

'Your lady friend seemed tired,' she said with a knowing smile. 'I'm sure she'll appreciate it if you surprise her with a little snack.'

When he entered their room, Cassandra was standing with her back against the door, gazing out the window. Diagon Alley lay below, buzzing with life, full of stores that sold magical supplies and gadgets.

He put the sandwiches and the wine on the table and stepped behind her to wrap his arms around her. Her hair was wet and she smelled of musk and honey.

He pulled her close to his chest and started nibbling at her neck. He felt her relax in his arms, and she let her head fall to the side to give him unlimited access to her neck. The soft moan that escaped her lips as he cupped her breasts in his hands made a shiver go down his spine. And suddenly, all the tension was gone, and his body was crying out for her embrace. All he wanted right now was to be close to her, to be with her, inside her. And as he turned her around, he found his own desire reflected in her blue eyes.

Her lips tasted of sweet honey, and the passion with which she answered his kiss made Severus lose his balance. He stumbled towards her and pressed her up against the window sill, their tongues entwined and their hands feverishly trying to get access to naked skin. Soon her right leg was wrapped around his waist, and he ground his crotch against hers while his fingers desperately tried to unbutton her shirt.

Fabric was torn, buttons fell the floor and shaking hands found hot flesh. Busy removing the remaining pieces of clothing, they stumbled across the room and collapsed on the bed, panting. Severus latched his teeth onto Cassandra's neck, and as he entered her with one swift movement, she arched up against him, moaning loudly. Again and again he buried himself up to the hilt in her warm wetness, and she reflected his movements by bucking up against him. His hand was on her breast, massaging the soft flesh, and his tongue darted in and out of her sweet tasting mouth, copying the rhythm of their hips.

He was oblivious of the world around him when he climaxed. The rhythmic contractions of Cassandra's muscles around his cock had been coaxing him for several minutes, but he had held back until he had felt a shiver go through her body and had been sure that she had reached her peak as well. Only then did he let go. He heard the blood rush in his ears, felt life surge through his veins, and as he spilled himself inside her, he could not help but cry out her name in ecstasy. Panting, he collapsed upon her, his whole body shaking.

When he had caught his breath, he lifted his head to look at the woman beneath him. Her cheeks were rosy, her pupils dilated, and the loving smile on her lips made him stare at her in amazement. Only a year ago, he had not even dared hope that somebody would ever look at him like that.

He rolled onto his side and pulled her close to him, letting his hands trail up over her body to caress her breasts. As he placed a tender kiss on her smiling lips, she sighed contently and nestled up against his chest, pulling a blanket over them both.

'I wonder if they heard us down in the bar,' she asked after a while and giggled.

And Severus smiled. If anyone had heard, he would not care. If it were up to him, the whole world could know that he loved the women in his arms more than anything else.

~ ~ ~

Their stroll through Diagon Alley the next morning proved to be rather exhausting. The rumour of Severus Snape having returned to the Wizarding world had spread like wildfire. And it seemed as if every witch and wizard in Britain had come to see him.

They didn't manage to buy half of the items they had planned. They actually only made it to the Apothecary, Madam Malkin's and Flourish and Blotts. The entrances to the other stores were more or less barricaded by people who had come to catch a glimpse of the wizard who had risen from the dead. They all wanted to pat his back, shake his hand and thank him.

Severus endured it. He shook hands and answered questions, just as he had done the day before at the Leaky Cauldron. He tried to put up an impassive face and stay polite. But he hated the crowd, hated being the centre of attention, and soon found himself getting edgy and rather ill-tempered. And he would gladly have fallen to his knees and kissed Cassandra's feet for her brilliant idea to shove him behind a bookshelf at Flourish and Blotts and Apparate directly to their room at the Leaky Cauldron.

'Looks as if we will have to order our supplies and have them owled to us,' she said with a broad smile on her face. 'Going shopping with you is a nightmare, Severus Snape!'

When he scowled at her, her smile faltered and was replaced by a look of concern. 'Was it like you imagined it?'

