

There Will Always Be Hope

by morgaine_dulac

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Walking Down Memory Lane

Chapter 1 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 1: Walking Down Memory Lane

'You look tired, Severus. Mea culpa. I kept you up too long last night. Maybe, it's time for you to retire? I will send an elf to your quarters with some sandwiches and tea. And maybe some brandy?'

Snape looked up from the stack of essays in front of him, contempt for the headmaster edged into every line of his pale face despite the old man's kind offer.

'Do not try to make me believe that you suddenly care for anyone or anything beside the greater good, Dumbledore,' he snarled. 'As long as it serves your purpose, I could be shaking from exhaustion, you would not care.'

Dumbledore inclined his head. 'This is your tiredness talking, Severus,' he said softly, as if he were talking to a petulant child. 'Take a relaxing herbal bath. I recommend lavender and rosemary. Or go for a stroll. Or...'

Snape slammed his quill down onto the table so violently that the tip broke and the ink spilled and splattered all over the essays.

'Or what? Tantric yoga?'

A bemused smile flitted over Dumbledore's wrinkled face before he opened his mouth to respond, but Snape didn't stick around long enough to hear. He vanished the essays with a wave of his wand they had been so bad that they would need to be re-written anyway and left the staff room in such a hurry that his billowing robes could have been mistaken for a cloud of black smoke. He did not care that him slamming the door resulted in three portraits falling from the wall. Neither did he care about the students who scurried out of his way with terrified expressions on their faces or Filch's outcry that he had just mopped the floor in the corridor Snape was striding through. He did neither have the strength nor the will to care. He didn't even trust himself to lift his gaze and look at anyone. If he did, he would most probably pull his wand and start throwing hexes and curses to the left and right, not caring whom or what they hit or how much damage they caused.

He needed to get out of the castle, he repeated to himself. He needed to leave the grounds, even, to be able to breathe fresh air that had not been polluted with lies and deceit. He needed to get away from everything: Hogwarts, Dumbledore, Potter, the Dark Lord, yes, even the Wizarding world. And he knew just where to go.

He Apparated to the edge of a forest, a good half hour's walk away from the village he hadn't visited since he had been a boy. Back then, he and his father had arrived

there by bus. It had been a long and bumpy ride, and little Severus had been ever so uncomfortable. His father had not told him where they were headed, and even though Severus would have much preferred to stay at home with his mother, he had not once protested. He had known better than to talk back to his father, and when the man had said that they'd go away for the weekend, Severus had it deemed best to obey. But he had been terrified during the whole journey, scared to death that he would never see his mother again. Yet when they had gotten off the bus, all Severus' worries had disappeared. They had been melted by the rays of the spring sun, carried away by the gentle breeze. His father had taken him to the lake, and they had spent the day fishing, and when they had retired for the night, his father had not touched a single drop of alcohol, not even for dinner. And for the first night in many years, young Severus had slept soundly, without having to fear either his father's harsh words or his fists.

Had his father known that this village, wedged in between a dark and eerie forest and one of the greenest lakes he had ever seen, was the only village in Britain where not a single witch or wizard resided, Snape wondered now as he walked along the dusty gravel road that led towards the village. He himself had not learnt about this fact until years later, when his Muggle Studies professor had taken his class on a field trip to this particular village. They had Apparated to the edge of the forest then, just as Snape had done tonight. They had handed over their wands to their teacher who in his turn had given them to an Auror for safekeeping, and then the youngsters had spent the day amongst Muggles, studying them and marvelling at them. Young Severus had recognised the pub where his father had bought him fish and chips and had spent quite some time by the lake, while his classmates had engaged in Muggle activities such as going to the cinema. He had once more breathed in the fresh air and turned his pale face towards the spring sun, remembering the only weekend from his childhood when he had not been afraid of his father. Of course, he had never told the man about it. It would surely not have earned him anything else than a good thrashing.

Before entering the village, Snape paused in the shadow of the church wall, carefully tucking away his wand in his boot. He was not supposed to bring it to the village at all, he knew that. Doing any kind of magic within the village was severely punished by the Ministry, and there were Aurors patrolling the outskirts of the village at any hour of the day, making sure that nobody broke the law. But Snape did not feel comfortable handing over his wand to any of them, even if it was only for the short time it would take him to walk through the village and down to the lake. These were perilous times, with danger lurking around every corner, and a man like Severus Snape could not afford to be caught without his wand.

It was a quiet, starless night. The moon was nothing more than a thin crescent in the dark sky, and Snape enjoyed the solitude by the lake. It almost seemed as if he was all alone in the world. There was no Dumbledore, no Dark Lord, no duties, no obligations. There wasn't even any magic, and that night Snape thoroughly relished that feeling. For what good had magic ever done to him, he contemplated. His father had hated it and never missed out on any opportunity to let his son know that he thought him to be a freak, and young Severus had often wondered if his father would have loved him if he had turned out to be a Squib. He would never have come to Hogwarts, never been sorted into Slytherin House, never become acquainted with Lucius Malfoy and never met the Dark Lord.

Now Snape sighed. Not knowing magic would have spared him a lot, he could not deny that, but not knowing magic would also have led to him never getting to know Lily. They had been drawn to each other since they had been two of a kind in a world where neither of them belonged, and for a short while, at her side, young Severus had been allowed to be happy. But then he had destroyed that happiness by calling his best friend a Mudblood. Dark magic had taken a hold of him and he had let it happen. He had been seduced and taken in, and in the end, that same dark magic had destroyed everything he had ever held dear.

The whimper that escaped Snape's lips that night was so tiny that it could have been mistaken for the whispering of the wind in the trees, and by the time he left the edge of the lake, even the treacherous tear that had run down his cheek had dried. It was too late to cry for Lily now, too late to have regrets. Dumbledore had revealed his plans, and all Snape could do now was what he had been doing for almost six years: protect the boy who had his mother's eyes, keep him from harm until the day he had to die in order to fulfil his destiny, to keep the Wizarding world from plummeting into darkness. When that was done, he would be allowed to mourn and beg Lily for forgiveness.

He was frozen to the marrow when he returned to the village. The last winter winds were pulling at his cloak, yet even though he longed for his bed and the crackling fire in his quarters, Snape headed for the pub. He was not yet ready to leave the non-magical world, the village where he was free of everything that had ever burdened him. And maybe, a glass of Muggle spirits would give him both the strength and the courage he needed to face the nightmares of which he knew that were bound to haunt him that night.

Things hadn't changed much in the little pub. The furniture was the same and so were the pictures on the wall, and Snape thought that he even recognised the old fishermen who sat at one of the tables. They had been sitting there the night his father had bought him dinner, and most probably, they still told the same tales.

He slipped into a booth, hid away in the shadows and was almost surprised as the barmaid approached him only moments later. He had not seen her when he had entered the pub, and her steps had been so silent that she seemed to have appeared out of thin air.

'What can I get you?'

'Scotch,' Snape muttered.

'With some water?'

Snape just nodded, barely lifting his gaze.

The barmaid returned less than a minute later, putting a crystal tumbler onto the table that seemed both too exquisite and too expensive for an establishment like this pub, and Snape contemplated the glass for quite some time before he even considered nosing the amber liquid that it contained. Then he stuck his nose into the glass and gently sniffed the whisky, inhaling its warm, peaty aroma before pulling away again, rolling the glass as he did so. It was too dark to really appreciate the spirit's colour, but Snape imagined it to be the shade of molten gold or honey dripping from a comb at midsummer's eve.

'Let me light you another candle so you can see what you're drinking.'

The barmaid produced a box of matches from her apron, and Snape watched her hands as she lit one of the matches. Her fingers were long and slender and her nails perfectly manicured, and just as the glass she had put in front of him, her hands seemed out of place in the shabby little pub.

'No need to bother,' Snape pointed out and put his hand over the little glass that held a half-melted, dusty tea light. 'I prefer the dark.'

He heard a sharp intake of breath and saw how the hand that held the match started to tremble, and when he looked up, he managed to catch a glimpse of the barmaid's green eyes before she blew out the match and the booth filled with darkness once more.

Snape blinked. He had been thinking about Lily a fair bit over the last twenty-four hours, and as he had now looked into a pair of green eyes, he had thought that he recognised them. But surely, his tired mind was playing tricks on him. Lily was long gone and her eyes forever closed.

As the barmaid left him, he started sipping his whisky, trying to forget, but however hard he tried, however hard he blinked, he was unable to block out the eyes he had just seen. Almond shaped and green as spring clover, almost hidden behind thick, dark lashes. He did know them. They were more than just a memory. But could it be? Could this woman be the girl he had lost almost fifteen years ago? How would she have ended up here, in a shabby little pub in the only village in Britain where witches and wizards only existed in fairy tales?

Snape shook his head at himself. The chances of this woman being Nadezhda McKibben were more than slim, and even considering the possibility was ludicrous. But still, he could not stop himself from tentatively looking back over his shoulder.

