

A Gift of the Goddess

by morgaine_dulac

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

I: A Baby? Yes, Our Baby

Chapter 1 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go as always to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks also go to my beta, Apple Blossom, and to Jolene at HPFF, who gave me the idea for this story.

Chapter I: A Baby? Yes, Our Baby

Severus awoke in the early hours of morning. Why he had woken up, he did not know. It was not like he felt rested or anything. He had slept three hours tops, and when he turned to his side, he felt a sharp pain in his back. He grimaced and swore under his breath. He did not like to admit to himself that he was not twenty anymore and that a night of lovemaking was just a tad too much for his body.

He reached out for Cassandra and pulled her towards his chest. He felt her resist for a moment, heard her mumble a protest in her sleep. But when he cradled her towards his body, he felt her relax. He buried his face at her neck and inhaled the scent of her hair. Musk and honey, so familiar, so comforting.

His body reacted almost immediately to the memory of the first time he had smelled her hair. They had been dancing at that ridiculous Goth party in Hveragerði, and all of a sudden his lips had been on hers. And a few hours later she had taken him by the hand and led him to her bedroom. He had been clumsy and insecure at first and had made a fool out of himself. It had been such a long time since he had been with a woman, and for some moments he had been afraid that he had blown his chances. But Cassandra had taken him with all his flaws and shortcomings that night and shown him heaven. And he had let her, over and over again.

Once more, he inhaled deeply and pulled Cassandra closer. She was his now, his alone. He had proposed the night before, and she had said yes. Finally, finally, she had said yes.

The skin of her neck felt warm and soft against his lips, and so did the skin of her thigh against his fingertips. He heard her sigh contentedly in her sleep, felt her nestle into the curve of his body, and despite the lack of sleep and the pain in his back, he wanted nothing more than to make love to her. Just to be close to her and to show her how much he loved her.

But when his hand caressed her stomach, he remembered what she had told him the night before and froze. She was pregnant! She was carrying his child!

When she had told him, he had just stared at her, unable to take in what she had said. But then he had seen the smile in her eyes, and his surprise had given way to endless happiness. But now, this glorious feeling had been replaced by sheer panic.

He let go of Cassandra as if burnt. He heard the disappointed whimper that escaped her lips, but he did not care. And thankfully she drifted back into a deep slumber only seconds later.

Severus slipped out of the bed and padded soundlessly into the bathroom, locked the door behind him and stepped into the shower. At first he did not even turn on the water but just stood there, staring blankly ahead of himself.

A baby! Merlin's pants, he couldn't be a father! He knew nothing about children, except that they turned into insufferable dunderheads by the age of eleven.

He turned on the water, let it prickle down his back and felt how his muscles relaxed. But it did nothing to ease his mind. With a sigh, he rested his forehead against the cool tiles and took some deep breaths.

A baby! Merlin, he was going to be a father. Cassandra was pregnant with *his* baby.

His mind filled with thousands of questions. What was he to do with a child? What did he have to offer? Could he even offer love? And what if he turned into his father?

The mere thought made Severus shake. He had never known when his father had started to hate him. He did not even know *why* he had. Maybe his father had never needed a reason.

What if he would not need a reason either? What if he just turned into a monster, too?

Ridiculous! This was *his* baby. His and Cassandra's. And as mawkish as it sounded, this child was the fruit of their love. Why would he *not* love it?

But still, the thought of becoming a father scared the living daylights out of Severus Snape.

~ ~ ~

When he re-entered the bedroom, Cassandra lay curled up under the blanket, facing the bathroom door. She must have heard him come in, because she opened her sleepy eyes and reached out her hand. And Severus took it, slipped under the blanket and pulled her towards his chest.

'How long have you known?' he asked. 'How far along are you?'

'I'm eight weeks in,' Cassandra replied. 'You can set a clock after my period, so I knew right away. And I went to see Poppy shortly after we returned to Hogwarts.'

'Why did you not tell me before, Cassandra?'

He felt her shift in his arms, and her voice was shaky when she spoke. 'I was afraid, Severus. After ... after what Yaxley did to me, the Healers told me that I would never be able to carry another child. And Poppy told me that the risk of me losing this baby within the first two months was bigger than ...'

She broke off and tried to free herself from Severus' embrace. But he refused to let go. He pulled her back towards him and cupped her chin with his long, tender fingers. His black eyes locked onto her blue ones, and he saw that hers were filled with tears.

'Telling you would have made everything so real,' Cassandra whispered. 'It would have meant acknowledging this baby. And I was too afraid ... I did not dare ...'

Carefully, Severus brushed a tear from her cheek. 'You did not dare hope. You were afraid you would lose this baby.'

Cassandra nodded. 'By not telling you I could convince myself that the baby did not exist. I did not dare to become attached. Losing my first child had been almost too much to bear. And I did not want to have to go through this once more.'

Awkwardly Severus patted her cheek. He had wanted her to tell him, he had wanted to be there for her. But it did not matter now.

'But the baby is safe now, is it not?' he inquired. 'And you are too?'

To his relief, he saw a smile appear in her eyes. The same smile he had seen the night before.

'Yes, Severus. I saw Poppy yesterday. Everything is alright.'

He could almost feel her smile tickle his lips as he kissed her. And as he embraced her, he never wanted to let go of her again.

'Did you say you are eight weeks in?' he asked after a while. 'But that means ...'

'Yes, Severus,' she whispered. 'This baby was conceived in our room at the Leaky Cauldron, the day we returned to the Wizarding world. The day we returned home.'

II: Scared? You and Me Both

Chapter 2 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR for creating the HP universe and Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter II: Scared? You and Me Both

The wedding of the Professors Snape and Black was not going to be a big affair. Minerva had been informed, of course. They had to tell her; she was the Headmistress, and with that their employer, after all. But most of all, Minerva was a dear friend to both of them. And she and Filius had happily agreed to be witnesses to the marriage.

The ceremony was to be held in the Headmistress' office. There would be no flowers, no flowing white gown and no little girl scattering rose petals. There would be just the couple, the two witnesses and the registrar from the Ministry. There would be no fancy hocus-pocus, just a simple, small wedding.

The date had been set by Severus: October thirty-first, the night of Halloween. Cassandra had frowned at him when he had announced his decision. She knew very well what that day meant to him: he had taken the Dark Mark on that day; he had lost Lily. It was a dark day for Severus Snape, and still he had chosen that day as his wedding day.

'I need to leave my past behind me,' he had explained. 'Returning to the Wizarding world meant a new start, and I refuse to dwell on my past. And what better day is there to leave everything behind and start anew than the Celtic New Year?'

Then he had taken Cassandra into his arms and held onto her as if he were afraid that she would slip away.

'Besides that, it is your birthday, my love,' he had whispered. 'And it is the day I fell in love with you.'

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But when the big clock in the Headmistress' office struck six o'clock on Halloween evening, Severus Snape was not there. He was still in the dungeons.

He was wearing his finest black robes, and his hair was framing his face like curtains of black velvet. He would have looked dashing had it not been for his deadly pale face.

He had not slept much the night before. Every time he had closed his eyes, he had felt like falling, like falling into the darkness he had been trying to escape for so many years. And he had seen faces of people he had not seen for over a decade. He had seen his father, the Dark Lord, Lily and Sirius Black. And they had all been laughing at him.

'What are you thinking, Severus Snape?' they had asked. 'Who are you trying to fool? You are tainted by the Dark. You will never be good. And you will infect Cassandra with the dark disease that is running through your veins. You will poison her, destroy her. And the baby.'

Heavens, the baby! He had dreamt of Cassandra presenting their new-born child to him. The child had looked just like him: pale skin, raven-black hair. But it had had red eyes. The eyes of Evil. Voldemort's eyes. And Severus had felt nothing but hatred and disgust.

He had not been able to turn away. He had just stared at the child for what had seemed like hours. And in the corner of his eyes he had seen the ghosts of his past, still laughing at him: 'We warned you, Severus,' they had taunted. 'We warned you that you would destroy even something as innocent and pure as a new-born child. It is the darkness within you that has poisoned your heir.'

And he had screamed. He had screamed until his lungs had hurt. And he had fought the invisible bonds that had made it impossible for him to take his eyes off his child. But he had been unable to. And first when his fist had made contact with the tiny skull had he finally woken up, still screaming.

He had wanted to run to Cassandra then, fall to his knees and beg her to let him go, beg her to give up on him and save herself.

But Minerva had brought Cassandra to the Three Broomsticks the evening before, babbling something about the bride and groom not being allowed to see each other before the wedding because that meant bad luck. Bad luck indeed, Severus thought. Minerva had no idea.

And so he had taken to pace his study instead, wringing his hands and cursing his wretched fate.

Unfortunately, Minerva took her chaperoning duties far too seriously, and Severus had not seen Cassandra all day. And that was why he was still down in the dungeons at six o'clock, all alone and terrified.

He could not go through with this. He must not drag Cassandra and their unborn child into the abyss of his darkness. He had to let them go.

He was leaning against the mantelpiece, staring into the empty fireplace when he heard the door open. But he did not need to look up to know who the visitor was. It could only be Cassandra.

His nostrils felt with the comforting scent of musk and honey as she approached, and he relaxed slightly. And before he knew it, he felt something warm and soft in his hand. It was a pair of dark-green woolly socks.

'What is the meaning of this?' he spat, incredulously staring at the socks in his hand.

'I figured you got cold feet.'

The slightly sarcastic tone in her voice made Severus narrow his eyes.

'I have not cold feet,' he hissed and then turned away. He had not meant to be mean to her. By the gods, he had never meant to.

He shivered as he felt her fingers brush his arm, and her words sent chills down his spine.

'I am scared too, Severus.'

'You have no idea, Cassandra.'

He squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. Part of him wanted to throw her out of his study, slam the door in her face and scare her away so she could be safe. And another part wanted to hold her, keep her close and let her chase his shadows away. But he was so scared that keeping her close meant endangering her and the baby.

'No, Severus,' she went on, her voice warm and firm. 'I have no idea. And I never will unless you tell me. Please, Severus. Please talk to me.'

Her plea cut right into his heart, and he sank onto the nearest chair, burying his face in his hands.

'I am scared, Cassandra,' he admitted, surprised how easily the words had come. 'I am terrified that I will hurt you, that I will hurt our child.'

Cassandra sank onto her knees in front of him and took his hands into hers, and Severus could see in her eyes that she wanted him to go on.

'I have done terrible things, Cassandra. And I want nothing more than to believe what everybody is telling me: that I did those things because I had no choice, because there was a war. But what if my soul is too tainted by the Dark to be ever allowed into the Light again? What is if this is *me*? What if I drag you down into the darkness with me, you and our child?'

'Didn't you once tell me that we have to embrace our past to be able to go on living?' Cassandra asked. 'Your past made you into the man you are today, Severus, the man I fell in love with, the man I chose to spend the rest of my life with.'

'Yes,' Severus cut her off. 'You chose. But our child did not choose its father. What if I am a danger to this child, Cassandra?'

'Why would you be, Severus? You are you. You are not a Death Eater anymore. You are not a dark wizard. And most of all, you are not your father.' She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment before she went on. 'Don't you think that I am afraid too, Severus? Don't you think that I am afraid that I will some day make a mistake that will make our child hate me as much as I hated my parents?'

Severus just stared at her. He had truly never thought of this. Why would *she* be afraid? His dear Cassandra, the woman who had managed to chase his shadows away

and bring him home.

'Yes, Severus,' she went on. 'I am scared. I am terrified. But we are not our parents. We are good people. And we will simply have to try our best.'

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If Severus had thought that he could keep his marriage to Cassandra quiet by having a simple ceremony in the Headmistress' office, he had been sadly mistaken.

He smelled a rat already when they entered the Great Hall. The mood was simply too cheerful for a normal Halloween feast. And when Minerva got up and raised her glass and every person in the hall did the same thing, he just wanted to turn on his heels and stalk out. But it was already too late.

'Dear colleagues, Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and Slytherins,' Minerva began. 'Let me be the first to introduce to you: Professor and Madam Snape.'

Severus scowled at the applause that erupted and wished he had insisted on having dinner in the dungeons.

'You did not seriously think they would let us keep this quiet, did you?' Cassandra whispered into his ear.

The grin on her face made Severus relax, slightly at least, and he let her take his hand and pull him towards the staff table.

Only when they were seated and everyone had returned to their dinner plates did Severus realise how beautiful his bride looked. He hadn't noticed in the Headmistress' office. He had been too nervous and too busy convincing himself that everything was going to be alright. But now ... She was wearing a long, black robe that also seemed to be blue and green depending on how the light fell on it. Her hair was raging red and spikier than ever. And her eyes were sparkling with a happiness Severus had never seen before.

And for some glorious and peaceful moments, he dared indeed believe that everything was going to be alright.

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How Filius had managed to get around his wards and sneak into his private chambers to bewitch the ceiling was beyond Severus. Had he been that preoccupied that he had actually forgotten to ward his door?

At first, he had scowled at the starry sky and the full moon and seriously considered dragging Filius down to the dungeons and making him reverse the charm. But sitting in his armchair by the fireplace hours later, Severus didn't mind anymore. He actually enjoyed seeing Cassandra's silhouette in the pale moonlight. She was fast asleep, curled up under the black silk sheets. And Severus could not take his eyes off her.

She was his now, his alone. And she was carrying his child.

Once more, for the umpteenth time that night, Severus' joy mingled with the feeling of sheer panic. And he actually jumped as he felt something brush against his legs.

'Nicodemus, you nuisance,' he hissed. 'How did you get in here?'

The tabby meowed innocently, jumped onto the armrest of the chair and started rubbing its head against Severus' arm.

'How come you are always around when I have something to think about?' Severus whispered, absentmindedly scratching Nicodemus behind its ears. The cat's purring was soothing, and he allowed his thoughts to run freely.

It was too late to run now. Not that he wanted to run, not really. Even if he was scared.

When Cassandra had shown him the way home he had put his soul into her hands, had let her heal his wounds. And without even realising it, he had done the same for her. Their pasts had linked them. And now they would share a future.

He sighed and lifted Nicodemus onto his lap. 'Will you be there for us?' he whispered, quite surprised that he was seeking comfort from a cat.

The tabby purred and Severus allowed himself to smile. Yes, he was more scared than he had ever been before. But this time, he did not have to face his fears alone.

III: Welcome, Little One

Chapter 3 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks to JKR for creating the HP universe.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

And thanks to *you* for reading.

Chapter III: Welcome, Little One

Everything was prepared.

Cassandra had let her NEWT class write their exams already in early April. She said that she would do the grading after the baby was born. Poppy had prepared all the necessary potions. And a Healer from St. Mungo's was on stand-by in case there were any complications. And the elves had had a blast decorating the nursery. Yes, everyone involved was prepared and calm. Everyone except the father-to-be.

With the end of April approaching, Severus became edgy, and he did not let Cassandra out of his sight more than necessary. He brewed Strengthening Potions, Sleeping Potions, Vitamin Potions and made sure she took them all. He escorted her to her classes, to her meals in the Great Hall. And every time she took as much as a deep breath, he was ready to take her to see Poppy right away. This had all gone so far that Cassandra had once or twice actually lost her patience with her husband and sent

him to the dungeons to calm down. But Severus always returned, was right by her side, and sometimes, she did not even notice. At those occasions, a smug grin would appear on his face. Having been a spy for all those years seemed to have its advantages after all.

It was on the last day of April that Severus once more stood in front of Cassandra's classroom door before lunch. She was the last one to come out, and Severus could nothing else than gape at her. She looked radiant. Her cheeks were rosy, and the smile on her lips had never been brighter. She had not looked that healthy and happy in weeks.

Her appearance and her joyful mood was enough to distract Severus, and hence he was completely unprepared for Cassandra suddenly falling dead in her track right outside the Great Hall, clasping her side.

'Did we walk up the stairs too fast?' he inquired, feeling slightly guilty for having set such a fast pace. 'Have you got a stitch?'

Once more Cassandra smiled and took his hand. 'No, Severus, this is not a stitch. I think I am having contractions.'

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'Severus, let go off me!'

The tone in Cassandra's voice was a strange mixture of a laugh and an angry shriek, but Severus did not listen.

'Poppy!' he yelled. 'Poppy, get in here!'

He carefully guided Cassandra to the closest bed and made her sit down.

'Are you alright?' he inquired over and over again. 'Are you in pain?'

'Whatever is going on in here?' sounded Poppy's voice from the front door. She was obviously just returning from her lunch.

'The baby is coming,' Severus exclaimed.

The medi-witch smiled kindly and let her gaze wander from Cassandra to Severus and then back to Cassandra again.

Cassandra grinned. 'He's exaggerating, Poppy. I've only felt two or three contractions over the last hours.'

Severus stared at her in utter disbelief. 'Two or three? And when exactly were you planning on telling me?'

'There, there, dear boy,' Poppy said and took a firm grip around Severus' left wrist. 'Now, you go and have a seat over there while I examine the mother-to-be.'

He opened his mouth to protest, but Poppy cut him off. 'No! Don't argue. Just sit.'

'It's funny, isn't it?' Cassandra asked with a broad smile on her face as Poppy had closed the curtains around the bed. 'Severus Snape, ex-Death Eater, bat of the dungeons and terror of all the students of Hogwarts, is totally losing it due to one simple contraction.'

Poppy murmured a diagnostic spell and then patted Cassandra kindly on the cheek. 'You know, dear child,' she said. 'He has tried to fool us for years, but he has always been a softie at heart.'

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When Poppy opened the curtains again, Severus rose from his chair so fast that it fell over.

'Is everything alright?' he demanded to know. 'Cassandra ... the baby ...'

'Would you calm down?' Poppy chided him. 'Cassandra is perfectly fine and so is the baby. I am, however, a little concerned about you. Let me take your pulse.'

'Let go off me, woman,' Severus hissed angrily as Poppy took his wrist.

And the medi-witch smiled. 'Ah, there he is, scowling, hissing Severus Snape. Glad to have you back.'

As if on command, Severus indeed started scowling, but Poppy's smile did not falter.

'Now, I want you both to go and have lunch,' she instructed. 'Severus, you make sure that Cassandra eats something as well. Something light, a soup maybe. She will need her strength later today.'

'Now, after lunch, you, Severus, will return to your lessons. Cassandra, you will cancel yours and go for a walk or take a relaxing bath. And when the intervals between contractions get shorter or if you feel uncomfortable in any way, you come and see me right away. Is that understood?'

Severus and Cassandra both nodded and left the hospital wing for the Great Hall as instructed. Neither of them was brave enough to argue with Poppy. But however hard Severus tried, he could just not imagine how he was going to give a proper lesson that afternoon.

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As expected, the afternoon turned out to be a nightmare, and not just for Severus. If the students had found him unpredictable and foul when he had still been a spy during the war, then they had not seen him a few hours before his first child was born. Every mistake in the classroom was severely punished, and half-way into the lesson the students started to wonder if there would be any House points left in the evening. And when the bell finally rang, they fled the dungeons in panic.

For the first time in his career, Severus did not even bother tidying up his classroom. He simply locked the most pricey and dangerous potions ingredients into the cupboard and then stormed out of the room, his black robes billowing behind him. He had to see Cassandra.

He almost bumped into her in the corridor. She looked by far less cheery than she had at lunchtime.

'Is there a fire, or why is everybody running out of your classroom?' she joked. But then her grin faltered, and a moan escaped her lips.

Severus grabbed her by the shoulders. 'What are you doing down here?' he inquired, frowning. 'Why are you not in the hospital wing?'

'Because,' Cassandra replied in a defiant tone, 'Poppy said that walking is good for me.'

But then she winced, and Severus twirled her around, firmly holding on to her shoulders.

'We are going to see Poppy. Right now.'

And Cassandra did not resist. She too knew that it was time.

~ ~ ~

'I am not leaving her side!' Severus bellowed.

'Yes, you are,' Poppy replied in a calm tone. 'The Healer will arrive at any moment. And there is absolutely nothing you can do, Severus. You would only be in the way.'

The word *Healer* made Severus regain some of his control, and he started to understand how serious the situation was. Poppy was more than capable of delivering a baby. And the fact that she had called for a Healer from St. Mungo's meant that something was amiss.

'Please, Severus. Go and wait in my office.'

He cast a last glance at Cassandra. Her face was deadly pale and covered with sweat. And her eyes were closed. Poppy had given her a Calming Draught about ten minutes ago. It had taken her all her powers of persuasion to make Cassandra swallow it. The red-haired witch was surely as stubborn as a donkey. But Poppy had not had any choice: the labour had gone on far too long, and Cassandra had been hurting far too much. Had Poppy not sedated her, she would most probably have passed out from sheer exhaustion.

Severus had been by his wife's side the whole time, sometimes holding her hand, sometimes massaging her shoulders or caressing her cheek. Some hours ago he had been excited and curious. But as the evening had turned into night and midnight was approaching, he had become nervous. And Cassandra's anguished moans had driven daggers into his heart. He had never felt so helpless before in his life. And he hated the feeling.

He felt his stomach clench as Poppy dragged him away from the bed and pushed him towards her office. He did not want to leave Cassandra. He wanted to be there for her. He wanted to do ... well, *something*.

'You will come and get me, Poppy, will you not? If anything happens ...' He did not even try to hide the panic in his voice. He was scared, so terribly scared.

Poppy pushed him onto a chair and quickly squeezed his hand. 'Everything will be alright, Severus,' she said. 'Just have faith.'

Then she turned and left Severus alone in the office with a bottle of Odgen's and a dreadful feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He managed to stay seated for about five seconds. Then he started pacing the tiny office.

What was happening out there, he wondered. What had gone wrong? And where in Hades was this blasted Healer?

He tried to listen at the door but soon realised that Poppy had put a Silencing Spell on it. Hence he did not even try the handle. If Poppy did not want him to hear, she had certainly made sure that he would not come bursting into the ward either. So he continued pacing the room, from the door to the bookshelf, from the bookshelf to the window.

It was pitch black outside. But on the faraway hills Severus could see the flickering lights of the Beltane fires. Amazed, he stared at the dancing flames. During all his years at Hogwarts, he had never realised that the fires were still lit.

The soft clicking of the door being unlocked made him spin around. Poppy was standing in the doorway, looking tired but calm, and in her arms she was carrying a little bundle.

'You daughter, Severus,' she whispered and smiled.

And Severus stood as rooted to the spot, staring at the medi-witch, unable to take in what she had just said. He did finally snap out of it when Poppy had crossed the room and was holding out the baby towards him.

He stiffened, suddenly struck by the irrational fear of dropping the tiny human being, but Poppy professionally arranged his arms and hands so he would hold the baby safely.

'There is no need to be scared, Severus,' she whispered.

And he relaxed enough to look down at the little bundle that was now lying in his arms. His daughter was looking up at him with eyes blue as the spring sky. She had her mother's eyes. And the down on her tiny head foretold that her hair would one day be just as red as her mother's as well.

Her mother. Cassandra!

Suddenly, the knot in Severus' stomach was back. And so was the panic in his voice.

'Cassandra. How is she?'

Poppy smiled. 'She is alright. She lost a lot of blood. But your potions will help.'

Severus never waited for permission but pushed past Poppy and stormed towards Cassandra's bed, still holding the baby safely in his arms.

Cassandra looked tired, so terribly tired. But when she heard Severus approach, she opened her eyes and a smile lit up her pale face.

'I see you have met your daughter, Severus Snape.'

'Our daughter,' he replied and smiling looked down at the baby his arms. 'She has your eyes, beloved.'

'All babies have blue eyes, Severus.'

He settled beside Cassandra on the bed, wrapped his right arm around her shoulders and positioned the baby so Cassandra could see what he saw.

'I did not just mean the colour, my love,' he explained. 'I meant the look in your eyes. You are both smiling.'

~ ~ ~

Cassandra soon fell asleep with the baby at her chest. And Severus stayed beside them, his arms wrapped around his beloved wife and his eyes on his darling little daughter. How could he ever have thought that he would do anything but love this little child, he wondered.

'I will always be there for you, little one,' he whispered. 'I will protect you and love you. And you will never have to be afraid of anything.'

He felt Cassandra shift in his arms and found her looking down at their little baby daughter as well.

'Eydis,' she whispered in a sleepy voice. 'We should call her Eydis.'

And Severus nodded. Because who else than a goddess could have given him such a gift?

IV: Family Bonds

Chapter 4 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Unfortunately I do not own the HP universe. JKR is making all the bucks.

Thanks to Apple Blossom for beta reading, and thanks to you for reading this.

Chapter IV: Family Bonds

With a content sigh Severus let himself fall back in his chair, watching the last student close the dungeon door behind her. Finally, the school year was over. Finally, he was free.

He had to admit that it had been one of his quietest teaching years. The students who took Healing Charms and Potions were all at NEWT level and hence interested, willing to learn and most of the time well behaved. But still, Severus' teaching duties took away far too much time from his private life. And he considered every moment away from his wife and daughter a moment lost. And with the NEWT exams and the grading that followed, those moments had been far too many.

But he would make up for it over the summer. He had rented a little cottage just outside Hogsmeade village where he and his family would spend an undisturbed summer. He had not told Cassandra yet. Nor had he told her that he had hung a two-seat swing in the apple tree in the garden. It was going to be a surprise. Maybe, he would tell her already today.

With an almost indistinguishable smile on his lips, Severus packed up his teaching supplies and left the classroom. He would tidy up another day.

He strode towards his private chambers but found them empty. No surprise, really. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and Cassandra had almost certainly taken Eydís out into the grounds. The students of Hogwarts had all but adopted Eydís as their substitute sister. Many of them missed their little siblings sorely and loved the little Snape baby.

When first Severus had noticed, he had not liked the idea of those dunderheads playing with his little angel. But when he had heard the joyful laughter and seen Cassandra's smile, he had changed his mind. He had never had any friends as a child and, seeing that his little daughter was already surrounded by so many people who loved her, made him very, very happy indeed.

The yard was filled with students who were enjoying the warm weather and the fact that the last lesson of the year was behind them. They would spend the afternoon taking farewell for the summer, and tomorrow they would board the Hogwarts Express and return home. Years ago, Severus would have scowled at all the smiling faces. No, he would probably not even have seen them, as he would not have left the dungeons while the sun was still up. But now he returned the students' cheerful greetings at least with a not too curt nod and did not even mind the bewitched football that happened to swoosh by his head.

Yes, times had truly changed. *He* had changed.

He spotted Cassandra's raging red hair at the edge of the lake. She was sitting on the bench under the big oak tree, and the wind was carrying her laughter over the grounds. But instead of laughing with her, Severus felt the blood freeze to ice in his veins when he saw who was sitting beside Cassandra. There was no mistaking the mop of blond hair, the elegant, tailored robes. And when Severus approached the bench, he even caught sight of the snakehead that adorned the cane in the man's hand.

'Malfoy,' Severus hissed. 'Lucius Malfoy.'

The blond man turned and extended his hand. 'Severus, my friend. It is so good to finally see you face to face. I could not believe my ears when I heard that you are still alive and have returned to the wizarding world. Yet here you are, dark and scowling as ever.'

Reluctantly, Severus shook Lucius' hand and eyed him carefully. He had certainly become older. His hairline was receding, and had his hair not been blond, there would surely have been a few grey streaks visible. The lines around his cold grey eyes had become deeper, as had those around his mouth. But the arrogant smile and the supercilious look in his eyes had not changed a bit.

'Where is Eydís?' Severus asked, pointedly turning away from Lucius.

'Narcissa took the babies for a stroll,' Cassandra explained and pointed towards the edge of the lake where Severus could make out the curvy silhouette of Narcissa Malfoy pushing a pram. Then he frowned.

'Did you say *babies*?' he inquired. 'Plural?'

'Yes,' Lucius answered instead of Cassandra. 'When Narcissa heard that her cousin had a baby with one of our oldest friend, she insisted on coming to visit. And we thought it was a charming idea to bring our grand-son along.'

Grand-son? Merlin's pants, had the little twit Draco Malfoy reproduced? Was there to be yet another generation of schmoozing, scheming, insinuating Malfoys?

Lucius had either not noticed the sour look on Severus' face or had decided to ignore it. And he was still smiling when he smoothly went on: 'Narcissa and I would like to invite you and your adorable wife to dinner tonight, Severus. We have to celebrate that there is yet another heir to the most noble house of Black.'

~ ~ ~

After dinner, Severus reluctantly followed Lucius to the drawing room for a drink. Narcissa had excused herself already during the main course due to a migraine. And Cassandra had left shortly after the dessert. It was her first night away from her baby, and Lucius, gracious host as he was, had excused her. And Severus had stayed behind. Not because Lucius had asked him to stay for old times' sake, but because Cassandra had reminded him that it would be bad manners to leave.

'Your wife is a lovely creature,' Lucius said as he handed Severus a glass of brandy. 'That smile, those eyes ... and those comely curves. Tell me, has pregnancy turned her into this shapely goddess or has she always looked so good?'

Severus gritted his teeth and decided not to answer. He had seen Lucius ogling Cassandra with that lusty look in his eyes all evening. He had felt flattered at first, he had to admit that. Lucius Malfoy had always been known for his good taste, and the fact that he found Cassandra attractive appealed to Severus' ego. But as the hours ticked by,

and as he noticed how Lucius leant in closer and closer towards Cassandra and how she merrily laughed at his jokes, Severus had been forced to hold on tight to his napkin so he would not throw it at Lucius. Or worse.

'And the endearing way she smiles at your comments, Severus. Just the way Narcissa does,' Lucius went on, a smirk on his face. 'Ah, the Black girls. They may act demure, but they are incorrigible minxes in the boudoir.'

Then he leant forward, the lusty look back in his grey eyes. 'I am sure your dear wife is no exception to that, is she, Severus?'

Severus put his glass down with such force that the brandy swapped onto the table. 'Whatever sexual capacities my wife may or may not possess is not any of your concern, Lucius.'

Lucius cocked an eyebrow. 'There, there, Severus. Those years living as a Muggle have not turned you prude, have they? Well, at least, you have come to your senses about your preferences in women. I knew you had it in you, Severus. I always knew that you preferred a pure-blood witch. I never understood what you saw in that Mudblood Evans.'

Severus had to use all his self-control not to slam his fist right into Lucius' pretty face. How dared he take a stab at Lily? And how dared he accuse him of having chosen Cassandra because of her blood status?

'Have you still not understood that bloodlines do not matter, Lucius?' he hissed. 'When I fell in love with Cassandra, I did not even know that she was a witch.'