He shrugged. 'I do not know what I imagined,' he replied and turned to stare out of the window.

To be honest, he was surprised. Nobody had ever been happy to see him, and now there were wizards and witches flocking around him, beaming up at him, telling him how grateful they were and welcoming him back into their midst. Even former students whom he had made gut Flobberworms and clean cauldrons with their toothbrushes were now talking to him with smiles on their faces.

'You're a hero, Severus Snape.'

Lost in his thoughts, he had not heard her approach, and her words were just as comforting at the warm embrace she offered.

'Harry Potter made sure that people know how much you have risked, how much you have sacrificed. It is only natural that they now want to come and see their hero.'

'If they only stopped beaming up at me like lovesick teenagers,' Severus growled, and Cassandra laughed.

'You might just have to get used to people looking at you differently now. You are not the scary, dark wizard anymore. You have stepped into the Light.'

He looked down at the red-haired witch in front of him and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead.

'I am very glad that I found you, Cassandra,' he murmured. 'And I am very glad that you are here with me.'

She tenderly brushed a streak of hair from his face and looked into his eyes. 'I'd like to ask you a favour, Severus.'

Anything, he thought. He would do anything for her.

'Come to Grimmauld Place with me tomorrow.'

He agreed before he realised what he was actually agreeing to. Going to Grimmauld Place meant facing the ghosts of his past. He would have to enter the house where he had never been met with anything but hatred and distrust. And he would come to stand face to face with Harry Potter.

~ ~ ~

The boy had grown up to be a man, but in Severus' eyes he was still the same: still the boy he had protected for seven years and whom he had disliked every single moment; still the Golden Boy who had saved the Wizarding world even though he was less than averagely talented; still James Potter's son.

Severus allowed himself a moment of surprise. Shaking off his past wasn't as easy as he had thought then. After almost three decades, he was still holding a schoolyard grudge.

'Mr Potter,' he greeted curtly, glowering down at the young man.

'Prof... Mr. Snape,' Potter replied, avoiding the dark wizard's gaze. He was obviously uncomfortable. No wonder, really. He had expected Cassandra, and she had certainly told him that she would bring company. But he might just not have expected Severus Snape. And if he had, well, his feelings against his former Potions master were just as unfriendly as the ones the older wizard held for him.

'It feels strange to welcome you to your childhood home,' Potter addressed Cassandra. 'But please, do come in.'

The place had lost its gloom. The shrunken elf heads had been removed from the banister, and somehow Potter had even managed to remove Walburga Black's portrait.

'Feel free to go anywhere you want,' Potter told Cassandra. 'This is much more your house than it is mine.'

She knew where to go. Her room had been on the second floor, the third door to the left, right beside Sirius' room. She would start there. Severus got ready to follow her up the stairs, but she shook her head at him. 'I'd rather do this alone. If you don't mind.'

Of course he would not mind. 'Come and find me, if you need me,' he offered. 'I will be ...'

'In the kitchen,' Potter filled in. 'I'd very much like to have a chat with you, Mr. Snape.'

Reluctantly, Severus followed Potter to the kitchen. What now, he wondered. Was the Boy Who Lived Twice going to fill him in on how he had managed to defeat the Dark Lord and save the Wizarding world from plummeting into Darkness? Would he lecture him on how to live as a hero?

'Ginny made biscuits before she left,' Potter said, pushing a plate towards Severus. 'She has taken the babies to her mother's for the day.'

Babies? Severus raised an eyebrow. Oh Merlin, the Golden Boy had produced offspring. Surely they would be just as insolent, impertinent and attention-seeking as their father and grandfather had been.

Instead of commenting, Severus gave a short nod of acknowledgement and then busied himself with stirring the coffee Potter had poured.

What as he supposed to say now? What did the boy expect? Praise?

'Thank you.'

Severus jerked up his head and stared at Potter. What had the boy just said?

'Thank you,' Potter repeated. 'Thank you for looking out for me. Thank you for giving me the tools to do what I was destined to do. I would not have succeeded without your help.'