The woman was now standing in front of a door that was marked with the words "Staff only", conversing with a stout, balding man, most probably the owner of the pub. She was a good head taller than the man and was bending down in order to whisper into his ear. Her dark hair obscured her features, bereaving Snape of another chance to see her eyes, and he could not help but think that she did not want him to see her face. Then she noticed him looking at her, turned on her heel and disappeared through the door behind her, and only moments later, the front door opened, causing Snape to sink back into the shadows of his booth. He knew the two men that had entered the pub. They were both Aurors, Ministry employees, and Snape had no desire whatsoever to be seen by any of them. He had done nothing wrong, but if they saw him, they would still wonder what he was doing in this Muggle village, and Snape did not want to answer any questions.

The two Aurors chose a table in the middle of the pub, next to the old fishermen, and ordered each a cup of coffee, one with milk, the other with sugar. They looked alert, scanned the room with attentive eyes but didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. And within fifteen minutes, they had finished their coffee and were heading out.

Maybe he should leave as well, Snape considered, even though he had barely touched his whisky. All of a sudden he was not in the mood for alcohol anymore and longed instead for fresh air. Most probably, the walk back to the forest would do him much better than any drink ever would. But when he rose to leave, he saw the landlord coming towards him.

'Wasn't the whisky to your liking, sir?' the man asked, eyeing Snape's almost full glass. 'I'll get you another brand, if you like.'

Snape shook his head.

'It was quite an exquisite drop,' he said politely. 'But I realised I am not in the mood for whisky.'

'May I get you something else?' the landlord asked. 'Brandy? Gin?'

Snape frowned. It almost seemed as if the man didn't want him to leave.

'Please, sit,' the landlord urged. 'I'll bring you a glass of Bunnahabhain. On the house, of course. You'll love it. Sit, sit.'

Still frowning, Snape sat back down. He had rarely encountered a landlord so eager for a patron to stay and was now far too intrigued to leave. Certainly, the landlord had good reasons for wanting to treat him to a fine glass of Scotch.

The man returned with two glasses, and as he sat down opposite Snape, there was no doubt that he had something on his mind. He looked curious, even excited, and Snape had barely time to nose his whiskey before the landlord started talking.

'I saw you talking to my daughter.'

'Your daughter?' Snape asked.

'The barmaid,' the landlord clarified.

Snape slowly put down his glass, feeling almost a bit disappointed. So the woman wasn't Nadezhda McKibben. Of course not. Chances of Hufflepuff winning the House Cup this year were bigger.

'We weren't really talking,' he said now. 'I simply pointed out that there was no need to light another candle.'

'Oh, I see.'

The landlord looked crestfallen and the excitement had all but vanished from his face.

'I thought... I was hoping that... that you knew her.'

Once more, Snape frowned.

'You see,' the landlord continued, leaning in slightly and dropping his voice to a whisper. 'She isn't really my daughter. She came wandering into the village one night, a little more than fourteen years ago. Nicely dressed but in quite a state. She had no idea where she was or where she had come from, and so the cops took her down to the hospital. My wife, may she rest in peace, was a nurse there, you see. She took pity on the girl when she was released. Poor thing had nowhere to go. So my wife brought her here. We gave her a job and a place to stay. And when my wife died... The girl is the only family I have left, and I am the only family she knows.'

'Fourteen years ago?' Snape wondered. Surely, by now the woman must remember where she came from or someone must have come looking for her, but the landlord firmly denied this.

'You know, it's quite strange. The cops took her fingerprints and everything but found nothing at all. It's almost as if she appeared out of thin air. We tried everything. Therapy, hypnosis. We even sent her to a medium one day. But nothing. All she seems to remember is her name.'

'And what, if I may ask, is her name?' Snape enquired, once more optimistic.

'Hope,' the landlord answered. 'Her name is Hope.'

A/N:

Dear reader, old and new,

I am very glad that you have read this first chapter and hope you enjoyed it. I know I let you wait a long time after *His First*, and I apologise for that. I also have to ask you to be patient. This is not an easy story for me to write and as fluffy bunnies are far and few between, I hope you will forgive me if I need to take a breather every now and then. I promise I will not let you wait too long for the next chapter.

A Crack in the Wall

Chapter 2 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 2: A Crack in the Wall

It was long past midnight when Snape finally left the pub and with it, the Muggle village. His steps were surprisingly steady, despite the fact that the old landlord had kept

refilling his glass over and over again. But then of course, Severus Snape could hold his liquor, had been forced to learn how to over the years. He was perfectly able to spend a night at Malfoy Manor, wine and dining without getting drunk yet at the same time drinking enough to not insult his host. He had his strategies for keeping a clear head. For a man in his position, this was imperative. What if the Dark Lord called for him in the middle of the night? It wouldn't do showing up intoxicated. He had too much to hide, too many secrets to protect.

Nadezhda McKibben had been one of those secrets once, Snape mused as he made his way towards the forest. He had taught the girl white magic while the Dark Lord demanded that she be taught curses, and hours later, he had lied right into the Dark Lord's face, telling him that the girl was making good progress, that she would be ready to take the Dark Mark before winter came. Yet even though the girl had never been branded, Snape still felt that he had failed her somehow. She might not have had her soul swallowed by Darkness, but he had seen her smile falter, and in the end, it had vanished for good.

And then *she* had vanished.

Snape sighed and looked back towards the village once more. The barmaid had not returned all evening, bereaving him of the chance to have a better look at her, and even though landlord Edmunds was a talkative man, he had not given Snape many clues to discover she was his long lost student or not. Of course, the young woman had shown up in the village at about the right time, didn't have any family or friends who were looking for her, and those two facts alone made it very plausible that she was a witch on the run, a witch so desperate to get away from the Wizarding world that she would seek shelter in a Muggle village. But Snape didn't dare hope. For certain, Edmunds would have noticed if he'd had a witch living under his roof for so many years. Nadezhda McKibben had never known the Muggle ways. Something as simple as using a light switch would have seemed odd to her, and she would surely have given herself away by flinching at the ringing of a phone or the moving, talking pictures in a television set. But then again, according to landlord Edmunds, the young woman who had come wandering into the village fourteen years ago had been in quite a state, both physically and mentally. Any odd behaviour on her part could have been explained by her current condition. She would have had time to learn how to adapt to her new surroundings. And Nadezhda McKibben had always been a clever witch.

A miniscule smile tugged at the corner of Snape's lips. 'Hope. Her name is Hope,' Edmunds had said, and while Snape remembered the landlord's words, he heard the echo of words spoken one and a half decades ago by a then sixteen-year-old girl.

'Nadezhda is a Bulgarian name, sir. It means *hope*.'

Hope...

Snape shook his head at himself. He should just let it go. Hope was common enough a name, and then again, this might simply be a coincidence. He should just forget what he had seen, what he *thought* he had seen, and walk away. He had been distracted all evening, had been thinking about Lily far too much and then simply *wished* to see her eyes in the darkness, those eyes which he knew so well. And Nadezhda's eyes had reminded him of Lily's already when she had looked at him for that very first time. The same colour, the same shape...

'Good evening, professor Snape.'

Instinctively, Snape drew his wand to point it towards the direction from where the greeting had come, ready to defend himself. But when a dark clad figure detached itself from the shadows of the trees at the edge of the forest, he lowered his weapon just as swiftly. There was no mistaking the woman's posture and her almost soundless steps. Some things never change.

'Good evening, Miss McKibben,' Snape said in a low voice.

His breath froze to ice in the cold night air like hers had, and Snape thought that he heard her teeth chatter. She must have been standing at the edge of the forest for quite some time.

'You have been waiting for me,' he stated.

The woman nodded.

'How did you know I would come here?'

'Magic always leaves a trace, especially in a place like this, where there normally is none,' she started to explain. 'I knew you Apparated here and simply hoped you would choose the same spot to Disapparate again. After all, wizards are creatures of habit.'

Snape couldn't help but smirk. The woman in front of him had no idea about his habitual behaviour. She might remember how he kept his books and potions in a certain order on the shelves in his classroom and study, but she couldn't even begin to imagine the rigidness of his daily routines, how even the buttoning of his robes in the morning had become a sacred ritual.

'Are you a creature of habit, Miss McKibben?' he enquired.

'Most definitely,' she answered. 'Any means to keep one's sanity, am I right? And it's Edmunds now, sir. Miss McKibben vanished half a lifetime ago.'

'Along with Nadezhda?' Snape ventured to ask.

'Did she ever exist?' the woman questioned.

She looked up at him at the same moment the clouds parted. The pale moonlight shone down upon her face, and Snape's breath caught in his chest. Her eyes were still as green as spring clover, and the coldness in them rivalled the chill of winter. Two precious gems, lifeless and cold, just like the emeralds that represented the House she had once been sorted into.

When was the last time a smile had reached those eyes, Snape wondered. Had they ever sparkled?