'When you fell in *love*?' Lucius snorted. 'Dear Severus, are you trying to tell me that *you* are capable of love? *You*?'

Severus swiftly got up and towered over Lucius to glare down at the blond wizard with cold black eyes.

'Yes, Lucius, in contrast to you, I am capable of love. I do not care about bloodlines or status. I do not need to lead a sham marriage like you. Cassandra has made me complete, and I love her more than life itself.'

Good manners forgotten, Severus turned and headed for the door. But before he opened it, he faced Lucius Malfoy for the very last time.

'I pity you, Lucius. I pity you for never having experienced what I am experiencing with Cassandra. I pity you for not knowing true love. And I am warning you: if you ever try to spread your venom within my family again, I swear that I will make you regret that you were born.'

~ ~ ~

'Is everything alright?'

Cassandra's voice made Severus spin around. And he stared at her, not really comprehending where she had come from.

He had not entered the nursery on his return, although he had seen the soft candle light and heard Cassandra singing softly to their baby. He had wanted to go and join her, more than anything else, but something had made him stay in the darkness of his study. Something about all the things Lucius Malfoy had said made him feel as if he did not belong by her side.

And now Cassandra was standing right in front of him, in the darkness of his study. The darkness he should never have dragged her into.

'You seem tense,' she stated.

And Severus couldn't help but snort. 'Dinner at Malfoy Manor usually has that effect on me.'

Cassandra wrapped her shawl tighter around her. 'Yes, being in Lucius Malfoy's company is not exactly a walk in the park. Just imagine that I almost had to marry that scoundrel.'

Severus' breath caught in his chest and he swallowed dryly. What had she just said?

As if she had sensed his surprise, Cassandra explained: 'When my mother found out that she was pregnant with a girl, she immediately started searching for a suitable son-in-law. Lucius Malfoy was of course high up on her list. Just imagine, the most noble house of Black connected with the Malfoys. It was a dream come true for her. You should have seen the tantrum she had when she found out that aunt Druella had been faster and that Narcissa had already been promised to Lucius.'

'Would you have married him?' Severus asked.

He knew he should not have asked, but Lucius' snide remarks were still ringing in his ears and prevented him from thinking straight.

Cassandra stared at him with utter disbelief. 'You are not seriously asking me that question, are you, Severus?'

'Lucius Malfoy is a good catch,' Severus retorted. 'Twenty years ago, many witches would have killed to have him. Why would you not have taken him?'

Cassandra snorted. 'You must be joking, Severus. I ran off and married a Muggle, remember? I did not want to marry any pureblood my parents chose for me. And I would most definitely not have married Lucius Malfoy!'

'You did not seem to mind him flirting with you all evening.'

That statement wiped any trace of a smile off Cassandra's smile, and the temperature of her voice dropped by easily ten degrees.

'I was being polite, Severus. We were guests at Malfoy Manor.'

'Lucius would still take you, you know,' Severus went on, ignoring the upset tone in Cassandra's voice. 'He made this very clear.'

'Is that what this is all about, Severus? Do you feel threatened by Lucius Malfoy?'

Severus did not answer. Instead he turned to his desk and started shuffling around some stacks of paper. He did not even turn around when Cassandra spoke again. But he did not need to see her face to know how hurt she was, how disappointed.

'Is this what you think of me, Severus? That I would just fall for some handsome grey eyes and a catching smile? Do you trust me that little?'

Then he heard the rustling robes, footsteps, and the sound of the bedroom door closing. She had not even slammed it shut, but closed it slowly and carefully, had made sure that it was really closed. And that said more than a thousand words.

Severus closed his eye and let out the air he had been holding in his lungs. What had he done? Why had he accused Cassandra of a crime she would never even think of committing. Why had he felt the need to hurt her, to push her away?

'Slytherin self-preservation,' he murmured to himself, remembering another incident when a door had closed between them. That time, he had been the one walking out on Cassandra. It had been after he had found out that she was a witch, that she was a Black. He had felt hurt and betrayed that day. And like an angry viper, he had hissed and struck. Not to kill, but to scare away whoever dared to come too close.

He was so bloody good at it. He had done it before and lost his best friend. But he mustn't lose Cassandra. Not like this.

He wanted to go after her and had already reached the door when he paused. She had made sure that the door was really closed. Clearly she did not want him go after her. If she cared to listen to his apology, she would not have left, would not have closed the door that carefully.

It was too late.

Severus felt himself go cold, saw the shadows move in on him.

'We've warned you, Severus Snape,' they taunted. 'We knew you would hurt her eventually. And *you* knew it, too.'

Severus pressed his palms against his eyes, tried to shut out the faces of his past that yet again had come to haunt him. But it did not help. They were inside his head, inside his mind.

'She hates you now, Severus. You have hurt her. And she walked out on you because she couldn't stand the sight of you.'

As if burnt, Severus let go off the doorknob and grabbed his travelling cloak instead. He would not spend the night in the dungeon. Where he would go, he did not know. Maybe he would go wandering around the grounds. Maybe he would venture into the Forbidden Forest. Or maybe he would go to the cottage he had rented.

The cottage. Oh, he had pictured it so nicely. The garden, the swing in the apple tree where he had hoped to wrap his arms around Cassandra and tell her that all this was for her. But now he doubted that she would even go there with him.

He wrapped his cloak around himself and was already half-way out the door when a noise from the nursery made him fall dead in his track. Eydis was crying. And he knew by the sound of it that she was not crying because she needed her nappies changed. She had had a bad dream and was crying in fear.

For a moment, Severus paused, expecting Cassandra to open the bedroom door and run to her daughter. But the door stayed shut. This was peculiar. Cassandra was usually the one who was out of bed and by Eydis' side before Severus even had realised that the baby was crying.

He frowned. Had Cassandra cast Muffliato on the door so he would not hear her cry? Did she therefore not hear the baby? It was unlike her. But then again, nothing about this evening was normal in any way.

Stripping off his travelling cloak again, Severus strode towards the nursery where Eydis was lying in her crib, crying. The sound cut into his very heart, and he picked up his little daughter and carefully held her to his chest. To his surprise, Eydis' crying subsided immediately. And as he looked down at her, he found her looking at him with those enchanting blue eyes.

'I wish I could dry your mother's tears as easily as yours, little one,' he whispered. 'But I am afraid that I am the one who made her cry in the first place tonight.'

He placed a tender kiss on his daughter's forehead, held her close to his heart.

'Your father is an idiot,' he stated. 'Did you know that, little one? A bloody fool.'

Of course, the baby did not answer. But Cassandra did: 'And still, she loves you, Severus. And so do I.'

He turned and saw his wife standing in the doorway. She was still wearing her velvet dress, and despite the dim lights, he could see the traces of tears on her cheeks.

'I am sorry, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'I never meant to hurt you.'

She was by his side in a blink of an eye. And as he inhaled her familiar scent and felt her touch his shoulder, the warmth finally returned to his body.

'I know you didn't, Severus,' she replied, her voice soft and warm. 'But before you can stop hurting those around you, you will have to stop hurting yourself.'

A/N: Thanks go to star_girl for helping me with dearest Lucius. Now he sounds just right, doesn't he?

V: For Them

Chapter 5 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR for letting us play around in her universe.

Thanks also go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter V: For Them

Everything had started with a letter from Andromeda Tonks, Narcissa Malfoy's sister. She, too, was Cassandra's cousin, and seeing that she was what could be called *the nice cousin*, it was only natural that she had written and enquired about Cassandra's health after childbirth. And it was also only natural that Cassandra had invited her for tea.

Severus had been pleased at first. The little family gathering at Malfoy Manor had been a disaster, and hence he was glad to see a happy smile on Cassandra's face when she had read Andromeda's letter. And having Andromeda over for tea had seemed like a delightful idea. Too late had he realised that Andromeda would bring her grandson, too. And he had not even dreamed of little Teddy having the idea of bringing his god-father along.

The moment Harry Potter's shadow had darkened the doorstep, Severus had decided that the little cottage in Hogsmeade was the very last place on earth he wanted to spend his day. And so he had left, making up the excuse of having to prepare a potion for the next term, the term that wouldn't start until six weeks from now. A ridiculous excuse. Ludicrous! But both Andromeda and Potter seemed to have bought it. Cassandra, however, had not. And Severus knew it.

He had been at Hogwarts for about two hours and had indeed started a batch of Essence of Dittany when the fire crackled and Cassandra's head appeared in the flames.

'Done brooding?' she asked.

'I am not brooding,' he replied sourly. 'I am working.'

Cassandra said nothing to that. But Severus could have bet his last Galleons that she was rolling her eyes at him, if only inwardly.

'Have they left yet?' he enquired.

'No, they have not. Eydis has taken quite a shine to Teddy, and he's reading her a story right now. They will be staying for dinner. Teddy, Andromeda and Harry. And Ginny will be arriving shortly as well, with the children.'

To that, Severus gritted his teeth and declared that the potion would keep him busy until after nightfall. And that earned him a lecture about manners.

'You are being rude, Severus Snape. Are you aware of that?'

He just cocked an eyebrow at his wife. Surely, manners had absolutely nothing to do with the whole situation.

'I have to prepare my lessons, Cassandra,' he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. 'This potion needs to be ready when the new term starts.'

He saw anger flash in her eyes and knew immediately that she was still not buying his excuse.

'Dinner's at six,' she simply said. And he could hear in her voice that she was not angry. She was more disappointed than anything else. 'Try to be on time.'

The fire flared up, and Cassandra's face disappeared. And suddenly, Severus regretted his decision to leave for Hogwarts. He was well aware of how much Cassandra had wanted him to be at home that day, how much she had hoped that he would at least talk to Potter. He knew he should go back to Hogsmeade immediately. But he was both too proud and too stubborn.

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It was a quarter past five when Severus approached Hogsmeade on the dusty gravel road. He figured that the forty-five minutes until dinner would give him enough time to explain to Cassandra why he had kept away all day. He had, after all, had more than enough time to think about his reasons. All the ingredients to his potion had been in the cauldron by half past one, and for the rest of the afternoon, he had basically just stared at the simmering brew and let his thoughts run free. And however hard he tried to analyse the situation, he always came to the same conclusion. The reason why he had left the cottage had jet-black hair and green eyes.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, over and over again, the Chosen One, the Saviour. Severus still did not like him. He had made that very clear the first time they had met upon Severus' return to the Wizarding world. But they had talked that day. And one could say that they had made some kind of peace. Potter had seen Severus' memories and understood. And he had even said *thank you*. But all that was not enough to make Severus forgive and forget. He was still very much determined that this boy was too much like his father to ever be liked.

That boy? No, Potter was not a boy anymore, Severus corrected himself as he reached the small gate that led to the garden. The boy was a young man now, a husband and soon a father of three. And as Severus watched Potter now as he was playing with his two sons, he had to admit that there wasn't much left of the insolent, strutting brat he remembered.

Nobody had noticed him yet, and Severus decided to linger at the gate for a little while longer to observe the people he had known in another lifetime:

Andromeda Tonks looked a lot older than she should have. The war had deprived her of everything she had held dear: her husband, her daughter, her son-in-law. All she had left was little Teddy. And the only time her face lit up was when her eyes fell on her grandson.

Teddy Lupin. The boy had his mother's kind face and her hair, but his posture and the way he walked reminded Severus only too much of Remus. He had hated Remus for the better part of his life. It had only been towards the very end that he had understood that the werewolf had never meant any harm. He had just tried to fit in. Just as Severus himself had done. Remus had chosen the Marauders, Severus the Death Eaters.

Ginny Weasley. Or rather Ginny Potter. Severus allowed himself a tiny smile. Had anyone asked him, he could have told them already in Ginny's first year that she was going to end up with Potter. There had been something in the eleven-year-old girl's eyes that had made it very clear that she would not rest until Potter was hers. But as usual, nobody had asked him. And as usual, he had held his peace.

He watched Potter walk up to his wife and gingerly put his hands on her rounded belly. And as they both smiled, Severus figured that the baby was kicking. And he remembered the first time he had put his hand on Cassandra's belly and felt the little life that was growing inside her. And he understood exactly why Potter was smiling.

The two Potter boys were sitting on a woolly blanket under the apple tree with little Eydis between them. When Severus caught sight of them, his face turned into a scowl at first. How dared the Potter brats get close to his little daughter? But then he saw James Potter tickle Eydis' belly. And when he heard her gurgle happily, he considered that maybe, just maybe, the two boys were not doing any harm after all.

'Would you like to have your dinner out here on the street?'

Cassandra's voice made Severus spin around. He had not heard her approach.

'I saw you come walking down the street some minutes ago,' Cassandra explained. 'When you didn't come inside, I figured you didn't know how to open the garden gate.'

There was a mischievous grin on her face, and Severus couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from twitching.

'I'm quite glad you're back, you know,' Cassandra went on. 'Please, say something intelligent to me, Severus. I am begging you.'

He raised an eyebrow. Whatever did she mean?

He got his explanation in a blink of an eye. 'It's terrifying, really. As soon as you've given birth, people expect that you don't want to talk about anything else than nappies, rashes and colic. Please, Severus, save me!'

Severus smirked. 'Would you like me to give you a lecture on Flobberworms?'

'Merlin, yes,' Cassandra moaned. 'Give me two!'

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Dinner wasn't as bad as Severus had expected. Teddy Lupin was a very well-behaved little boy, and even the young Potters seemed to have manners. And when they forgot them and started to be loud or play with their food, one stern look from their mother was enough to make them remember again.

Yes, Ginny Potter-Weasley had indeed grown up to be a remarkable young woman and mother. And Severus was very pleased that she and Cassandra seemed to get along so nicely. He liked the thought of Cassandra making a new friend.

He had been worried about her, to be honest. Since they had returned to the Wizarding world, she had not made contact with any of her old schoolmates or acquaintances. He had mentioned this one or twice, but Cassandra had always changed topics rather quickly. Too quickly, maybe. And Severus had started to wonder if she simply did not want to reconnect with anyone from her old life.

'Young Mrs. Potter is rather nice,' he pointed out after the guests had left and he and Cassandra were sitting on the swing under the apple tree. They had only lived in the little cottage for two weeks, but already it felt like a tradition to spend an hour or two on the swing after they had put Eydis to bed. And it was Severus' favourite part of the day.

'You mean Ginny?' Cassandra answered in a sleepy voice. She had pulled up her feet, and her head was resting at Severus' chest. It wouldn't be the first time that she fell asleep in this position.

'Do you like her?' he inquired, wrapping his arm tighter around his wife's shoulders.

'Yes, I do. She has a wonderful sense of humour. And she has a great hand with children.' She shifted slightly in his arms before she went on. 'It's funny, really. I am nearly old enough to be Ginny's mother. And there she is, bearing her third child and knowing so much more about handling babies than I do.'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'You are not feeling ... inadequate, I hope?'

There was a moment of silence before Cassandra spoke again, and Severus frowned. She should not have to think about that answer. She was a loving mother, and Eydis never lacked anything.

'I know we haven't discussed this, Severus,' she started tentatively. 'But I am considering going back to teaching in September.'

Once more, Severus frowned. This did not entirely come as a surprise. He had not expected Cassandra to resign to the standards the Wizarding society had set for their women. She had never seemed the type who would be content with just staying at home, looking after their child and have tea with other mothers. But still, her going back to teaching presented them with some minor problems.

'I'd still be teaching at NEWT level only,' Cassandra went on. 'And Minerva said that there shouldn't be a problem arranging my schedule in a way which makes it possible for me to be with Eydis as much as possible.'

She had obviously already given this a fair bit of thought. And somehow that fact annoyed Severus.

'And who will take care of Eydis while you are teaching?' he asked in a tone that was slightly harsher than he had intended it to be. 'You know I have signed up to teach Potions again. And that is a full-time position.'

Once more, silence settled over the swing. Severus' arm was still wrapped around Cassandra's shoulders, but he could feel that she had tensed up. Had he been too harsh, he wondered. Did she now think that he wanted to lock her up at home with their child, just as upper-class wizards had done with their wives for centuries?

Then she shifted in his arms and sat up, and Severus' first reaction was to pull her back against his chest again. But the look on her face made him withdraw his hand.

'Ginny made us a very nice offer, Severus,' she started. 'She will be home with her children until they start school. And she would very much like to take care of Eydis a couple of days a week.'

'This is out of the question,' Severus retorted before he actually had had time to think about it. 'If you insist on going back to teaching, we can arrange one of the elves to look after Eydis when you and I are both occupied. And I am certain that Poppy will not mind helping out either.'

He could have sworn that he saw a flash of disappointment on Cassandra's face, but her voice revealed nothing of it when she spoke.

'Can we at least talk about this, Severus?' she asked. 'I am confident that elves are good babysitters, but they do have other tasks in the castle. And Poppy, too, has a job of her own. And Eydis will soon be old enough to want to play with other children.'

'The students of Hogwarts are practically fighting over who gets to play with her,' Severus replied, knowing very well that this was a ridiculous argument.

'Playmates of her own age, Severus. I've seen her with the Potter boys today. They loved cuddling her. And soon they will have a baby sister of their own. They would grow up together. They would be friends. Because whether you like it or not, those children will be at Hogwarts at the same time as our daughter. It is only fair to let her become friends with them already at such a young age.'

'I am not having my daughter being brought up by the Potters,' Severus snapped.

'So this is what it is all about: you not liking the Potters.' Cassandra shook her head. 'Is this fair, Severus? Is it fair to transmit your resentments to our daughter? Is it fair to make this decision for her just because she is too little to make it herself?'

Severus opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by a heart-wrenching howl from the nursery. The little one had woken up.

He had already gotten up from the swing when he caught sight of Cassandra's face. She suddenly looked very tired to him, and he was torn between the urge to rush to his daughter and the longing to wrap his arms around his wife again. But he decided that it was wiser to think about his words carefully before he said any more.

~ ~ ~

As so often, Eydis had stopped crying the moment Severus had picked her up. But still, he had cradled her against his chest and taken a seat in the rocking chair by the window. He cherished the feeling of the little warm body in his arms, the smell of honey that emitted from the red down on her head. He loved this little child more than anything else in the world. And the day she was born, he had promised her to always be there for her, to protect her and to make sure that she never wanted for anything. But now his promise presented him with a dilemma. Yes, he wanted his daughter to grow up with other children, he wanted her to make friends and be loved. But why, why by the fires of Hades, did it have to be the Potter boys?

But Cassandra was right. It was a perfect solution. He, too, had noticed that Ginny had a wonderful way with children. And the boys were indeed rather nice. And around umpteen corners, the Weasleys were family, after all. Wasn't Arthur Weasley something like Cassandra's cousin once removed?

Severus shook his head. This did not matter. What mattered was the fact that Ginny Weasley had had nothing better to do than choose Harry Potter as father for her children. And as much as the rational part of Severus' brain told him to grow up and get over his schoolyard grudge against the boy's father, he could not. He simply could not.

'Did we rush things, Severus?'

He didn't need to look up. And he wasn't surprised to find Cassandra standing beside him all of a sudden either. His nostrils had filled with her comforting scent a while ago. He knew that she had been standing at the door for at least five minutes, watching him.

She took a pillow from the crib and knelt down on it in front of Severus' feet, wrapped her arms around his legs and laid her head in his lap. And he caressed her hair with his free hand while he still held Eydis safely against his chest with his other.

'What do you mean?' he whispered.

'Were we in too great a hurry to return to the Wizarding world?' Cassandra rephrased. 'Should we have waited? Should we have made peace with our ghosts before we came back?'

He didn't reply for a while, but continued stroking her hair and gently rocking the baby. He knew which ghosts she was talking about. He saw them flickering in dark corners, met them in his dreams. And sometimes, they even took shape. Like they had today.

When Severus finally spoke, he had made his decision. He had to make a stand. Not for himself, but for his wife and his daughter.

'No, Cassandra,' he said. 'We did the right thing to return. We cannot battle our ghosts at a distance. We have to come face to face with them to make peace. And tomorrow we will visit the Potters.'

VI: Welcome to the Family

Chapter 6 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR for creating Severus Snape.

Thanks also go to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

Chapter VI: Welcome to the Family

The arrangement turned out to be better than expected. Cassandra started teaching again on the first of September, and Eydis became a part of the Potter family. And not just Eydis, as a matter of fact.

Severus was not too happy in the beginning. Yes, he could see that the whole Potter-Weasley clan had taken a shine to his daughter. He could see that the little one was well taken care of. And he could also see that Cassandra thrived in her role as a teacher and that she did not love Eydis any less just because she did not spend twenty-four hours a day with her. But still his stomach clenched every time he stepped out of the fireplace in the Potter kitchen. As much as they all loved his daughter and as much as they smiled at him when he arrived, Severus could just not get rid of the feeling that he was not welcome.

But his feelings were about to change the day Ginny Potter returned from St. Mungo's with her third child in her arms.

She had gone into labour on a Friday afternoon in early November. She and Harry had Flooed to the hospital later that night, and Molly Weasley, hen mother as she was, had refused to leave her daughter's side. And that was why Severus and Cassandra ended up staying the whole weekend at the Potters', babysitting, although Severus had been more than reluctant at first. He was still not too fond of James and Albus Potter. But as Cassandra and Eydis were both sleeping over, he decided that he might as well do the same.

It was late on Sunday night when the Potters returned. It was hard to tell who looked more exhausted, Ginny or Harry, and for once Severus could sympathise with the young man. He too had been a mess for several days after Eydis' birth, waking up ten times a night just to run to the crib to make sure that the little one was still there.

The congratulations were quickly exchanged, and while everybody else was fussing over the new baby, Severus retreated to the guestroom to pack up his and his family's belongings. The Potters were home again, and surely they could take care of their sons themselves now.

It was there Ginny found him.

'Thank you for looking after the boys,' she started. 'James tells me you are quite the story teller.'

'Cassandra did most of the story telling,' Severus replied without looking up from his bag and quietly omitting the fact that he had told the boy the story of *The Wizard's Hairy Heart* without even once having to look into the book.

'You have a good hand with children,' Ginny went on. 'Albus simply adores you.'

Now Severus did look up and frowned. *Adore* was certainly not a word he was used to be associated with.

'Severus, I hope you know that Harry and I consider you, Cassandra and Eydis as part of the family.'

Severus opened his mouth to deliver a biting comment about Potter views of his old Potions master, but Ginny cut him short.

'Yes, even Harry,' she said in a determined tone. 'And we would very much like you to be the godfather of our daughter.'

Severus' eyebrows threatened to shoot up into his hair. 'You cannot be serious, Mrs. Potter.'

'I am very serious, Severus,' Ginny replied. 'And would you stop calling me *Mrs. Potter*?'

He scowled and decided that this conversation required his best teacher-voice.

'Ginny,' he started, pronouncing the word unnecessarily clearly. 'I am not godfather material.'

To that, Ginny snorted. 'Severus, ten years ago nobody would even have considered you being *father* material. And now look at you. Do you even realise how you light up every time you lay eyes your daughter?'

Severus huffed. The girl must have gotten one Bludger too many to the head. He, Severus Snape, former Death Eater, Bat of the Dungeons and Worst Nightmare of Any Hogwarts Dunderhead did certainly *not* light up. Ever.

'Please, Severus,' Ginny went on. 'At least consider it. You and Cassandra are like family to us. And James and Albus surely consider Eydis to be their little sister. So please, think about it.'

Severus was still frowning when the door opened and Molly entered the room with her granddaughter in her arms.

'Have you persuaded him yet?' she asked.

And Severus' frown became even deeper. 'Is everybody in on this?' he demanded to know.

Ginny grinned. 'Actually, yes. It was Harry's idea. And Cassandra was quite confident you would say yes. Eventually.'

Severus closed his travel bag with a little more force than necessary and glared at the two Weasley women. 'My dear wife might just be mistaken for once.'

He was just about to stalk out of the room when Molly stood in his way and more or less thrust the infant into his arms.

'There, little one,' she cooed. 'Say hi to your godfather, Lily Luna.'

Severus' felt his stomach clench, and his hands started to shake. He had not been prepared for this. He had not been prepared for Ginny's proposal, and most certainly he had not been prepared to be reminded of Lily.

He mumbled something about having to think about the proposal and was out of the room in a blink of an eye. His feet carried him out of the house, through the garden and out into the open field behind the house. And he did not stop before a massive stitch made him gasp for air and clasp his side.

Out there, alone on the snow-covered field, Severus Snape sank to his knees.

Lily. Lily Evans. The only friend he had ever had in his old life. The girl he had once loved with all his heart. The girl he had lost in a most terrible and gruesome way. He had grieved for her the better part of his adult life. And he had lain down his life in order to give her son the tools to take down the monster that had killed her. And her eyes had been the last thing he had seen before he had ... *died*.

But he had not died. He had survived. He had been given a second chance, had started a new life and found a new love, his true love. And he had not thought about Lily for years.

A strange feeling crept into his stomach, a feeling he couldn't define. Was it guilt, he wondered. Did he feel guilty that he had all but forgotten about Lily Evans?

He lifted his head and stared blankly into the darkness. He almost expected to see Lily's ghost in front of him, as he had done so many times in his old life. But the air was still, there was not even a flicker that was associated with the appearance of a ghost. Nothing. He was alone. All alone.

'Am I free?' he whispered into the night. 'Have I repented?'

Had someone looked out onto the field that night, they would have seen nothing but a dark figure cowering on the frozen ground. But Severus did not feel alone. In his thoughts, he was not even kneeling in the snow not far away from the home of Harry Potter. In his thoughts, he was at the playground at Spinner's End, looking down at his ten year-old self and a red-haired girl with eyes green like spring clover. He heard the girl laugh. And when she looked up at him, she was smiling.

How long he had been kneeling in the snow, Severus did not know. But when he rose, his robes soaked and his legs aching from the cold and the awkward position he had been kneeling in, he felt at peace. He had finally said goodbye. At least to one of his ghosts.

Cassandra was waiting for him at the backdoor when he returned to the house, a thick woolly shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

'Are you alright?' she asked.

And Severus just nodded and wrapped his arms around her, inhaling the comforting scent of her hair.

'I am sorry we took you unawares,' she whispered. 'I should not just have assumed that you would like the idea of becoming a godfather.'

'You are very well aware of the fact that I do not appreciate surprises,' he tried to chide her. But his voice was too soft and his embrace too tender to fool her.

'Then you will do it?' she asked.

And to his own surprise, Severus smiled and nodded.

~ ~ ~

Had Severus known what it meant to be a part of the Potter-Weasley family, he would have turned down Ginny's request. By Merlin, he would have hexed the little witch and fled. But he had not, and now he had to suffer for it.

It was virtually impossible to just Floo to the Potters', pick up Eydís, inquire about her day and then Floo back to Hogwarts without being invited for dinner. And the invitations to spend the weekend with the entire clan became more pronounced every week as well.

At those occasions, Severus swore inwardly, counted silently to ten and more than once hoped that a band of Death Eaters would burst into the house and put him out of his misery. But even he understood that the Potter-Weasleys meant well and that it would be rude to decline.

Molly Weasley was the worst of them all. Not only did she constantly pester him about being too pale and too thin and that he had to eat more, but every time he picked up Lily or Eydís, the woman made a truly horrid noise of delight.

'Oh, Severus,' she would exclaim. 'You are such a wonderful man. Simply adorable.'

And as much as he scowled at her, the Weasley matron would just not change her mind.

All this considered, it was not surprising that the Snapes were invited to celebrate Christmas at the Burrow. And as much as he struggled, Severus knew that it would take a much braver man than him to turn down Molly, Ginny and Cassandra. And so he was outvoted and had to resign himself to spending Christmas Day in Ottery St. Catchpole.

The house smelled of gingerbread when they arrived. And the first thing Severus caught sight of when he stepped out of the fireplace was an enormous Christmas tree decorated with hideously blinking Muggle Christmas lights. Arthur's idea for sure. But before he could deliver a biting comment, Severus found himself being attacked by James and Albus, who demanded that he read them a story, built a snowman with them and bewitched their toy dragons to roar like real ones, and preferably all at once. And he saw Cassandra wink at him as she brought Eydís to the nursery, and he knew that he was on his own.

Fascinating, he thought to himself hours later as he was sitting in a comfortable chair in the sitting room, sipping his mulled wine, his eyes resting on his wife who was cradling their daughter in her arms. Truly fascinating.

If somebody had told him a couple of years ago that he would be spending Christmas with the Weasleys and Harry Potter, reading fairy tales to two little boys and accepting a ghastly knitted jumper from Molly without being Imperiused, he would have declared them mad without hesitation. A couple of years ago, he would not even have considered celebrating Christmas at all and especially not with these people.

But times had changed. They truly had. And so had he.

His heart warmed as he saw Cassandra looking up at him, and he ventured smiling at her. It was a tiny smile, almost imperceptible. But he was Severus Snape, after all. And Severus Snape was not known for smiling. Not in public anyway.

When she rose to take his hand and pull him out into the snowy garden, he followed her only too willingly. And when the back door closed behind them, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, never wanting to let go again.

'I am glad you haven't hexed anybody yet,' she said with a broad grin when he had let go of her in the end and they had settled on the stairs of the porch.

'I was very close when Molly presented me with that ridiculous jumper,' he snarled.

'You will wear it, of course.'

Her voice was dripping with irony. But still, Severus cocked an eyebrow and replied dryly: 'I am considering donating it to Nicodemus' basket. The tabby is getting old and deserves a warm bed.'

He cherished the sound of her laughter and pulled her towards him to feel the sound vibrate in his chest. And they sat like this, huddled up in the cold Christmas night for quite a while before Cassandra spoke again.

'I know we agreed on no presents, but I'd like you to have this.'

Severus looked down at the tiny box she had put into his hand, opened it and frowned. It was a ring, forged of silver, three snakes encircling a black crystal.

'This is your ring,' he stated, confused about her reasons for giving him the Black family ring.

But when he eyed it closer and saw that the engraving had been changed: the phrase *Toujours Pur* had been erased and replaced by *Toujours Fidèle Always True*.

And when he looked into Cassandra's eyes, Severus understood.

VII: Time to Let Go

Chapter 7 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating Severus Snape, and to my beta Apple Blossom.

Chapter VII: Time to Let Go

'Is Cassandra still not feeling well?' Ginny asked in an anxious tone as Severus for the fourth time that same week came to pick up Eydis alone. Usually, he and Cassandra would Floo to the Potter home together, and on Wednesdays and Fridays they would even stay for dinner.

'She is getting better,' he replied with a sigh. 'The fever is going down. And the cough seems to be subsiding as well, if only slowly. But she is still feeling weak.'

