

The Way Home: Yule Edition

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This is my response to the Yule 2008 Challenge. My prompt: 3. Revisiting Friends: If you have an established story, give us a one-shot tale to complement it so we know what your characters are up to for Christmas.

If you have been following *The Way Home*, make sure to finish it before you read the Yule Edition as it contains spoilers.

And you might want to have a hanky ready.

The Way Home: Yule Edition

It was still dark when Severus awoke on Christmas morning. The winds were howling. The branches of the trees were whipping against the castle walls. And the shutters clattered as if some ghost was shaking them, trying to rip them off their hinges. The snow was falling heavily. And it was icy cold.

Eyes still closed, Severus turned to his side and reached out for his beloved wife. But all his hand could grasp were empty bed sheets. Cold, empty bed sheets. His eyes flew open, and he looked around his chamber, disoriented. Where was Cassandra? Why was she not sleeping beside him? And why was he still wearing his robes?

Then it hit him. All the memories of the last twenty-four hours came crushing down on him like a tidal-wave, threatened to drown him, to pull him down into darkness.

He was still wearing his robes because he had been too exhausted to take them off when Poppy had sent him to bed. And Cassandra was not sleeping beside him because she had passed away the night before.

She had been forced to stay at the hospital wing since December thirteenth. She had had difficulties breathing, and even the tiniest of efforts could throw her into a coughing fit that made her sink to her knees. Severus' potions could not help her anymore, and on December twentieth, Poppy had taken Severus aside and prepared him for the worst: Cassandra would not leave the hospital wing anymore. And she would probably not live to see the New Year.

He had spent as much time as possible with her. He had gone to see her before breakfast every day, had visited her between his lessons, had eaten his meals at the hospital wing and spent his evenings by her bedside. And only when both Poppy and Cassandra had been about to lose their patience with him had he retired to the dungeon. He knew that they meant well. But he hated them for sending him away.

Then on the morning before Christmas, Poppy had come to take Severus out of his seventh year's Potions class. He had not needed to ask. There could only have been one reason for Poppy to come and get him: Cassandra was dying.

She had been calm, had smiled a tired smile at him and reached out her hand for him when he arrived at her bedside. The pain had been clearly visible in her blue eyes, and every coughing fit had made her body shake. But she had been brave, just as she always had been.

Towards the evening, the coughing had subsided, and for some minutes Severus had been able to convince himself that everything was going to be alright. But of course, he had been fooling himself. Cassandra's breathing had become shallow, her pulse weak. And he had known that she had given up the fight.

He had spent the last hours holding her close to his chest, caressing her hair and placing tender kisses on her forehead. He had never held her so tight, never loved her that much. And he knew that he would never do it again.

Shortly before midnight, he had felt her hand cramp around his, her body tense up. And she had looked into his eyes for a very last time and told him that she loved him more than anything else in the world. Then her eyes had fluttered shut, and her grip on his hand had softened. And Severus did not even know if she had still heard him when he had told her that he loved her, too.

He had not cried. She had asked him not to. He had just sat there, with his arms tightly wrapped around her body, his lips pressed onto hers, staring blankly ahead of himself.

And even now, on Christmas morning, lying alone in his bed in the dungeon, Severus did not cry. Instead he closed his eyes and pressed his face against Cassandra's pillow. She had not slept in this bed for almost two weeks, but still her scent lingered.

After what seemed like hours, Severus dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. His body was heavy, and he felt as if every ounce of strength had been drained from him.

Her soap was still lying in the soap dish. Severus picked it up and held it to his nose, inhaled the comforting scent of musk and honey. He had loved that scent since the very first time his lips had brushed against hers. He would miss it.

Back in his chamber, he opened his closet to take out a new robe, and his eyes fell upon a Christmas present, wrapped into sparkly silver-blue paper. Cassandra had bought it already in November, knowing that their daughter wished for nothing more than a Muggle dollhouse.

Eydis. With a bang Severus realised that their daughter did not know yet. She was still sleeping peacefully in her bed, blissfully oblivious to the fact that her mother had gone. He rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. How was he going to tell her? What was he going to say?