'Why did you run? Tonight, I mean,' he added quickly, noticing how ambiguous his question was. He knew why Nadezhda McKibben had run away fifteen years ago. Or at least, he thought he knew.

'Wouldn't you have, sir?' she wondered. 'If a ghost from another life suddenly stood on your doorstep, wouldn't you run?'

Snape nodded. He would probably have run to the end of the world.

'I did not follow you,' he pointed out. 'You could be halfway to the highlands by now. Why did you choose to wait for me here?'

He saw her swallow and a muscle twitch at her jaw, but she held his gaze steadily. When she spoke, her voice was firm.

'When I recognised you, I panicked. I never wanted to be found, especially not now, especially not by you.'

Snape frowned. Especially not now? Especially not by him? Whatever did she mean?

'I have been seeing the signs for some months now,' she answered his silent question. 'That bridge collapsing last summer and nobody knowing why; the so called hurricane in the West Country and the everlasting fog; people disappearing or being murdered, people whose names I remember very well. And those Aurors that are patrolling the village... Well, let us say that some of them should learn how to talk a little more quietly.'

She broke off and took a deep breath, and Snape unconsciously tightened his grip around his wand.

'I know evil is rising once again,' the woman continued. 'An evil so dark there is only one wizard who can be responsible for it. ~~His~~ back, isn't he?'

Snape nodded gravely and watched her rub her left wrist. Had her scars healed, he wondered. Or were they festering once more, like the mark the Dark Lord had left *of his* arm?

'I guess he has a greater scheme and that he does not care about a girl who never even joined his ranks,' she went on. 'But when I saw you, when I understood who you were... Forgive me, sir, but I could not know whose side you are on this time.'

'Do you know now?' Snape enquired in a matter-of-fact tone.

'No. I simply assumed that you would neither have let me leave the pub nor spend hours chatting with the landlord if you were looking for Nadezhda McKibben on the Dark Lord's orders.'

'Cleverly deducted,' Snape pointed out, resisting the urge to hand out House points. The woman in front of him was not his student anymore and any sardonic comment from his side would be utterly out of place.

They looked at each other in silence for quite some time. Snape could easily have penetrated her mind, reading her thoughts in order to answer all the questions that were burning inside his own mind, but he refrained from doing so. He had no right to ask her any questions, about neither her sudden disappearance nor what she had been up to for the last fifteen years.

'Aren't you curious about why I came here?' he asked instead. 'To a Muggle village?'

'I am sure you had your reasons, sir. Reasons that are none of my business.'

As little as her reasons for being in this village were any *of his* business, Snape concluded. He was curious, of course, but decided to bide his time.

'Is there still something left in the Bunnahabhain bottle?' the woman asked after a couple of moments.

Snape nodded.

'A glass or two, I assume.'

'Why don't you come back and empty it one day? I'm sure Edmunds would be glad to see you again.'

'Would you?' Snape asked.

'I promise you I won't run away again. Good night now, sir. It has been a pleasure seeing you.'

'The pleasure was mine, Miss... Miss Edmunds.'

Edmunds. Hope Edmunds. Her new name felt strange on his lips, but as Snape watched her disappear into the night, he came to the conclusion that calling her Nadezhda McKibben would have felt even stranger. That witch did not exist anymore, had not existed for over a decade. That he had happened to stumble across her that night didn't make any difference.

But Snape could not deny that he was curious. Curious about why she had chosen to live in this village of all places, how she had been and who she had become, and when he returned less than a fortnight later, he had a hard time convincing himself that he was returning simply because he really wanted to finish that bottle of Bunnahabhain. He had been thinking about Nadezhda about Hope more often than he cared to admit over the last two weeks. But when he once more sat in the same dark booth he had chosen during his first visit, all the questions which he had so carefully formulated in his mind seemed to have vanished. This pub wasn't the right place to ask them. It belonged in a different world, even in a different time. Hope was not the witch he had once known, and he himself seemed to be someone else as well. Maybe he was once more the little boy on a weekend excursion with his father, secretly watching the old fishermen who were sitting at the next table, hoping to catch a part of the wondrous tales they were sharing.

'Slow night?' Snape asked when he was served his drink.

'I wish,' Hope answered, her eyes wandering from the fishermen to the lone drunk who was talking to the landlord at the bar. 'This is about as busy as it gets.'

Snape frowned.

'How do you keep in business?' he wondered.

'Who says we do?'

She inhaled audibly through her nose and after having checked that all her customers were satisfied for the time being, she sat down opposite Snape.

'There's still some money,' she explained in a low voice. 'Old money.'

'I see.'

She didn't need to say more. Snape had seen the muscles of her neck tighten and her hands start to shake slightly before she had hidden them under the table. She was using her heritage to keep the business afloat, old money, acquired through generations by one of the oldest Wizarding families in Britain. Old money that probably was her very last link to the life she had left behind.

'Does Edmunds know?'

'Of course not. I've been doing the books ever since his wife died. He has no idea, neither about how bad business is doing nor about the money. He doesn't need to know.'

'He will not hear it from me,' Snape assured her and thought he'd heard her give a sigh of relief.

'Edmunds does not know anything, does he? About who you are and *what* you are?' he asked, keeping his voice low.

'Of course, he doesn't,' Hope interrupted him and then quickly lowered her gaze as if to collect herself. No matter how many years had passed, her upbringing was still very obvious. Good girls do not interrupt. Good girls do not lose their composure.

After a few moments, she once more lifted her gaze, looking imploringly at her former Head of House.

'As far as Edmunds is concerned, I do not remember anything about my past. I appeared out of thin air one day, owning nothing else than the clothes on my back. No money, no memories. There is *nothing* for him to know. Nothing at all. Do you understand?'

His eyes never left hers when he nodded, and once more, Snape promised not to utter a single word. Her secrets weren't his to tell.

He watched her cross the room and listened to her chatting with the fishermen as they took their leave, saw her replace the drunken man's empty glass with a plate of pie and mash and imagined the ghost of a smile on her lips as the man started to eat. Most probably, it was not the first time that she made sure he didn't drink himself into a stupor.

'A regular customer?' he asked as Hope brought him his second pint and the man staggered out of the pub half an hour later.

'Hm. A widower. His wife passed away years ago, but he still comes here to drown his sorrows as soon as he gets his hands on some money.'

'And you make sure he does not spend the lot of it?'

'If he doesn't sober up before morning, he won't be able to go to work,' Hope explained. 'No work, no pay. He has a son to take care of, you see.'

'It is very kind of you to feed him and send him home even though his drinking would earn you money,' Snape pointed out.

'I need to do something good in this world, don't I?' Hope replied, her voice suddenly filled with so much bitterness that it made Snape shiver. As did the look in her eyes.

'I am certain you have done plenty of good,' he tried to appease her, but Hope slowly shook her head.

'Not enough, sir. Not nearly enough.'

'Don't you listen to her, stranger. She's being far too modest for her own good. And what are you doing drinking ale? Don't you and I have a nice bottle of Bunnahabhain to finish?'

The landlord sat down opposite Snape, in the same spot Hope had sat less than an hour ago, and patted her arm in a friendly gesture.

'Hope, darling, why don't you go and fetch that bottle? And lock up while you're at it, would you? I doubt we'll get any more customers tonight.'

Had the man not noticed the look in Hope's eyes, Snape wondered. How could he not have? But maybe, Snape thought, *he* knew what to look for while Edmunds did not. For he knew that look, saw it in his own mirror far more often than he wanted to. That look filled with self-hatred and desperation, overshadowed by endless guilt. What on earth had happened to the girl he had once known? What had taken away her innocence and her hope?

'She is my ray of sunshine, my Hope,' the landlord started. 'I don't know what I would have done without her. When my wife passed away... She was my everything, you know. My sun, my air. If it hadn't been for Hope, I would have followed her to the grave. But Hope took care of everything. Me, the pub. I owe her a lot.'

'You don't owe me anything. You gave me a home when I had nowhere else to go. The least I can do is tend your bar.'

Both Edmunds and Snape looked up at Hope, who was suddenly standing beside them once more, the landlord seemingly a little more surprised than Snape.

'I sometimes wonder how you manage to sneak up on people like this, dear one,' he pointed out. 'It's almost as if you appear out of thin air. Poof! Like magic.'

He gesticulated like a Muggle Wizard who was pulling flowers out of his sleeve or a rabbit out of a hat, and Hope tilted her head, giving him the tiniest of smiles.

'Are you sure you should have another drink? You seem to be imagining things already. There is no such thing as magic.'

The landlord laughed heartily, thereby missing that Hope's hands were once more shaking as she put down her tray.

'Will you not be joining us?' Snape asked as he noticed that she had only brought two glasses.

'I'm afraid not. I can't hold my liquor.'

She was trying to make it sound like a joke, but her smile was so fake that Snape saw right through it. She didn't want to be there anymore, so much was clear to him.

'I'll count up the till and go to bed if that's alright,' she addressed the landlord.

'Are you sure?' Edmunds enquired. 'It's still early. Have a cup of tea and sit with us, dear.'