Ginny frowned. 'That seems to be one nasty cold she's got there. How long has she been in bed now? Ten days?'

Severus nodded. 'Eleven days, to be precise. Poppy says it is nothing contagious. But I am afraid that Cassandra is not feeling well enough to look after Eydis. Would it be inconvenient for you to take her tomorrow as well? I have to prepare for the NEWT exam.'

'Of course not, Severus,' Ginny replied, almost indignantly. 'You should not even need to ask this question. I'll happily look after Eydis. You know that.'

Yes, he knew. He knew it very well. But he hated to be a burden. And he hated to ask for favours. But there was one more thing he needed to ask of young Mrs. Potter.

'Eydis' birthday is in eight days,' he started. 'And I have no sense whatsoever for cakes or decorations. Would it ...'

'If you are about to ask if it would be *inconvenient for me to arrange Eydis' birthday party*, then you can save your breath,' Ginny cut him short.

And for a moment, Severus feared that he had indeed been asking for too much. But then he saw a mischievous grin on Ginny's face.

'It would not be *inconvenient* at all, Severus,' she went on, rolling her eyes at him. 'I'd love to organise the party. And I even insist on having it here. The Hogwarts dungeons are no place for a children's party.'

Then she smiled and pointed to the stairs. 'Eydis is upstairs with the boys. Go get her, Floo back to Hogwarts and tell Cassandra not to worry. I will take care of everything.'

~ ~ ~

'And then James said I could not play because I am a girl. And then Albus hit him with a book. And then I told Albus he was mean. And then ...'

Severus smiled at the flood of words that came from his daughter's mouth. Eydis always had so many things to tell after a day at the Potters'. And she truly seemed to enjoy spending time with the two boys.

'Do you think Albus should not have hit James?' he asked, wondering for a moment if Eydis was still too young to be lectured about the fact that physical violence was never a good way to go.

But Eydis made decision for him. 'No, Albus should not hit James,' she replied in a determined voice. 'James is nice. And I will marry him.'

For a terrifying moment, Severus forgot that his daughter was only three years old and paled. Heavens forbid that she should marry a Potter. Over his dead body! Merlin's pants, over Potter's dead body!

'Daddy, I want to go see Mummy. Can I?'

The longing in Eydis' voice made Severus' mind return to the present, and he sat her down to help her get out of her coat and take off her boots.

'I think Mummy is asleep, little one,' he answered in a quiet tone. 'But we can peek inside the bedroom and see. But you must promise to be very quiet.'

He put a spell on the bedroom door that kept it from creaking and gingerly pushed it open. Cassandra was sitting in the bed, propped up by three big pillows, a stack of papers in her lap and another one on the blanket beside her. The soft candle light made her messy hair look like dancing flames and even gave her cheeks a healthy glow. But Severus knew that in fact she was pale like a ghost.

Cassandra's eyes lit up with a smile when she caught sight of her husband and her daughter, and she held out her arms for Eydis. The little one shot past Severus like a bolt of lightning and was on the bed and in her mother's arms in a matter of seconds.

'Mummy, Mummy, I will marry James Potter,' she exclaimed happily.

Cassandra smiled faintly. 'Have you told Daddy yet?' she asked, looking at Severus with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes that made him believe that she had been the one to set that ridiculous idea in their daughter's head.

'Mummy, will you read me a story?' Eydis asked, obviously already forgetting about her wedding plans.

Severus approached the bed and tousled his daughter's hair before placing a tender kiss on Cassandra's forehead. She was still hot, but her temperature was certainly falling. And the feverish glitter in her eyes had all but disappeared.

'Mummy needs to rest, little one,' he explained.

'No, it's alright,' Cassandra replied, giving him an almost imploring look. 'Mummy can read you a story, little one. Which one would you like to hear?'

'*Babbitty Rabbitty*, please,' Eydis squealed, already reaching for the book on the nightstand.

Severus took off his boots and positioned himself beside Cassandra, gingerly put his arm around her shoulders and listened to her rough, hoarse voice as she read the tale to Eydis.

This cold should have passed by now, he thought. Her fever was certainly on its way down, but her cough was starting to worry him. No one had ever responded so badly to one of his Coughing Potions. And even Poppy was growing concerned.

Eydis was half asleep by the time Cassandra finished the story, and Severus carried her to the nursery, charmed her clothes off and her nightgown on and carefully tucked her in before kissing her goodnight. Once more, she mumbled something about marrying James Potter. But within a minute, she was fast asleep.

For some moments, Severus lingered by his daughter's bed. She was the spitting image of her mother: her hair just as red, her eyes just as blue and her smile just as adorable. And Severus loved them both more than life itself. And if Eydis in fifteen years' time still wanted to marry James Potter, he would not be the one to say no. He would do anything to make his little angel happy, even accept a Potter as his son-in-law.

When he returned to the master bedroom, Cassandra had taken up working on her papers again.

'You should be resting not grading essays,' he chided her with a soft voice, while reaching for the quill to take it out of her hand. To his surprise, she let go almost immediately.

'I am bored, Severus,' she sighed, letting her head fall back onto the pillows. 'So terribly bored. Lying here the whole day is driving me insane. I hate being sick!'

Severus could relate to that. He too would rather take a triple dose of the most disgusting potion than be laid up.

Once more, he positioned himself beside his wife and laid his arm around her shoulders.

'How are you feeling?'

'I'm fine,' she replied, but the coughing fit that followed belied her immediately.

Severus held on to her and waited until she was breathing normally again before he went on. 'Yes, I can see that you are just peachy, my love.'

It felt good to see her smile at his sarky comment. He had not seen her smile for quite a few days.

'Did Eydis enjoy herself at the Potters' today?' Cassandra inquired.

'Far too much, I would say,' Severus replied in a dry tone. 'As you have heard, she is planning on marrying James Potter.'

'Would you mind?'

To that question, Severus cocked an eyebrow. 'The girl is barely three years old. I do not think there is any need to worry just yet.'

'No, probably not,' Cassandra mused and snuggled up against her husband's chest before she went on. 'I am glad Eydis likes the Potters. And I am very happy that you are warming up to them as well.'

~ ~ ~

Severus sank into his favourite armchair and poured himself a healthy measure of Firewhisky, hoping the alcohol would soothe his nerves.

It had been a horrid afternoon. The whole kitchen and the whole living room at the Potter house had been decorated in pink. There had been pink chairs, pink table clothes and pink napkins. Even the cake had been pink. Ghastly, truly ghastly!

He had been clenching his jaws to fight off the nausea from the minute he had arrived, and by mid-afternoon his jaws had actually started to ache. But not even the sight of Eydis' big, happy smile could have made him relax. And once more, he had found himself hoping that a searing pain in his left forearm would call him to the Dark Lord. Even that would have been better than being trapped in this sugary, pink nightmare.

But Eydis had had a wonderful third birthday and was now sleeping peacefully in her bed. And Cassandra was in the bathroom, getting changed.

The thought of his wife slipping into something more comfortable, as she had put it, gave Severus a tickling feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had very much missed the feeling of her naked skin under his fingers while she had been ill. And the nights he had slept in the second bedroom in order not to disturb the little sleep she was getting had seemed to be the loneliest and coldest nights in his life.

But for the last couple of days, Cassandra had looked much stronger and healthier. And when she had kissed him that morning, Severus had almost melted in her hands. And had Eydis not been next door, waiting to go to her birthday party with her parents, he would have forgotten his good manners and taken Cassandra right there against the bookshelf in his study.

As she closed the bathroom door behind her, Severus couldn't do much more than gasp. The dark fabric of the long, silken nightgown she was wearing clashed violently with the pale skin of her bare arms, her hair seemed to be on fire, and her smile was the happiest and at the same time the most seductive he had ever seen.

He closed the distance between them in a heartbeat, wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close, attacking her neck with hungry lips. He heard her moan and felt her press her body closer to his, and he instinctively pushed his hips forward to relieve some of the tension that was building up in his groin. And when his lips found hers, the world around them seemed to disappear.

But then he felt Cassandra stiffen in his arms and wriggle away, and at first he did not understand. But then he heard her gasp for breath.

'I'm sorry,' she panted between coughs and tried to laugh. 'I forgot to breathe.'

And Severus laughed, too, and carefully patted her back as if she had something stuck in her throat.

But the coughing did not stop. In fact, it became worse. And when Severus felt Cassandra's fingers dig into his biceps, he grasped her by her shoulders and to make her look at him. He found her eyes dilated in fear and her lips starting to turn blue.

The next thing he knew, he had scooped her up in his arms and was carrying her to the hospital wing.

~ ~ ~

He felt helpless. So terribly helpless. And he hated the feeling.

As soon as Poppy had managed to force some potion down Cassandra's throat and the coughing had subsided, she had called a Healer from St. Mungo's. And then she had ushered Severus out of the ward, telling him that he would only be in the way.

So now he was pacing the corridor outside the ward, wringing his hands and occasionally hexing one of the decorative suits of armour.

Then the door opened, and the Healer stepped through. 'Professor Snape, a word if you please.'

Severus paled. 'Is Cassandra alright?' he demanded to know.

The Healer nodded. 'For the moment, yes.'

'What do you mean, *for the moment*?' Severus snarled.

The Healer did not even flinch and remained calm. 'Maybe we should step into Madam Pomfrey's office?' he suggested.

Severus was seething. 'We are not going anywhere,' he snapped. 'I demand to be informed about my wife's condition. And I demand to be informed now.'

The Healer looked at Severus with a calm expression on his face. But his voice was grave enough for Severus to understand that something was severely wrong.

'I'm afraid there is nothing we can do,' he started.

And Severus just stared at the man in front of him without really taking in the words. He heard something about diminished lung capacity, symptoms being made worse by the cold weather. But his mind seemed blank. And nothing made sense.

'Maybe she has two years left, maybe only one,' the Healer went on. 'Or maybe only months. I am very sorry.'

That was when Severus snapped out of it.

He had a sudden impulse to put Crucio on the Healer in front of him. How dared this quack tell him that he was going to lose Cassandra? How dared he let it happen? He was a Healer, by Hades! He was supposed to cure people!

'What do you mean, you are sorry?' Severus bellowed. 'Magical medicine has been practiced for hundreds of years. And by the look of your wrinkled face, you have at least fifty years of experience in the field. Are you seriously trying to tell me that the best you can come up with is that you are *sorry*?'

His outburst did not help. And neither would hexing the man, Severus knew that. Instead he shoved the Healer out of the way and rushed into the infirmary.

Poppy was nowhere to be seen. She had certainly anticipated Severus' reaction and judged it wise to stay out of his way. Or maybe she wanted to give him and Cassandra some privacy. Whatever her reasons, she was not in the ward.

Before Severus pulled open the curtains around Cassandra's bed, he paused to steady himself. He had to calm down. Cassandra needed him now, and he would be no sort of support or comfort to her if he was in a state.

She looked calm as he approached her bed. And when she saw him, she smiled and reached out her hand.

Her hand was cold. Clammy and so terribly cold. But Severus held on to it, pulled it to his lips and kissed it, trying to warm it with his lips and his love.

'How are you doing?' Cassandra asked, her voice faint but steady.

Severus stared down at her, incredulous. 'How am I doing?' She could not seriously have asked that question. 'Cassandra, I do not consider *my* wellbeing the most important matter at this point.'

She tightened her grip around his hand, and for a second Severus could have sworn that he saw tears in his wife's eyes.

'It matters to me,' she whispered. 'Right now it matters more than anything else.'

That was when Severus broke. When he heard the sadness in Cassandra's voice and the compassion it held for him, he sank to his knees by her bedside, pressed her hand against his face and cried bitter tears.

This was not fair!

Why now? Why did fate have to rip her away from him now, now that finally everything seemed have fallen into place, now that he finally felt at home?

'Severus, please. Look at me.'

He lifted his eyes to look up at Cassandra, expecting tears on her cheeks as well. But there weren't any. Still, she looked unspeakably sad.

'Please, don't cry for me, Severus,' she begged as she tenderly brushed a strand of hair from his face. 'Please, don't.'

Severus blinked feverishly, still holding on to her hand. Not cry *for her*? Whatever did she mean?

'I don't want to die, Severus,' she went on. 'I want to grow old with you. And I want to see our daughter grow up, fall in love and have a family of her own. But fate has decided differently. And believe me, whatever wicked deity is responsible for this, I will give them a piece of my mind. But I refuse to spend the time I have left feeling sorry for myself.'

The ghost of a smile flickered over Severus' face as he kissed Cassandra's hand once more. Of course she would not curl up under a blanket and cry. She was too strong for that. And she loved life too much. However much time she had left, she would make sure that every day started and ended with a smile. He knew that very well.

'Poppy wants me to stay here tonight,' Cassandra explained, tenderly brushing away the last tear from Severus' eyelashes. 'Will you stay with me?'

What a question. Of course he would stay. If it were up to him, he would never leave her side.

~ ~ ~

It had been Cassandra's idea to spend some weeks in Iceland during the summer. And Severus had immediately agreed. Firstly, because he had the urge to fulfil any of Cassandra's wishes nowadays. And secondly, because returning to Iceland felt like travelling back in time, to a time where Cassandra's illness did not exist, to a time where the future was still bright. A time where there still *was* a future.

They didn't talk much about her illness. Cassandra did not want to.

'I am alive today,' she used to say whenever Severus tried to talk to her. 'And I am not going to discuss my death with you.'

He knew she was in denial. And Poppy had said that there was no point in pressuring her. She would talk about it when she was ready.

But still, her defensive attitude disturbed Severus. She might not want to talk about what was to come, but he did. He needed to. For his own sake and for Eydis. But Cassandra was stubborn. And Severus knew that he would have to give her time. The last thing he wanted was to make her sad.

'Do you know what I've always appreciated about the Icelandic weather?' she suddenly asked, and Severus looked up at her from his coffee, cocking his eyebrow.

'Might it be the fact that it only seems to rain horizontally?' he suggested.

Cassandra grinned, and Severus could not help but do the same. He remembered having asked her the very same question the first time they had visited the tiny café in Reykjavik. She had laughed so hard at his irony that she had almost started to cry. It was a happy memory.

Severus' gaze travelled from her face to the window. It was indeed raining horizontally. And there didn't seem to be an end to the downpour either.

Then the tiny bell over the door announced a new customer, and Severus spotted a tall, blond man with happy blue-grey eyes. He was drenched to the bones.

'You would think living here for more than two decades would have taught the man to carry an umbrella with him all the time,' he commented dryly.

'You're the one to talk,' Cassandra retorted jokingly. 'You used a newspaper this morning as well.'

'Give the man a break, Cassy,' came Per's cheerful voice from the door. 'Dear Severus has only lived here for five years. It takes a while to get adapted.'

Cassandra laughed and was almost immediately wrapped up in a bone-crushing hug by her old friend.

'And this must be little Eydis,' Per exclaimed. 'The spitting image of her mother.'

He let go of Cassandra and embraced the little one with the same love he had embraced her mother before. And Severus wondered if anyone except him had noticed that there were tears shining in Cassandra's eyes.

And suddenly he realised why she had come to Iceland to meet her oldest friend. She was finally ready to let go. She had accepted her fate and was ready to say goodbye.

VIII: Slipping Away

Chapter 8 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating Severus Snape, and to my beta Apple Blossom.

Chapter VIII: Slipping Away

Her skin felt soft and warm, and the curve of her body fitted perfectly against his. And Severus held onto his wife as if he were afraid she would disappear the moment he let go of her.

It was Halloween night, Cassandra's birthday and their fourth wedding anniversary. Eydis was sleeping over at the Potters', and her parents had returned to the privacy of the dungeons shortly after the dinner in the Great Hall to share a glass of wine and to escape the staff's and the students' well-meant, but still ever so annoying, congratulations. They had settled on the couch, Cassandra with her head against her husband's shoulder and Severus with his arms carefully wrapped around his wife.

Later in the bedroom, he had made love to her. His hands and lips had explored and tasted every inch of her body, carefully, tenderly, trying to memorise each tiny movement she made, each delightful sound that escaped her lips. And from the moment he had buried himself between her thighs, his eyes had never left hers. And the love he had seen in those blue pools had almost made him break.

She had called out his name when she had climaxed and clung onto him for dear life. And Severus had held onto her in his turn, indeed scared to let go, indeed afraid that she would slip away.

He knew the day when they had to say goodbye would come all but too soon. And when Cassandra wriggled in his arms, he felt an icy coldness and panic seep through his veins. He did not want to let go of her. Never.

'I forgot to take my potion,' she said as he tightened his grip around her. And reluctantly he let her slip out of the bed.

'I'll be right back,' she promised before she closed the bathroom door behind her. And Severus smiled as she blew him a kiss.

But she broke her promise. The minutes ticked by, and Cassandra did not return. And Severus grew worried. He put on a robe and soundlessly approached the bathroom door. He sensed the magical field at once: she had warded the door from the inside.

'Cassandra?' he called and softly knocked at the door. But he received no answer. In fact, there was not a single sound coming from the other side of the door.

Muffliato, he deducted quickly. It had always been one of her best spells. She could even cast it without a wand.

Severus tried the doorknob and to his surprise found the door unlocked. Had she just not wanted him to hear and trusted that he would not come and look for her?

He found her crouching on the floor. She was holding on to the edge of the marble basin with one hand and clutching a half-empty vial in the other. Her breath was ragged, her cheeks wet with tears.

Stubborn little witch, Severus thought as he caught sight of the blood-stained handkerchief that lay crumpled up in the basin. She would rather hide and cough her lungs out than let him be there for her.

Wordlessly he knelt down beside her and took the vial from her hand, judging that there was no need to force her to drink any more of the potion.

'How long have you been taking this?' he inquired in a professional tone, taking her now empty hand into his.

He did not need to ask, not really. He knew the potion. He had brewed it himself only three weeks ago, had brought it to Poppy the same day he had finished it. It had a numbing effect, eased the cough and made breathing easier. He had brewed it especially for Cassandra, but he had sincerely hoped that she would not need to take it just yet.

'Why did you not tell me?' he asked. 'Why did you not tell me that your symptoms are worsening?'

She did not answer, did not even look at him but kept her eyes resolutely on the floor. And Severus wrapped his arms around her and pulled her towards his chest. She felt small, fragile.

'Allow me to be there for you, Cassandra,' he begged and placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

'But you *are* there for me, Severus.'

The sound of her voice made his heart ache, and he tightened his embrace.

'How much do you think it means to me to see you outside my classroom waiting for me?' she went on. 'Not because you *have* to or feel *obligated*, but because you *want* to? It means the world to me to know that you care, Severus.'

Stupid little witch. Of course he cared. He cared so much that it hurt.

'Do you want me to get Poppy?' he inquired.

Cassandra shook her head. 'It is late. And there is not much she can do.'

'Then you have seen her already?' The thought hit him like a Bludger to the head. Of course she had been seeing Poppy. That's where she had gotten the potion.

'I've been seeing her twice a week since the beginning of October,' Cassandra confessed.

And Severus realised that the time had come when Cassandra was indeed slipping away from him.

~ ~ ~

It was the third Sunday in November. An icy wind was howling through the grounds, and all the inhabitants of Hogwarts castle were huddled around a warm fire somewhere, clutching cups of tea or hot chocolate, happy to be inside. Everyone except Severus Snape, that was.

He had retired to his private study shortly after breakfast, had not even left it for lunch. He kept himself busy, brewed potions for Poppy's stocks and worked on new ones. He was doing his job, he told himself. But some people would have said that he was hiding there.

He had been doing this a lot lately. He had no desire to socialise, did not feel like chatting with his colleagues. All he wanted was to be on his own. He needed time to think. About ... *the future*.

The word tasted bitter in his mouth. He found it all but impossible to imagine a future nowadays. He could make his mind think as far as to the day when Cassandra would leave him but no further. Everything beyond that day seemed like a big black pit, filled with nothing but loneliness and despair. And he was sitting right in the middle of it.

Why was fate being so cruel? Why had it let him find love, let Cassandra guide him back to the Wizarding world and then decided to just tear her away from him only a few years later? Had he not repented? After all he had done, did he not finally deserve some happiness?

He sealed another vial and sighed. He felt endlessly tired, and the thought of going up to the Great Hall, having dinner and then slipping into bed with his arms wrapped around his wife seemed inviting. But Severus could not make himself go.

Every meal in the Great Hall was torture. Minerva knew of Cassandra's condition. So did Filius. And Poppy, of course. And every time they laid eyes on Severus and Cassandra, they gave him a pity-filled look. And he hated it. Them feeling sorry did not help at all. Instead, it made the inevitable just more tangible. And so Severus kept to himself.

The door creaked open, and he raised his head. Cassandra was smiling. She always was. But there were dark shadows under her eyes, and her red hair had lost its shine. She looked just as tired as Severus felt.

'We brought you dinner,' she announced and opened the door wider to let Eydis enter.

The little one looked so proud. She had managed to carry the plate all the way from the Great Hall down to the dungeons without dropping it. She was, of course, blissfully oblivious to the fact that her mother had charmed the plate against any kind of accidents.

'I ate all my peas, Daddy. I did not like them, but I ate them anyway. They are good for me.'

She was beaming up at him, and Severus took the plate from her hands and awkwardly ruffled her hair. It was flaming red and felt as silky as Cassandra's once had. And it smelled of honey, too.

'Come now, little one,' Cassandra said and reached out her hand towards Eydis. 'It's bedtime.'

'Will you come and read me a story, Daddy?' Eydis pleaded and looked up at her father. And Severus felt a stab in his heart as he looked into her blue eyes. She had gotten them from her mother, too.

'Daddy is busy, love,' Cassandra explained. 'But he will come and kiss you goodnight.'

Eydis bottom lip quivered for a second, but she did not argue. Instead, she quickly hugged her father's leg and then set off towards their quarters.

Cassandra had already reached the door when she turned to look at her husband.

'Please, eat your dinner, Severus. I know you have skipped lunch,' she said in a quiet voice. 'And do come and say goodnight. Eydis misses you.'

Severus did not answer but busied himself with his vials again, not looking up before he was sure that Cassandra had left the study. First then did he bring his hands to his face and rub his tired eyes.

He felt lousy. He had not picked up Eydis at the Potters' once over the last two weeks. And he had only brought her to bed on a handful of occasions. It wasn't that he was too busy, not really. At the moment, he just couldn't make himself look at his daughter, the spitting image of her mother. It simply hurt too much. And he did not even dare imagine how it would feel to look at the little one when Cassandra had gone.

Then he lowered his hands and clenched them into fists.

'You are a coward, Severus Snape,' he hissed under his breath. 'Do you really think hiding in the dungeons is going to make this any easier? Do you really think losing Cassandra will hurt less if you make her turn away from you?'

Of course it would not hurt less, on the contrary. If he continued like this, he would surely alienate his wife. And if she turned from him, he would never forgive himself for not having tried to make the best out of the little time they had left together. By Hades, he had begged her to allow him to be there for her only weeks ago. And then his own fears had driven him away from her.

He didn't bother tidying up, didn't even care if the potion he was working on got spoiled. He only wanted to be with his wife and his child.

He fell dead in his track outside the nursery when he heard Eydis' voice.

'Is Daddy angry with me?' she asked.

'What would make you say such a thing, little one,' Cassandra replied. 'Has Daddy said something?'

'Daddy did not come to say goodnight yesterday. And he did not come to Lily's birthday party.'

The rustling of fabric told Severus that Cassandra was embracing their daughter, and her muffled voice told him that she was holding on tight.

'Daddy is not angry with you, little one,' she said. 'Daddy is ...'

Again, there was the rustling of fabric, and through the gap in the door, Severus saw Cassandra cupping Eydis' chin.

'Do you remember that Mummy told you that she would have to go away soon?' she asked, looking into the blue eyes that were a perfect reflection of her own. 'That's what Daddy is angry about.'

'Maybe Daddy and I can come, too,' Eydis suggested. 'Then Daddy won't be angry anymore.'

'No, little one, Daddy and you cannot come along,' Cassandra replied in a soft tone. And Severus thought that he had heard her stifle a sob. 'Mummy has to go alone.'

There were some moments of silence. And then Eydis asked the question which made Severus want to sink to his knees and scream.

'When will you come back, Mummy?' the little one asked. 'Soon?'

'No, little one. Mummy won't come back. Mummy will never come back again.'

Never. Such a big word for such a little girl.

Severus felt tears burning in his eyes. How could Eydis understand? How could the concept of death be explained to a three-year old?

From the shadows, he saw Eydis snuggle up against her mother's chest, saw Cassandra wrap her arms lovingly around the little one. And to his surprise, neither of them looked sad. In fact, there was a smile on Eydis' face, just as there always was when she was in her mother's arms. And there was a smile on Cassandra's lips, too. A tiny smile, but a smile nonetheless.

That was when Severus approached them. And when they opened their arms to embrace him, he knew that he had been forgiven.

~ ~ ~

'How are you feeling today, my love?' Severus asked as he approached Cassandra's sick bed on the morning before Christmas, carrying a breakfast tray.

And Cassandra smiled and reached out her arms towards Eydis, who was hanging on to her father's robe, still looking sleepy and suckling her thumb.

Such had been their morning routine for ten days now, ever since Poppy had decided that she would not let Cassandra out of her sight anymore. Since December thirteenth, Cassandra had been staying at the hospital wing. And since then Severus had every morning woken up their little daughter, dressed her and taken her to see her mother and have breakfast with her.

Cassandra looked tired that morning, pale. But nonetheless she smiled and held Eydis in her arms to feed her toast with honey. Nonetheless she kissed Severus' hand as he caressed her cheek.

Maybe he should have seen Cassandra's hands shaking as she buttoned Eydis' coat. Maybe he should have noticed that she held on to the little one just a little bit longer than usual. Maybe he should have heard her voice tremble when she took farewell. And maybe he should have seen the tears in her eyes.

But he had not. And if he had, then his subconscious had told him to ignore it. And when Severus Flooed to the Potters to leave Eydis in their care for the day, he was convinced that he would as usual pick up his daughter in the evening and that they would go and visit Cassandra to have dinner with her in the hospital wing. He even hoped that she would feel well enough the next day to take part in the Christmas celebration in the Great Hall.

But his hopes were shattered when Poppy knocked at his classroom door a few hours later.

~ ~ ~

Cassandra was calm when Severus arrived at the hospital wing. And when she caught sight of him, she reached out her hand and smiled. It was a tired smile, but it did reach her eyes. And Severus knew that she was smiling for him and him alone.

Her hand was clammy when he took it and cramped around his when a coughing fit made her whole body shake. And he held on to her hand, wrapped his free arm around her shoulder and hoped that his touch would at least give her some comfort.

He did not notice how the hours passed. He just sat by Cassandra's side, held her hand and saw her drift in and out of sleep, each time endlessly relieved when she opened her eyes again to look at him. He wasn't ready to let her go. There was still so much he wanted to tell her. But the words failed him, and he could only hope that his caresses and kisses were enough to make her understand how much he loved her and how much he would miss her.

Towards the evening, Cassandra's coughing subsided, and for some minutes Severus managed to convince himself that her time had not come yet, that they didn't need to take farewell just yet. But deep down he knew that he was fooling himself. And when Poppy came to take Cassandra's pulse and sadly shook her head, Severus knew for certain that the battle had been lost.

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

Shortly before midnight, her hand cramped around his once more. And Severus felt a wave of panic wash over him as he felt her body tense up in his arms. He knew it was time.

'I love you, Severus,' she breathed, her blue eyes searching for his black ones.

'And I love you, Cassandra,' he replied. 'I love you more than anything else in the world.'

Then the blue eyes fluttered shut, and the grip of her hand around his softened. And Severus did not even know if she had still heard him when he had told her that he loved her, too.

Staring blankly ahead of himself, his mind and heart in torment, Severus sat there on the bed with his arms tightly wrapped around Cassandra's body. He was holding his future in his arms, the future that had slipped away from him. It had once been a bright future and filled with joy. But now it had shrivelled into a black and empty existence.

'You have to come back to me, Cassandra,' he begged, not really sure if he was thinking the words or saying them out loud. 'I cannot live without you. I need you by my side to go on. Please, come back. I cannot do this without you.'

He talked and talked, repeated the statement of his inability to go on over and over again, until it felt true, until he was convinced that everything was meaningless. He did not want to exist anymore. He wanted to slip away into darkness, follow his beloved wherever she had gone.

It was Minerva who brought him back. He had not even heard her enter the ward or approach the bed but first became aware of her presence when she gingerly placed her hand on his shoulder.

'You need to go to bed, Severus,' she said in a tearful voice. 'You need to rest.'

'There is no point in resting, Minerva,' he replied in a harsh tone. 'Just like there is no point in waking up tomorrow morning.'

The older woman's hand brushed his cheek, and Severus slightly leant into her touch. It felt warm, comforting. And when Minerva spoke again, the tears in his eyes burnt hotter than ever before.

'Yes, there is a point, Severus,' she said. 'Eydis needs you.'

This chapter is dedicated to a strong little boy whose name I won't mention here. His Mummy died from cancer when he was barely three years old. He still tells everyone that she is on a journey around the world, from which she will never return.

He misses his Mummy sorely and often cries because she left him and his Daddy behind. But he firmly believes that she is now in a wonderful and sunny place.

IX: His Reason to Go On

Chapter 9 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, and to Apple Blossom for beta reading.

A/N: Those of you who have read *The Way Home* The Yule Edition will recognise certain passages in this chapter. I am too fond of that piece to completely ignore it.

Chapter IX: His Reason to Go On

Eydis had been fast asleep in her bed when Severus had returned to the dungeons shortly after midnight. How she had gotten there, he did not know. Maybe Ginny had brought her back to the castle. Or maybe one of the elves had picked her up at the Potters'.

It did not matter.

He had lingered for some moments at the door to the nursery, envying his daughter for her dreams and the peaceful smile on her face. In the little one's dreams Cassandra was still alive, and there was still hope and light in the world.

After having carefully closed the door, Severus had staggered into the master bedroom where he had let himself fall onto the bed. He had been too exhausted to take off his robes and boots. But that had not matter either.

Nothing mattered anymore.

When he awoke in the early hours of Christmas morning, he felt washed-out, and every muscle in his body was aching. Out of sheer habit, he turned to his side and reached out for his beloved wife. But his hands closed around cold air, the bed sheets beside him were empty.

At first, Severus did not understand. His brain was too tired, his mind too tormented to allow him to form any coherent thought. Why was he alone? Where was Cassandra? And why had he slept fully-dressed?

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: Cassandra was gone and so was the light of his life.