Silently, he opened the door to his daughter's room. If Eydis was still asleep, he would not want to wake her. But his little three-year old angel was already sitting up in her bed, talking to her teddy bear. When she heard him approach, she looked up, and Severus felt a stab in his heart. She had her mother's eyes, blue like the spring sky.

'Where is Mummy, Daddy?'

Severus swallowed dryly and picked Eydis up, held her close to his chest.

'Mummy is not coming,' he whispered. 'Mummy has gone away and will never come back.'

She was only three. How was Eydis to understand that her mother had died? How was she to grasp the concept of death?

When they had understood that there was no hope, Severus and Cassandra had talked to Eydis, tried to make her understand that one day soon, Mummy would forever go away. And the little one had asked why she and Daddy couldn't go with her. And they had not had any answers to that.

'Is Mummy with the angels now?'

Severus looked into his daughter's blue eyes. He did not believe in angels, but for this little girl, angels were just as real as Hippogriffs and Hinkypunks.

'Yes, little one,' he answered. 'Mummy is with the angels now.'

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The Great Hall fell silent as he entered. Most students had gone home for the holidays, and those who had remained at Hogwarts were sitting at a single table in front of the staff table. And they were all looking at him now as he strode through the room, his daughter on his arm.

He had dressed her in a dark blue satin dress and braided her unruly hair. She had neither wriggled nor fidgeted, but had let him work. And when he had been done, she had wrapped her little arms around his neck and said, 'Thank you, Daddy.' And he had had to bite his lips so as not to cry.

They all knew already, of course. Probably, Minerva had informed both the staff and the remaining students of Madam Snape's death. Some were looking at him now with tears in their eyes; others lowered their gaze to the ground.

When he sat down at the staff table with his daughter on his knees, Minerva's self-control crumbled. She started sobbing uncontrollably, not caring that there were students present, not caring that anybody saw. And for a long time, her sobbing was the only sound to be heard in the Great Hall.

'Daddy, why does Aunt Minny cry?'

Severus looked down at his daughter, his own throat almost too tight to speak. 'She is sad because your Mummy left.'

The little girl seemed to contemplate his words for some moments and frowned. 'But Mummy never cried. Mummy always laughed.'

Severus gasped. Cassandra's laughter had been the first thing he had noticed about her. He had loved it, cherished it. And first now he realised that he would never hear it again.

This was too much, just too much.

His eyes searched for Poppy, and the medi-witch immediately stretched out her arms for Eydis and took her from him, understanding his plea without him having to say anything.

He turned on his heels and left, flew down the corridors with a scowl on his face that was so dark that even the Bloody Baron retreated into the shadows.

He slammed the dungeon door shut behind him and started pacing the room, from the door to the bookshelf, to his desk and back to the door. Over and over, he took the same route, unable to stand still, unable to think.

After the umpteenth round, he opened his liquor cabinet and poured himself a healthy measure of Ogden's, downed it before he even had time to think whether alcohol on an empty stomach was a good idea. Of course, it was not. His stomach turned, and he hurried to the bathroom, bent over the basin and started retching.

When his stomach was completely empty, he stripped off his robes and stepped into the shower, let the warm water run down his back while he rested his forehead against the cool tiles. He wished he would drown, wished the pain would just run out of him and go down the drain, wished the world around him would disappear.

Then his nostrils filled with the well-known scent of musk and honey. And he remembered a New Year's night many years ago when he had washed Cassandra's hair, dried her body off with a fluffy towel and tender kisses. He had made sweet love to her that night. And it had been the night when he had fallen in love.

It felt wrong how his body reacted to the memory. And at the same time, it felt so right. He stroked himself with a firm hand while he imagined hearing Cassandra's soft voice whisper words of love into his ear, feeling her breath tickle his skin. It felt as if she were there, right beside him.

When he peaked, he lost control and sank to his knees in the shower, his body shaking with dry sobs. Never again would he hear her laugh. Never again would he see her smile. And never again would he feel her tender touch.

What was the point, he wondered. Why did he still exist?

His shaving knife on the edge of the basin looked so tempting. It was sharp. One swift cut and everything would be over. It would not hurt anymore.

He had already stretched out his hand when he heard her voice.