He sounded concerned, but Hope still shook her head.

'Tomorrow will be a much better day if I retire now,' she pointed out. 'Good night, father. Sir.'

'A barmaid who cannot hold her liquor?' Snape mused after Hope had gone upstairs. 'That is quite unheard of.'

'Oh, she can hold her liquor alright,' Edmunds pointed out. 'I've seen her drink sailors under the table. But there are days when...'

He broke off and sighed.

'She is a gentle soul, my Hope. Fragile, to say the least. She hides it well most of the time, but sometimes I can tell that there is... a shadow, something from her past that keeps her from smiling. I don't know what it is, and sometimes I think that I don't want to know.'

He looked up at Snape, his brown eyes full of worries.

'Do you mind if we have that drink some other time?' he asked, pointing at the glasses and the bottle. 'I think I'd better go check on Hope so she won't do anything stupid.'

The Deal

Chapter 3 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 3: The Deal

It was a cold night, and despite it being the middle of March, the cold winds blowing in from the North carried with them the smell of snow and ice. Yet Snape still lingered at the edge of the Black Lake, staring into its depths without really being aware of them. Instead, he imagined the icy green water of the lake by the Muggle village. Green like her eyes and just as cold.

He should go back and make sure that she was alright, Snape thought a couple of times but each time shook his head at himself almost before he had finished the thought. Edmunds would take care of her, just as he had for the last fourteen years. There was nothing he could contribute, Snape told himself. And besides, Hope losing her composure that evening was most probably his fault anyway. He could not tell when their conversation had turned sour or which of his questions he shouldn't have asked, but he was quite convinced that the evening would have turned out different if he had held his tongue.

Maybe he shouldn't have returned to the pub in the first place, he thought now. Certainly, upon their first meeting, Hope had invited him back. But had she anticipated what was going to happen? Had she been prepared for a ghost of her past to come barging into her life once more? Had she been prepared for the memories that would awaken? Or had she been taken by surprise, been caught unawares and been scared by what she'd seen, so much that she once more decided to run?

Snape breathed in the cold night air, exhaled and kicked at a stone with frustration. All of a sudden, he was not sure anymore why he had gone back to the pub and wondered if it were for the best if he stayed away from now on. Hope was not the girl he had once known, and the girl he *had* known Nadezhda was long since gone. There was no room for him in Hope's life, and she certainly had no need of him. If anything, he was a cold reminder of a past she had no desire to be reminded of. He should let it go. He should leave her alone. But when Snape laid himself down to rest in his quarters that night, he could not help but see her eyes in front of him in the dark: cold and desolate but just as precious as the emeralds that filled the Slytherin hourglass in the Entrance Hall.

It shouldn't be like this, Snape mused, once more sitting up, acutely aware that he would not receive the gift of sleep that night. After all those years away from the Wizarding world, Hope should have found peace. She should have been able to leave behind everything she had witnessed, everything she had been through. The suffering, the darkness, the deceit. But for some reason, everything was still there, festering in her heart and soul.

'There is a shadow,' Edmunds had said. 'Something from her past that keeps her from smiling.'

Snape sighed. Maybe running away had not been the right decision after all, he mused. Maybe the very magic Nadezhda had run away from was the reason why Hope didn't know how to smile. Magic was not simply a gift, a tool to employ whenever one had use of it. Magic was part of one's soul, and denying it could have dire consequences. Maybe Hope was lacking the one thing she tried so hard to forget. Maybe she felt it, too, and had therefore invited him back in, him, her old teacher, the one who had once shown her white magic, good magic. Maybe she wanted him to show her again. Just maybe...