Severus wanted to scream, wanted to cry and let the tears wash away his pain. But the tears did not come. He could feel them burning in his eyes, felt them form a lump in his throat, but they did not liquefy, did not run down his cheeks. And he wondered if he would ever be able to cry for Cassandra.

Her scent was still there, all around him. It lingered on the pillow that he pressed against his face to stifle his dry sobs and on the blanket he wrapped around himself to drive forth the cold that made him shiver. And when he closed his eyes, he could imagine her sitting close to him, wrapping her arms around him, warming him. But he knew that she was not there, that she would never be there again. And he doubted that the chill would ever leave his bones and soul.

How long he had been sitting on the edge of their bed, tightly wrapped into a blanket that neither provided warmth nor comfort, Severus did not know. Nor did he know how he had managed to gather the strength to drag himself into the shower and back to the bedroom to get dressed. He could feel his body moving, but he did not feel in control of it. It was just carrying out its daily routines, even though all that Severus wanted was to crawl into the darkest corner of the dungeon and just be forgotten.

His focus first returned as his eyes fell upon a Christmas present on the bottom of the wardrobe. It was wrapped into sparkly silver-blue paper, and the memory of Cassandra sitting on the floor in his study, struggling with the wrapping paper, was as clear in front of Severus eyes as if he were looking at the scene right that moment. The package contained a Muggle dollhouse. Cassandra had bought it already in November, knowing that it was their daughter's greatest wish.

Eydis. With a bang Severus realised that their daughter did not know yet. He had neither had the strength nor the heart to wake the little one up last night. And so she was still sleeping peacefully in her bed, blissfully oblivious to the fact that her mother had gone.

How was he going to tell her? What was he going to say?

Silently, he opened the door to the nursery. If Eydis was still asleep, he would not want to wake her. He would let her sleep, would let her dwell in a world where her mother was still alive for just a little while longer.

But Eydis was already sitting up in her bed, talking to her teddy bear. And when she looked up at him, Severus felt his breath catch in his throat, felt once more the endless sadness wrap its cold fingers around his heart. Eydis had her mother's eyes.

Fighting the impulse to look away, Severus approached his daughter. He had still no idea what to say.

'Has Mummy gone away now?'

Her question made Severus freeze in mid-movement. How did the little one know? Who had told her?

'Mummy hugged me very tight yesterday,' Eydis went on, imitating her mother's embrace by clutching her teddy bear towards her chest.

That was when Severus understood that Cassandra had known. She had known that she would never see her daughter again. And he was endlessly relieved that she had had the chance to take farewell.

He picked a dark blue satin dress for Eydis and sat down to braid her unruly hair. It was as red as the sunset over the moss-clad hills of Iceland, and it smelled of honey. And with a sigh Severus remembered that Cassandra's hair had always smelled of honey, too.

Taming Eydis' hair was a difficult task, but the little one neither wriggled nor fidgeted. She let her father work in silence, and when he was done, she turned to wrap her little arms around his neck.

'Thank you, Daddy.'

And Severus hugged her tight while the tears in his eyes burnt hotter than ever before.

~ ~ ~

Severus was not prepared for the scene that greeted him in the Great Hall. To be honest, he had not known what to expect.

He had figured that the staff had been informed of Cassandra's demise. And he had mentally prepared for them shaking his hand and expressing their condolences. But he had certainly not been prepared for the oppressing silence that settled over the Hall as he made his way towards the staff table with Eydis on his arm.

The Ravenclaw banner behind the high table was draped with a black, thin fabric and was the only banner that was still hanging at full height. The other House banners had been lowered, so had the Hogwarts coat of arms. And even the Christmas decorations seemed to sparkle much less than usual.

The handful of students that had remained at Hogwarts for the holidays were seated at one single table in front of the staff table. They had all raised their heads to look at their Potions master as he had entered the Hall, their eyes filled with compassion, some even with tears. And when Severus approached them, some of them lowered their heads, others raised their glasses and toasted silently towards him. A Ravenclaw girl started to sob, and her friend wrapped her arms around her. And Severus strode by, his eyes resolutely on Cassandra's empty chair.

The staff's reaction was similar to the students'. Filius nodded silently towards Severus, Hagrid blew his nose rather noisily, and Poppy sobbed silently into her handkerchief. Minerva's face looked stern, but her reddened eyes showed clearly that she had been crying earlier.

But when Severus 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. For a long time, her sobbing was the only sound to be heard in the Great Hall. And Severus kept his eyes on the plate full of toast in front of him.

'Daddy, why does Aunt Minny cry?'

Severus looked down at his daughter and swallowed dryly. His throat was almost too tight to speak.

'Aunt Minny is sad because your Mummy left, little one.'

The little girl seemed to contemplate his words for some moments and frowned.

'But Mummy never cried,' she stated in a clear voice. 'Mummy always laughed.'

Severus felt the lump in his throat become bigger. Cassandra's laughter had been the first thing he had noticed about her. It had been in a park in Reykjavik. He had been sitting on a bench, reading a book, and Cassandra had been sitting in the grass with a friend. Her laughter had sounded so happy, too genuine to ignore. He had loved it, cherished it. And first now he realised that he would never hear it again. And the thought was almost too much for him to bear.

Panic rose in his chest, made it hard for him to breathe. He knew that he had come to the point where he could not pretend anymore. He knew he would break. But he could not lose control here in the Great Hall. Not in front of his colleagues and students, not in front of Eydis.

His eyes searched for Poppy, and the medi-witch immediately stretched out her arms for Eydis and took her from him. She had understood his plea without him having to say anything. And Severus knew that she would take good care of Eydis until he was able to return.

He left the Great Hall with his robes billowing behind him, never noticing the alarmed looks on his colleagues' face. And had he noticed, he would not have cared. He just had to get away from them.

~ ~ ~

In the sanctuary of his study Severus started pacing: from the door to the bookshelf, from there to the desk and then back to the door, the same route over and over again until his head started spinning and his feet wouldn't carry him no more. Then he grabbed a bottle of Ogden's, poured himself a healthy measure and downed it, never considering effects the alcohol would have on his empty stomach. He barely made it to the bathroom before he started retching.

When his stomach was completely empty and his retching resulted in nothing more than painful spasms, Severus stripped off his robes and stepped into the shower. The warm water made the aching muscles in his neck relax but it didn't do anything to soothe the pain in his heart.

Cassandra's soap was still lying in the soap dish, and Severus picked it up, held it to his nose and inhaled the familiar scent of musk and honey. He remembered a New Year's night many years ago, when he had washed Cassandra's hair, dried her body with a fluffy towel and tender kisses. He had made sweet love to her that night. And it had been the night he had offered his heart to her.

It felt wrong how his body reacted to the memory of their lovemaking. And at the same time, it felt so right. Severus stroked himself with a firm hand, imagined hearing Cassandra's soft voice whisper words of love into his ear, even felt her breath tickle his skin. In his mind she was there, right beside him. With his climax came the tears. His body started shaking with sobs, and Severus sank to his knees in the shower, slamming his fist against the tiles until the skin broke and his blood mixed with the warm water that was running down the drain.

What was the point, he wondered? Why did he still exist? Never again would he hear Cassandra laugh. Never again would he see her smile. And never again would he feel her tender touch. There was no point. He has lost his light. His future was made up of nothing but darkness.

His shaving knife on the edge of the basin looked so tempting. It was sharp. One swift cut and everything would be over. More of his blood all of it would go down the drain and with it all of his pain. Yes, that was what he wanted: end it all, drift away.

He had already stretched out his hand when he heard her voice: 'Don't do this, Severus.'

He heard Cassandra's voice as clearly as if she were standing right behind him. And in his desperation he answered her, repeating the words he had whispered the night before, when he had still been cradling her dead body in his arms.

'You have to come back to me, Cassandra. I need you by my side. I cannot do this without you.'

He knew that she was not there. He knew that his over-tired mind was playing tricks on him. But her voice was so soft, provided so much comfort. He wanted to believe that she was there.

'You are strong, Severus,' she whispered. 'And you have friends who will be there for you if only you let them: Minerva, Poppy, the Potters. Let them help you, Severus. Don't push them away.'

'What is the point?' he asked. 'Give me a reason to go on, Cassandra. Just one.'

'The name of your reason is Eydis, Severus. Take care of her. Make her as happy as you have made me.'

X: The End of December

Chapter 10 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, and to my lovely beta Apple Blossom.

A/N: Those of you who have read *The Way Home The Yule Edition* will recognise certain passages in this chapter. I am too fond of that piece to completely ignore it.

Chapter X: The End of December

Half an hour later, Severus stomped into the staff room, wearing his thick travelling cloak and carrying Eydis' woolly cloak, gloves and hat.

The little one was sitting on Poppy's lap in front of the crackling fire, drinking hot cacao and explaining to the medi-witch how the story of *Babbitty Rabbitty* was supposed to be read. When she caught sight of her father, her little face shone up and she was by his side in a blink of an eye.

'Daddy, why are you wearing your cloak?' she asked. 'Are you going out? Can I come?'

'Yes, Eydis. You and me, we are going out,' Severus replied, already crouching down get Eydis' clothes on. 'Daddy is going to take you for a broom ride across the lake.'

The little one started jumping up and down from excitement, but Poppy and Minerva looked at Severus as if he had lost his mind.

'Do you think this is a wise thing to do, Severus?' Minerva asked in a low, concerned tone. 'On a day like ... today?'

Severus got up and scowled. He did not want Minerva to elaborate her thought. Not with Eydis in the room.

'Poppy, would you mind taking Eydis outside to check if she needs a second pair of socks?' he asked in a calm but imperative tone.

To his relief, the medi-witch understood his hint immediately and ushered the little one out of the room.

When the door had closed, Severus turned towards Minerva.

'Are you actually suggesting that hiding under a blanket, wallowing in sorrow, would do either of us any good today, Minerva? Perhaps you would like me to empty my stock of Firewhisky as well?'

'Well, this is what you usually do, isn't it, Severus? Hide in your dungeon, shutting out anybody who cares for you and wants to offer a helping hand.'

Witch and wizard just stared at each other for some moments, and Severus felt a muscle twitch in his jaw.

Minerva knew him very well by now. She had seen him in his worst moments: she had seen him being bullied as a child, had seen the dark bruises on his face every time he had returned from school holidays. She had seen him when he had been on his knees after Lily's death. She had seen him close the door of the dungeon behind him, making sure no one would come too close. But she had also trusted him when no one except Dumbledore had. And she had given him a new life. She was indeed the best friend he had on this cold Christmas morning.

'Not this time, Minerva,' he sighed. 'This is not just about me this time.'

He sank onto a chair, running his hand through his dark hair. And for the first time that day, Severus Snape opened up his armour and bared his soul.

'My world had become a dark place last night, Minerva,' he said in a voice that was uncharacteristically soft for the stern Potions master. 'And at some point this morning I seriously considered putting an end to all of this. I have had enough, Minerva. I am tired of the darkness. But I realised that there is still a light burning for me.'

'Eydis,' Minerva whispered, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder.

And Severus nodded. 'I think there is a reason that we were blessed with this child. And I think there is a reason that she is the spitting image of her mother. And I am not going to let this child remember Christmas as the day she learnt that her mother died. I want to see her happy, and I want to see her laugh. Just like her mother always had.'

Minerva withdrew her hand and turned away. And Severus knew that she was hiding her tears from him. She did not want him to see.

So he stood and left the room. He, too, knew his friend well enough by now to know when she needed to be left alone.

~ ~ ~

'Faster, Daddy. Faster.'

Eydis' squeals of delight echoed over the frozen lake, and Severus tightened his grip around her and steered his broom into a dive to pick up more speed. He hadn't flown that reckless in years, but Eydis' laughter told him that he was doing the right thing, that he had made the right choice.

Yes, part of him longed for the seclusion of the dungeons, for the illusion of peace alcohol could have created in his mind. He even saw the sharp edge of his shaving knife in front of his inner eye and once more considered the idea of just letting go, of slipping away. He did not even need the knife. Crashing his broom at such a high speed would surely be fatal.

But every time he heard Eydis squeal and felt her body shake with yet another fit of laughter, Severus realised that he had put down the knife for a good reason and that he was not going to crash his broom. Not now, not ever. Not as long as Eydis needed him.

He had given his daughter a promise the night she was born. He had promised her that he would always be there for her, that he would protect her and love her. And he was not going to break his promise now when she needed him the most, when *he* needed *her*.

Hogsmeade Village was bustling with life. As every other year, Christmas had come as a surprise to so many witches and wizards, and they were now all hunting for their last Christmas gifts, all stressed, all huddled up in their warm winter coats.

And Severus felt a strange kind of calmness settle in his mind and heart as he walked down the main street with his daughter at his hand. Maybe he could do this after all? Having lost Cassandra would always hurt, he knew that. But maybe he could fulfil his promise and make his daughter happy. And himself. For her sake.

~ ~ ~

They returned to Hogwarts by mid-afternoon. The remaining students were all outside, playing in the snow. It was amazing to see how all of them had turned into little children again, throwing snowballs at each other and building snowmen. Some of the older students had managed to bewitch some snowmen to walk around and sing Christmas carols. And Severus did not even try to stop Eydis from running after the white giants.

She had been fascinated at the ones outside the Three Broomsticks where they had stopped for hot cacao. Every time the carolling snowmen had walked past the window, Eydis had tucked at her father's sleeve to make him watch. Oh, she had been so happy. And when Rosmerta had approached their table to inquire about Cassandra's health, Severus had neither had the heart nor the strength to tell her the truth. He did not want to burst the bubble but share his daughter's happiness. Just for an hour or two. Just for today.

He lingered in the alcove as two Ravenclaws packed Eydis onto a wooden sleigh and started pulling her around the yard. They loved the little one, just as most of the other students of Hogwarts. 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. And Severus was glad to see the joy in his daughter's eyes.

Eydis was all but exhausted when the elves called everyone to dinner. But her cheeks were rosy, and there was a smile on her lips. She had certainly enjoyed herself that Christmas day.

She fell asleep in Severus' lap at the dinner table in the Great Hall, and he carried her down to the dungeon and to her bed. Her arms were tightly wrapped around his neck, and for a while, Severus was not sure if he really wanted to let go of her. And when he finally did, he felt strangely cold.

He was just about to close the door to the nursery behind him when he heard Eydis call for him.

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

With great effort, Severus swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat, felt the cold fingers of sorrow tighten their grip around his heart. Oh, he wished he could tell Cassandra. He wished she would be waiting for him in their bedroom, her arms open and a smile playing around her lips. But he knew she would not be there. And the thought of his empty bed made his eyes fill with tears.

But Eydis' voice had sounded too happy for him to reply anything else than: 'Yes, little one. I will tell Mummy.'

~ ~ ~

There was a single candle burning on the nightstand when Severus entered the master bedroom, and he found a tiny box on his pillow, wrapped in dark green paper. Surely one of the elves had put it there. The box contained a silver locket, engraved with a viper with dark, mysteriously glittering eyes. Cassandra's Patronus.

As Severus opened the locket, his hands shaking, Cassandra looked up at him with her heavenly blue eyes and smiled for him, just for him. A sob shook his body, and he

had to blink fiercely to be able to read the tiny card.

Dearest Severus,

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

Merry Christmas,

Cassandra

That was when Severus sank onto his bed, dropping the card as he brought his hands to his face. All of a sudden he felt tired, so endlessly tired, and endlessly desperate. What if she had not heard him? What if he had said it too late?

'Did you hear me say it, Cassandra?' he whispered into the darkness. 'Did you hear me say that I love you?'

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

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

Yes, she knew. She had written it in silver ink on the dark green card that was now lying at Severus' feet. He would pick it up later, tuck it into his pocket and treasure it until the day he died. He would always carry it with him, as the last proof of her love.

He slept peacefully that Christmas night, with his face buried in the pillow that still carried her scent. And in his dreams Cassandra was there, right beside him, holding him in her arms until the morning.

~ ~ ~

Severus had never realised that the Shrieking Shack was so close to the little hill on which Hogsmeade cemetery was situated. Maybe that was why people had so easily accepted the idea that the rumbling building was haunted.

When he knelt to lay a rose on his wife's grave, his eyes lingered on the shack, and his thoughts started drifting. He had almost died there, twice. Once due to a juvenile prank and once at the hands of the most evil creature that had ever wandered the face of the earth.

His old life had ended there in the Shrieking Shack when the Dark Lord had set Nagini on him, and he had been given the chance to a new life. He had taken it, started over and found love. And now he was back, lying to rest the woman he loved, and once more it was time to start a new life. A life without her.

But he was not alone. Beside him stood his little daughter, holding flowers in her hand, and behind him stood a handful of people who actually cared:

Minerva was looking stern with her hair in a tight bun and her hands firmly clasped around a white handkerchief with which she, now and then, silently wiped away a tear. She had always been there for him. They had shared countless cups of tea and the occasional glass of Ogden's. And Severus knew that he could always count on her support. Even or especially when he himself did not have the strength to ask for help.

Poppy was crying openly, not ashamed to hide her tears. She had taken care of Cassandra over the last couple of weeks, had made sure she never wanted for anything. She had even put up an extra bed beside Cassandra's, so Severus and Eydis could spend the night in the hospital wing whenever they wanted to. And despite her being a medi-witch, Cassandra's death had been hard on Poppy.

Filius had been Cassandra's Head of House, her mentor. He had made sure that she had had somewhere to go when her family had disowned her. And he had held on to her wand from the day she had turned her back on the Wizarding world and given it back to her the day she had been ready to return. Severus never knew exactly what Filius had said to Cassandra that Christmas Eve five years ago. But whatever he had said, it had opened Cassandra's mind to the possibility of following Severus back home.

Per, too, had come. At first, Severus had been worried to invite a Muggle. He had not known that Per had known about Cassandra being a witch for years. But now, it seemed natural that she had told him. He was, after all, her oldest friend. He had been there for her during the loneliest days of her life. He had made her go on. And Severus was endlessly grateful for it.

And then there were the Potters. Severus had brought Eydis there the day after Christmas. Cassandra and Ginny had agreed to let the children have a play date after the celebrations, and Severus had seen no reason to disappoint his daughter by not going. On the contrary. He wanted Eydis' life to be as normal as possible.

Harry Potter had silently shaken Severus' hand and gawkily patted his shoulder. And Ginny had given him a quick hug and then let go. Not once had she asked him the awkward question of how he was holding up. But when she had found him standing in the garden, his fists clenched and his eyes burning with tears that he was unable to shed, she had told him that she would take care of Eydis that night if he wanted to be on his own. And he had just nodded at her, and gratefully Disapparated.

Yes, it was an odd collection of people that had come together on the little hill not far away from the Shrieking Shack that December morning. But they all had two things in common: they had all come to take farewell and to make sure Severus would not forget that they were there.

XI: The Apple of His Eye

Chapter 11 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, and to my lovely beta Apple Blossom.

Chapter XI: The Apple of His Eye

'Daddy! Daddy!'

Eydis' yelling made Severus drop the entire amount of Belladonna he was holding into his cauldron. And ignoring the stench that rose from the now spoiled potion, he

sprinted from his study to the nursery, prepared for the worst. Just like he always was.

The last six months had not been kind on Severus' nerves. He was tense, edgy and ready to strike at any point, just like a dragon mother protecting her eggs. Those who knew him well whispered behind his back, said that he was crankier and more fear-provoking than he had been even during Voldemort's reign of terror.

He heard their whispers, but he did not care. He did not have the luxury to relax. He had a daughter to protect. Ever since Cassandra had passed away, Eydis' welfare had been his first priority. He rushed her to the infirmary at the first sign of a sniffle. He never closed the door to the nursery at night, afraid that he otherwise wouldn't hear her if she called for him. And when he was not teaching, he never let her out of his sight.

Some people claimed that Severus was overdoing it, that he was too protective, too shielding. But they did not understand that he had no choice. If anything happened to Eydis, he would not know what to do. She was his reason to go on, his light in the dark. Without his little daughter, there was no point in struggling on.

'Daddy, look!'

When Severus saw his daughter's broad smile, his pulse and breathing relaxed immediately, and the anxiety in his chest was replaced by a feeling of pride when he realised why the little one had called for him: she was levitating three balls in the air, one blue, one green, one silver. She made them zoom around her room, made them chase each other, made them dance like fairies in the moonlight. And Nicodemus, the old tabby, seemed to have become a kitten again and was jumping up and down, trying to catch one of the balls.

It wasn't the first time Eydis was performing magic. She had managed to Disapparate once when Severus had tried to make her put on a dress she thoroughly hated. He had chucked it later that day. She frequently made the peas from her dinner plate float to someone else's. But Severus always made sure they floated right back, preferably directly into her mouth. And on several occasions, she had turned James Potter's hair green when he had been teasing her. That action had been rewarded with a smirk from her father.

Yes, Eydis had done magic before, but this was the first time she seemed to be doing it on purpose.

Severus caught the three balls in his hands as they came zooming towards him and then sent them rolling across the floor for Nicodemus to play with. But now the tabby seemed to remember his age and returned to his basket instead to snuggle up in that horrid jumper Molly had given Severus for Christmas. It was all ragged by now, more or less shredded to pieces by the tabby's claws. But Nicodemus defended the shreds with his life, and it would have taken a braver man than Severus to try to remove the jumper. Despite his age, that cat was feisty!

'Did you make the balls fly on purpose?' Severus inquired as he settled on the edge of Eydis' bed and pulled the little one onto his lap.

'Yes,' she replied, a slight frown on her face. 'Was that wrong?'

Severus smiled a tiny smile and let his fingers brush over his daughter's forehead to make the frown disappear.

'No, little one,' he explained. 'It was not wrong. You are a witch. It is a good thing that you are starting to explore your powers.'

'What else will I be able to do, Daddy?'

Once more Severus smiled, this time at his daughter's inquisitiveness.

'There is almost no end to a witch's powers, little one,' he went on. 'In due time you will learn how to make objects change their shape, make them fly or vanish. Maybe you will even learn how to change your own shape one day. Or maybe you will learn how to fly without a broom.'

The little one was beaming now, and her frown had all but disappeared.

'Can I learn all this now, Daddy?' she begged. 'Please, can I?'

'In due time, Eydis, in due time,' Severus replied. 'You are still little. And you have all the time in the world.'

~ ~ ~

It was a peaceful summer. Severus had once more rented the little cottage at the outskirts of Hogsmeade. He wanted Eydis to be able to spend most of the summer outdoors and make friends with the other wizard children in the village. Or at least, that was what he told people.

His true reason for renting the cottage was another, though. Cassandra had always been healthy and happy there. They had spent three wonderful summers in that cottage, three summers filled with joy and laughter. And that was how Severus wanted to remember Cassandra: the smiling, red-haired witch who would play hide and seek with Eydis in the sunshine and then, late at night, lie curled-up on his lap on the swing in the apple tree. That was his Cassandra, the one he would always carry in his heart, not the pale shadow that had withered away in the infirmary at Hogwarts. And it was the Cassandra he wanted Eydis to remember as well.

Now and then, the little one would ask what Mummy was doing and if she was alright. And each time the question drove a dagger into Severus' heart and made a feeling of panic rise in his chest. He did not have any answer to that question, and in his opinion, Eydis was still too little to understand that her mother had gone forever. He did not know how he could make her understand. And he was not sure that he wanted to either.

'Mummy is fine,' he would say with a lump in his throat. 'And when you close your eyes at night, Mummy will be there and watch over you.'

And so far, the little one seemed content with his answer and never asked when Mummy would come back.

But she did miss her. And Severus was glad to know that the little one had not forgotten her yet.

When he had asked Eydis to help him pack their things to move to the cottage for the summer, she had at once run to her nightstand and picked up the one picture she possessed of her mother. It had been taken on top of the Astronomy Tower during sunset. Cassandra was smiling, and her hair was shining redder than the setting sun.

'Mummy has to come, too,' the little one had said, holding out the picture towards her father. And he had taken it from her and carefully put into his suitcase.

When they had arrived at the cottage, Eydis had immediately asked for the picture and then placed it on the windowsill in the kitchen. And Severus had ruffled her hair and smiled, although sadly. The kitchen had always been Cassandra's favourite place.

Even though he had told Eydis that she would have to wait to learn magic, Severus could not keep himself from exploring her powers with her. She had developed quite a knack for Levitation and had gone from randomly levitating toys to making them float to predestined spots. Severus would let her set the table by magic now and then, even if that meant plates crashing to the ground and breaking into a thousand pieces. But out there in the garden behind their little cottage it did not matter. And little Eydis tried again and again, showing an incredible stubbornness for a four year old. And Severus couldn't help but smirk: that stubbornness was certainly a family trait.

~ ~ ~

'And you are sure that you don't want to come to London with us tomorrow?'

Severus cocked an eyebrow. 'Ginny,' he said with his best teacher-voice. 'Do I really look like a man who would enjoy a day of clothes' shopping with you, your mother and four toddlers?'

Ginny grinned. 'No, but neither does Harry. And he comes along anyway.'

'That, my dear, is because your husband, classical Gryffindor as he is, has no survival instinct whatsoever,' Severus pointed out, his face as impassive as if he had just declared that the world was indeed not flat. 'I, on the other hand, am a Slytherin. Self-preservation is part of my nature.'

Ginny burst into laughter, and Severus turned back to his cauldron. This was the fourth batch of Essence of Dittany he was brewing this summer. It was beyond his understanding how often four-year-olds managed to scrape their knees and elbows.

As if they had been waiting for their cue, Eydis and the Potter boys came scrambling into the kitchen, all three of them covered with grass stains and abrasions, playing with a Muggle football. Or at least, the boys were playing. Eydis was just jumping up and down between the two boys, trying to reach the ball, but she was too short. And by the look on her face, she was growing more and more frustrated.

'Boys! No ball-play in the house!' Ginny's voice cut through the laughter. 'You're not allowed to do that at home either.'

The boys froze at their mother's voice, and the ball fell to the floor. That was when Eydis got hold of it, not with her hands but with magic, and in the next moment she sent it soaring across the kitchen.

'Eydis, no!' Severus bellowed, his voice echoing through the kitchen.

And then all hell broke loose.

If his voice had startled Eydis, or if she had simply lost control over the ball, Severus did not know. But suddenly, the cursed football dropped on height and came crashing down into the cauldron on the kitchen table. And Severus had just enough time to grab his daughter's arm and pull her out of harm's way.

The cauldron hissed angrily and boiled over, and the burning hot potion drenched Severus' left side. The skin of his arm blistered immediately, but he did not react to the pain. All he could think of was the fact that Eydis had been standing in the exact spot he was standing in mere seconds earlier. The potion would have hit her right in the face.

'You are not allowed to use magic unsupervised,' he hissed through clenched teeth, trying to control his terror and the pain in his arm both at once. 'How many times do I have to tell you this before it sinks in?'

'I'm sorry, Daddy,' the little one replied, staring at him with big eyes.

'You could have seriously injured yourself, Eydis. Do you realise that?' His voice was harsher than he had intended, and he was still holding onto her arm, shaking her to make a point. 'Do you?'

Eydis bottom lip started to quiver, and she was now fighting against her father's grip, trying to make him let go of her. And when Severus saw the tears in her blue eyes, he did let go of her as if burnt and staggered backwards until he hit the table.

That was when Eydis took off. In a blink of an eye she was out of the kitchen. Seconds later the backdoor slammed shut. And for some endless moments Severus just stared after her, his heart racing.

He knew the look he had seen in her eyes. It was the look of fear. His reaction had scared his little daughter. ~~He~~ had scared her. And she had run away from him.

'Severus, let me look at your arm.'

Ginny's voice made Severus jerk up his head. He had forgotten that she was still there. He had forgotten about the two boys, too, but neither of them mattered at the moment. Only Eydis mattered.

Unceremoniously, he shoved Ginny out of the way and rushed out of kitchen and out into the garden. Eydis was sitting on the swing in the apple tree. But she was not swinging. She had pulled up her knees against her chest, was hugging them tight, and her head was lowered. She was crying.

She winced when Severus called her name and immediately slipped of the swing and ran into the opposite direction, up the three steps that led to the garden gate. She never saw Albus' little toy dragon that was lying on the bottom stair.

The awful sound of her knee crushing against the stone steps was followed by a howl of pain, and Severus was by his daughter's side in a blink of an eye. There was a deep cut on her right knee, and it was bleeding heavily. Eydis' face was ashen, and there were tears running down her cheeks.

Severus knelt down beside her to tend the wound, but her little hands pushed him firmly away.

'Go away,' she demanded, her tear-filled voice shaking. 'I don't want you right now. I want Mummy!'

For a moment, Severus stared at his daughter in shock. She had never pushed him away before. And since Cassandra's death, she had not once asked for her mother. Not once. Until now.

And then came the moment Severus had dreaded for months. Eydis' face screwed up as if she were in agonising pain, and her cry cut into his heart like a knife.

'Mummy!' she screamed. 'I want my Mummy! Mummy!'

Severus tried to console her. Heaven knew he tried. But her cries became shriller, her face redder and she kicked and wriggled until he finally had to let go of her. And he couldn't make himself reach out for her once more.

'Your Mummy is gone,' he whispered in desperation, for the first time articulating the words in front of his daughter. 'She will never come back.'

Severus he saw Ginny come running from the house and scoop Eydis up in her arms, heard her ask something. But he couldn't answer her, couldn't move. He was rooted to the spot, felt as if a thousand stones were dragging him to the ground.

He had failed her, failed his little daughter when she had needed him the most. He had tried so hard to replace her mother but had failed. And today he had scared her, hurt her. And she had pushed him away.

He had let her down.

~ ~ ~

Night had already fallen when Severus entered the house. Harry had taken the boys home hours ago, but Ginny was still sitting in the kitchen.

'Is Eydis alright?' Severus asked in a hoarse voice, avoiding the young woman's eyes.

'The cut looked worse than it was,' she replied, pushing a cup of tea into his direction. 'But I did use up all the Essence of Dittany you had left in your cupboard.'

Severus took a seat and closed his hands around the steaming cup. Despite the warm summer night, he felt icy cold. And Ginny's answer had not been the one the one he had hoped for. To be honest, he had all but forgotten about Eydis' injured knee. What he was concerned about was the damage he had done to her soul.

'The little one asked for you when I put her to bed,' Ginny said after a while.

That was when Severus looked up at the young with opposite him, a surprised look on his face.

'Why is it that you men always think that your children hate you for life when they tell you to go away?' Ginny asked, smiling the kind smile she had inherited from her mother. 'Harry's the same. And he should really know better by now.'

'She wanted her mother,' Severus stated in a low tone, still hanging onto his tea cup for dear life.