Severus kept staring at the boy. Had those words, those words of thanks, just come out of the mouth of a Potter? Was it possible?

'You know Ginny had another boy three weeks ago,' Potter went on. 'We named him Albus Severus.'

'Albus Severus?' Severus snorted. Now that was just ridiculous. 'Mr. Potter, naming a child Albus Severus is cruel even by my standards.'

But Potter just smirked at him. 'I knew you would hate it. But sooner or later you will have to accept that the Wizarding world owes you thanks. Naming my son after you is just the beginning.'

And then they talked. They talked about the war, the peace that followed and even about the time before the war, the time when Harry Potter's mother and Severus Snape had been friends. She had been the reason why Severus had agreed to protect the boy. And now the boy was a man and had the right to know.

When Cassandra came down into the kitchen, the two men had made peace. They would never be friends, and they were both aware of that. But when they took farewell, they shook hands, and a pair of dark eyes met a pair of green ones.

'I still do not like you, Mr. Potter,' Severus growled.

And Harry Potter smiled. 'It is nice to know that some things never change.'

XXI: Professors Black and Snape

Chapter 21 of 22

Finally, they are at home.

Thanks go to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks also go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And of course thanks go to you for reading and reviewing.

Chapter XXI: Professors Black and Snape

They had Flooed from the Leaky Cauldron directly to the Three Broomsticks, and Severus had barely exited the fireplace when he found himself being pulled into a tight embrace. Highly perplexed, he let it happen.

'Oh, Severus, dear Severus.'

When Rosmerta finally released him, there were tears running down her face, and she hastily wiped them off with her sleeve.

'When Minerva told me that you were alive, that you were coming back, I almost could not believe it. It made me so, so happy, Severus. And now you're here. You are really here!'

Once more she brought her sleeve to her face to dry off the tears that still came rolling down her cheeks. And Severus took the opportunity to pull Cassandra to his side.

'Rosmerta, may I introduce ...'

'No need, Severus,' Rosmerta interrupted. 'I would never forget that smile. Welcome back, Cassandra.'

Severus frowned. 'You two know each other?'

'During my seventh year, I practically spent every Hogsmeade weekend here,' Cassandra explained.

'You always ordered peppermint tea with honey,' Rosmerta filled in. 'And you always came alone.'

The smile faltered from Cassandra's face. 'It's not like I had an awful lot of friends to hang with back then.'

The bitter tone in her voice caught Severus by surprise. Would she ever be able to make peace with her past, he wondered. He himself had the advantage of being able to actually meet most of his ghosts, to look them in the eyes and make his peace with them. But Cassandra's ghosts really were ghosts. Anyone who had ever meant anything to her had died during the war, and so had those who had hurt her. For her, there was no one left to make peace with.

When Rosmerta left to fetch Butterbeer, Severus wrapped his arms around Cassandra's shoulders and kissed her gently on the forehead.

'I am here for you now, beloved,' he whispered. 'You will never have to be alone again.'

~ ~ ~

Hogwarts. Severus stopped dead in his tracks and swallowed dryly as the castle came into sight.

He had visited a couple of times over the last months, but he had always Flooed directly to Minerva's office. It was the first time in almost a decade that he actually saw the castle from the outside. Had it always been that big, that majestic?

To a Muggle it was just a jumble of battlements and towers, a huge, rambling ruin. But a wizard could see a magnificent castle, with towers and turrets so numerous that one would lose track of them should one start counting, surrounded by luscious green hills, the dark Forbidden Forest and the Enchanted Lake.

But Severus Snape saw more. He saw the huge oak doors that made up the main entrance, remembered how safe he had always felt behind them. He saw the tower that held the Headmistress' office, remembered the year he had been Headmaster and how he had never been able to make himself call that office his. And he saw the Astronomy Tower, the place where he had cast the spell that had killed his dearest friend and sent himself onto a road that led straight to hell.