With a groan, Snape climbed out of bed, shaking his head at himself. There were too many maybes and too many questions, questions to which he would not find any answers in the confinement of his quarters. The questions might not be his to answer, but he did not care. He had once promised that girl to look out for her and had failed her, a mistake he intended to rectify now no matter how high the cost. He owed her that much at least, and the next morning, he promised himself, he would return to the Muggle village in order to look straight into Hope's green eyes and demand to talk to Nadezhda. For Nadezhda McKibben was the only one who could answer the questions neither of them yet knew how to ask.

~~~

The look on landlord Edmunds' face was one of utter surprise when he unlocked the door of his pub the next morning and caught sight of the dark clad man outside, who seemed to have been waiting for the pub to open for quite some time.

'I do hope you went home to sleep,' he exclaimed. 'Judging by the dark circles under your eyes, I'd say you didn't, though. Where do you live, anyway?'

'Close enough to have made it there for some hours of sleep,' Snape replied.

Edmunds was right, however. He had not slept. Instead he had tried to come up with the right things to say to Hope, the same questions he had prepared so carefully over the last weeks but not had the opportunity to ask the night before. Now he would ask them. Now he would demand answers. But when he entered the pub, he found that Hope wasn't there.

'How is your daughter?' he enquired, trying to sound casual but failing miserably. Why he was even trying to hide his concern, he didn't know. His returning obviously meant that he did care.

'Didn't sleep either, the poor thing,' Edmunds replied. 'She's still upstairs in her room. I'm not sure she'll come at all down today. Coffee?'

Snape nodded.

'Milk and sugar?'

'Black.'

'You'll regret this,' Edmunds warned, and sure enough, Snape winced slightly when he swallowed the first mouthful of the black brew.

'I'm rubbish at making coffee,' Edmunds apologised and pushed the sugar bowl towards Snape. 'Hope's coffee, however, is a gift from heaven. I don't know how she does it, but she seems to have a knack for it. Whoever taught her how to brew deserves a medal.'

*I'm sure her old Potions master would be delighted to hear that* Snape thought, hiding a smirk behind his cup and wondering if Slughorn would even remember Nadezhda McKibben. Certainly, the daughter of a simple Ministry employee had not been material for the Slug Club. Most probably, Slughorn had forgotten all about her.

'How is Hope?' he now enquired for the second time that morning, this time intentionally using the name Nadezhda had chosen. He wanted to make sure that Edmunds knew that he was not simply making small talk. He did care about Hope. He cared a lot.

Edmunds put down his cup, leaned back in his chair and gave Snape a scrutinising look.

'You seem to care quite a bit about her considering that you've only met her twice,' he pointed out. 'Are you sure you don't know her?'

'Would it matter?' Snape asked, putting down his cup as well, unblinkingly meeting the landlord's gaze.

'No. I assume it wouldn't,' Edmunds replied and then buried his face in his hands.

'I would give my very soul to see a smile in her eyes,' he continued quietly. 'Just once. God knows she deserves it.'

Then he once more lifted his head, once more looking Snape straight in the eyes.

'Do you know what it takes?' he wondered. 'Do you know how to make her smile?'

'I am afraid I don't,' Snape replied, but to his surprise, the landlord still straightened up.

'You'll try your best, though, won't you?' he asked and Snape nodded. Try was all he could do. But when he climbed the stairs that led to the flat above the pub about half an hour later, he wondered what he had gotten himself into. He was representing everything Nadezhda had fled, the world she had left behind, dark magic as well as light. How would he of all people ever be able to chase her shadows away? Would she even let him try? But despite his doubts, he walked along the corridor at the top of the stairs and knocked on the second door to the right.

No answer.

Snape wasn't even surprised. Edmunds had prepared him, telling him about the days when Hope refused to leave her room, when she turned down both food and drink and would do nothing else than stand by the window for days at a time, blankly staring into nothingness, until lack of sleep and nourishment would make her collapse on the floor.

'I'm scared for her on those days,' Edmunds had told Snape. 'She has never tried to hurt herself, but I can't stop myself from thinking that one day, she will open that window and jump to her death. She has promised me a hundred times that she won't, but it's still my greatest fear.'

Snape swallowed drily. He had no idea what he would find on the other side of the door when he opened it. In the best of cases, Hope was up, getting ready to go downstairs and face the world. In the worst of cases, she had broken the promise she had given to the man who was more of a father to her than Duncan McKibben ever had been. Nobody would ever know her reasons, and Snape would spend the rest of his life wondering whether he and his sudden appearance in her life had been the cause for her breakdown. And once again, a pair of green eyes would come to haunt his darkest dreams.

He pushed open the door ever so carefully, preparing himself for the worst. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he could not stop himself from giving a sigh of relief when he saw Hope standing by the window which was firmly closed. She was wearing a dark green dress, and it was hard to tell where her black hair ended and the black shawl around her shoulders started.

'What are you doing here?' she asked as Snape stepped into the room. She had not turned around, and he had to assume that she was seeing his reflection in the window.

'I wanted to make sure that you are alright,' he answered. 'I will leave again if you want me to.'

He'd leave her room, her life, anything she'd ask him to. But to Snape's surprise, her answer was another.

'I'd like you to stay.'

She turned around ever so slowly, feet first, then hips and torso. She seemed reluctant to look at him, and when she finally turned her head, she kept her gaze lowered for quite some time. Snape saw her chest and shoulders rise and heard her take a couple of deep breaths, almost as if she were gathering the strength and courage to look at him. When she finally did look up, he almost wished she hadn't.

She was a pitiful sight. The dark shadows under her eyes clashed violently with her pale cheeks, and together with her red-rimmed eyes, they bore witness of far too many sleepless nights. But there were no traces of dried tears on her cheeks, and Snape wondered if she even knew how to cry.

'Please,' she said almost inaudibly. 'Stay.'

Snape nodded and wordlessly closed the door. Who was he to refuse her? How would he be able to live with himself if he walked away now? Yet so far, he had no idea why Hope wanted him to stay.

He sat down on the chair that she offered him by the vanity table and watched her extinguish a candle on her nightstand, only now realising that the frame behind it contained a painting of a burning candle and not a mirror. He could have sworn that he had seen both candles flicker as he had entered the room, but as one was now extinguished and the other quite still, he figured that he must have been imagining things.

'I have lit a candle every evening for the last fifteen years. It burns through the night and keeps me company. Silly, isn't it? A grown woman being afraid of the dark.'

'Not silly at all,' Snape pointed out, not daring to even start counting the nights when he heard the shadows of the past moving around his bed and didn't dare open his eyes to face them. He knew very well what it meant to be afraid of the dark.

'Some days, I am even afraid of the light,' Hope continued, her eyes still on the extinguished candle. 'In the bright light of day, there is nowhere to hide.'

He heard her take a shuddering breath and saw her bring her hand to her face for a moment, but when she turned to look at him once more, Snape was taken by surprise. She was still pale and her eyes still red, but the look in them was one of determination.

'It's quite easy to walk through the front door of the Leaking Cauldron and step right into Muggle London, you know,' she started. 'After two blocks you're used to the noise and after a couple of hours you have learnt how to avoid getting hit by cars and busses. Another couple of hours and you realise that Muggles aren't all that different from Wizarding folks.'

'If I recall correctly, you did well in Muggle studies,' Snape commented. 'Some of your peers were Muggles. Their world could not have been all new to you.'

Hope nodded.

'Who knew that I would have use for a school subject that earned me more beatings than praise at home,' she said with a slightly bitter tone. 'But I was grateful for my Muggle friends, especially for Charles. I couldn't have made it without him.'

'Charles Herrington?'

Snape frowned, and a minuscule smile tugged at the corners of Hope's mouth as she sat down opposite him on the edge of the bed.

'You never wondered why Charles changed his mind about spending the Christmas holidays at Hogwarts, did you? We very much hoped you wouldn't.'

Snape raised an eyebrow in surprise. Charles Herrington? The stuttering boy who had been so afraid of his Head of House that he had spilled the beans on his best friend on Christmas morning, revealing that she had sneaked out of the castle the night before?

'Mr Herrington never sought my permission to leave the castle that Christmas,' Snape explained. 'It was Headmaster Dumbledore who arranged for him to Floo directly to...'

He broke off and his left eyebrow joined his right.

'...the Leaky Cauldron,' he finished slowly, trying to wrap his mind around the scheme that was unfolding before him.

'It wasn't the best of places to wait for him,' Hope admitted. 'But it was Christmas, and the pub was busy, and a couple of extra Galleons can turn people into blind bats. No one saw me. No one knew I was there. And the name Nadezhda McKibben never made it into the ledger. She had already ceased to exist.'

'So Mr Herrington met you there and...'

'...and took me to his great-aunt's cottage, right there, on the other side of the lake.'

She nodded towards the window, and Snape followed her gaze, even though he knew that he wouldn't be able to see the lake from where he was sitting, never mind the opposite shore.

'He stayed with me until term recommenced, teaching me how to work the lights, the heating and the stove,' Hope recounted.

'What about Mr Herrington's great-aunt?' Snape enquired.

'She had moved to a retirement home half a year earlier,' Hope explained. 'The cottage was to rent but in too bad a state for anyone wanting to live there. But Charles had always been one of Professor McGonagall's best Transfiguration students.'

She didn't take her eyes off the window while she described in detail how Charles had transformed the rundown cottage into a palace for her or how he had put up Muggle Repelling-Charms around the property to ensure that no one would bother her. It was almost as if she were travelling back in time in her mind, back to the cottage where her Charles had taken such good care of her. Her features softened, and Snape imagined how she had been happy there. Hopefully, Charles had been able to magic the smile into her eyes which she now so sorely lacked.

'By the time Charles had to return to Hogwarts, he had taken care of everything,' Hope continued. 'He even made sure that his great-aunt received a monthly payment, so she would believe that someone was renting her cottage. He had thought of everything and had been kinder to me than anyone ever had. And to this day, I am ashamed of what I did to him.'

She bent her head and took a deep breath, and as she looked up at Snape again, he could see tears glittering in her eyes.

'I erased his memory,' she confessed. 'On the last night we spent together, after he had fallen asleep in my arms, I made sure he would never remember Nadezhda McKibben. It broke my heart, but I could not take the risk of him letting slip one day that he knew where she was. She had to disappear for good.'