'Oh course Eydis wanted her mother, Severus. You had just yelled at her, and then she hurt herself. Who would you have wanted?'

'I did not mean to raise my voice.'

The confession came from the bottom of his heart, and Severus was himself surprised that he was telling Ginny Potter, his ex-student, a woman twenty-two years his minor. But it felt right to tell her. He trusted her. She would understand.

Again, Ginny smiled. 'Don't you think it breaks my heart every time I realise that I have yelled at my children, especially when they didn't deserve it? Eydis did something stupid that could have put her in danger and you reacted. A little vehemently perhaps, but that's normal, Severus. It's natural. You are a good father. Don't doubt yourself.'

Then she got up, put her tea cup into the sink and then stepped towards the fireplace. 'Go, peek inside her room, will you, Severus?' she begged. 'The little one might still be awake.'

With a flash of green light, Ginny was gone, and Severus was alone in his kitchen, still clutching onto his tea cup as if it were a life-buoy. Did he dare face his daughter right now?

Then his eyes fell on Cassandra's picture on the window sill. She was smiling at him, just as she always was. And for a moment Severus could have sworn that she was beckoning towards the nursery door and that the room was filled with the scent of honey.

'I wish you were here, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'I truly wish you were.'

Eydis seemed to be fast asleep as he approached her bed, and Severus carefully lifted up her blanket to have a look at her knee. It was still swollen, the cut still visible. But the Essence of Dittany was working its magic, and by the next day, all there would be left of the cut would be a faint, white scar.

Severus was just about to go back to the kitchen when Eydis called for him.

'Daddy, don't go. Please don't leave me alone.'

He turned to find her stretching out her arms towards him, and he knelt down beside her bed to embrace her.

'I did not mean to yell at you, little one,' he whispered, holding her close towards his chest. 'I am sorry, Eydis.'

Then Eydis' tiny arms tightened around her father's neck, and he thankfully closed his eyes. That simple gesture meant more to him than any words she could have said.

XII: Her Mother's Gift

Chapter 12 of 20

Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, my beta Apple Blossom and all you faithful readers out there.

Chapter XII: Her Mother's Gift

Severus allowed himself a tiny smile as he put the lid on the dark-brown wicker basket, hiding the meowing kitten from sight. It was indeed an adorable little creature, even the stern Potions master had to admit that. He would, however, never do so in public.

When he had tried to smuggle the kitten unseen into the castle, Minerva had caught him, and he had been forced to cut off her exclamations of delight by telling her that he intended to feed the kitten to the five foot snake that served as Slytherin's mascot this year. Minerva had gaped at him with a mixture of shock and disgust, and he had stalked past her, desperately trying to hide his smirk. Of course he would never feed this kitten to that vicious snake that resided in the Slytherin common room since last summer. The little creature was far too cute for that kind of destiny.

The first thing Severus had noticed about the kitten had been its eyes. They had been glowing in the semi-dark of the Magical Menagerie, where he had actually intended to buy some rats for the Slytherin snake. Yes, glowing was exactly the right word to describe the kitten's bright yellow eyes. And its fur was shining in warm brown and red tones. The perfect familiar for the little red-haired witch that was the daughter of Severus Snape.

Eydis would be overjoyed with a new cat. Or at least, Severus hoped she would.

She had been heart-broken the day Nicodemus had not woken up after its mid-morning nap. They had played together the whole morning, and then the old tabby had snuggled up in his basket, buried its nose in the shreds of Severus' old sweater and silently passed away. And Eydis had cried bitter tears when she had found her dear playmate and realised that he would never wake up again.

Severus had cradled his daughter against his chest and stroked her hair, explained to her that the tabby had lived a long and joyful life, and that he had not suffered. And the little one had wiped her tears with her sleeve and said that she understood. But Severus could see Eydis' lip quiver every time she passed the spot where Nicodemus' basket had stood since the day she had been born.

Severus missed the old tabby, too. Nicodemus had been a dear friend to him for almost ten years. Had it not been for the cat's curiosity and its annoying habit of climbing bookshelves, Severus would never have found the Black family ring, and he would never have considered the possibility of Cassandra being a witch. And maybe, she would never have told him. And maybe, they would never have found their way home.

Yes, he missed Nicodemus, too. And maybe that was why he had not considered buying a new cat. But when this little kitten had looked at him with its bright yellow eyes, he had not been able to resist. And Eydis' upcoming birthday had been the perfect excuse to purchase the flaming fur-ball.

Seven. Severus could hardly believe that his little daughter was turning seven already. It seemed like only yesterday that Eydis had been a baby. It seemed like only yesterday that he had held her in his arms for the first time and carried her to her mother's bed and seen the endless joy in Cassandra's eyes.

Oh, Cassandra. Severus swallowed dryly and willed the lump in his throat to disappear. It was on days like these that he missed his wife so much that his heart actually ached. Three and a half years had passed since she had passed away, and still Severus would wake up on certain mornings and reach out for her, just to find the bed sheets beside him cold and empty. And on those days, he would gladly sell his soul to have her back, to see her smile, to hear her laugh.

Those were the days when he would lock himself in his study, hide from the world and pretend that he was too busy to even attend a meal in the Great Hall. And his colleagues and friends had learnt that it was best to leave him alone on those days, as he would lash out at anyone who even tried to approach him. Anyone but Eydis.

How often she had carried a plate of food down to the dungeons in the evening to make sure that he ate something, Severus did not know. He did not even know if bringing him food was her own idea or Minerva's. It didn't really matter anyway. The moment the little one would enter his private study, he would feel the ice around his heart melt. For *her* he would put away his cauldron, leave the dungeon and go up to the Great Hall. For *her* he would even visit the Potters. For *her* he would go to the gates of hell.

A tiny meow from the basket made Severus snap out of his reverie, and he lifted the lid to give the kitten one of his trademark glares.

'If you dare spoil the surprise, I swear you will become snake food after all,' he snarled.

But when the kitten looked up at him with its big yellow eyes, his glare dissolved into thin air, even the stern Severus Snape couldn't help but smile.

For a moment, he considered putting Muffliato on the basket but decided against it. If the kitten should happen to meow before Eydis had opened the basket, the little one would surely smile. And a smile from his daughter was worth more than all the Goblin gold in the world to Severus. Her smile was the light in his world.

~ ~ ~

Eydis was already sitting up in her bed as Severus entered her room, and she reached out her arms towards her father and indeed gave him one of the sweetest smiles in the world.

'Daddy, is my birthday present in there?' she exclaimed and pointed at the basket, her smile growing wider by the second.

Severus tried not to grin and cocked an eyebrow instead. 'Good morning to you, too, Miss Snape,' he replied, towering over his daughter and looking down his nose at her.

Eydis bit her lip and lowered her gaze. 'I'm sorry, sir,' she mumbled.

Severus was on his knees in front of her in a blink of an eye. He had certainly not meant to chide her. Sometimes he simply forgot that she was just a little child who was easily hurt and frightened by his intimidating glare.

He cupped her chin and made her look at him. 'Happy birthday, little one,' he said softly before placing a tender kiss on her forehead.

'How old are you now?' he asked jokingly. 'Five?'

Eydis narrowed her eyes and gave him a look that could only come from Snape genes. 'Seven, Daddy. I am seven,' she replied, holding up seven tiny fingers. 'I am a big girl now, you know.'

'A big girl?' Severus repeated, smirking at her. 'In that case, I will have to return your present. The content of this basket is certainly not suited for a big girl.'

Even if he had wanted to, Severus would never have stood a chance to remove the basket from the bed. Eydis launched herself onto it and took off the lid before he had even finished his sentence. And he just sat down on the edge of the bed, his head resting against the headboard, and watched his daughter's face shine up like the sun.

'Daddy, it's a kitten!' she exclaimed, fishing the little animal out of the basket and holding it up before her. 'Oh, Daddy, this is the cutest kitten I have ever seen. Is it mine? Can I keep it?'

Severus crossed his arms in front of his chest and smiled. 'Only if you can give it a proper name,' he declared.

'Is it a boy or a girl?'

'It is a tomcat, little one.'

Eydis frowned and started chewing her lip, her eyes intently on the kitten.

'Eldur,' she exclaimed after a while.

Severus' left eyebrow shot up. 'Eldur? Why Eldur?'

Eydis sat down the kitten on her lap and looked up at her father. 'It's Icelandic. It means *fire*.'

'Yes, I am aware of that,' Severus replied, now frowning. 'But why do you know, little one?'

Once more, Eydis started gnawing at her lip, and Severus could see that she was not really sure if she wanted to let him in on the secret.

'I've been studying,' she finally said, very quietly, before she resolutely put the kitten back into the basket and pulled back her blanket, revealing a small stack of books.

'One of the elves brought them earlier,' she explained. 'She said they are Mummy's old books.'

Severus eyed the books carefully. They were indeed Cassandra's: dictionaries and grammar books, both Muggle languages and magical, *The Nibelung Saga*, *The Aeneis*, *Magick Potions*, *The Crone's Book of Charms and Spells*. He remembered the first time he had seen those books in her bookshelf. It had been the first time Cassandra had told him she was a witch. And he had not believed her. He had not wanted to believe her, had not dared.

'Did the elf say *why* she was bringing you these books?' he inquired, trying to shake off his memories.

Eydis nodded. 'Yes. She said Mummy wanted me to have them when I was old enough. Especially this one.'

She picked up a heavy leather-bound album and held it out towards her father. 'The elf said Mummy wanted me to read this.'

For the second time that morning, Severus felt his heart ache and a lump form in his throat. He knew this album. Cassandra had bought it shortly after Eydis had been born.

He remembered her opening it for the first time, writing in it with her favourite quill. It was a present for Eydis, she had said. She had put pictures in it, written in it regularly, and she had never allowed him to look at it.

He also remembered seeing the album once after Cassandra had passed away, the day he had cleaned out her nightstand. He had not wanted to look at it. And he was not sure if he wanted to look at it now either.

He was just about to push it away from him when Eydís put her hand onto his.

'Can we look at it together?' she asked. 'Please, Daddy?'

She never gave him a choice. Before he could object, she had snuggled up beside him and had opened the first page.

Severus recognised Cassandra's handwriting at once. There was no mistaking the slender, artistic letters or the tiny stars she had used to dot her i's with. He had always adored her handwriting.

'Daddy, will you help me read?' Eydís pleaded.

And with a raspy voice, Severus started to read the lines his beloved wife had written for her daughter:

My beloved child,

You will be reading this on your seventh birthday. So let me start by wishing you all the happiness in the world. I hope that your big day will be bright and sunny and that your Daddy has bought you a wonderful cake. One you like. Because your Daddy has no taste whatsoever when it comes to sweet things.

I wish I were there with you, my darling.

As I am writing this, you are but two years old, my sweet. Your Daddy has just tried to feed you with spinach, and you have accidentally of course turned over the plate, and it has landed in his lap. Daddy has tried to scowl at you but failed miserably. I think that he will never be truly angry with you. Try not to be angry with him either. He loves you very much, you know.

You will see that many pages in this book are empty, little one, but be assured that they will not remain so. They will reveal their secrets once you are ready for them, once you are ready to ask the right questions. And I hope they will give you the answers you are looking for.

Once more, I wish you a very happy birthday, my darling. Please tell your Daddy I love him. And be good to him, little one. He needs you just as much as you need him. And don't forget that I love you both more than anything else in the world.

Take care of each other.

Mummy

Severus' voice had become thicker with every line, and in the end he had to bite his lip to keep back the tears. His hands were shaking, and he struggled between hugging the album to his chest and throwing it as far away as he could.

Then he felt Eydís throw her arms around his neck and heard her tiny voice whisper in his ear: 'I am sorry, Daddy.'

Severus blinked back the tears and freed himself from his daughter's embrace, held her firmly by her shoulders and looked deep into her blue eyes.

'What are you sorry for, little one?'

'For not remembering Mummy,' she whispered and cast down her eyes. 'Aunt Minny says so wonderful things about her. How she laughed and smiled. And how she made you smile. And everybody says that I look just like her. But as much as I want to, I cannot remember her.'

Severus felt a stab in his heart. He could not let this happen. He could not allow his little angel to feel guilty about this. It was not her fault.

'You were just a baby when your Mummy passed away,' he tried to explain in a calm voice. 'You had far too little time with her. It is only natural that you do not remember.'

He caressed Eydís' cheek with his fingertips and silently wiped away the little tear that was hanging on her lashes.

'Your Mummy was a very smart witch, little one,' he went on. 'She knew that you were too young to remember her. And I think this is why she wanted you to have this album.'

Once more, he laid his arm around his daughter's shoulder and pulled her onto his lap. And together they turned the page and revealed the first picture that had ever been taken of Eydís: she was lying in her mother's arms, and Cassandra was smiling.

I dedicate this chapter to my dear friend star_girl. No one else squeals like you when reading the words *Severus Snape* and *kitten* in one sentence.

XIII: Where It All Began

Chapter 13 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, to my lovely beta Apple Blossom and to all you faithful readers out there.

Chapter XIII: Where It All Began

'It really does rain horizontally in Iceland,' Severus muttered under his breath before he retreated into the house again, furtively using magic to dry his wet clothes.

He had meant to go for an early morning walk around the village, but the sudden downpour had forced him to go back to the bed and breakfast where he and Eydis were renting a room for the weekend. It was a little blue house right on the edge of Hveragerði, and the elderly landlady was very proud of her garden and her hothouse where she cultivated all sorts of flowers and vegetables. Ragnheiður seemed like a nice enough lady, and Eydis had certainly taken a shine to her, but Severus was not sure if he could cope with her fussing and chatter this early in the morning. He had gotten quite a big enough dose of that upon their arrival the night before.

He and Eydis had arrived a little later than scheduled, due to the late delivery of their Portkey from the Ministry. Ragnheiður, who of course had assumed that her guests had been travelling the Muggle way, had immediately started to fuss over Eydis, exclaiming how tired the darling child must be after such a long journey, and had insisted on serving hot cacao and fudge cake. Naturally, this had resulted in a sugar-overload in the girl's system, and she had not been able to go to sleep before long after midnight. Hence, she was still asleep now.

Severus was just about to enter his room as the landlady appeared in the door that led to the kitchen.

'Góðan daginn,' she greeted him cheerfully. 'I have just put the kettle on. Do you fancy a nice cup of tea, Mr. Snape?'

Severus closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. There was no way in Hades he would be able to talk himself out of this. The Icelandic matron was too much of the Molly Weasley-type to take no for an answer. Oh well, a cup of tea was always right, and he would not be able to go back to sleep anyway. And knowing his daughter, she would scratch his eyes out if he even tried to wake her up at such an early hour. So he might as well sit in the kitchen for a while and have a cup.

'Now sit, Mr. Snape. Sit, sit, sit.' Ragnheiður ushered Severus towards a comfortable fluffy armchair and put a steaming cup into his hands. 'My very special blend,' she exclaimed, beaming at him as she took a seat opposite her guest.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled the fumes that were rising from the tea. 'Violets and lavender,' he concluded. 'And elderflower?'

Ragnheiður nodded eagerly. She seemed as excited as a five-year-old who was showing off a new toy.

'You seem to know your herbs and flowers, Mr. Snape. How come?'

'I have been known to dabble in the field of herb lore now and then,' Severus replied, hiding his smirk behind his teacup and secretly wondering how the old woman would react if he told her that he was a wizard. But then again, she might not be all that surprised. The small stone huts in her garden suggested that she at least believed the tales of elves and fairies still living in the Icelandic hills. Maybe she believed in witches and wizards, too.

Severus let his gaze wander over the moss-clad hills that surrounded Hveragerði. The sun was up now, but it could not be much later than six thirty. It had barely been five o'clock when the first rays of sun had tickled his nose and awoken him.

The hills lay peacefully in the morning sun, and Severus allowed himself to dwell in memories for some moments. He had walked across those hills many times with Cassandra. He knew that right behind them lay a geyser field and that Cassandra's old house was situated right over there, just around the small hill to the left of the village. Surely, another family lived there now.

Then his mind started to wander. What if Nicodemus had not knocked over the casket that had contained the Black family ring? Would Cassandra ever have come clean? Would she ever have confessed that she was a witch? And would he, Severus, have told her who he really was? Or would dear Minerva just have sat them down one day and told them to stop behaving like stubborn children and tell the truth to each other?

He also tried to imagine another scenario, one where Severus Smythe and Cassandra Svensson lived happily in the little house on the other side of the village, him still working at the hospital, her still trying to make her students understand the beauty of the English language. But it did not work out. As much as Severus tried to keep his thoughts in the Muggle world, they always drifted back into *his* world, *Cassandra's* world, the world of witches and wizards. They had always belonged there, both of them. They had just needed someone to walk back home with them.

With a sigh, he put down his cup and thanked the landlady for the tea. Suddenly he had the urge to be alone.

'What do you think your little sunshine would like for breakfast, Mr. Snape?' Ragnheiður called after him as he crossed the kitchen to get to his room. 'Chocolate croissants, maybe?'

Severus turned and cocked an eyebrow. 'I am not sure my daughter's system has recovered from last night's sugar rush yet, ma'am. Hence, I think toast and tea would be appropriate.'

'Oh, we will see about that, won't we, Mr. Snape?' Ragnheiður replied and smiled. And Severus could see that her wrinkled hands were already busy forming croissants from the dough that was lying in a bowl on the counter.

~ ~ ~

Severus carefully closed the door behind him and peered towards the bed by the window where Eydis was still fast asleep on her stomach, her left hand resting on the leather-bound album she had gotten from her mother four years ago. She must have fallen asleep while reading it last night.

The album was one of Eydis' dearest possessions. She could spend hours leafing through it, and now and then she would come running to her father, asking him to tell her more about a certain picture or a name that had appeared on one of the pages that mere moments ago had still been empty.

It was due to that album that Severus had decided to take Eydis to Iceland.

He had been sitting on the swing in the apple tree behind their Hogsmeade cottage on a sunny Saturday afternoon in April, completely lost in thoughts, when Eydis had come to him, the album in her hand and a curious expression on her face.

'Daddy, may I ask you a question?' she had begged. 'How come you did not know that Mummy was a witch when you met her?'

He had beckoned the little one to come and sit beside him, and she had snuggled against his side, her arms tightly wrapped around her album.

'I met you mother in Iceland,' he had started, 'far away from the Wizarding world.'

'What were you doing there?' Eydis had asked.

'It was some years after the Second Wizarding War. Both your mother and I had had enough of fighting and needed some time on our own,' he had gone on, hoping that Eydis would not ask any more questions about her parents' reasons for leaving the Wizarding world. He deemed her still too little to understand the role he had played in the war and how much heartache it had brought her mother.

Thankfully, the little one had been more interested in how her parents had managed to find each other on an island full of Muggles, and her questions had stuck to that particular topic the whole afternoon. And that evening, Severus had decided to take his daughter to Iceland for her birthday.

And there they were now, in Hveragerði, the place where he had come to love Cassandra so many years ago.

He moved closer towards his daughter's bed to see which picture she had been looking at before she had fallen asleep and could not help but smirk. It was a Muggle photograph of himself and Cassandra taken at that ridiculous Goth party she had dragged him to on her birthday. Cassandra's hair had been spiky enough to spear anyone who came to close, and she had been wearing a long black skirt in crushed velvet, with a corset top that had been laced in the back. Merlin, how Severus had hated that

corset later that evening. He had been fumbling at it like a hormone-driven, brain-dead teenage boy! Why Cassandra had not laughed at him was still beyond him. But then again, that had been his Cassandra, always so understanding, always taking him with all his flaws and shortcomings.

'Góðan daginn.'

Eydis' sleepy voice ripped Severus out of his reminiscence and he smiled at his daughter. 'Good morning to you, too, little one.'

The little one. She wasn't that little anymore, his Eydis. She had turned eleven that week, and in three months she would start her education at Hogwarts. She would certainly be a good student, Severus was convinced of that. She was curious and ambitious, and she had obviously inherited her mother's knack for languages.

'Did you sleep well?' Severus enquired.

Eydis rolled onto her back and nodded, pulling the blanket up to her nose. 'Hm, I dreamt of Mummy.'

Severus settled on the edge of the bed and brushed a strand of hair from his daughter's face. 'Of course you have, little one. You fell asleep looking at her picture.'

Eydis sat up and pulled the album onto her lap. 'Mummy was very beautiful,' she said, caressing the picture with her finger. 'And you look very happy in that picture, Daddy. You both do.'

Then she put the album aside and got onto her knees to wrap her arms around her father's neck.

'Will you show me where you and Mummy met?' she begged. 'And where you fell in love?'

And Severus embraced his daughter and nodded.

~ ~ ~

To Severus's surprise, the little café had not changed a bit. The furniture was still the same and so were the hideous green and yellow striped tablecloths. And he could have sworn that the woman behind the counter had worked there twelve years ago, too.

He ordered a cup of black coffee for himself and a cup of hot cacao for Eydis and even let the little one talk him into buying one of those sugary chocolate chips cookies. Not that it had taken much persuasion from her side. If she wanted a cookie, of course she would get one. Severus had never been able to say no to her, and he would not start now when it was about something as trivial as a cookie.

He gestured towards a table on the other side of the room. 'Your mother and I used to sit over there by the window,' he pointed out. 'She always liked to know who was walking by.'

Eydis grabbed her cacao and her cookie and scurried over to the table Severus had pointed out. And when he joined her some moments later, she looked up at him, a broad smile on her face.

Severus felt a lump form in his throat. How often had Cassandra waited for him at that very table and smiled at him as he approached? How often had they discussed the Icelandic weather? And how often had he tried to say something witty just to make her laugh?

He swallowed dryly and took a seat opposite his daughter, who had now sunk her teeth into her cookie.

'You have inherited your mother's sweet-tooth, little one,' he pointed out. 'She loved those cookies as well.'

Eydis put her cookie down and tilted her head. 'You miss Mummy a lot, don't you, Daddy?'

Severus took a deep breath. The lump in his throat was getting bigger, and he found it hard to speak.

'Yes, little one,' he answered silently. 'I miss you mother very much. I have done so every single day for the last eight years. And I will probably do so until the day I die.'

Eydis nodded. 'It is more obvious here,' she started. 'You seem ... I don't know. You seem sadder here than you do at Hogwarts, Daddy. Is this because you and Mummy were always happy here?'

Severus sighed and tightened his grip around his cup. 'Your mother and I had quite some arguments here, little one,' he admitted. 'Most of them due to the fact that your father can be a bloody fool at times.'

Eydis grinned. 'I think the words Mummy used in the album *arestubborn Slytherin*.'

Severus cocked an eyebrow at his daughter and then hid his face behind his cup, pretending to drink. And Eydis, too, lowered her gaze. All of a sudden, she was very busy crushing cookie crumbs with her fingers.

When she raised her head again, she looked directly at her father, and her blue eyes locked onto his black ones.

'Tell me about Mummy, will you, Daddy,' she begged. 'Tell me how you remember her. Tell me what made you love her.'

'The first time I saw your mother was in the park we passed this morning,' Severus started. 'I was reading a book and she was having a picnic with a friend.'

'What made you notice her?' Eydis enquired.

'Her laughter,' Severus replied. 'It sounded so happy, so genuine, too honest to be ignored.'

'I think I remember Mummy's laughter. I sometimes hear it at night when I am dreaming. But when I try to think of it, it just disappears. It's like trying to catch smoke with your hands.' Eydis paused and frowned. 'Does that make any sense, Daddy?'

Severus nodded slowly. 'Yes, it does, little one.'

Once more he looked down at his coffee, willing the feeling of panic in his chest to go away. He was so scared that one day he would forget Cassandra's laughter, that one day it would slip away and disappear just as Cassandra had.

Silence settled over the table by the window. Eydis continued crushing cookie crumbs, and Severus continued staring at his coffee, desperately trying to come up with something to say.

But it was Eydis who finally broke the oppressing silence. 'Did you ask Mummy out on a date then?'

Severus almost snorted. He would never have dared ask Cassandra out on a date.

'It was actually your mother who suggested meeting here,' he explained. 'She would sit here every day after four, grade papers, drink coffee and wait for her bus. And I would join her on Thursday afternoons, after my shift at the hospital had ended. And she would smile at me in the same way you are smiling at me now, little one.'

Next thing Severus knew, Eydis had slipped down from her chair and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck.

'I wish I had known her,' the little one whispered. 'Mummy seemed to have made you so happy, Daddy. And I know that she loved you very much. She told me so.'

Severus wrapped his arms around his daughter, burying his face on her hair and remembering the first page in the album her mother had given her. *Please tell your Daddy I love him*, she had written. On the very first page of the last gift Cassandra had given her daughter, she had written down her love for him.

He could not hold back his tears any longer. Silently he wept into his daughter's red hair, letting the tears wash away the pain he had carried in his heart for eight long years.

Yes, Cassandra had made him happy. She had made him smile and had shown him the way back home. And she had given him the two greatest gifts in the world: her love and the daughter he was now holding in his arms.

XIV: Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor

Chapter 14 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, to my beta Apple Blossom and all you lovely readers.

Chapter XIV: Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor

Severus and Eydis were just about to finish their breakfast in the garden when a somewhat ruffled barn owl dropped a letter onto the girl's plate. There was no mistaking the seal. It was her Hogwarts letter.

Dear Miss Snape,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Please find enclosed a list of all required books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.

Yours sincerely,

Severus Snape

Deputy Headmaster

Eydis looked up from her letter and grinned. 'Daddy, are you seriously telling me that I am supposed to write a reply, go down to the post office, pick an owl, pay it, and then send the poor animal for a two minutes' flight to Hogwarts, when *you* are the Deputy Headmaster and sitting about one and a half feet away from me?'

'Yes, Eydis, this is exactly what you are supposed to do.'

'You're kidding, right?'

Severus cocked an eyebrow at his daughter, and she rolled her eyes if only inwardly. Of course he was not kidding. Severus Snape did not kid, on principle. And Eydis knew that very well.

'And when you have sent off the owl with your reply,' Severus went on, 'we are going to discuss your living arrangements and lay down rules on how you and I are going to interact while you are a student at Hogwarts.'

'My living arrangements and rules on how you and I are going to interact while I am a student at Hogwarts?' Eydis repeated. 'What do you m...'

Once more, Severus' left eyebrow shot up, and that was enough to silence his daughter. *When* did I say that we are going to discuss this?' he asked.

'When I have sent off the owl, sir,' Eydis replied in a low tone, scowling slightly.

And Severus smirked. 'Precisely, Miss Snape. Now off you go.'

~ ~ ~

When Eydis returned from the post office, Severus was still sitting in the garden. But the breakfast table had been cleaned, and he was reading a book. And Eydis took her seat opposite him, looking at her father in anticipation.

Severus did not seem to be in a hurry, though. When he had finished his chapter, he paused for a few moments to contemplate what he had just read, and then he closed the book and carefully laid it down. Then he put his elbows on the edge of the table, clasped his hands in front of him and leant slightly forwards, his beetle black eyes on his daughter.

'At Hogwarts,' he started in a grave tone, 'I am not your father, Eydis. I am your teacher, your Deputy Headmaster and possibly your Head of House. You will address me as Professor Snape or sir, and I will address you as Miss Snape and treat you as I treat any other student. Is that understood?'

Eydis nodded and grinned. 'Yes, Professor Snape, sir.'

That cheeky little witch! Severus tried to scowl at his daughter but failed miserably. Instead an amused sparkle appeared in his eyes.

'We still have seven weeks, little one,' he said, his tone suddenly not so grave anymore. 'And until the first of September, I would very much like you to call me Daddy.'

~ ~ ~

Severus knocked at the half-open door and peeked into his daughter's room.

'Dinner is ready, little one,' he announced. 'Are you coming?'

Eydis was sitting on her bed with her back against the wall, hunched over something Severus could not see. She did not seem to have heard him.

He took a step over the threshold. 'Eydis?'

This time, she did hear him. Slowly, she turned around to look at her father, a slight frown on her face.

Severus raised his left eyebrow. 'Is something the matter?' he enquired.

'No,' Eydis replied in a tone that suggested that her thoughts were far, far away. 'I've been reading.'

Severus stepped closer and saw that Eydis was holding onto Cassandra's album. It was getting thicker by the week: new pictures appeared almost every time Eydis opened it, new writing materialised on hitherto empty pages, and new pages filled out the cover. The older Eydis got, the more questions she had. And she found the answer to most of them in her mother's work.

When had Cassandra written down all these things, Severus wondered. And how had she been able to foresee all the questions her daughter would have? It was almost uncanny at times, and Severus had seriously started to consider the possibility that Cassandra was still there, that it was her ghost who was filling the pages in the album.

'And what have you been reading about?' he asked.

Eydis moved closer towards the foot end of her bed, beckoning him to sit down and join her.

'I am wondering which House I will be Sorted into,' she explained.

Severus nodded. In less than a week, Eydis would start her education at Hogwarts. And despite her having grown up in the castle, everything would change now. Everything would be new. It was only natural for her to be getting nervous.

'Has your mother been able to answer your question?' he asked.

Eydis' frown grew deeper. 'Actually, she said it would not matter. She wrote that all the Houses are equal, and that I should follow my heart when the Sorting Hat asked me where I wanted to belong.'

'I see. Then which House have you chosen for yourself?'

Eydis shrugged. 'I don't know. I feel like I don't fit in anywhere. What does that make me, a Hufflepuff?'

Severus snorted. Just how wrong did the words *Snape* and *Hufflepuff* sound in one sentence?

'No, little one,' he said, shaking his head. 'I do not think Hufflepuff House is where you belong.'

'Where would you put me, Daddy? If you were to Sort me?'

Severus pondered her question for a moment. 'You are an intelligent girl,' he started. 'You study hard and enjoy learning new things. You would make a fine Ravenclaw. But you are also ambitious and stubborn enough to fit in Slytherin House.'

'Not Gryffindor then?'

'Over my dead body!' The sentence had escaped Severus before he had been able to stop himself, and he bit his tongue when he saw the grin on his daughter's face.

'Mummy really knew you well,' she said. 'She anticipated a reaction like that.'

Severus cocked an eyebrow as Eydis shoved the album into his hands. Sure enough, there it was, Cassandra's handwriting in blue ink on white parchment *Gryffindor House values courage and daring. And although I am convinced that you will grow up to be a brave and courageous girl, I advise you to take off the Sorting Hat quickly should it put you into Gryffindor. Your father might just incinerate it.*

'What's wrong with Gryffindor House?' Eydis enquired.