Yes, Hogwarts castle held all kinds of memories for Severus Snape: good ones and bad ones, joyful ones and those that had made up his nightmares for so many years. But most of all, this was home.

He felt Cassandra take his hand and reluctantly took his eyes off the mighty castle.

'Ready to go?' she asked.

And he just nodded and followed her home.

~ ~ ~

'Are you telling me that you lived down here in this dark, damp dungeon for almost two decades?'

The tone of her voice suggested that she sincerely doubted his sanity. And Severus lifted his eyes from his trunk to look at Cassandra, who was leaning casually against the doorframe, a broad grin on her face.

'I always appreciated privacy,' he explained. 'Very few people voluntarily came down here to the dungeons.'

'Must have given you quite a reputation,' Cassandra went on, looking around curiously. 'Gloomy, no sunlight. No wonder your students called you a bat.'

Her laughter spread through the dungeon like the first breeze of spring over the still frozen grounds. And all Severus could do was stare at her, captured by her smiling lips, enchanted by the sparkle in her eyes.

'A house-warming gift,' she finally said and handed him a small silver box, decorated with a dozen snakes with emerald green eyes.

Severus opened the lid and frowned. 'Floo Powder?'

'I took the liberty of letting your fireplace being connected to mine,' she explained. 'You can visit any time you like.'

'Is that an invitation, Professor Black?' he asked, smirking at her.

She smiled and got onto her toes to kiss him. She tasted of honey, and Severus found himself melt at the feather light touch of her lips.

When they broke apart, her blue eyes locked onto his dark ones, and she smiled once more.

'No, not an invitation, Professor Snape,' she whispered. 'Rather a request.'

~ ~ ~

To Severus' surprise, teaching proved to be rather pleasurable. Of course, there were still some dunderheads in his class, but they did not enrage him as dunderheads had done ten years ago. Maybe they had become smarter? Or had he, against all odds, become softer?

He snorted at the mere thought. Softer? Severus Snape? Ha! That was just ridiculous. There had to be another explanation. There just had to be another reason for the fact that his students didn't make him fly off the handle anymore. It was probably due to the fact that most of them were Ravenclaws. Or that they were in their seventh year and therefore somewhat more mature. Or that they were taking his subject, Healing Charms and Potions, on their own account. They were all aspiring to become Healers and were therefore quite eager to do well. Yes, that had to be it. Definitely. Because Severus Snape had *not* become soft.

Cassandra, too, seemed to enjoy her teaching duties. But now and then, she would shake her head at her students, rolling her eyes. And this seemed to be one of the nights when she seriously doubted that there was even one intelligent student in her class.

'This is not even a mandatory subject,' she groaned. 'One might think that the students who study it would actually ... study.'

She rubbed her neck, took up the quill and returned to grading. And Severus leant back in his chair, his arms folded in front of his chest and his eyes fixed on her.

He loved looking at her when she sat opposite him grading papers, loved how the candle light made her red hair look like dancing flames, loved how she now and then rolled her eyes at some student's essay. And he would gladly have sold his soul for every time she looked up from her work to smile at him.

'Oh for heaven's sake,' she exclaimed and slapped her forehead with her hand. 'Those nincompoops can't even get their prefixes right. Have a look at the translation of this spell: instead of moving the object from the table into his hand, this student will hex his own hand into the table.'

Then a mischievous grin appeared on her face. 'How about I don't correct the translation and let him practice his spell during the next lesson?'

The vicious undertone in her voice made Severus laugh out loud. He remembered a time when he had let his Potions students test their antidotes on their pets. They had managed to poison quite a few of them.

He leant over the desk and took Cassandra's hand in his. 'I like the way you think, Cassandra,' he said and placed a tender kiss on her knuckles. 'It is very Slytherin.'

She smirked at him and rubbed her neck with her free hand. 'I'm done grading for today,' she announced. 'One more bad translation and my brain might just explode. Mind if I take a nice hot shower?'

Of course he did not mind. Her taking a shower in his quarters meant that she would stay the night. And that was something Severus never minded.