'You didn't have your wand at the time,' Snape pointed out, but Hope simply shrugged.

'Charles had a wand. I had borrowed it a couple of times during the holidays in order to perform some simple spells on the house. It was obedient enough. And since Charles never returned to the cottage or even went looking for me in the morning, I assume the charm worked. It didn't do any damage, did it?'

'None that I have seen,' Snape assured her.

'Good. Good,' Hope whispered, hastily wiping away the tears of relief that were running down her cheeks, and Snape could only imagine how many sleepless nights she had spent, wondering whether she had unintentionally hurt her best friend.

'If I remember correctly, Mr Herrington has become a Healer,' he told her. 'I could make some enquires, if you'd like me to.'

'No! No. No, please, don't. I don't want to... I can't...'

She broke off, covering her mouth with her hands. They were once again shaking, and Snape had the good grace to look away, giving Hope time to regain her composure.

'I do not want to know anything about the Wizarding world,' she said in the end. 'I can't know. I mustn't. Do you understand?'

Snape nodded.

'I do understand, Miss Edmunds,' he said gravely and rose from his chair. 'And because I understand, I will now bid you goodbye.'

'No. Please, don't go,' Hope exclaimed and rose as well, and for the tiniest of moments, Snape thought that she was about to grab his arm. But she stopped in mid-movement, drew back her hand and hid it in the folds of her dress.

'How can you want me to stay?' Snape asked, truly confused. 'I am part of what you left behind. The Wizarding world, magic. I will always remind you of it, no matter how carefully we try to avoid the subject.'

'I never had anything to fear when you were by my side,' Hope replied quietly. 'The magic you showed me is not the one I fled from. And besides, you came to this village for a reason, just as I did. I have no right to ask you to leave.'

Snape swallowed. Upon finding his former student here, he had almost forgotten why he had come to the Muggle village in the first place a fortnight ago. It was a place with no magic, neither dark nor light. It was a place where none of his masters existed, neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort. It was a place where Severus Snape did not exist. Here he was neither spy nor Death Eater. Here he was simply the boy he had once been, grown into a man that no one knew.

'I have no right to ask you to leave,' Hope repeated. 'And when I told you that it had been a pleasure seeing you again, I meant it. I really did. So, please, the next time you come here, let us forget who we once were. Let us forget what we know about each other and where we come from. Let's just be... two acquaintances who share a drink every now and then in a shabby little pub. Do you think we can do this?'

'I do not know, Miss Edmunds,' Snape answered truthfully and looked deeply into her green eyes. 'But I do think we should give it a try.'

## Revelations

### Chapter 4 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

#### Chapter 4: Revelations

It was one of those grey Sunday afternoons in mid-April. The students of Hogwarts were huddled up inside, doing their homework in their dormitories or the library, the sixth-years concentrating on the theory of Apparation. The staff was busy marking papers and preparing lessons, and Snape was quite certain that no one in the whole castle had noticed that he had not been in the Great Hall for lunch. He rarely ate there on the weekends, preferring the privacy of his own chambers, and as his nose now filled with the scent of roast and potatoes, gravy and Yorkshire pudding, he knew that his decision to have lunch at Edmunds' pub instead of having sandwiches in his study had been the right one.

'Would you like to have a glass of wine with your food?' Hope asked as she wiped the table in the booth Snape usually occupied.

'I would love to,' he replied, wondering for a moment if he should offer a compliment about the delicious smell that hung in the air but then deciding against it. Such a comment seemed far too trivial.

'I'll be with you in a moment,' Hope promised and hurried off again, and Snape gazed after her, admiring her soundless steps and her posture as he had done so many times before, not only over the last one and a half months but already when Nadezhda had been his student. She had been taught well once, and no matter how much time that had passed, she would never be able to shake off the teachings that had become part of her very being. She would always keep her back straight and her eyes lowered, make sure no one noticed her and only speak when she was spoken to.

Was he the only one who noticed how out of place she was in this establishment, Snape wondered. Could no one else see that she belonged in more esteemed settings, in a fancy tea room or an elegant dining hall?

He let his gaze wander around the pub. Sundays were the one day of the week when the place was truly busy, and this Sunday it looked as if the whole village had come there for lunch. But Hope didn't seem stressed. She took time to chat with each of her patrons, refilled their glasses and carried out empty plates. She was the perfect hostess, and had she not chosen a different life, she would certainly be hosting parties at McKibben manor that would make the Malfoys pale with envy. By the table closest to the bar, she lingered for quite some time, talking to the pale, straw blond boy with big brown eyes, who was enjoying apple crumble and custard for dessert. He smiled at her and blushed as she said something which Snape couldn't hear, and before Hope left the table she affectionately ruffled the boy's hair. She would have made a good mother as well, Snape was certain of that.

Eventually, he was being served his lunch and while he was eating, the patrons left one by one, returning to their homes. Silence settled over the pub, and Snape allowed himself to sink deeper into his seat, enjoying the quiet and the warm feeling that was spreading through his body. He stretched out his legs under the table when he had emptied his plate, inhaled deeply and closed his eyes for one short yet blissful moment. It was only now that he realised how tired he was, only now that he understood the blessing of having a place to get away from all his obligations and responsibilities. The little Muggle pub had become his haven, a sanctuary to which he could retreat when he was in need of a break. No one would ever look for him here. Most people he knew would never even think he'd sink so low as to socialise with Muggles.

'Rough week?'

Slowly, Snape lifted his gaze to look up at Hope. As so many times before, he had not heard her approach.

'Rough year,' he stated and then pinched the bridge of his nose.

Hope had no idea. She might think that a couple of cauldrons had exploded or that a student had managed to poison a peer. She might think that it was his daily teaching duties that were giving him a headache. She had no clue, of course, that Snape spent his waking hours shadowing the son of Lucius Malfoy, making sure the boy didn't hurt anyone else in his attempt to murder the headmaster of Hogwarts. Neither did she know that he had been up until the small hours, brewing yet another potion that would keep said headmaster alive for another month or two. The curse from Marvolo Gaunt's ring was growing stronger and spreading, weakening Dumbledore with every day that passed. But the old wizard was not yet ready to die. All his pieces stood not yet ready in the giant game of Wizarding chess that he was playing. He *mustn't* yet die. For even his own death was part of his strategy and Snape yet another of his pawns.

But Hope knew nothing of this, and Snape was not planning to tell her. They had made a deal, after all, and in this deal, the Wizarding world did not exist.

'There's still some apple crumble,' she informed him. 'Would you like some?'

'I couldn't fit anything more in my stomach even if I tried,' Snape admitted.

'You are missing out. Edmunds' custard is legendary.'

Snape sighed as he placed his hand on his stomach, and Hope tilted her head.

'Maybe we should go for a walk?' she suggested.

'In this weather?' Snape questioned.

'It's not that bad.'

'What about your patrons?'

'I think Edmunds can handle them,' Hope pointed out. 'After all, there aren't that many left.'

She looked back over her shoulder. Everyone had left apart from the three fishermen at their usual table, and the landlord had just served them a new round of ale. They would be busy for a while, drinking and telling tall tales. There was no reason why Hope couldn't leave the pub for half an hour or so. She fetched her coat, and within a few minutes, she and Snape had left the pub.

The weather had actually become worse. The mists hung now thick over the lake, and there was a drizzle, but Hope didn't seem to mind. Her steps were determined, and Snape followed her without asking where she was leading him. It didn't matter. Not one bit.

At the edge of the lake, she came to a halt, gazing out over the water. At first, Snape thought that she was watching the pair of swans that were courting each other, but eventually the birds disappeared into the mists, and Hope did not avert her gaze. For her eyes were searching for the shore on the other side of the lake, the shore that was as deeply hidden in the mists as the shores of Avalon.

'I've been having strange dreams lately,' she suddenly said, still gazing into nothingness. 'About wizards and witches, old castles and manor houses. I haven't dreamt about those things for years.'

'I think it is only natural that you should be having such dreams now,' Snape started carefully. 'However, I apologise that my appearance here has triggered them.'

Hope swirled around.

'No, please. Don't. Don't apologise,' she interrupted. 'I, um, ... They are not bad dreams, you know. Not like the ones I used to have. Back then, when I started to light the candle, hoping it would protect me during the night. I would wake up screaming back then, with cold sweat running down my back and my heart pounding like mad in my chest. At some point, I was so afraid of my dreams that I'd do anything to stay awake.'

She broke off, taking a shuddering breath, and Snape in his turn barely dared breathe. He had not dared hope to learn anything more about how Hope had fared when she had first come to the Muggle world. A month ago, up in her room, she had made it quite clear that she did not want to talk about her past. But now she seemed to have changed her mind, and Snape feared that the slightest interruption would make her fall silent once more. So he kept quiet, barely able to hold back the questions he had been dying to ask ever since he had come to the pub the first time and realised who the landlord's daughter really was.

'It all started out so well,' Hope continued after a while, once more turning towards the water. 'I was surprised at how easy it was to live without magic. Yes, there were things I had to learn, but Charles had taught me what I needed to survive. I knew my way around the house, could work the stove and the heating, and he had shown me how to take the bus to get to the villages around here. I didn't want to do my shopping at the same place every week, you know. I didn't want to be noticed, not even by a simple store clerk. And it worked. No one ever asked me any questions, no one ever seemed to recognise me, and eventually I allowed myself to relax. I would go for long walks by the lake, sometimes even stopping at a pub to have lunch. I talked to people, chatted about the weather and other meaningless things. I went to church on Sundays to study the Muggles, and once or twice I even went to the cinema. I was doing well, and my new life was one big adventure. I started to enjoy myself. But then the baby was born.'

'The baby?' Snape's eyes widened, and for the duration of a heartbeat, he thought that he had misheard. But Hope nodded.

'But... Madam Pomfrey provided you with a potion,' Snape went on. 'Did you not...'

'I did take it,' Hope claimed. 'I don't know, maybe I did something wrong or...'