'There is nothing wrong with Gryffindor House per se, little one. And many great witches and wizards have been Gryffindors,' Severus started, not really sure how much he was supposed to say or rather, how much he was supposed to omit. 'But, unfortunately, Gryffindors have the tendency to be somewhat full of themselves.'

Eydis' grin grew broader. 'Then *that's* why James Potter has been Sorted into Gryffindor.'

Severus barely managed to hold back a sour comment. Yes, Harry Potter's oldest son had certainly been Sorted into Gryffindor for good reasons: his head was just as inflated as his father's and grandfather's had been. And he had inherited their talent for trouble and mischief as well. And Severus had to admit that he'd rather see his daughter be Sorted into Hufflepuff than the same house as James Sirius Potter.

~ ~ ~

Severus had been pacing the Entrance Hall for almost half an hour. He knew very well that the Hogwarts Express did not arrive at Hogsmeade Station before six o'clock and that it would take Hagrid at least twenty minutes to take the first-years over the lake. But still he was already there in the Entrance Hall, waiting anxiously.

Two years earlier, when he had welcomed new students to Hogwarts for the first time, he had taken a different approach. He had let Hagrid guide the children into the Entrance Hall, and then he had swooped down on them, striding down the stairs, his black robes billowing behind him. They had paled and huddled closer together, and even the ever so cocky James Potter had taken a step backwards. And Scorpius Malfoy had casually disappeared behind the backs of his two gorilla-like friends. Severus, however, had not even blinked, but had welcomed the first-years to their new home in a low and drawing tone, had seen the children recoil and had enjoyed himself immensely.

But this year, he lacked the peace of mind for that kind of power game.

He had started to feel uneasy the moment he and Eydis had arrived on Platform nine and three-quarters. The girl had flung herself into James Potter's arms the moment she had caught sight of the boy. Yes, the two had been best friends since they both had been toddlers, and they had not seen each other the whole summer, but that did not justify Eydis throwing herself at Potter in such a way. And in addition to that, Potter had held onto her for a little too long. At least, that was Severus' opinion. And heavens only knew what they had been up to on the train.

He crossed the Entrance Hall once more, trying to shake off the uncanny pictures that were creeping into his mind: Eydis wearing a beautiful white wedding dress, Eydis smiling at him from the end of the aisle, Eydis promising her everlasting love to James Sirius Potter!

'Get yourself together, man,' Severus muttered under his breath, silently wondering if all fathers felt that way about their daughters. Did they all want to throw Crucios at any potential boyfriends? Or was it just him? Or was it just because that potential boyfriend was a Potter?

Potential boyfriend. If he thought about it, Severus had to admit that the idea was rather ridiculous. Eydis was eleven, just a little child. Surely, she was not thinking of James Potter as a potential boyfriend. Or was she? Merlin's beard, the girl had threatened with marrying Potter already at the age of three!

Severus would have crossed the Entrance Hall yet once more and would probably have thrown a hex at any random object, had not the heavy oak door swung open, and Hagrid had waltzed in, followed by the first-years. And so Severus shook off his qualms and stood tall, glaring down his nose at the nervous-looking children, his best scowl on his face.

'Welcome to Hogwarts,' he began in a low tone. The silence among the children was so absolute that there was no need to raise his voice. One could have heard a pin drop onto the flagged stone floor, and one could certainly hear the nervous rumbling of certain bellies.

'Before you are allowed to sit down and enjoy your first meal here at Hogwarts, you will have to be Sorted into your Houses. These are Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. I am certain that each and every one of you has already pondered the question of where you belong, and many of you will already have come to a conclusion. But let me assure you that the Sorting Hat's decisions are often unfathomable to say the least. You might be in for a surprise.

'Your House will be like your family for the next seven years. Everything you do will reflect on your House: achievements will earn you House points, rule breaking will make you lose them. Those of you who happen to be Sorted into Slytherin House will do well to think twice about losing points. I rather enjoy having the House Cup on the mantelpiece in my quarters, and I would hate to give it up. And you will hate to be the one to be responsible for it.'

Then he turned on his heel and led the first-years into the Great Hall. And although he had not once looked directly at Eydis, Severus knew that his daughter was smirking.

~ ~ ~

Why could Eydis not have her mother's last name, Severus wondered. If her last name were Black, she would already have been Sorted, and he would be able to relax. But her last name was Snape. S-n-a-p-e. There were only six other first-years whose last names were even further down on the alphabetical list, and that meant that Severus had to put the Sorting Hat on thirty-four students before it was Eydis' turn.

Sanders, Sellers, Sikes, Smith, Smythe. Severus smirked at the little Smythe girl. Why had he ever agreed to carry such a ridiculous last name when he had been living on Iceland? Smythe! For Merlin's sake!

'Snape, Eydis.'

Several people craned their necks to get a better view. Of course, the Sorting of the daughter of Severus Snape was an interesting matter. Would she follow in her father's footsteps? Or her mother's?

The little one was smiling as she stepped forward. She did not seem half as nervous as her peers did. But then she was the only one who knew that the scowl on the Deputy Headmaster's face was just for show.

Severus did not smile back at his daughter. It wouldn't have been professional. But when she sat down on the four-legged stool, he saw her small hands shake. And after he had put the Sorting Hat on her head, he could not resist letting his hand brush against her shoulder. Swiftly, furtively, hoping that no one had noticed.

The Sorting Hat seemed to take ages to come to its decision. Surely everyone else had noticed that, too. And Severus absentmindedly wiped his hands at his robe just to quickly clasp them behind his back seconds later. Since when did he get sweaty hands? That was totally unheard of.

Finally, the Sorting Hat announced its decision: 'Slytherin.'

Severus felt his lips curl into a smile, but he never let it happen. Instead, he nodded almost unnoticeably at his daughter as he removed the Sorting Hat from her head. She would do well in Slytherin House. She was certainly ambitious and stubborn enough to make Salazar proud. And her father as well.

It wasn't until Eydis had arrived at the Slytherin table and he saw her shake hands with Scorpius Malfoy that Severus started to think that maybe just maybe there might be trouble ahead.

XV: Father and Daughter

Chapter 15 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, to my lovely beta Apple Blossom and all you faithful readers out there.

Chapter XV: Father and Daughter

Severus was just about to leave the dinner table when a polite cough from Filius made him turn his head to look at the Head of Ravenclaw House.

'Eydis earned ten points for Slytherin today,' Filius declared, beaming. 'She was the first of the Slytherins to cast Wingardium Leviosa properly.'

The good news was rewarded with a raised eyebrow from Severus. 'And why, pray tell, Filius, do you feel the need to share this information with me?'

The little wizard almost choked at his pumpkin juice and coughed for quite some time before he could give Severus an answer. 'Eydis is your daughter,' he gasped. 'I assumed you would be proud of her.'

Severus drew himself up to his full height and glowered down at his colleague.

'While at Hogwarts, Miss Snape is not my daughter, Filius,' he explained in a tone that would have made every single first-year Hufflepuff faint. 'She is a student like every other, and I am nothing more than her teacher, her Head of House and her Deputy Headmaster.'

Filius looked flabbergasted, and Minerva butted in: 'Severus, I admire your professionalism, but I think you are overdoing it.'

Once more, Severus' eyebrow shot up. 'Overdoing it, Headmistress?'

'Yes. It is indeed prudent of you to treat Eydis like every other student while she is in your classroom. But when we are talking about her among colleagues, among *friends*, you are allowed to be proud of her, Severus. For goodness sake, you are *supposed* to be.'

Severus gave her a look just as sinister as he had given Filius before, but the older woman did not even flinch. Not even when he somewhat vehemently pushed back his chair.

'How I treat my students or my daughter for that matter is entirely up to me. In case you have any complaints, Headmistress, I suggest filing an official complaint to the School Governors.'

A curt nod was all his colleagues got from him before he left the staff table. And as he swept down the aisle between the Slytherin and the Ravenclaw table, his robes billowing behind him and a trade-mark scowl on his face, several students lowered their heads. No one dared meet the eye of the Potions master when he was in that kind of mood.

Eydis, however, did not even notice. She sat with her back against the aisle and was deeply immersed in a conversation with Scorpius Malfoy.

~ ~ ~

Slamming the door of his study shut behind him felt good, so incredibly good. And for a moment, Severus considered ripping it open again and slamming it once more, just for the sake of it. But he restrained himself. Slamming doors didn't really help, and he should not have let himself get wound up like this in the first place.

He had to hand it to his colleagues: they were right. Unfortunately enough, they were entirely right. He was most probably overdoing it. He had always been known for being biased and favouring Slytherin House. He had always been by his standards generous with awarding his House points. But when it came to Eydis, he had not awarded her one single point since she had started her education. Not that she hadn't deserved them.

During her first Potions class, Eydis had identified all fifteen potions ingredients correctly. Of course she had. Severus had expected nothing less of her. She had, after all, been brewing potions with him ever since she had been tall enough to reach the cauldron. But he had not given her any points for her knowledge.

During her second Potions class, Eydis had been the first student to hand in a perfectly brewed batch of a simple antiseptic. And again, Severus had not awarded any points and only acknowledged the potion with a brief nod.

He tried to convince himself that the little one didn't mind. She knew that she was doing a good job. And she also knew that he was not the type of father or teacher who handed out gold stars for a chore well done. And she also knew better than to expect any special treatment from the Potions master just because she was his daughter.

But his conviction had faltered when he had overheard two first-year Slytherins in the back of the classroom. They had been discussing whether he was being especially nasty to his daughter, or if he was just in an exceptionally foul mood.

And now, even his colleagues thought that he was *overdoing* it.

Then maybe he was. But what was he supposed to do? Hand out points left and right just to prove them wrong?

Maybe Eydis studying at Hogwarts had not been such a good idea after all. Severus had considered sending her to Durmstrang. Tishonov, the new Headmaster there, would certainly have been delighted. But Minerva had advised against it. And Severus had to admit that he did not want to send Eydis away.

To be completely honest, he found it hard enough to have her sleep in the Slytherin dormitories instead of their quarters. He missed her. He missed their bantering at the dinner table, missed her marching into his study around eleven o'clock at night, telling him that it was time to go to bed. But most of all he missed the sleepy smile on her face when he went to wake her up in the morning.

He gave an almost imperceptible snort. Who would have thought? He, Severus Snape, Terror of the Dungeons and the Reason Why So Many First-Year Hufflepuffs Wet Their Beds, missed his little daughter although she was never more than a few feet away. He could see her as much as he wanted to. He saw her at breakfast, lunch and dinner, and twice a week in his class. As her Head of House, he could summon her to his office at any time of the day, and nobody would dare ask any questions. If he wanted to, he could even come up with a reason to give her detention two or three nights a week. Merlin, he could set her an impossible task in class and then force her to take remedial Potions.

Or he could just stop being such a stubborn git and smile at her once in a while.

Severus frowned. Would anybody even notice if he awarded Eydis with some points now and then? Would anyone mind? And would anyone disapprove if he took off his teacher's robe on the weekend and took her to Hogsmeade for some ice cream, as her *father*?

He would consider his options. And the next day in Potions class provided that she deserved it he would award Eydis ten points. Fifteen, actually. Just because he could.

~ ~ ~

December was a busy month. Minerva had come down with the flu in late November, and Severus, in his role as Deputy Headmaster, was running the school, teaching his classes and brewing countless batches of Pepperup Potion. And when Poppy prescribed him three days of bed rest to cure his own head-cold, he almost hexed her. As if he had time for lying in bed.

It was a trying time, though, and when the last student closed the dungeon door behind her after the last lesson before Christmas, Severus let himself fall onto the nearest chair and closed his eyes for a moment. He could not recall the last time he had felt so exhausted. He had had a headache for the last five days, certainly due to his cold, his hands were icy cold, and he could feel every muscle in his body aching.

He rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. 'You are getting old, Severus Snape,' he said to himself.

Not that he was old by numbers. Fifty-eight was no age for a wizard. But both his body and his mind had been through enough hardships to fill three lifetimes, and right now, Severus felt endlessly tired and very, very old indeed.

He would, of course, attend the Christmas feast in the Great Hall that evening. It was his duty. But he would retire early, draw himself a relaxing hot bath, and then probably take a Sleeping Potion so he would be able to spend an undisturbed night. And tomorrow, on Christmas Day, he would just ...

Christmas Day, the loneliest and at the same time the most wonderful day of the year.

It was the day of the year when he missed Cassandra the most. And it did not take a lot of effort for him to remember how alone, how desperate he had felt that Christmas morning eight years ago, when he had woken up and realised that the love of his life was gone forever. Everything had seemed so meaningless to him that morning. And he had seriously considered following his beloved beyond the veil. But Eydis had held him back. She had needed him then, and he had needed her. And together, they had managed to go on.

It had been hard at times. He still missed Cassandra sorely. She had done so much for him. She had shown him the way home and given him the two greatest gifts of all: her love and their little daughter.

Severus smiled faintly as he thought of his little daughter. She wasn't that little anymore. She was eleven now, a good student and a popular girl. He had seen the looks she was getting from her male peers, and he wasn't sure if he was supposed to feel angry or proud.

The next day, the students who remained at Hogwarts for Christmas would go for Christmas brunch at The Three Broomsticks. Eydís would go, too. Severus knew that. She had come to ask his permission a week ago, and he had of course given it to her. He wanted nothing more than see his little angel happy. And if she wanted to spend Christmas with her friends, he would not stand in her way.

But he had to admit that he would miss her.

~ ~ ~

'Thank you, Severus.'

'For what?' he asked, looking into Cassandra's blue eyes.

'For making Eydís happy, for making her smile.'

Then Cassandra started to fade away, and Severus extended his hand, tried to hold on to her.

'Can't you stay?' he asked, perfectly aware that she couldn't. But he had to ask. He always did.

Once more, Cassandra smiled at him, just for him. And when Severus woke up, he could have sworn that the pillow beside him smelled of musk and honey, and that the bed sheets were just a tad warmer than they used to be.

It had been a good night. He had allowed himself a glass of mulled wine during the Christmas feast and then a glass of Firewhisky in his quarters. And that small amount of alcohol had been enough to send his body and his tired mind into the land of slumber. The Sleeping Potion he had intended to take stood still on his nightstand, untouched.

He had dreamt of Cassandra. He still did so quite often, especially around Christmas. But this dream had been different. She had smiled at him, and they had talked. And whereas dreams of her normally made him wake up with a feeling of emptiness in his heart, that Christmas morning he had woken up feeling peaceful and at ease. And he could not help but wonder what it meant.

He showered and got dressed, made sure Eydís' Christmas present was still safely stowed away in his study, and then he ascended the stairs to go to breakfast in the Great Hall. It wasn't until he saw that only a few students were still there that he realised how late it was.

'Severus, are you alright?' Minerva inquired with a frown as he took his seat.

'Why ever would I not be, Headmistress?' He had had a look in the mirror. He wasn't paler than usual. And the dark shadows under his eyes were actually less prominent that morning. Why would she ask if he was alright?

'It is nine thirty, Severus.' Minerva sounded truly worried. 'You have never been that late for breakfast before. I assumed that you had been here earlier.'

'If you must know,' he explained, 'I slept late.'

'Slept late?' Minerva's eyebrows threatened to disappear in her hair, and she grabbed his hand. 'My dear boy, are you certain that you are feeling alright?'

To his own surprise, Severus did not withdraw his hand. Instead, he looked at Minerva, his colleague, his friend, and nodded.

'Yes, Minerva,' he replied. 'For the first time in a long time, I am actually feeling alright.'

~ ~ ~

'Where the hell have you been?' Eydís' outraged voice greeted Severus as he returned to his quarters.

'Language, Miss Snape.'

'Miss Snape?' She rolled her eyes at him. 'You might have failed to notice, but it is Christmas, Daddy.'

Daddy. She had not called him Daddy for quite some time but always Professor or Sir. Just as they had agreed.

'Yes, Eydís, I am very much aware of the fact that it is Christmas today,' Severus replied and smirked as he saw the little one cross her arms in front of her chest.

'And?' she demanded.

'And what?'

Once more Eydís rolled her eyes. 'Haven't you forgotten something?'

'You will get your present in the evening, Eydís. Just as you always do.'

'Not *that*!' The tone in her voice told Severus that his daughter was getting annoyed with him, but for the time being he honestly had no idea what she was talking about. 'Merlin's pants, it's Christmas, Daddy! Broom ride, Hogsmeade, visit Mummy.'

For a moment, Severus just stared blankly at his daughter. Certainly, she couldn't be planning on spending her Christmas Day with *him*. She was about to have brunch with her friends. She had told him so a week ago.

'Well, are you coming or not?'

'I thought you were going to have brunch at the Three Broomsticks,' he finally managed to get out.

'Yes, I am,' Eydís replied. 'Later. But right now, I want to go on a broom ride with my Daddy. Just like we do every year.'

~ ~ ~

Two hours later, Severus and Eydís sat behind two cups of hot cacao at the Three Broomsticks. The other students had already arrived and were flocking around the brunch buffet Rosmerta had laid out, but Eydís didn't seem to be in a hurry to join them. She had even threatened James Potter to hex him if he came over and asked her once more. And so the boy had trotted off, and Eydís had stayed seated, opposite her father.

'Did Mummy like red roses?' she suddenly asked.

Severus shook his head. 'Your mother hated flowers. The first time she invited me to tea, she especially told me not to bring any.'

Eydis frowned. 'Then why are there always roses blooming on her grave?'

Severus swallowed. To be honest, he did not know why he brought roses. Gryffindor red roses, for Merlin's sake. It had probably something to do with the silly notion of red roses representing love.

'I think Mummy would be glad about them anyway,' Eydis went on.

Then she laid her hand onto Severus'. And he stared at it. It looked ridiculously small.

'You still miss her, don't you, Daddy?'

Severus looked up, and his black eyes met Eydis' blue ones. They had the same shade of blue as Cassandra's, the same shape. And still they couldn't be more different. Eydis' eyes were always laughing. And while there had always been a smile in Cassandra's eyes, there had always been the hint of a shadow as well. Always. Even at the happiest of times.

Severus took a deep breath before he spoke, and the ghost of a smile flitted over his lips. 'Yes, little one,' he confessed. 'I still miss your mother.'

'That's okay, you know,' Eydis said and squeezed his hand. 'I miss her, too.'

~ ~ ~

Despite her protests, Severus left Eydis with her friends at the Three Broomsticks and then made his way through the bustling crowd of Hogsmeade toward the edge of the village. He had no Christmas shopping to do and hence no actual reason to linger, but he did not feel like returning to Hogwarts just yet.

Why he decided to return to the cemetery, he did not know, but suddenly, he was standing at Cassandra's grave once more. It had been snowing since he and Eydis had left, and the roses he had brought were covered with a thin layer of snow.

'I am sorry that I insist on bringing you flowers, Cassandra,' he whispered. 'I am aware that you do not like them. But I do not know what else to bring you.'

The first gift he had ever given her had been three scented candles. She had liked them. Maybe he should bring candles the next time he visited and bewitch them to burn even when it was windy or raining.

'Are you visiting your wife?'

Severus turned around and came to look at a tiny, very old and wrinkled woman who was leaning heavily on a walking stick. In her other hand, she held a bouquet of yellow tulips.

'I am visiting my husband,' she went on and pointed towards a grave three rows away. 'He is lying right over there, has done so for thirty-seven years.'

Severus nodded silently. Thirty-seven years and she was still bringing him flowers. Would he still visit Cassandra twenty-nine years from now?

The crone stepped closer and leant slightly forwards to read the inscription on Cassandra's headstone. 'Not even forty-seven,' she lamented. 'It's a shame when the young ones have to go. Such a waste.'

Again, Severus nodded. He did not know what to say.

'The little one you were here with earlier, she is your daughter, isn't she?' the woman inquired. 'She is the spitting image of her mother.'

How ever did she know?

As if she had read his mind, the crone answered. 'I can see them, you know. The ghosts. It's a rare gift. Some call it a curse.'

'Do you mean they are here?' Severus asked despite himself. Surely, the old woman must be suffering from dementia. 'Your husband and my wife? Are they here?' He desperately wanted her to say yes.

'Not just here,' she explained. 'They are always with us. They never leave the ones they love.'

He had hoped that much.

~ ~ ~

It was mid-afternoon when Eydis came to find her father. The crone had long since left the cemetery, and Severus's cloak was covered with snow.

'Are you alright?' the little one asked as she tugged at her father's cloak. He had not noticed her.

Slowly, Severus tore his eyes away from Cassandra's grave and faced his daughter. She looked just as worried as Minerva had done earlier that day.

He reached out his arm for her, and Eydis let herself be pulled into an embrace and laid her arm around her father's waist. They stood there for quite some time, both absorbed in their own thoughts.

'Do you think that your mother is still here with us?' Severus finally asked.

And Eydis nodded. 'Yes. Sometimes when I am reading in the album, or late at night when I cannot sleep, it feels like she is there, like she is watching over me. It is like I can sense her. Does that make any sense, Daddy?'

'Yes, it does, little one.'

Eydis looked up at her father, and for the second time that Christmas Day, blue eyes locked onto beetle black ones.

'Will she always be there, Daddy? Will Mummy always be there to watch over us?'

To that question, Severus had no answer. But he truly hoped that the crone had been right and that Cassandra would never truly leave them.

XVI: And the Past Will Come to Haunt You

Chapter 16 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating the HP universe, to my wonderful beta Apple Blossom and all you faithful readers.

Chapter XVI: And the Past Will Come to Haunt You

'A spring ball, Headmistress?'

Severus couldn't believe it. He would have expected a ridiculous idea like this from Dumbledore any day. But Minerva? He had thought her more sensible than that!

'Yes, a spring ball, Severus. It has been a dreadful winter. According to Poppy, there have never before so many students come down with the cold or the flu as this year. Or teachers for that matter.'

She turned away to blow her nose, and Severus made a mental note to brew her another potion. Her sinuses were obviously still not clear. Neither were his, and the headache this was causing was slowly but surely driving him insane. Yes, a spring ball would just be the icing on the cake.

'Due to the circumstances,' Minerva went on, tucking away her handkerchief, 'Pomona, Filius and I find it advisable to organise something nice for the children.'

Frivolous Sprout and bobbing Flitwick! But of course! Severus groaned inwardly. He should have known that those two were involved somehow.

'I am not going to teach any dancing classes this time, Minerva,' he stated firmly, glowering at the Headmistress. He had been there, done that and certainly not liked it. The dancing classes he had had to teach during the Triwizard Tournament had been pure horror. Never in his life had he seen so many uncoordinated, clumsy people gathered in one room. Merlin's pants, even Draco Malfoy had had two left feet. Considering his genes, Severus had expected better from that boy. And he sincerely hoped that the dancing genes had jumped only one generation in that family and that there was some hope for Scorpius.

'Why ever not, dear Severus?' Minerva asked, a twinkle in her eyes that would have outshone Dumbledore's. 'You did a wonderful job the last time. I recall Slytherin House making quite the impression at the first Yule ball.'

Severus snorted. Yes, Slytherin House had made a very good impression that time. This had, however, had less to do with his skills as a dancing instructor than with the fact that he had threatened his students with detention should they dare to make fools of themselves. And so they had danced like fairies, and those who had been unable to Crabbe and Goyle, for instance had wisely kept to the buffet.

'I assume that your decision is final, Headmistress,' he inquired, 'and that there is no possibility of changing your mind?'

'Yes, Severus,' Minerva replied with an almost mischievous smile. 'My decision is final. The ball will be held on the first of May, and the Heads will be responsible for instructing their Houses in dancing and proper behaviour. And not even you will be able to wriggle yourself out of it.'

~ ~ ~

Approaching the Great Hall felt like being called to the Dark Lord. Severus' palms were sweaty, his stomach was turning and if he continued clenching his teeth, he would surely need a headache potion in an hour or two. How he hated this!

Everybody in the castle students, teachers, ghosts, even Filch had been talking about nothing else than this blasted ball for the last couple of weeks. Last week's staff meeting, for example, had been torture. Pomona and Filius, the two masterminds behind the whole event, had had a million questions to solve and had decided that the rest of the staff should help. Should there be lilac or pink flowers in the Great Hall? Should the table cloths match the flowers or the candles? Should the first-years be sent to bed earlier than the seventh-years? Should additional wards be put on the rose garden to keep couples from sneaking off in order to ... ehm, get cosy, as Filius had put it?

Severus had tried to hold his tongue. Oh, he truly had. But Pomona had kept nagging him, and in the end, he had just given her a piece of his mind. However, his suggestion of decorating the Hall in black and hexing any male student who got closer than two feet to a female student while not on the dance floor, had not been met with any enthusiasm whatsoever. Hence, he had held his peace for the rest of the meeting.

And now it was too late to say anything.

Severus paused at the entrance to the Great Hall and peered inside. It seemed as if Pomona and Filius had decided on white table clothes, rose-coloured candles and lilac and white flowers in the end. Not too bad, but still horrific.

'You just can't wait to go inside, now can you?' Eydis' question was followed by a giggle, and Severus turned around to face his daughter. When he caught sight of her, the biting remark he had had on his tongue disappeared into thin air.

The little one looked beautiful. She had chosen a light green dress made of the finest fabrics adorned with tiny roses, and Ginny had helped tame her unruly red hair. The dress had cost Severus a fortune, but he did not care. Nothing was too expensive for his little angel.

Eydis smiled at him and spun around, making fairy dust rise from her skirt. It tickled Severus' nose, and he smiled back at his daughter. He was very proud of her and endlessly pleased to see her happy.

'I see you have chosen spring colours as well,' Eydis stated as she had come to a halt and eyed her father with her arms crossed in front of her chest. Her voice was dripping with irony, and Severus cocked an eyebrow at her.

'Do enlighten me, Miss Snape. Whatever is wrong with black?'

With an innocent expression on his face, he looked down at his clothes. He was wearing high-collared dress robes made of black velvet. Plain and simple, nothing fancy. He had for some moments contemplated wearing something green he was, after all, the Head of Slytherin House but had decided against it. Pomona and Flitwick had turned down his suggestion of black decorations, and he was not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing him wear colours.

Eydis grinned. 'Nothing's wrong with black, Daddy. It would just have been fun to see people faint had you shown up in white robes.'

Mischievous little witch!

Severus smirked and looked around the Entrance Hall. 'Where is your escort, Lady Snape?' he wondered. 'I figured you and Scorpius would come up from the dungeons together.'

'Didn't I tell you?' Eydis frowned. 'I am not going with Scorpius.'

Severus gave his daughter a questioning look, and she started fidgeting with her gloves.

'He's been a real prat lately,' she explained, 'showing off the new broom his grand-dad has bought him and boasting about how great a family the Malfoys are. And yesterday he graciously reminded me how grateful I should be that he asked *me* to go to the ball with him. So I told him to buzz off and shove up his broom where the sun doesn't shine.'

'Miss Snape, language,' Severus reprimanded his daughter, not because that he disliked the idea of a broomstick up any Malfoy's behind, but because it wasn't good manners to say it out loud.

Eydis scowled. 'Ever since Scorpius' dad went to work abroad, his grand-father has been swamping him with gifts. He has even come to every single Quidditch match to see Scorpius play. And after that, he always comes to the common room, hands out sweets and tells stories about the Malfoy family and how wonderful they are. If you ask me, he is a slimy git. And he's rubbing off on Scorpius.'

Severus narrowed his eyes. He did not like Lucius Malfoy worming his way into the hearts of the Slytherins again. But, unfortunately, he was still school governor and patron of Slytherin House, and therefore, Severus could not simply ban him from either the school grounds or the Slytherin common room. All he could do was keep his eyes and ears open and make sure Lucius didn't gain too much influence among the youngsters.

Before Severus could give his daughter any advice about keeping away from the Malfoys, they were approached by James Potter.

'Are you ready, Eydis?'

Eydis beamed up at the stylish boy and took his outstretched hand, winking at her father before she let herself be escorted into the Great Hall.

And Severus looked after them, sending a silent prayer to every deity he could think of. When Scorpius Malfoy found out that he had been replaced by a Potter, there would be hell to pay.

~ ~ ~

Everything happened incredibly fast. There was a commotion on the other side of the dance floor, and before Severus or any other teacher for that matter had been able to intervene, Eydis had punched Scorpius Malfoy right into his pretty face.

The boy had gone down like a wet sack, and now Eydis was towering over him, her eyes narrowed and her wand pointed at Scorpius' chest.

'Once more, Malfoy,' she hissed. 'Open your filthy, lying mouth once more, and I swear you will regret the day you were born.'

'Miss Snape, lower your wand,' Minerva commanded. 'Lower it this instant.'

Eydis did not seem to hear the Headmistress. She was still pointing her wand at Scorpius, who was now casually wiping blood off his face with his sleeve. Any other boy would have trembled, but *he* looked rather smug, almost triumphant.

'Eydis!'

Severus' imperious voice made Eydis flinch.

'Lower your wand *now*.'

Her head jerked up, and her eyes met her father's. Now it was Severus's turn to flinch. He had never seen his daughter like this. Her face was pale as a ghost, her pupils dilated as in fear. Her hands were shaking, and her breathing was shallow.

'What is the matter, Eydis?'

Severus took a tentative step forwards and extended his hand towards his daughter. That was when she dropped her wand and started backing away from him. The look in her eyes was one of a trapped animal. Severus looked towards Scorpius, who was still lying on the ground. What in Hades had this boy said or done that had upset Eydis in such a way?

'Tell me he's lying.'

Eydis voice wasn't much more than a whisper now, and Severus doubted if anyone except him had heard her. He had, however, not the faintest idea what she was talking about.

Then she ran. Out of the Great Hall and down the stairs that led to the dungeons. And Severus was right at her heels.

He was surprised when she turned left at the bottom of the stairs. The Slytherin dormitories were situated to the right. Where was she going?

Then he heard a heavy oak door slam and fell dead in his track. Why would the little one run away from him and then seek refuge *his* chambers? It didn't make sense.

He opened the door slowly, carefully, mentally prepared to duck in case some heavy object came flying in his direction. But nothing happened. In fact, his quarters were filled with an almost eerie silence.

'Eydis?'

He received no answer.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside the room, calling for her once more. 'Eydis?'

Nothing.

He lit the candles with a wave of his hand and looked around. The door to Eydis' old room stood open, but the room was as empty as the rest of his quarters. Wherever had she gone?

When he entered his study, he found the little box of Floo Powder lying on the rug in front of the fireplace, and it didn't take him many seconds to put two and two together. He threw a handful of the powder into the flames and called for Potter.

'Severus, what happened?'

'Is Eydis with you?'