'Eydis. Take care of her, Severus. Make her as happy as you have made me.'

He heard Cassandra's whisper as clearly as if she were standing right behind him. And although he knew that she was gone, that she would not hear him, he answered her.

'I will not have Eydis think of Christmas as the day she learnt her mother died. I will make sure that she is happy and that she will be looking forward to Christmas every year.'

And as he looked into the mirror, he saw her. For the fraction of a second, he saw Cassandra's ghost. And she was smiling at him.

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'Faster, Daddy. Faster.'

Poppy and Minerva had looked at him with concern when he had stomped into the staff room, wearing his woollen cloak and carrying Eydis' winter cloak, gloves and woolly hat, and declared that he was going to take his daughter for a broom ride across the frozen lake. They had not seen that as a sensible suggestion and had probably feared that he had lost his mind. And so had he for a moment. But as he heard his daughter squeal in delight as they flew in full speed over the ice, he realised that he had made the right decision.

They stopped for hot cacao at the Three Broomsticks, and Eydis laughed at the bewitched snowmen that were walking up and down the street outside the window. And when Rosmerta came to their table to wish them a Merry Christmas and inquire about Cassandra's health, Severus just didn't have the heart to tell her the truth. She would learn soon enough, and for now, she deserved a Christmas as merry as the one Eydis was experiencing.

In the afternoon, Severus watched his daughter running around in the snow with the students of Hogwarts. They all loved Eydis. Many of them had little siblings at home whom they missed very much, especially over the holidays, and having a sweet little substitute sister like Eydis was a delight for all of them. They built snowmen for her, pulled her around the yard on a wooden sleigh, and some of the older students would even bewitch the snowflakes to shine in different colours to make the little one smile. And Severus smiled, too.

Eydis fell asleep at the dinner table in the Great Hall that night, and Severus carried her down to the dungeon and to her bed. Her cheeks were rosy, and there was a happy smile on her face. She had had a lovely day.

He was just about to close the door when he heard her call for him.

'Daddy, will you tell Mummy that I had fun?'

With great effort, Severus swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat. 'Yes, little one,' he answered. 'I will tell Mummy.'

When he retired to his own bed, he found a tiny box on his pillow, wrapped in dark green paper. Surely one of the elves had put it there. With shaking hands, he unwrapped the little package and found a silver locket. As he opened it, Cassandra looked up at him with her heavenly blue eyes and smiled. For him, just for him.

His eyes filled with tears, and he had to blink fiercely to be able to read the card. He had always admired her handwriting, the curvy, artistic letters and the little stars she used to dot her i's with.

Dearest Severus,

Thank you for giving me the greatest gift of all. Thank you for loving me.

Merry Christmas,

Cassandra

Severus sank onto the bed and dropped the card as he brought his hands to his face. He would not cry. He had promised her.

'Have you still heard me say it?' he whispered in desperation. 'Have you heard that I love you?'

And for the second time that Christmas day, he felt her presence beside him, felt her touch on his cheek and heard her voice.

'I did not need to hear you, Severus. I know.'

He lifted his gaze and stared into the darkness. He could not see her, but he knew that she was there.

'Have you been there the whole day?' he asked.

'Yes, my love,' came the answer. 'I have been right by your side all day. And I want to thank you for making Eydis smile. Thank you for giving her a wonderful Christmas.'

He caught a swift of musk and honey and felt as if he were enwrapped in her arms. And he let himself go, sank into her embrace and thankfully closed his eyes.

Severus slept peacefully that Christmas night. And when he awoke the next morning, he noticed that Eydis had crept into his bed and was sleeping right beside him. He carefully brushed a streak of red hair from his daughter's face, planted a tender kiss on her forehead and promised that all her Christmases would be filled with the same joy as this one had been.

And so they were. Every Christmas, Severus and Eydis went to Hogsmeade, thawed the ice and snow on Cassandra's grave and put down a red rose. Then they went for cacao at the Three Broomsticks, bought candy at Honeydukes and bewitched snowmen to sing Christmas carols.

And when evening came, they rode their brooms over the frozen lake back to Hogwarts, back home.

All Christmases aren't white. But there is always hope. Cling to it.

Love,