He uncorked a bottle of wine and put it on the nightstand, pulled back the bedcovers and smiled as he let his hand glide over the soft silk sheets.

This night was going to be special. Tonight, he was going to propose. And this time, he would not let her turn him down.

He heard Cassandra sing in the shower and grinned. She had taken a liking to Muggle music. What was it called again? Hard Rock? It was the most dreadful excuse for music Severus had ever heard of, but still he lingered at the entrance to the bathroom to listen. Cassandra always smiled when she sang, and her smile was a sight he would never grow tired of.

When the scent of musk and honey filled his nostrils, he decided that he did not want to wait. He wanted to touch her now, feel her skin against his, taste her, love her, make her his. He stripped off his robes and carelessly let them glide to the floor, let his vest and boxers join them. When he reached the shower, he was completely naked and his arousal already clearly visible.

Cassandra gave a small gasp of surprise when he wrapped his arms around her from behind. And as he started placing small, tender kisses on the side of her neck, she let her head fall to the side, and he felt her body press up against him. She moaned softly as he cupped her breasts with his hands, and the sound sent jolts of pleasure to his crotch.

He held her body close to his with one strong arm around her waist while he softly nibbled at her neck, only pausing now and then to whisper words of love into her ear. When he let his free hand slip between her legs, he felt a shudder go through her whole body, yet another as he applied pressure to her sensitive nub and a third one as he entered her with one careful finger. He felt her muscles tighten and let a second finger join the first, while the ball of his thumb rubbed against her clit. She gasped, moaned, wriggled in his arm, but he did not let go of her.

'Come for me, love,' he whispered into her ear. 'Come for me and tell me you are mine.'

She would have fallen had he not held her. He felt the blood pulsate in her core, felt her muscles contract around his fingers, heard her call his name.

'Yes, Severus. Yes, yes.'

With his arm still wrapped around her waist, they stumbled out of the shower, and he bent her over the basin, entered her from behind with one swift movement. It did not take more than three or four powerful thrusts for her to peak again, and Severus had to withdraw. The sensation of her muscles tightening around him would have driven him over the edge. And he did not want this to end. Not yet, not that soon.

He covered the back of her neck with tender kisses, let his hands slide over her shoulders, down her back and to her front, cupped her breasts in his hands and massaged them gently, rubbed his cock softly against her pulsating core. And as soon as she had stopped shaking and her breathing had slowed down, he entered her again, slowly this time, inch by inch. His hands came to rest on her shoulders, and he pulled her towards him as he thrust forwards. He wanted to bury himself inside her, fill her completely.

When he felt his own orgasm approach, he bent forward and whispered into her ear: 'Look at me, Cassandra.'

She lifted her head, and her blue eyes met his dark ones in the mirror.

'Tell me you are mine, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'Tell me you love me.'

'I love you, Severus Snape.' Her voice was hoarse and croaky, trembling, but the look in her eyes told him that every word she said was true. He could see heaven in her eyes.

'I love you,' she sighed. 'And I will always be yours.'

He wrapped his arms around her waist, pressed his chest against her back, and slid into her up to the hilt. He could not hold back any longer. Not that he wanted to either. A few more quick thrusts and he was there, felt the blood rush in his ears, felt his seed spurt into her warmth.

For some minutes, he just clung to her, unable to move, unable to even think. This was paradise, sheer bliss.

When Severus had caught his breath, he brought his lips to her ear once more: 'Will you marry me, Cassandra?' he whispered. 'Will you carry my name?'

'Yes, Severus,' came her answer. 'Yes, I will.'

~ ~ ~

Hours later, the wine stood still untouched on the nightstand. There had been neither time nor the opportunity to drink it.

They had re-entered the shower, had washed each other's hair and bodies, had dried each other off with soft towels and warm kisses. And before they had realised what they were doing, their bodies had already been entwined again, and it had been a struggle to even make it to the bed.

Now Severus was lying on his side, his eyes half-closed, one arm under his pillow and the other tightly wrapped around Cassandra, who lay curled up against his chest.