She shrugged.

'That child was fathered by a powerful wizard,' she went on. 'It wasn't going to let itself be...*murdered* by a simple potion.'

Snape stood silent, staring at Hope, almost unable to take in her words. How had she coped? Adapting to a whole new world must have been difficult enough for a girl her age. For a girl was what she had been, a mere child. How had she managed to take care not only of herself but a new-born as well?

Then his jaw dropped.

'That *boy*...' he said slowly. 'The boy you were talking to earlier. Back in the pub...'

He had been the right age. Straw blond hair and pale skin, the spitting image of Barty. And Hope had been ever so affectionate. But she shook her head.

'No,' she said quietly. 'Pete is just a sweet and lonely boy who stole my heart years ago when he came wandering into the pub looking for his father the day his mother was laid to rest. I've watched him grow up. Helped him with his homework and made sure his father didn't drink himself to death. *My* little boy, however, lies buried in the churchyard on the other side of the lake. He didn't live to celebrate his first Christmas.'

She nodded towards the opposite shore, and for the first time ever, Snape was glad she wasn't looking at him anymore. He was unable to hide both his shock and his confusion, and Hope didn't need to see that. And when she continued her story, her voice was so feeble that Snape doubted that he would be able to bear to see the look in her eyes. What sadness would he see there, what pain?

'He was a beautiful boy. Hair as black as the wings of a raven, pale skin and his father's eyes. He was my pride and joy, my everything. But he was also the reason why I stopped leaving the cottage. I knew that even little babes are able to perform magic. What would I have done if he made his teddy bear float among a crowd of Muggles? Or worse, when a wizard or witch was looking on? I couldn't take that risk. I simply couldn't. So I locked us in, only leaving the house to pick up food and supplies when he was fast asleep, praying that he wouldn't wake up, praying that he wouldn't do any magic. Then one day when I came home, I found him dead.'

She brought her hands to her face, taking a couple of deep breaths, and Snape simply watched her, at a loss for words.

'Sudden infant death syndrome,' she continued after what seemed like several hours but could not have been more than a couple of seconds. 'The doctors said that it just happens and that I was not to blame. He might have died that afternoon even if I had been right by his side. But I never forgave myself for having left him alone.'

Her voice broke, and she gave the tiniest of sobs which she was quick to muffle with her hands. She cleared her throat, and when she looked at Snape again, he could see no tears glittering in her eyes. The look on her face was composed and her eyes once more the cold emeralds which he knew so well.

'I have no memory of what I did afterwards,' Hope continued in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I assume I went back to the cottage. After all, I had nowhere else to go. But I don't remember sleeping or eating. I don't even remember coming here, to this side of the lake where I had never been before. I don't remember being in the hospital nor coming to the pub. All I remember is the candle on my nightstand, how it burned every night and sometimes even during the day. It was the only light in otherwise eternal darkness.'

Snape stood as if petrified. He didn't know what to say or even what to think. He was simultaneously horrified and in awe, admired the strength of the woman in front of him and pitied her at the same time.

'Hope, I... I don't... I am at a loss...'

'There is no need for you to say anything. I am thankful that you stayed to listen.'

'Why?' Snape managed to bring forth. 'Why did you share this with me?'

Hope shrugged.

'I don't know. I thought I'd never tell anyone. But maybe the time was ripe. My apologies if it made you uncomfortable.'

'No! Merlin, no!' Snape exclaimed. 'I am... surprised, to say the least. Claiming anything else would be a lie. But I am also very honoured.'

'Honoured?' Hope asked, frowning.

'That you trust me enough to share this with me,' Snape explained.

'She has always trusted you, Severus. I thought you knew that.'

Hope gasped as a voice cut through the silence at the edge of the lake, and Snape spun around, wand at a ready, even though he knew the voice very well.

'What are *you* doing here?' he hissed.

'There, there, Severus. Put your wand away,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'We both know you won't use it against me. Just yet.'

'What are you doing here?' Snape repeated, obediently stowing away his wand but fixing the headmaster of Hogwarts with a stare so poisonous that a weaker man would have died on the spot.

'I am merely visiting an old friend,' Dumbledore explained, striding past his Defence teacher. 'How have you been, my dear?'

He stretched out his hand, but Hope didn't take it. Instead, she recoiled, her face pale and her eyes darting between her former headmaster and her Head of House.

'An old friend?' Snape inquired. 'Are you telling me you knew all along that Hope... that Miss McKibben was here?'

'I most certainly knew, Severus. As headmaster, it is my duty to know where my students reside, even when they choose to terminate their studies somewhat prematurely.'

Snape's eyes darted towards Hope. How could she have kept this from him? How could she have pretended that she had no contact with the Wizarding world? How could she have him believe that he was the only one?

He felt betrayed, hoodwinked and used, and his first impulse was to run. He was even considering Disapparating, no matter the punishment imposed by the Ministry. But then he saw the look in Hope's eyes, those eyes which normally didn't betray any of her emotions. The eyes that had looked at the Dark Lord without blinking once. They were now filled with confusion, and Snape could even detect a hint of fear.

Frowning, he directed his attention once more towards Dumbledore.

'You better explain yourself, Albus.'

'I intend to,' the headmaster agreed. 'I owe an explanation not only to you, Severus, but also to Miss McKibben. But may I suggest returning to the pub? The weather is rather unfriendly, and I happen to know that the last patron has left. Our conversation will be undisturbed. And I do think that we are all in need of a nice cup of tea and a large brandy.'

He strode off towards the village without waiting for either Snape or Hope to reply, and most probably, he didn't notice that both of them lingered by the edge of the lake. Either that or he had chosen to give the two some time on their own.

Hope was still pale as a ghost, staring after Dumbledore, and Snape in his turn stared at her, waiting for her to say anything. But she didn't utter a single word, not even long after Dumbledore's purple cloak had disappeared in the mist. Her lips were slightly parted and the lower one was trembling.

'You did not know,' Snape pointed out eventually. 'You had no idea Dumbledore knew about your whereabouts.'

Hope gasped for air.

'How? How... how *could* he know?' she asked, her voice unsteady. 'I was so careful.'

'Dumbledore always finds a way,' Snape said calmly, swallowing his anger for the old man.

What had Dumbledore been thinking, showing up like this? He must have foreseen that his sudden appearance would scare her, that she would start wondering about who else knew where she was. She knew nothing about Albus Dumbledore, had no idea how powerful he was or how many secrets he had.

'There is no reason to be afraid,' Snape tried to soothe her, carefully laying his hand on Hope's shoulder. 'If Dumbledore knew where you were for all those years and chose not to contact you, then I am quite certain that he made sure no one else would find you. Come, let us return to the pub. The old man has quite a bit of explaining to do.'

They didn't talk on their way back to the village. They walked side by side, both with their hands deeply buried in their pockets. Hope kept her eyes firmly on her shoes, and Snape looked ahead, desperately trying to block out memories from over a decade ago, memories of the night when he had led Nadezhda McKibben to Riddle Manor, where she had been supposed to receive the Dark Lord's mark. Somehow, this walk felt just about the same. Ridiculous, really, Snape was well aware of that. Albus Dumbledore always looked out for his students and would do anything in his powers to keep them from harm. Most probably, he had set heaven and hell in motion when Nadezhda McKibben had disappeared, had found her and made sure she fared alright. Most probably, he also had very good reasons for showing up here today. But Snape still feared what lay ahead and that he was once more leading Nadezhda to a place where she did not want to go.

May she forgive him for it.

## An Unexpected Guardian

Chapter 5 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 5: An Unexpected Guardian

As Dumbledore had predicted, the pub was empty of patrons as they entered. Edmunds stood behind the counter, drying glasses, but he seemed not to notice neither Dumbledore sitting by the window nor Snape and Hope entering the pub.

'You put enchantments on the place,' Snape concluded.

'I most certainly have,' Dumbledore replied merrily and pulled out two chairs. 'I prefer to converse privately with the two of you.'

'Privately?' Snape cocked an eyebrow. 'You do realise that the Ministry will have been alerted by now, don't you? In a few moments' time, the pub will be crawling with Aurors.'

But Dumbledore didn't seem to worry.

'Did I forget to mention that the Auror on duty today is an old friend of mine? I have been assured that a little bit of magic will go quite unnoticed today. Now, sit, both of you. Tea or brandy?' he asked, conjuring first three glasses out of thin air and then an entire tea set, carrying the Hogwarts coat of arms.

Snape's eyes darkened. Trust Dumbledore to bend the rules. Was there anything he couldn't get away with?

'This is a very nice little pub,' he mused, smiling benignly at Hope as she took a seat beside him. 'And is that apple crumble I smell?'

'I hardly think you came here in order to admire the decor or to have pudding,' Snape snapped. 'And if I recall correctly, you were about to give us some explanations.'

'Yes, indeed,' Dumbledore replied, steepling his fingers in front of him. 'Where to start?' he pondered aloud. 'Where to start?'

'How about you start with telling us how you came to know about Hope's...*Miss McKibben's* whereabouts?' Snape suggested impatiently. Dumbledore's circumlocutions were making his bile rise.

'Ah, now *that*, dear Severus, is a very good suggestion. If you must know, one of my sources was a member of your House and a dear friend of yours, Nadezhda. You don't mind me calling you Nadezhda, do you?'

Hope almost imperceptibly shook her head, and Snape frowned. Charles Herrington's memory had been erased. He couldn't have tattled. Or had the spell not worked?

'As you might recall, Severus' Dumbledore continued, 'Mr Herrington sought my permission to visit his parents after Christmas despite previously deciding to stay at

Hogwarts in order to catch up on his studies. As you also might recall, the boy blushed easily and had no talent for lying whatsoever. Also, he cared deeply for you, Nadezhda, and was very worried. He only had your best interests in mind when he decided to tell me about your plans.'

'And you simply let those plans be carried out?' Snape questioned.

'I thought it unwise to get involved. For the time being, that is,' Dumbledore explained. 'After all, said plans had been carefully crafted, and if I am honest, I was curious to see how they would pan out. However, when Mr Herrington returned to Hogwarts in January, with seemingly no recollection whatsoever of where he had spent the last two weeks, I did grow slightly concerned.'

'Slightly?' Snape hissed, finding it increasingly harder to control his temper. 'One of your students returns to Hogwarts with his memory erased and another one is missing somewhere in Muggle Britain and you grow *slightly* concerned? I am starting to think that Lucius was right a couple of years ago. You are losing your touch!'