'Yes, she is with Ginny. What's the matter, Severus?'

Severus never answered. Instead he grabbed a second handful of Floo Powder and stepped into the flames.

'Will you please tell me what's going on?' Potter requested as Severus stepped out of the fireplace in the Potter kitchen. 'Eydis was in quite a state when she arrived, totally

distraught. Aren't you having the spring ball today?'

'We were,' Severus replied curtly. 'There was an incident. Where is my daughter?'

'She is in here.' Ginny closed the door that led to the sitting room behind her, but she did not seem to be ready to give anyone access to the room. Instead, she nodded towards the kitchen table. 'Have a seat, Severus. Harry, would you get us something to drink?'

'I demand to see my daughter,' Severus barked and remained standing.

'And I tell you to have a seat.' Ginny's tone was calm but firm and reminded Severus very much of Molly. 'It's just as well. I don't think Eydis is quite ready to talk to you just yet.'

'Why is she so upset?' Harry asked as he put three glasses and a bottle of Odgen's onto the kitchen table. 'Don't tell me James did something stupid.'

Ginny smiled faintly. 'No, James didn't do anything. It was Scorpius Malfoy.' She looked at Severus once more. 'Would you please sit down now?'

'What did that little cretin do?' Severus hissed, still ignoring Ginny's request.

'Scorpius didn't *do* anything,' she explained. 'But he *told* Eydis something. Something that was not his to tell.'

Severus felt his breath catch in his throat. Heavens, no, he thought. Not this.

Ginny stepped away from the door and made her way slowly towards the table. 'He told her about the Death Eaters. He told her about the most trusted followers of Lord Voldemort.'

That was the moment when Severus' knees gave way and he let himself fall onto a chair.

'But Eydis knows,' Harry started, sounding slightly confused. 'She knows about Severus having been a Death Eater.'

Of course she knew. Every child in the Wizarding world knew. They knew what stood in the history books. They knew that Severus Snape had turned his back on the Dark Lord already before Harry Potter had been born, that he had spied for Dumbledore and that his deeds had given Potter the tools he had needed to bring Voldemort down for good.

What the history books did not tell, however, was how well Severus Snape had played his role. Yes, there had been Death Eaters who had all along doubted his loyalties, but the Dark Lord himself had always believed Severus Snape to be his truest and most loyal servant. And there were those who still believed this, and those who still believed that he was nothing but a turncoat, a cunning opportunist whose smooth talking had made Dumbledore save him from Azkaban. Surely Lucius Malfoy was one of those people. And Scorpius had probably heard that story already when he had been lying in the cradle. And now the little pest had decided to share.

Severus clutched his glass so hard that the edges cut into his palm. He had been long since aware that he would have to come clean one day, that one day Eydis would need to know the whole truth about his past life. But he had deemed her too young, had thought that she was not ready.

He was not ready.

He emptied his glass and got up. 'Tell Eydis I await her in my quarters.'

'Severus, wait,' Harry started.

But Ginny cut him short. 'Let him go, Harry,' she said softly. 'He needs time. They both do.'

~ ~ ~

'Please tell me Scorpius lied.'

Severus had heard Eydis Flook in, but he had not turned around in his chair. And even now, after she had addressed him, did he still stare straight forward, into the dark.

'Daddy?'

He felt her small hand on his shoulder and looked up, and dark eyes met blue ones.

He could see that his little angel had been crying, and he hated himself for it. 'I am sorry, Eydis,' he whispered.

She pulled up a stool and sat down, propped up her chin on her father's knees and looked up at him.

'Tell me that you never believed in what Voldemort said,' she started. 'Tell me that you never thought that pure-bloods were better than half-bloods and Muggles. Tell me that you were never like the Malfoys.'

Severus brushed a strand of red hair from his daughter's face and sighed. It was time to come clean.

'There was indeed a time when I *did* believe in everything what Voldemort said. I *did* believe that pure-bloods were entitled to rule the Wizarding world. I *did* loathe the fact that my father had been a Muggle. And I *did* envy the likes of Lucius Malfoy.'

Eydis frowned, but she did not shrink away. She was still looking up at him with her heavenly blue eyes, and the questioning look in her eyes gave Severus the strength to go on.

'I was dazzled by what Voldemort had to offer. Riches, power, *friends*. I had never had any of those things, and it took me years to understand that Galleons could not make me happy, that holding power over others did not give me any satisfaction and that those *friends* were only my friends as long as they could gain something from that friendship.'

'And that was when you went to Dumbledore?'

Severus nodded. *That* part of the story was well known: he had run from the Dark Lord and become a spy for the Light. His reasons for it were however still obscure to most people. And they would remain so.

Eydis started chewing at her lip. 'Scorpius said that everything was a charade, that you never truly left Voldemort.'

'It was a part I had to play, little one. I had to make Voldemort believe that I was his man through and through. And the easiest way to do this was letting everyone else believe it, too.'

He shrugged and closed his eyes for a moment, willed the shadows of his past to go away. 'I played my part well, maybe too well, and I made many enemies over the years. Some of them have not forgiven me to this very day.'

Once more he looked down at his daughter. She was still chewing her lip, and Severus did not need to use Legilimency to know that there was something else bothering her.

He cupped her chin and made her look at him. 'There is more, am I right? Scorpius said more than this.'

Eydis' lip started to quiver, and a single tear made its way down her cheek. 'Scorpius said you went after Mummy because you wanted to cover up your tainted blood-line. He said you had me because you wanted to be a part of a pure-blood family.'

Part of Severus wanted to jump up, Floo to Malfoy Manor and Crucio the life out of Lucius Malfoy. Yes, he would use Crucio. Avada Kedavra would be far too merciful. But he remained seated. Lucius Malfoy did not matter right now. The only thing that mattered was Eydis.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her into a standing position in front of him so he could look straight into her eyes.

'Never believe anything a Malfoy tells you, Eydis,' he began. 'I fell in love with your mother long before I knew she was a witch. And I would have continued loving her even if she *had* been a Muggle.'

He brushed away the tear with his fingertips.

'And *you*, little one ... Your mother and I had never hoped to have children. You were the greatest gift I ever received. And I love you with all my heart. Never let anyone make you believe anything else.'

Slowly, carefully, Severus pulled his daughter into a tight embrace. He had never held her that close, had never been so afraid that she would push him away.

But she wrapped her arms around his neck, and with endless relief, Severus closed his eyes. She would not push him away, not tonight. Hopefully, she would never have a reason to.

'Please, Daddy, can I sleep in my old room?' she asked softly. 'I would like to be here with you tonight.'

And of course, Severus nodded. Because sending away his little angel was the last thing he wanted to do.

XVII: Visiting Old Friends and Foes

Chapter 17 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for creating Severus Snape, to my beta Apple Blossom and all you wonderful readers.

Chapter XVII: Visiting Old Friends and Foes

Dear Daddy,

I am having so much fun here on Gran Canaria with the Potters.

Today, we went to Las Palmas to wander in the sand dunes. We managed to get lost Ginny said afterwards that men should never been trusted with directions and ended up being out in the burning sun way longer than we had planned to. Now all the Potters look like lobsters, especially Ginny, James and Lily. I don't, though. Because I used my Daddy's Sunblock Balm! James laughed at me when I put it on in the morning. And now look who's blistering. Ha! That will teach him!

I still don't understand why you didn't come along, Daddy. The ocean is wonderful, and the sun seems to shine so much brighter here than in Britain. I know you don't like the sun, but you could sit in the shade under a palm tree, you know.

Well, you know where to find us, should you change your mind.

Miss you!

Love,

Eydis

Severus smiled and put the postcard back between page three hundred and ninety-four and three hundred and ninety-five. He had used the card as bookmark ever since it had arrived three days ago and re-read it every time he opened his book.

'You miss the little one, don't you, Severus?'

He looked up at Rosmerta who was refilling his cup. She was smiling at him.

'It's hard not to notice how your face lights up every time you pick up that card. When will Eydis be coming home?'

'In two weeks,' Severus replied, adding some milk to his coffee. His stomach couldn't handle black coffee anymore.

'And what will you be doing until then?' Rosmerta inquired. 'Don't tell me that you have nothing better to do than come here every day.'

Severus raised an eyebrow. 'I was not aware of the fact that you dislike customers, Rosmerta.'

The witch laughed and sat down opposite him.

'Dear Severus,' she stared. 'I love to have you here. You know I do. I was just hoping you'd find something more enjoyable to do with your child-free three weeks.'

Severus frowned. Something more enjoyable?

'Don't get me wrong, Severus,' Rosmerta continued. 'You are a wonderful father. And I know that you love Eydis more than anything in the world. But have you had *one* day on your own since ... since Cassandra passed away?'

Severus felt something clench in the pit of his stomach. Nine years had passed since Cassandra had died, and still he flinched every time somebody mentioned her demise. And no, he had not spent a single day on his own since that day. He was either teaching or spending his time with his daughter. Being busy felt good, and he had not felt that he needed any time on his own either.

'I'm sorry, Severus,' Rosmerta said and patted his hand. 'I did not mean to open old wounds.'

Severus shrugged. And to his own surprise, he did not withdraw his hand. 'Then what do you propose I should be doing, Rosmerta? And do not suggest me taking up gardening. Pomona has tried that already.'

Rosmerta laughed. 'Now that would be a sight. Severus Snape on his knees in the garden, his hands dirty and his nose burnt by the sun. Heavens forbid you get a tan. But seriously, Severus, maybe you should get away for a couple of days. I know how much you love your cottage, but I think a change of scenery would do you good. And don't tell me you can't go because of Eldur. I'd love to take care of the little cat while you're away.'

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Why Andromeda Tonks had been the first person he had thought of to visit, Severus did not know. Maybe it was because she had been the only one of Cassandra's relatives who had been genuinely pleased when her cousin had returned to the Wizarding world. Maybe it was because of something as trivial as the fact that she baked delicious biscuits. Or maybe it was because she, just like him, had been left with nothing more than a child to love and hold on to. But whatever the reason, Severus had to admit that he had not felt so at ease and relaxed as that afternoon in Andromeda's kitchen for a long time. She had indeed baked a batch of her famous cinnamon biscuits and had put out a bottle of home-made elderflower lemonade. And they sat and talked, about everything from the weather to the new Minister of Magic.

'I have to say that I admire you, Severus,' Andromeda said after a while.

Severus gave her a questioning look, and she blushed.

'When Harry took Teddy on a holiday for the first time, I swear I did not breathe for six days. I was terrified that something would happen to the boy. Goodness, I even made him take along a Portkey so he could get straight home in case something happened. And they only went to Ireland. And you have Eydis running through sand dunes in Spain with the Potter boys, and here you are, cool as a cucumber, having biscuits and lemonade.'

Severus was just about to tell her that he was indeed more concerned about his daughter's welfare than was prudent, but was interrupted by the whooshing sound that announced somebody arriving by Floo. He turned his head toward the grate and out of it stepped atypically ungracefully Narcissa Malfoy.

'It's over, Andromeda,' the blond woman blurted out in a voice that suggested that she had been crying. 'I filed for divorce this morning.'

She was on her way to fall into her sister's embrace when she noticed Severus and froze. 'What are you doing here?' There was no hatred in her voice, no disdain, just endless surprise.

'Severus came for some biscuits and some sympathy, just like you,' Andromeda explained and made Narcissa sit down opposite Severus. 'And now, I think we all need something stronger.'

She Accioed a bottle of Odgen's and three glasses, filled them up and thrust one into Narcissa's hand and one into Severus'.

'To Lucius Malfoy,' she proposed with an almost cheerful tone. 'May he rot in hell. Cheers.'

Andromeda downed her whisky with a speed that amazed Severus beyond reason. Then she turned to her sister to pat her on the shoulder. 'I am very pleased that you have finally come to your senses, kitten. I told you the day you got engaged that Lucius Malfoy was no good for you.'

'And I did not listen to you. I know, Andromeda. I know,' Narcissa replied, burying her face in her hands. 'Spare me the lecture. I have been giving it to myself plenty of times over the last weeks.'

Severus cleared his throat and got up. It didn't feel right witnessing Narcissa's breakdown. But Andromeda's voice made him sit back down.

'Oh, you are going nowhere, Severus Snape. We are about to seriously drag Lucius Malfoy through the mud, and I think you might just be in possession of some juicy details that will make it even more fun.'

A bottle of Odgen's later, Andromeda had vented her spleen upon Lucius, and Narcissa seemed much calmer. But she had had at least one glass too many, and when she tried to stand, she ungracefully fell back onto her chair and collapsed in giggles.

Andromeda giggled, too, and did her best to focus her eyes on Severus. 'Dear Severus, seeing as you are the only one here that can actually hold his liquor, may I appeal to your chivalrous side and ask you to escort my baby sister back to her manor? I'm afraid she might bump her head on the grate if she tries to Floo on her own.'

Severus frowned. Visiting Malfoy manor was very close to the bottom of his priority list. He hated that place, had done so for many, many years. And his last visit had left a very bitter taste in his mouth.

'Don't worry, Severus,' Narcissa started, misinterpreting the reason for his hesitation. 'Lucius won't be home. I know for a fact that he is in Monaco with an anorexic eighteen-year old barmaid. You don't have to fear a jealous husband.'

She got up but swayed so much that Severus feared that she might indeed bump her head on the grate. And he took pity on her.

'I would be a fine friend if I let you go home on your own in this state,' he growled as he grabbed her arm. 'And I trust Lucius has some Sober-up Potion in his bathroom cabinet, has he not?'

Then he turned to Andromeda. 'Will you be alright?'

But he did not get any answer. Andromeda had slumped over the table and was fast asleep.

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'Circe, this is embarrassing!' Narcissa groaned. She was leaning against the desk in Lucius' study, clutching her third cup of espresso and looking positively mortified.

To Severus' disappointment, the elves had not managed to find any Sober-up Potion anywhere in the manor, and he had therefore instructed them to start brewing coffee. Strong coffee.

'What exactly do you find the most embarrassing, Narcissa?' he sneered. 'You getting drunk, you throwing up on the rug in front of the fireplace or the fact that it took you so many years to figure out that your husband is unworthy of you?'

Narcissa gave a short laugh but immediately clutched her aching head. 'Yes, go ahead, Severus. Rub it in. Tell me how pathetic I am.'

'I do not think this is necessary.' His voice was all of a sudden much softer, and as he took the cup from Narcissa's shaking hands, he felt truly sorry for the witch.

'Everything will be alright soon, Narcissa,' he tried to console her. 'Tomorrow morning all that will remind you of your excursion into your sister's liquor cabinet will be a slight headache. And I am certain that your elves will be able to restore the Persian rug as well. As for Lucius, you are better off without him.'

He was just about to call for Silvy, Narcissa's favourite elf, when Narcissa's tear-filled voice made him close his mouth again.

'I loved him once, you know,' Narcissa sobbed. 'There was a time when I truly loved Lucius. Not when we were in school or when he started courting me. Back then I was simply taken by his charms and his good looks. I did not even love him when we got married and had Draco. I was just content to be the wife of glorious Lucius Malfoy. He bought me silken dresses and gilded shoes, and I was happy with that.'

'But during the last year of the Dark Lord's reign, when that foul creature practically lived here at the manor and threatened to take everything from us, that was when I loved Lucius. I loved him with all my heart, Severus. Because he was all I had.'

Severus was slightly taken aback by her confession. He had always seen Narcissa Malfoy as a trophy wife, a pretty jewel Lucius chose to show off when he deemed it prudent. And he had always thought that Narcissa had been pleased with that. It had, after all, been the life she had been groomed for since her early childhood. He had never, not once, considered the possibility that Narcissa had actually loved Lucius.

'What made you change your mind?' he asked, truly curious, genuinely concerned.

Narcissa took a deep breath to steady her voice. 'After the Dark Lord had fallen, I believed that we could finally be a family, Lucius, Draco and me. Status didn't matter anymore, and we didn't need to show off to anyone. And for a while, Lucius seemed content with that as well. Oh, he was a darling, Severus. He came home with hand-picked flowers, not bouquets of over-priced roses. He cooked dinner in his own kitchen instead of taking me to a fancy restaurant at the French Riviera. And he made love to me, Severus. For the very first time he did not just take me because he could but made sweet love to me, simply because he wanted me. Me, Narcissa, his wife.'

'But then Scorpius was born, a worthy heir to the House of Malfoy, an heir untainted by the Light. And Lucius decided to take the boy under his wings and make sure that he would not make Draco's mistake and develop a conscience.' She laughed contemptuously. 'He has done a fine job with Scorpius, hasn't he Severus?'

Severus didn't deem it necessary to answer. Narcissa was right of course. Despite his young age, Scorpius already showed all the traits his grand-father was so famous for. He was just as arrogant, just as self-righteous and spiteful.

'Lucius has disowned Draco, did you know that, Severus?' Narcissa went on. 'He said that Draco was not worthy of the Malfoy fortune due to him having chosen a different path than the one his father had staked out for him. That is why I am divorcing him. I want to destroy Lucius Malfoy. I want to take away everything he holds dear, his money, his houses, his trinkets. I want to hit him where it hurts, and I will make sure he will be hurting just as much as I have.'

Then she started sobbing again, and Severus could not help but wonder if despite her harsh tone Narcissa still loved Lucius, deep down in her heart. But he had to admire her for her courage, for her strength to stand up for her son, for her bravery to face up to Lucius squarely.

He stood beside her and awkwardly patted her shoulder, wishing he had something encouraging to say. But he did not, and so he kept quiet, let his hand rest on her shoulder, hoping that the little gesture would give her some comfort.

Who had moved first, Severus did not know, but suddenly Narcissa's lips were pressed against his, her hands were entwined in his hair and his in hers. Her lips were soft and tasted of coffee and the salt of her tears. But what Severus would remember the most would be how warm they felt. So incredibly warm.

'This is not what you want right now, Narcissa,' he managed to get out between kisses as Narcissa started unbuttoning his shirt with nimble fingers.

'It might not be what I want, Severus. But it is what I need.'

She latched onto his throat, and Severus moaned involuntarily as the palms of her hands rubbed against his chest. But he tried to resist, tried to pull away.

Narcissa held on to him. 'There was a time when you desired me, Severus. Do you remember?' she whispered into his ear. 'Don't you desire me anymore?'

He grabbed her by her shoulders and held her at an arm's length to look into her eyes. 'Yes, Narcissa. I desire you. And if you want me to I will take you, make you moan and scream my name. But I will not make love to you, Narcissa.'

He saw something flash in her eyes. It could have been jealousy or a hint of madness. But he did not ask, and he would never know. It did not matter anyway.

'It is not love I want from you, Severus,' Narcissa replied, her voice hoarse and raspy. 'I want you to make me feel desirable. I want you to make me feel like a woman again. Can you do that, Severus? Can you and will you do that for me?'

Severus simply nodded.

'Then take me.'

He did not even bother unbuttoning her blouse, but tore it from her with a force he had forgotten that he possessed. Her breasts were as warm as her lips, and Severus assaulted them with his hands, his mouth. He massaged, teased and suckled, relishing the beautiful sounds that escaped from her lips.

Then Narcissa pulled him up, and he crushed her lips with his, drank from them while his hands pulled up her skirts and made their way up her milky thighs.

'Rip them,' Narcissa moaned into his ear as he started fumbling with her knickers. And he did as he was told, ripped apart the delicate fabric and found her hot and wanting.

He took her right there on Lucius' desk, buried himself up to the hilt in her warm flesh. It felt so wrong and at the same time so incredibly good.

He grabbed her butt and pulled her close towards him. It had been so long since he had been with a woman, and Narcissa felt so good around him, so warm, that he knew that he would not last long if he wasn't careful.

He closed his eyes and buried his face at her shoulder, concentrated on his breathing and then pulled himself out, slowly, slowly, oh, so agonisingly slowly, and Narcissa's muscles contracted around him at the same pace as he pulled out. As he drove into her again, he groaned at her tightness and had to bite his lip to keep himself from spilling himself inside her.

'Lucius is a damn fool,' he breathed. 'Why would he choose an eighteen-year old girl if he can have you?'

Narcissa didn't answer but let herself fall back onto the desk, wrapping her legs around Severus' waist, pulled him towards her, bucking her hips against him at the same time. And he started thrusting into her in a rhythm that made them both moan and claw the surface of the desk.

He kept his promise that night and indeed made Narcissa scream his name as she came undone under him. And as he spurted his seed into her womb, he screamed her name as well.

And it felt so right. So damn right.

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'Take care of yourself, Severus Snape,' Narcissa said in a soft tone as she walked him to the door.

Severus nodded and resisted the sudden impulse to brush her cheek with his fingers. He did not feel that he had the right to touch her anymore. He gave her a half-hearted smile and hoped that she did not see that it did not reach his eyes.

'You too, Narcissa,' he whispered and then disappeared into the darkness.

He Apparated straight to his little cottage in Hogsmeade. It was late, long past midnight. There was not a single sound to be heard from the village, and all the lights were out. Even the moon was hiding behind the clouds. But it was still warm, and so Severus directed his steps to the garden, to the old apple tree.

There was a blanket lying on the swing. He must have forgotten to take it in the night before. He picked it up and put it in his lap as he sat down and buried his hands into it. It was an old blanket, worn and mended in several places, but Severus did not have the heart to throw it away. How many times had Cassandra snuggled up against him under that blanket? How many times had they kissed under it and even made love, right there on the swing in the old apple tree?

Oh, Cassandra. Suddenly, Severus missed his wife more than ever. He wanted her to be there with him, wanted her to wrap her arms around him, wanted her to ... He wanted her to forgive him. He had let her down that night, had betrayed her memory by sleeping with another woman.

Scowling, he threw the blanket to the ground and stalked towards the house. Suddenly he felt dirty, unworthy of sitting on the swing where he had sworn Cassandra that he would love her forever.

Merlin, what had he done?

The first thing he saw when he entered the kitchen through the backdoor was Cassandra smiling at him from the photograph that stood on the window sill. He had put it there every summer since Eydis had taken it with her all those years ago. He had always found comfort in that photo. But that night he wished that Cassandra were not smiling at him.

'I am so sorry, Cassandra.'

He crossed the kitchen with three swift strides, banged his bedroom door shut behind him and sank onto the bed. He just wanted to close his eyes and forget about the whole evening.

A soft meow made him jerk his head up. How the hell had Eldur gotten inside his bedroom? What was the cat doing in the cottage anyway? It was supposed to be at Rosmerta's. With a groan, Severus got up from the bed to throw the cat out, but he could not find it anywhere in his room. Then he realised that the meowing was coming from the kitchen.

There it was, the little red fur-ball, in the kitchen, meowing desperately and scratching on the door of Eydis' bedroom.

'Your mistress is not at home, you silly cat,' Severus growled. 'So stop the racket.'

But Eldur continued scratching at the door.

'Will you stop if I let you inside?'

The little cat shot past him like an arrow as he opened the door and jumped up on Eydis bed.

But if Severus had thought that he could now go back to his own bed and spend a quiet night, he had been sadly mistaken. Eldur continued meowing and was now clawing at Eydis' pillow.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' Severus snarled and pulled the pillow away from the cat's claws.

The leather-bound album landed on the floor with a thud, and Severus swallowed dryly. He had been certain that Eydis had taken it with her.

He hesitated. Picking up the album felt like he was doing something that was forbidden, like he was intruding on something private. Cassandra had given this album to Eydis, not him. It was a gift from a loving mother to her daughter, not from a wife to her husband. But still, Severus could not resist.

Suddenly, he wondered if Eydis was the only one who could find the answer to her questions in that album. Was she the only one who could draw comfort from Cassandra? Or would he be allowed to as well?

He sat down on Eydis' bed and started leafing through the album. He knew exactly which question he wanted to ask. But did he dare?

What if he did not get an answer? What if the answer was no?

He stopped at a page that held the picture of a tall, blond man in jeans and a Black Sabbath T-Shirt. Under it, there were three sentences in Cassandra's slender handwriting.

I mourned Thorbjörn for almost ten years. And I was sure that I would never love another man. But then I met you, and I learnt that it was alright to let go.

You? Severus gasped. Cassandra was not talking to her daughter on this page. She was talking to *him*.

How could she have known? How could she, all those years ago, have anticipated that one day, he would be looking for answers? But then again, had she really known? Or was her ghost still lingering just like the crone had said and filling the pages, providing wisdom and comfort?

'Are you still here, Cassandra?' Severus whispered.

There was no answer, and the only thing that disrupted the silence was Eldur's soft purring.

Severus sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. What had he expected? Cassandra was not going to materialise in front of him after all those years. Maybe it was time for him to accept that she was gone. Maybe it was time for him to let her go. But he did not want to.

Then, all of a sudden, the air seemed to be filled with the scent of honey, and Severus felt something brush against his cheek. His fingers cramped around the edge of the album, and the muscles in his neck tightened.

He felt confused, almost terrified, but he had to take a chance.

'Can you forgive me?' he asked into the semi-darkness.

He thought he heard a whisper, but when he strained his ears to listen, the sound drifted away. And he felt disappointed, let down.

Then the whisper returned, and a fourth sentence appeared on the bottom of the page:

You do not need to be forgiven, my love.

And that was when Severus knew that the crone had been right. Cassandra, his beloved Cassandra, would never leave his side.

XVIII: Of Boys and Girls

Chapter 18 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go to JKR, for letting me play around in her universe, and my beta Apple Blossom.

Chapter XVIII: Of Boys and Girls

Severus let his gaze wander through the classroom. It was unusually quiet. No rustling of parchment, no hushed conversations, nothing. All the eyes were on him, and they were filled with curiosity and excitement, even apprehension. He was teaching girls only that afternoon, girls from every House, all fourth-years. They had been all giggly and chatty when they had arrived, as girls their age normally were, but as he had swept into the room, scowling and with his trademark black robes billowing behind him, telling them what this special lesson was going to be about, they had all fallen silent.

He narrowed his eyes and frowned. Children, they were all still children, certainly still far too young to be instructed in brewing contraceptive potions. Merlin's beard Eydis was most definitely far too young. But there she was, sitting in the front row beside her best friend Sarah O'Mally, eagerly awaiting his lecture.

'Just because you know how to brew a contraceptive potion does not mean you absolutely have to start using it just yet,' Severus began in a tone that suggested that the girls better not be thinking about any kind of intercourse for at least ten more years. 'And just because you know how to brew the potion does not mean that the responsibility for birth control lies with you alone. That responsibility lies with the man just as much as with the woman.'

That kind of speech was usually Poppy's business, but Severus felt that he wanted to get the message across as well. After all, his little daughter was part of this class as well. And he was certainly not going to encourage those *children* to have sex. That was why he deliberately used the terms *man* and *woman* instead of *boy* and *girl*. Sexual intercourse was something for adults, for grown-up, responsible people, not chattering, giggling fourth-years. If it were up to him, he would not be teaching this class at all. But after last year's unfortunate incident involving a sixth-year Ravenclaw and a fifth-year Hufflepuff, teaching the students how to take precautions was most probably advisable.

'Your male peers have been instructed in how to make *their* potion for this very reason,' Severus went on, hoping that the message would sink in. 'They, too, need to take responsibility for their actions. However, I strongly advise you not to trust any teenage boy when they tell you that they have taken their potion. *You* should not trust them as they are generally so desperate for copulation that they would tell you the world is flat if it meant gaining access to your underwear. And *I* would not trust them because I have seen them brew their potions this morning. Let me assure you that it was not a pretty sight.'

He sneered and groaned inwardly as some of the girls giggled at his comment. Teaching the boys had been a nightmare. Every time he had as much as mentioned girls or the word intercourse, the boys had blushed, giggled, or worse, snuck their hands under the table and tried to look innocent for a couple of minutes. Three hours and five melted cauldrons later, only two of them had managed to hand in a potion that would actually work. The rest of the potions would make the drinker lose their hair, sprout fangs or render them infertile, which, in Severus' opinion, wasn't the worst of effects considering what kind of dunderheads those boys were. Some people should just not be allowed to reproduce.

The girls, to Severus' relief, were much calmer. They were interested and actually seemed to be prepared. They knew about smartweed leaves and cotton root bark, and after half an hour, Severus had rewarded both Ravenclaw and Slytherin House with ten points each, and the potions were well underway. With some luck, the girls would be able to hand in effective contraceptives before the afternoon was over. And with even more luck, there would not be another Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff-incident.

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'Daddy, when does a girl know that she's ready to have sex?'

Severus almost choked at his tea. He had taken Eydis to the Three Broomsticks for breakfast on the weekend after her fifteenth birthday and had planned to be spending a nice father-daughter-day with her. Discussing her sexuality had, however, not been on his agenda.

He cleared his throat and put on his most impassive face. 'Would that girl in question be you?' he asked, folding his napkin and putting it onto his lap in order to have something to hold on to.

Eydis blushed slightly. 'Well, um, might be,' she mumbled.

The first thought on Severus' mind was: 'When I am dead and buried!'

But he took a deep breath, clutched the napkin tightly and went for a more pedagogical approach.

'I assume that you are interested in a specific boy.'

The colour on Eydis' cheeks went from pink to dark red. 'Hm,' was the only sound that came out of her mouth.

'Hm?' Severus repeated. 'Does that mean yes?'

'Yes,' Eydis blurted out. 'Yes, it means yes. And yes, it is James I am interested in. And yes, I know that you don't like him. But I cannot help it, I fancy him anyway.'

The torrent of words that came tumbling from his daughter's mouth made Severus smirk, and he quickly picked up his teacup to hide his face behind it. He did not want Eydis to think that he was laughing at her. Instead, he raised an eyebrow.

'James Sirius Potter?' he asked slowly. 'The captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, who you accidentally knocked off his broom with a Bludger last Saturday?'

'Hey, he was about to score against us! Something had to be done.' Eydis was grinning now, and the colour of her face had returned to normal. 'And yes, James Sirius Potter is the boy I fancy.'

'I cannot say that I am surprised,' Severus went on, clutching his napkin again. 'You threatened with marrying Pot...James already when you were three years old. But I have to admit that I was hoping you would get over it in due time.'

'Yeah, why's that, Daddy?' Eydis had crossed her arms in front of her chest and was now looking at her father with a mixture of mischief and defiance in her blue eyes. 'Why do you not like James? You seem to get along nicely with the other Potters. All except Uncle Harry, perhaps.'

'Because,' Severus started but broke off.

What was he going to tell his daughter? That he still held a grudge on the boy's grandfather? It was the truth, but when he thought about it, it was highly ridiculous, not to mention childish. As much as he had hated the late James Potter, he could not transfer that grudge onto the grandson. And James Sirius to everybody's surprise was not up to half as much mischief as his father and grandfather had been. Even Severus had to admit that James was actually a nice kid.