'We need a cover story,' he stated dryly. 'You know how nosy Minerva is. She will want to know every tiny detail about the proposal. And we can most certainly not tell her about *that*.'

Cassandra giggled. 'No, we cannot. And we can most certainly not tell our daughter.'

Severus gave a non-committal grunt and was just about to pull the blanket up to his chin when her words sank in.

He shot up from the pillow and stared down at Cassandra, his mind racing. 'Our d... What did you just say?'

And Cassandra just smiled up at him and brushed his cheek with her fingertips.

'Our daughter, Severus Snape. I am carrying your child.'

A/N: The next chapter (the epilogue) will take you a few years into the future. Cassandra and Severus had their baby, and the little princess is almost old enough to go to Hogwarts. I had not meant to write a sequel and therefore wrapped up the story. But you know my muse. She is stubborn and made me write a sequel in the end anyway.

So, if you want to read about the first years of Severus and Cassandra's marriage, Severus' cold feet and the baby years, skip the epilogue and read the sequel *A Gift of the Goddess* instead.

XXII: The Circle Closes (epilogue)

Chapter 22 of 22

Severus returns to Iceland.

Thanks go first and foremost to JKR. Everything you recognise belongs to her.

Secondly, thanks go to my beta Apple Blossom.

Last but not least, I want to thank all you faithful readers. Thank you for reading and leaving such lovely notes. Your comments have meant a lot to me.

This chapter will take you a few years into the future. Cassandra and Severus had their baby, and the little princess is now almost old enough to go to Hogwarts. If you want to read about the baby years, skip this chapter and read the sequel *A Gift of the Goddess* instead.

Please have a hanky ready when reading this last chapter.

Chapter XXII: The Circle Closes (epilogue)

It felt strange returning to Iceland. Strange, but at the same time wonderful. He had spent eight peaceful years there. And he had found the love of his life.

He had not cried the day Cassandra had passed away. She had asked him not to. He had, however, cried bitter tears the day the Healer had told him that there was nothing they could do for her.

It had started with a cough in early spring. A cold, Cassandra had said. A cold that would go away as soon as the weather became warmer again. And he had believed her, had so desperately *wanted* to believe her. He had brewed Coughing Potions and believed her right up until the day that a coughing fit had made her collapse in his arms. He had rushed her to the infirmary, and Poppy had called a Healer. They had examined her for almost half an hour, just to come out and tell Severus that the illness had advanced too far to be stopped.

He had just glared menacingly at the Healer for some moments, even considered putting Crucio on him for lying. Then he had just shoved the man out of his way and rushed into the infirmary. At Cassandra's bedside he had broken down. He had not meant to cry. He had meant to be strong for her. But the thought of losing her had been overwhelming.

She had stroked his hair and begged him not to cry, told him that she wasn't afraid of dying and looking forward to spending the time she had left with him. Then she had dried off his tears and held him in her arms until the morning.

Spring had turned into summer, and her cough had become bearable. Severus had brewed her potions, had made sure she drank them. And for some weeks he had been able to convince himself that the Healer had been wrong. He had, after all, not heard her cough for quite some time. But then again, Muffliato had always been one of Cassandra's best spells.

Autumn had brought wet weather, and she had been forced to spend a lot of time in the infirmary. She had become weak and had difficulties keeping standing when a coughing fit hit her. And Severus had spent as much time as possible with her. Cassandra had hated being helpless, she had hated being sick. But she had never complained. And she had never cried.

She had passed away the day before Christmas. Her breathing had been shallow for days. And Severus had seen in her face that she was in pain. But she had been brave. Just as she always had been.

He had spent the last hours by her side, holding her in his arms, caressing her, kissing her. And when he awoke from his uneasy slumber on Christmas morning, his body drained from energy and his eyes burning from unshed tears, he could only hope that she had still heard him when he told her that he loved her more than anything else in the world.

He had awoken to this question ever since. It was the first thing on his mind when he woke up in the morning and the last thing before he drifted off to sleep at night.