'Imagine you had a daughter, Eydis,' Severus mused, trying to give Eydis an example that she could grasp. 'Imagine she was fifteen years old and telling you that she is seeing Scorpius Malfoy's son. What would you do?'

'A Malfoy? Merlin's pants, I would ground her for life!'

'Language, Eydis,' Severus chided her half-heartedly. He had anticipated a reaction like that. Eydis and Scorpius had been sworn enemies since the spring ball in Eydis' first year. Scorpius true Slytherin as he was had tried to regain Eydis' favour, but so far the girl had done nothing but show him the cold shoulder.

'Am I correct to assume that you would not want your daughter do be courted by a Malfoy because you do not like Scorpius?' he went on.

Eydis started chewing her lip and seemed to contemplate her answer very thoroughly. 'Yes, I think so,' she said after a while. 'But that would be somewhat stupid, wouldn't it? I mean, the boy couldn't help that his father is a troll.'

Severus smirked, and for some moments, silence settled over their table. He could see Eydis frown, could almost hear the wheels in her head turning, but he was not prepared for her next statement:

'I think I would tell my daughter to listen to her heart.'

Severus gasped. The words Eydis had just spoken reminded him of something her mother had once said, that true love was powerful enough to overcome anything. Her love for him had made her face her biggest fear, and she had returned to the Wizarding world with him. What kind of advice would Cassandra give her daughter now? What kind of advice would she give him?

'Daddy, are you alright?'

The sound of Eydis' voice made Severus return to the present. 'Yes,' he answered and cleared his throat once more. 'I was just thinking about your words.'

He bent slightly forwards and fixed his eyes on his daughter. 'What does your heart tell you, Eydis?'

'The problem is my heart doesn't tell me the same thing my brain does. My brain tells me that I should wait until I am truly ready. But my heart tells me that I am ready.'

Severus bit back a comment about it not being her heart that was talking but her hormones. Her very pert hormones that had no say in this whatsoever.

'I assume James and you are what is the correct expression going steady?' he enquired instead.

Eydis laughed. 'Yes, we're going steady, Daddy. Since the Christmas feast, actually.'

Blasted mistletoes, Severus thought and made a mental note to make sure there wasn't a bloody mistletoe hung up anywhere in the castle next Christmas.

'Then I assume you have kissed?' he went on, trying to sound relaxed. 'Made out even?'

Eydis blushed. 'Daddy!'

'Are you uncomfortable discussing this issue with me?' Severus asked, almost hoping that Eydis would say yes. Because she was more than uncomfortable. 'Maybe you should turn to a woman for advice. Ginny, perhaps?'

'Ginny said that if James is anything like his father, he won't kiss me until we are engaged.'

Now Severus had to oppress the urge to vomit. Hearing anything about any Potter's sexuality was enough to make him nauseous. Hearing the words *Potter* and *engaged* in one sentence just made it worse.

'Let us not be hasty,' he said, more to calm himself than Eydis. 'You are not getting married just yet.'

When Rosmerta cleared their table half an hour later, she could not help but wonder why one of the napkins had been shredded to pieces.

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'How about I do not refill you teacup but give you something stronger instead?' Ginny suggested with a kind smile.

Severus just nodded. Yes, alcohol might just be what he needed to survive this conversation. After his stroll through Hogsmeade with Eydis, the little one had gone to meet some of her classmates, and he had Flooed to the Potters'. He needed some female advice

'Our two lovebirds are thinking about getting serious then?' Ginny asked as she pushed a glass of Odgen's into Severus' direction. 'Well, I cannot say that I wasn't expecting something like that.'

Severus emptied his glass in one go. He knew that it was probably not a good idea, but to hell with it.

'There, there, Severus. It's not that bad,' Ginny said as she took a seat opposite him. 'I think the fact that both James and Eydis are asking for our advice in the matter proves that they are quite mature. They are not just going to *do it* for the sake of it.'

Severus flinched. The idea of his daughter, his little girl, *doing it* was just horrid. She was just a ...

'Eydis is not a little child anymore, Severus,' Ginny went on as if she had read his thoughts. 'She is slowly but surely becoming a woman. And she is getting concerned because almost all of her friends seem to have had their first sexual encounters while she hasn't.'

Severus felt his stomach clench. The idea of Eydis throwing herself into her first sexual encounter because her peers allegedly already had had sex, made him nauseous.

'She's seeing right through them, though,' Ginny tried to calm him and re-filled his glass. 'You taught her to think for herself, Severus. And that's what she's doing now. She is not asking her peers for advice but us. Me, you. And I think she has been talking to Cassandra as well.'

Severus nodded. Of course Eydis had been talking to her mother. The words *follow your heart* could only have come from Cassandra. And it had been well-meant advice, for sure. But Severus wished she had been more precise. And he wished that she were there, by his side, advising him as well as she was advising their daughter.

'What am I to tell Eydis then, Ginny?' he asked. 'I cannot forbid her to explore her sexuality. And at the same time, I have no intentions of encouraging her either.'

'Tell her that,' Ginny suggested. 'Tell Eydis that it is her choice, and that you will be there for her if she needs your advice. The worst thing you can do is make her feel guilty about her choice. Step back, and let things unfold.'

Severus downed his second glass of Odgen's and looked right at Ginny. 'And what kind of advice are you giving your son?'

'James?' Ginny smiled. 'I am telling him exactly the same thing, with the addition that the final decision lies with the girl with Eydis and that ~~no~~ is a *no* and not a *maybe*. We have to show our children that we trust them, Severus. Otherwise, they might sneak off and have sex in a dark alley in Hogsmeade or a shabby room at the Hog's Head. And we don't want that, do we?'

No, they certainly did not want that. And as corny as it sounded, Severus wanted his little girl to enjoy her first time. And if it happened to be with James Potter, then it would at least be with a boy she cared for. And with a boy who cared for her as well.

When Severus returned to their Hogsmeade Cottage, he found the door to Eydis' room closed. She had obviously already gone to bed.

He thought about knocking on her door for a moment but decided against it. If she should take up the topic of her first sexual encounter once more, he would listen to her and advise her as best as he could. But for now, he would take a step back and let things unfold, as Ginny had put it so nicely.

He did, however, leave a phial of the strongest contraceptive potion he had ever brewed on his daughter's doorstep and attached a note to it: *One tablespoon every month on the first day after your period. And remember: just because you have access to the potion does not mean you have to start using it.*

When he got up the next morning, the phial was standing on his doorstep instead. And on the back of his note, Eydis had scribbled a reply: *know that, Daddy.*

A/N:

Smartweed is used as a fertility regulator all over the world. It contains rutin, quercetin and gallic acid, all of which interfere with normal pregnancy. Infusions of smartweed leaves are said to bring on a missed period.

Cotton root has the effect of shutting down the corpus luteum's (a temporary endocrine structure in mammals) ability to produce progesterone, which is needed to maintain pregnancy.

Do not go dabbling with these ingredients on your own! Practice safe sex!

XIX: Love and Friendship

Chapter 19 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

Thanks go, as usual, to JKR, for creating the HP universe, my beta Apple Blossom and all you faithful readers.

Chapter XIX: Love and Friendship

'I've been wondering for years what your private home looks like,' Narcissa declared as she let her gaze wander through the kitchen in the little Hogsmeade cottage. 'I have to say that you have surprised me, Severus.'

'What did you expect, Aunt Narcissa? A bat cave?'

Severus gave his daughter a slightly disapproving look, but Narcissa smiled. 'The little one has certainly inherited your tongue, Severus. Say, Eydis, are you excited to start your last year at Hogwarts?'

Eydis shrugged. 'I guess. But it might prove to be a boring year.'

'Or maybe,' Severus interrupted, 'you will finally be able to fully concentrate on your studies, now that both Potter boys have left school.'

Eydis cocked an eyebrow at her father. 'Are you implying that you are unhappy with my grades, *Professor Snape*? Is an O in Potions and Charms not good enough? Would you like me to send an owl to the Minister of Education and ask if he could be so kind to adapt the grading system according to your wishes?'

The girl's voice was dripping with irony, and Severus couldn't help but smirk. They had had this discussion before.

'You are predestined to receive an O in Potions and Charms, *Ms Snape*,' he replied. 'Anything else would be a grave disappointment. But with both Potter boys gone, you might just be able to concentrate on those subjects for which you actually need to study.'

'You know, me not studying for History of Magic has nothing to do with James and Albus,' Eydis explained, now facing Narcissa, and her voice dropped to a whisper. 'It's just so unbelievably boring!'

Narcissa sniggered, and Severus was just about to tell his daughter that he had heard her when he was interrupted by an arriving owl.

'Talking of the devil,' he muttered as he inspected the roll of parchment the bird was carrying and handed it over to Eydis. 'From your beloved, I believe.'

Eydis blushed and snatched the parchment from her father's hand. In a matter of seconds, she had disappeared into her room.

'Beloved?' Narcissa enquired, an amused tone in her voice.

Severus sighed. 'Yes. It appears as if my daughter and James Sirius Potter are ... an item.'

Narcissa smiled kindly. 'Eydis and James Potter? Does that disturb you in any way, Severus?'

Severus frowned. 'Not as much as I expected it to, to be frank. Eydis had already threatened to marry the boy at the age of three. It almost seems as if Sibyll was right when she said that Eydis possessed the gift of the Inner Eye. And James Potter has despite my initial doubts turned out to be a fine young man. He is currently in Auror training.'

'Following in his father's footsteps then,' Narcissa concluded. 'How are you and Harry Potter getting along nowadays?'

A shadow fell on Severus' face, and Narcissa extended her hand to gingerly touch his arm. 'I'm sorry, Severus. I shouldn't have asked. It's just ... Harry Potter saved my son. He saved us all.'

'It is alright, Narcissa,' Severus started, awkwardly patting her hand which was still lying on his arm. 'Harry Potter and I have made peace many years ago. We will never be best friends, but for the sake of our children we have decided to let the past rest.'

The door to Eydis' room opened, and the girl re-entered the kitchen, her cheeks still slightly flushed.

'Daddy, James has got tickets for the Quidditch game in Edinburgh tonight. Please, can I go with him? Please?'

'We are having a guest, Eydis,' Severus started. 'It would be very rude ...'

'Severus, please,' Narcissa interrupted. 'Let the girl go. I am sure there will be other opportunities for us to spend time together.'

And Severus had no other choice than to give in. Two Black women looking at him with their blue eyes was not something he could resist.

Eydis hugged her mother's cousin and kissed her father on the cheek. 'And what will you two be doing?' she asked innocently.

'I was hoping your father would give me the full tour of Hogsmeade,' Narcissa replied, smiling tenderly at Severus. 'I am sure that a lot has changed since I last visited this little nest.'

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'How have you been, Narcissa?' Severus asked, absentmindedly tracing the edge of his teacup with his index finger. The Three Broomsticks was all but deserted, and he and Narcissa were sitting at a quiet table by the window.

'I have ... been busy,' Narcissa started. 'Divorcing a Malfoy turned out to be hard work. But I managed.'

'I heard Lucius got to keep the Manor.'

'The Manor, the summer house in the Lake District, the cottage in Switzerland. Yes, he got to keep just about everything. But I don't care.' She looked up and smiled at Severus. 'Really, I am glad to be rid of everything, including his last name. And the fact that he hates to pay alimony makes spending his money even more fun.'

'You are well taken care of then?' Severus enquired. 'You are doing alright?'

Narcissa's smile broadened. 'Yes, Severus. I am doing more than alright. My divorce lawyer was the son of one of Lucius' old business partners. And you know how Lucius treats his partners. Believe me when I tell you that the bitterness of the father has rubbed off on the son. He made sure that I am very well taken care of. But as fun as it was to see Lucius cringe, it really doesn't matter. I don't need his money. And I finally learnt that I don't need silken gowns and gilded shoes to be happy.'

'Are you seeing anyone?' Severus was himself surprised at his question. Narcissa's love life was certainly none of his business.

'Me?' Narcissa laughed. 'Honestly, Severus, who would want a seventy-something-year-old witch who is recently divorced and a grandmother of two?'

'Of two?' Severus was slightly stunned.

'Yes, two. Didn't you know that Draco and Astoria had another child three years ago?'

No, he hadn't known. He hadn't spoken with Draco since Scorpius' last year at Hogwarts, not since Lucius had decided that he was the one responsible for the boy's education and had taken him out of school and transferred him to Durmstrang.

'She's an adorable little girl with blond hair and blue eyes,' Narcissa went on. 'And her name is Cissy.'

Severus barely heard her. His thoughts were on Scorpius. Could he as the boy's Head of House have prevented Lucius from sinking his fangs into the boy?

'How is Scorpius?' he finally asked.

Narcissa bit her lip, and for a moment, Severus regretted his question. He knew how hard it was on Narcissa that her grandson was under Lucius' influence.

'The boy broke any contact with his father the very day he came of age,' Narcissa started, fidgeting with her napkin. 'And as you know, Lucius took him to study at Durmstrang. And since he graduated, the two of them have been travelling the Wizarding world, doing things I'd rather not know of.' Her voice was bitter but turned into a feeble whisper when she started talking about her son. 'The boy did not even say goodbye to his father. Draco was devastated, still is. His only son, his first born ... He is blaming himself. He thinks that he should have stood up to Lucius much earlier, that he should have made sure Scorpius didn't listen to his grandfather ...'

She was clutching her napkin with an iron grip, and now Severus really regretted that he had asked. He had not meant to upset her. He could imagine how it felt to see one's child getting hurt in such a cruel way.

'I am sorry, Narcissa,' he said honestly, taking her shaking hand into his. 'It was tactless of me to ask.'

Narcissa squeezed his hand and looked up at him. 'You were Scorpius' Head of House, Severus. You took care of him for almost seven years. Of course you're concerned about him. You had every right to ask.'

Severus felt a stab of guilt. *Concerned* was not a word he would have used. He had never cared much for Scorpius, at least not since the boy had seen it fitting to tell Eydis about her father's past. But now he wondered if he could have hindered the boy from following in his grandfather's footsteps. He should have made sure that Lucius did not spread his poison among the Slytherins. Who knew how many more had managed to corrupt? Unfortunately, it was too late now.

'Draco must not blame himself,' he pointed out. 'And Scorpius had no choice either. Once Lucius sets himself a goal, nothing and nobody will stand in his way. He will get what he wants. And if he does not get it, he will take it. The moment he decided that Scorpius was his true heir, Draco had lost the battle.'

Narcissa nodded. 'Yes, you are right, of course. I imagine Lucius promised Scorpius riches and adventures the boy couldn't imagine even in his dizziest daydreams. Of course the boy went with him. Of course he let himself get charmed. No one can resist Lucius.'

No, no one could. Severus knew that from his own experience. He, too, had once been promised riches and glory by Lucius Malfoy. And he, too, had followed him without thinking too much about the consequences. He had ended up with the Dark Mark branded onto his left forearm. Hopefully, the boy would be spared from similar a destiny.

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It was late afternoon when Severus and Narcissa returned to the cottage. They had spent the afternoon wandering around the village, talking, sharing memories. They had laughed, and they had been serious, and by the time they got back to the cottage, it felt to Severus as if Narcissa had been his best friend for many years.

Back in the kitchen, he put the kettle on and let himself fall onto the nearest chair. Being out in the fresh air all afternoon wasn't something he was used to, and it had made him tired.

'Are you feeling alright?'

Severus frowned. He had not been aware that he had closed his eyes. And as he looked at Narcissa now, he found her looking at him with a concerned look on her face.

'Are you, Severus?'

Her blue eyes locked onto Severus' beetle-black ones, and he couldn't help but smile.

Narcissa's eyes had truly changed over the years. There had been a time when they had been cold and filled with contempt. He had also seen them pleading and filled with tears. But today for the first time that he could think of he had seen a smile in those blue eyes. And they were beautiful. And Severus started to wonder whether those heavenly blue eyes were a Black family trait.

'If you don't give me an answer soon, I will Apparate to St. Mungo's with you.'

Narcissa looked truly concerned, and Severus shook his head. 'I am alright, Narcissa,' he assured her. 'The fresh air has made me tired. Those are the joys of getting older, I suspect.'

'Along with the wrinkles and the grey hair.' Narcissa gave him a tiny smile, but it faltered. 'Those things can easily be fixed with a simple spell. But I truly regret everything I have missed, all the years I have wasted in a loveless marriage ...'

She got up and walked towards the window. And Severus followed her gaze with his eyes, wondering what she saw when she looked at the old apple tree in the garden.

'Do you still miss her, Severus?' Narcissa suddenly asked. 'Do you still miss Cassandra?'

Severus left the kitchen table and joined Narcissa by the window. 'I swore that I would always love her, right there on that swing,' he replied, pointing towards the apple tree. 'Cassandra was the love of my life, Narcissa. I have missed her every day since she passed away. And I will miss her until the day I die.'

With a sigh, Narcissa let her head fall against his shoulder. And gingerly, Severus laid his arm around her.

'I envy you, Severus,' she said after a while. 'I wish I had known love like that.'

XX: Lay Back in the Arms of Your One True Love

Chapter 20 of 20

Sequel to *The Way Home*. Cassandra has shown him the way back home. And now she has given him the greatest gift of all. How will Severus Snape cope with fatherhood?

My dearest readers,

All things must come to an end, and now we have arrived at the final chapter oA Gift of the Goddess.

Once more, I want to thank JKR, for creating the Harry Potter universe and Severus Snape, and my beta, Apple Blossom, for her terrific work.

But most of all, I want to thank all of you. It means a lot to me that you are reading my stories and leaving your thoughts on the review page. And even if we do not agree on everything, I am grateful that you are sticking with me and my stories.

Now, grab a hankie and enjoy the last chapter.

Chapter XX: Lay Back in the Arms of Your One True Love

'The best advice I can give you, Severus,' Poppy started in a grave tone after she had examined him, 'is to take it easy.'

Severus sneered. Just how on earth was he supposed to take it easy? He didn't have the time to take it easy. He had NEWT exams to prepare, lesson plans to set up and a wedding to arrange. Taking it easy did not fit anywhere in his schedule.

He was just about to explain this to Poppy, when the medi-witch thrust a phial into his hand.

'Since when have you ever listened to anybody's advice when it concerned your health?' she muttered and then became serious again. 'I want you to take three drops of this potion every morning. It will make your heartbeat slow down and your blood pressure sink. And this is not a suggestion. This is an order, Severus.'

He pocketed the phial just in time to be presented with another one that contained a bright red substance.

'If you feel uncomfortable in any way, any pressure or squeezing sensation in your chest or pain spreading from your chest to your shoulders or arms, you take a big gulp of this and get your behind right to me or to St. Mungo's. Is that understood?'

Severus nodded. He understood very well.

'Please, Severus, take the warning signs seriously,' Poppy continued in a now much softer tone. 'I know that you think that you're still young. And by Hippocrates, sixty-eight is not a high age for a wizard. But your body has been through enough hardships to fill three lifetimes. And if you don't slow down, your body will do it for you. Please, take it easy, Severus.'

He resisted the urge to shake off the hand the medi-witch had laid upon his shoulder. She only meant well, he knew that.

He disappeared behind the curtain to put his robes back on. He didn't need to count the scars on his upper body to know that Poppy was right. His body had certainly been through a lot. And although the last thirty years had been a piece of cake, the damages he had suffered earlier could not be undone.

'When is the big day?' Poppy asked as Severus stepped into her office some minutes later.

'Beltane.'

'Beltane? Eydis is getting married on her birthday?'

Severus shrugged. 'What better day to get married than her twenty-first birthday? Sibyll has consulted the tea leaves, and Aurora has gazed into the stars. It will be a fine day.'

'I'm sure it will be,' Poppy replied, once more giving him a pleading look. 'Just make sure that you will be around, Severus.'

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The air was filled with the scent of roses and lilies. And Severus secretly wondered where his daughter had learnt to love flowers. It was certainly not part of her genes. He would have to blame Ginny for it.

But first he would have to thank her. She had been working tirelessly for weeks, putting together flower arrangements, choosing tablecloths and matching plates, talking to the caterer and the musicians. She had even sewn Eydis' dress, white silk sprinkled with fairy dust.

Yes, he would have to thank Ginny. And not only for the wedding, but for all the times she had been there for Eydis when the little one had needed to talk to a woman, to a *mother*. And he would also thank her for all the times she had been there *for him*. But for the time being, a smile in the direction of the mother of the groom was all Severus had time for. He had to go and find the bride.

Eydis was sitting on a bench in the garden. The fairy dust made her dress sparkle in the sunlight as if it were embroidered with a million tiny diamonds. And her long red hair that hung loose around her shoulders looked like a sea of flames.

'Are you getting cold feet?' Severus asked in a soft tone as he took a seat beside his daughter.

She looked up at him and smiled. 'No. Why? Were you planning on giving me a pair of knitted socks?'

Severus laughed. 'Your mother has tattled, I assume.'

Of course she had. Cassandra had shared everything with Eydis over the last fourteen years. Naturally, she would have told her how Severus had gotten the jitters before their wedding and how she had presented him with a pair of dark green woolly socks. Hopefully, she had omitted his attempts to hex her for it.

'You are going to go through with it then?' Severus went on. 'You are going to break your poor father's heart and marry a Potter.'

Eydis playfully slapped him on the shoulder, and he raised his hands in a defensive gesture. She knew he was joking, of course. The years when he had held a grudge against any male who went by the name of Potter were long since gone. He would never go as far as saying that he liked the late James Potter, but his hatred for the man had faded. And the love he saw in his daughter's eyes when she talked about her future husband made it impossible for Severus to hold any kind of resentment against the James Potter she had chosen to spend the rest of her life with.

He wrapped his arm around Eydis' shoulders and pulled her towards his chest.

'Have you chosen a name for the baby yet?' he asked.

Eydis lovingly caressed her rounded stomach and nodded. 'James has, actually. Cassandra if it is a girl. And Severus if it is a boy. If you don't mind.'

Severus Potter. Severus couldn't help but sneer. If someone had told him thirty years ago that he would let his daughter marry a Potter and that his grandson would combine the names Severus and Potter, he would have declared the person insane and probably hexed them into the next century.

But a lot of things had changed over the last three decades. He had changed. He had almost died, had been given the chance to a new life. He had taken it and found love. He had laughed. He had cried. And he had learnt how to go on.

Things had changed for the better, indeed. And here he was now, sitting on a bench in the garden, holding his beloved daughter in his arms, ready to walk her down the aisle, ready to let her go.

~ ~ ~

'Daddy, will you dance with me?'

'You should be dancing with your husband, little one.'

Eydis crossed her arms in front of her chest and pouted. 'James hates dancing.'

'So do I,' Severus replied. 'And pouting does not become you, Mrs. Potter.'

Eydis grinned. 'Sounds horrible, doesn't it? Eydis Potter. What was I thinking?'

'Were you thinking, little one?' Severus asked, arching his eyebrow. 'At all?'

Eydis laughed. 'You will never get over it, will you? You will always hold his last name against James.'

Severus smirked. 'As long as he makes you happy, little one, his last name could be Riddle, and I would not care. But the day he hurts you, I will risk a life sentence in Azkaban and put an Unforgivable Curse on him.'

Eydis shuddered theatrically and then smiled. 'My Daddy,' she said and grabbed his hand. 'My hero.'

Despite her being five months pregnant, she felt feather light in his arms, and when the song ended, Severus let go of his daughter only reluctantly. It did not feel right to let go of her. And when he retreated from the dance floor and blended into the shadows of the night, he suddenly felt cold.

He watched his little angel dance with her brother-in-law for a few moments and then retreated into the garden. He felt like being alone for a while.

The warm spring night air smelled of freshly cut grass and apple blossoms. And the stars seemed to be competing about which one of them could shine the brightest. Even the moon seemed to have been polished. Eydís had surely picked a wonderful night for starting her new life.

Severus sat down on the bench and rolled his head and shoulders. The muscles in his neck had been tense all day, and over the last couple of hours, he had gotten a pounding headache. No surprise, really. He had been clenching his jaw all day. He should have listened to Ginny when she had told him to relax already during lunch.

As if she had heard him, Ginny was suddenly standing right beside him.

'Are you alright, Severus?' she asked. 'You look pale.'

'I am always pale,' he replied, surprised at how shaky his voice sounded. 'And it has been a long and tiring day.'

Ginny sat down beside him and looked up at the starry sky. 'It has been a beautiful day, though.'

Severus nodded. 'It has, indeed.' He paused for a moment and cleared his throat before he went on. 'I want to thank you, Ginny. For everything you have done for my daughter.'

'Oh, don't be silly, Severus,' she said, cutting him off. 'It's my son's wedding as well. And to be honest, my mother and Narcissa did most of the work.'

'I am not talking about the wedding, Ginny. You have no idea how much you meant to Eydís over the years. You were the mother she never had. And that is what I want to thank you for.'

Ginny smiled at him. 'You would have done a wonderful job even without me, Severus. You turned out to be a wonderful father. And you have surprised us all.'

Severus snorted. 'You have no idea how much I surprised myself.'

Ginny giggled. 'How about you surprise everyone else once more and dance with me? My dear husband hasn't danced with me since we got married. And to be honest, my feet are actually rather grateful for it. But I would really like to dance with you. Just once.'

She got up and held out her hand for him. And Severus took it. Dancing with Ginny was the least he could do. But when he tried to stand, his head started to spin, and he sank back onto the bench, clutching his chest.

'Severus, what's wrong?'

He knew exactly what was wrong. But this must not be happening. Not now. Not today. Not on his daughter's wedding day!

'Potion,' he managed articulate. But he couldn't take the phial from his pocket. His arm felt heavy, and he was sure that his hands were shaking.

Thankfully, Ginny understood. He felt her hand in his pocket, felt the phial being pressed against his lips. And he swallowed, felt the liquid trickle down his throat and waited. But nothing happened. Ginny was talking to him, he knew that. She was asking questions. But he couldn't make out her words, and the tightness in his chest prevented him from speaking.

Then a bright light erupted in front of his eyes. And he thought that he was dying. He had seen that light before, that night when he had been lying on the dusty floor in the Shrieking Shack. Back then, he had not minded dying. He had not had anything worth surviving for that night. But today, he had.

It was first when he heard voices and saw the blurry outlines of people around him that he realised that the bright light had been Ginny's Patronus. She had called for help.

He felt himself being pushed back into a lying position on the bench, felt familiar hands on his neck and chest, and heard Poppy's voice:

'Call the Healers,' she commanded. 'We cannot risk Apparating him in this state.'

Then he saw Eydís' face. Her blue eyes were filled with fear, and her lips were trembling. 'We're taking care of you, Daddy. You'll be alright.'

No, he would not be alright. Deep inside, Severus knew that it was over. He was done fighting.

Gathering all the strength in his body and mind, he raised his hand to his daughter's face. She grabbed it and kissed it, held it to her chest.

'You'll be alright, Daddy,' she repeated, squeezing his hand. 'The Healers are on their way.'

Severus tried to squeeze back, but found himself unable to.

'I am sorry, little one,' he whispered instead. He was so unspeakably sorry for doing this to her on the day that was supposed to be the happiest day of her life.

'No, Daddy,' Eydís sobbed. 'Don't. Don't be sorry.'

Once more, he felt her squeeze his hand.

'I love you, Daddy.'

Then the tears started streaming down her cheeks, and Severus tried to dry them off like he had done so many times when she had been little. But she seemed to be drifting away from him, and her face started to blur in front of his eyes. Yet at the same time, it seemed to become clearer, more distinct.

For a short moment, Severus was confused, thought that maybe the Healers had arrived in time after all, that they had managed to save him. But then he realised that it was not his daughter's face he was looking at anymore.

It was Cassandra's.

She was welcoming him home.

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'Look at all those people,' Eydís said quietly as she let her gaze wander over the Hogsmeade cemetery. 'Who would have thought that so many would come and say goodbye.'

James wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulder. 'Your father was a great man, Eydís. Of course they would all come to pay him respect.'

Eydís nodded. The whole Potter-Weasley clan was there, of course. So were her father's Hogwarts colleagues. Slytherin House had meant to send two representatives, but since they had been unable to decide on whom to send, there were now about ninety students closely huddled together at the edge of the cemetery, all proudly wearing their House colours.

Narcissa was standing by the gate, crying bitter tears. She and Severus had become friends over the last years. Or maybe even more than friends, Eydís didn't know for sure. But she knew that her father had always seemed very happy in Narcissa's company, and she was grateful for it.

Next to Narcissa stood Scorpius, looking thin and worn. And as much as Eydis disliked the young man for what he had done in the past, she was glad that he had come to his senses and managed to escape the clutches of evil and return to his father, who was now standing among the Slytherins. He, too, had come to take farewell.

There were Rosmerta and the man who owned the Apothecary in Hogsmeade, Ollivander and many more whom Eydis did not know. And she couldn't help but wonder if her father would even like the commotion or if he would sneer and start throwing hexes.

She lingered by his grave when all the others had taken their farewells and departed. She didn't feel like leaving just yet.

The white marble of the headstone looked like freshly fallen snow. Why ever had she chosen white, Eydis wondered. Her father had hated that colour. But black just had not seemed to fit the inscription she had chosen: *Always Pure at Heart*. Because that was what her father had always been, pure at heart. He had always been honest, true to his friends, and he had loved with a passion Eydis hoped that she, too, would experience one day.

She gasped as the baby kicked. 'This one is going to be a Beater, Daddy,' she said, clutching her side. 'And considering how stubborn he already is, I am sure he will be a Slytherin.'

Then her blue eyes filled with tears, and she knelt to lay down two red roses, one for her father and one for her mother.

'I wish you could meet my baby boy, Daddy. I wish you could teach him how to fly a broom and how to brew potions. And I wish you, Mummy, could read *Rabbit* to him. I still remember your voice, you know.'

'You will do all those things just fine on your own, little one.'

Eydis blinked back her tears and lifted her head. Beside her stood a wrinkly old woman, holding a bouquet of yellow tulips.

'I'm sorry, what did you just say?' Eydis asked.

'I said that you would do all those things just fine on your own.'

'No, not that.' Eydis felt confused. 'You called me *little one*. My father always ...'

'Yes, I know,' the crone replied and patted Eydis' cheek. 'And he is very proud of you.'

'Proud of me?' Eydis stammered. 'But how ...'

'He is standing right beside you, little one,' the crone answered with a smile. 'He and your mother will always be right there with you. Because they are part of your soul.'