'Daddy, Daddy, can I get one of those cookies?'

Her sweet voice ripped Severus out of his reverie, and he looked down at the girl who was tugging at his sleeve. She looked so much like her mother: raging red, unruly hair, eyes blue like the spring sky and a smile that made the sun itself look pale. Of course she could get a cookie. He had never been able to say no to her.

The day Cassandra had told him that she was carrying his child, he had just stared at her in utter disbelief. They had both been convinced that Yaxley's spell had done too much damage for her ever to conceive again. And when he had been done staring, he had taken her in his arms and made love to her. He had never been so happy in his life.

'Yes, Eydis,' he answered. 'Of course you can get a cookie.'

Eydis. It had seemed fitting to choose an Icelandic name. And Cassandra had certainly chosen a beautiful one. Their daughter had truly been a gift, and Severus would have done anything for her.

He was a strict father and demanded a lot from his daughter. He had hired the best tutors in Britain, even taught her himself when his duties as Deputy Headmaster left him the time. He wanted his daughter to be great. He wanted her to excel in her studies. Once she graduated from Hogwarts, all the doors in the Wizarding world should be open to her.

But most of all, he wanted to see his daughter happy.

She had him wrapped around her little finger. And he would have walked through fire for her.

The day she was born he had sworn that he would never become like his father had been. He would never raise his hand against his daughter. And he would never make her cry.

Yes, he loved his daughter more than life itself. Had it not been for her, he did not know what he had done after Cassandra's death. He might have taken poison. He might have disappeared into the Forbidden Forest. Or he might just have become a bitter old man. But for Eydis, he had chosen to live.

The only thing he regretted was that Eydis had had far too little time with her mother. She had only been three years old when Cassandra had died, and now she could barely remember her. And that was why Severus had brought her to Iceland for her eleventh birthday, to show her the place where he had come to love her mother.

'Is this the café where you and Mummy used to meet?' Eydis asked.

Severus nodded and pointed towards a table on the other side of the room. 'Yes, we used to sit over there by the window.'

Eydis grabbed her cacao and her cookie, scurried over to the table he had pointed out and settled on the chair that was much too big for her. She had inherited her size from her mother as well and was at least two heads shorter than her peers.

When Severus approached, she looked up at him and smiled. Just the way her mother had done so many times. He swallowed to make the lump in his throat disappear and sat down opposite his daughter.

'Your mother loved those cookies as well,' he explained.

Eydis brushed some crumbs from her lips and tilted her head. 'You miss Mummy a lot, don't you, Daddy?'

He felt tears well up his eyes and quickly blinked them away. He would not cry. He had promised Cassandra.

'Yes, little one,' he answered silently. 'I miss your mother very much. I have done so every single day for the last eight years.'

'Tell me about mummy.'

Eydis often asked him to tell her about her mother. And Severus never grew tired of doing so.

'She used to sit on the chair you are sitting on every Thursday afternoon,' he began. 'She graded papers and drank coffee.'

'And waited for you?'

Severus nodded. 'Yes. And when I came in, she smiled at me with the same smile you are smiling at me now, little one.'

Eydis slipped down from her chair and hugged her father tightly. 'I wish I had known her,' she whispered. 'She seemed to have made you happy, Daddy. And I know that she loved you very much.'

Severus wrapped his arms around his daughter and buried his face in her red hair, unable to hold back the tears now. Yes, Cassandra had made him happy. She had helped him embrace his past. She had made him smile. She had truly loved him. And she had shown him the way home.

With his arms wrapped around his daughter, he raised his gaze towards the window and caught a glimpse of long blond hair. He blinked and recognised Per, who was holding the hand of a dark haired woman and carrying a laughing two year old boy on his shoulders. The blond man was smiling, and there was a glow in his eyes that suggested that he was very, very happy.

Furtively, Severus wiped the tears from his face and took his daughter by the hand.

'Come now, little one,' he said. 'Let us go to Hveragerði. Let us go home.'