'Now, now, Severus. Discovering how perfectly the charm had been performed, I didn't have any reason to believe that Nadezhda was in any kind of trouble. After all, we are talking about a very bright young witch. I assumed that she wouldn't have cut bonds with her best friend unless she was absolutely certain that she would do just fine on her own. Am I not correct, Nadezhda?'

'I didn't want anyone to know where I was, including Charles,' Hope confessed. 'It was the only thing that mattered at the time.'

Her voice was calm, and she was sitting with her back straight. She had wrapped her fingers around her tea cup, and Snape couldn't help but wonder if she was doing so in order to keep her hands from shaking. Dumbledore, however, did not seem to have noticed.

'You did very well,' he praised her instead. 'It took me months to find you. Had it not been for the birth of your child, I might never have.'

Hope flinched.

'How do you know about my boy?'

'The birth of every magical child is automatically recorded,' Dumbledore explained. 'I assume you did not know.'

Hope shook her head. She was holding on to her cup with such force now that her knuckles were turning white, and her face was so pale that Snape feared that she would faint at any moment.

'Only a few people know about the Book of Admittance,' Dumbledore continued. 'It is a powerful magical artefact in its own right, charmed by the founders of Hogwarts themselves. The only ones who have access to it are the residing headmaster and his deputy. I can, however, assure you that not even Professor McGonagall had seen that specific entry, and with your son's death, the record of his birth was erased from the pages of the book. No one knows that the boy ever existed. And thus, no one knows where he was born or where you are.'

With a sigh of relief, Hope closed her eyes before burying her face in her hands, and Snape, too, relaxed. He knew about the Dark Lord's plans to gather information about any magical births in the country to seek out and persecute Muggle-borns. Once Dumbledore was dead, it would only be a matter of time until he'd gain access to the Book of Admittance. Surely, he would want to hunt down the one that slipped through his fingers. But thankfully, there was now no record of Nadezhda McKibben's child, and she herself was safe once more.

'It was thanks to the Book of Admittance that I was able to trace you,' Dumbledore continued. 'I checked up on you occasionally and found that you had been doing quite well. Until the day your child expired, that is. That day, I saw you break, and that was the day I decided to reveal myself.'

Hope looked up from behind her hands, frowning. It was clear that she was trying to remember Dumbledore's appearance, but as she had told Snape that very afternoon, she had no recollections whatsoever of the time after the death of her child.

'You were in quite a state, my dear,' Dumbledore explained. 'I considered taking you to St. Mungo's but deemed that a wizard hospital was not the best place for you to be. So I brought you here and made sure that you were taken care of by the right people. The police officers that took you to the hospital were in fact two Aurors and Nurse Edmunds... well, Elisabeth was a Squib.'

'A Squib?' Snape asked incredulously.

'Of course,' Dumbledore replied, sounding as if it were the most natural thing in the world. 'As you are well aware, Squibs are looked upon with a certain degree of... disdain, and quite a few of them have chosen to settle here, in the only place in Britain that has never seen any magic. That Elisabeth Edmunds was on duty the night Nadezhda was brought to the hospital was, of course, a coincidence, but I welcomed it nonetheless. I deemed it wise to have her keep an eye on the girl, in case she happened to produce any kind of magic intentionally or accidentally. Elisabeth would understand and make sure no one else noticed. Thankfully, she never needed to.'

Snape sat as if dumbstruck. He could barely believe what he was hearing and at the same time he was not even surprised. This was Albus Dumbledore talking, after all, one of the most brilliant and cunning wizards alive. If anyone could have found Nadezhda McKibben, find her, make sure she was taken care of and then disappear again without her leaving any trace, it was him.

Hope, too, seemed puzzled, and when she finally spoke, her voice was so feeble that it was hard to make out her words.

'Why... How come I don't remember any of this?' she asked. 'Why don't I remember *you*?'

'You were not well, my dear,' Dumbledore replied with a gentle tone. 'Your grief and guilt were tearing at your very soul. I feared that you were a danger to yourself. Thus, I decided to ease your burden.'

'You used a Memory Charm on her,' Snape stated.

'I didn't do so lightly,' Dumbledore defended his actions. 'Meddling with someone's memory is not always the best of choices, and I did not know if it would do any good. After all, Nadezhda, your darkness festered in your heart and not in your mind. And that pain I could not take away. It is there to this very day, isn't it?'

Hope did not answer. Her hands still covered half her face, and her green eyes were staring blankly ahead. Snape doubted that she even saw Dumbledore. He, however, glared angrily at the old man.

'I think Miss McKibben has heard enough for today,' he pointed out.

He rose from his chair, and for the second time this afternoon, he gently put his hand on her shoulder.

'Come,' he simply said, and as Dumbledore didn't protest, he carefully guided Hope out of the pub. Edmunds had retreated to the kitchen, and he never saw the door that led upstairs open as if by magic. He neither saw Snape and Hope walk up the stairs, nor did he see Dumbledore vanish into thin air. As far as he was concerned, his pub had been empty for over an hour.

Hope didn't speak nor look at Snape. Her steps were steady, and she was once more keeping her back straight. But Snape wasn't easily fooled. He could see how she was trying to hide her shaking hands in the folds of her dress and how she flinched at the faintest sound.

'It is alright to be upset,' he said softly as he pulled out a chair for her in her room, the same chair he had sat on a few weeks ago. He in turn positioned himself by the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of Dumbledore as the headmaster walked away. He wanted to see him leave. He wanted to be sure that the old meddler had gone. But

the fog had grown even thicker, and Snape couldn't make out anything through the window.

'I should have known,' Hope said after a while. 'I should have understood.'

'What should you have understood?' Snape asked.

'That I wasn't alone.'

Snape frowned. From the tone of Hope's voice, he couldn't tell whether or not she was happy about that fact, and he figured that her sentiments could go either way: she could be grateful for Dumbledore's continuous protection or disappointed that she had not been able to keep her whereabouts secret from the Wizarding world.

'This was Elisabeth's dress, you know,' she continued, tugging at the hem of her sleeve. 'She gave me a lot of things. Clothes, books, hairbrushes and ribbons. But most of all, she gave me a home. I don't know where I would have gone, if she hadn't taken me here once I was released from the hospital. I don't think I could have gone back to the cottage. Not after my boy...'

She broke off and looked up at Snape, frowning.

'Do you think Elisabeth only took me in because Dumbledore asked her to?'

Snape shrugged.

'I do not know,' he replied, but as he saw the crestfallen look in Hope's eyes, he quickly added something else.

'I can tell that Edmunds has grown very fond of you. I assume his wife did as well. Do her reasons for taking you in really matter today?'

'No. I guess not.'

Hope exhaled audibly, brought her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes before squeezing them shut and letting her fingers trail through her dark hair. She bent her head and rubbed her neck, rolled her shoulders and then straightened up before taking a couple of steady breaths.

'None of it matters,' she said softly. 'These things happened half a lifetime ago. Maybe it's time to let them go.'

When she looked up at him, Snape could do nothing but gasp. He had expected to see many things in her green eyes. Tears, confusion, even anger, but he had not expected to see the ghost of a smile reflecting in them. It was as fleeting as a shooting star, gone in a heartbeat but just as mesmerising and precious. And Snape could only hope that one day, it would linger.

~ ~ ~

'How is the girl, Severus?'

Snape carefully closed the door behind him, fighting the urge to slam it shut with such force so it would fly off the hinges. He would keep his temper, he had promised himself on his way up to the headmaster's study. He would listen to what anything else Dumbledore had to say, listen and try to understand. But as the old man now sat behind his desk, looking ever so relaxed and pleased with himself, Snape found it hard to keep the poisonous tone out of his voice.

'Why would you ask me that?' he snapped. 'It seems to me like you know all about *Miss McKibben*.'

Dumbledore just smiled.

'Now, now, Severus. Have a seat. Tea?'

Snape turned down the tea but did sit down opposite Dumbledore, who took his time pouring himself a cup, adding milk and sugar. He seemed in no hurry whatsoever, and Snape struggled to keep his calm.

'Did you even for a moment stop to consider how startling your sudden appearance today would be?' he demanded to know after a couple of minutes of silence.

'I did indeed,' Dumbledore replied. 'I have considered revealing myself for many years but refrained from doing so just because I was afraid that Nadezhda wouldn't take it well. After all, she has been quite convinced that no one knew where she was.'

'Then what made you change your mind today?'

'The fact that you were with her, of course.'

Snape frowned. He had suspected that Dumbledore's appearance that afternoon had been well-timed and not a mere coincidence, but so far, he had not been able to figure out how the headmaster had known that he had been there.

'I assume you have a spy at the pub,' he suggested. 'One of the Aurors, perhaps?'

'Dear Severus, give yourself some credit. I am quite convinced that you managed to avoid being seen by any Auror. I know you have the means to disappear into the shadows, even without magic.'

'There is no need to flatter me, Albus. Tell me how you knew that I was at the pub.'

'Well, I did not know for certain that you were there *today*. I hoped you would be, but I could not know for sure. As little as I can know that you went there all those nights and weekends when you couldn't be found anywhere in the castle. You could, of course, have been summoned by Voldemort this afternoon, but I decided to take a chance.'

Snape exhaled through his nose and exaggeratedly clenched and unclenched his fist. Dumbledore was a genius, there was no doubt about that, and he certainly had a talent to make people lose their temper with his opaqueness.

'How did you know that I use to frequent this particular pub?' Snape now asked slowly, weighing every syllable so Dumbledore would not have a chance to give yet another ambiguous answer.

'Well, dear boy, I happened to see you once.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Well, not in the pub, but in Nadezhda's... *Hope's* room. And quite frankly, for a moment I was concerned that you might have noticed me as well.'

At first, Snape was intrigued, but as Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, smiling ever so smugly, Snape's eyes darkened once more. He was not in the mood to play games, and if Dumbledore now made him guess on how he had knowledge of whatever happened in Hope's room, Snape would be sorely tempted to throw an Unforgivable curse at him. Luckily for the headmaster, however, he provided an explanation.

'The candle, Severus. The candle on the nightstand and the painting behind it. Didn't you notice anything?'

Snape frowned. He had thought that he seen both candles flicker when he had entered the room, both the one that Hope extinguished and the one in the frame. But surely, it couldn't be!

Yet Dumbledore nodded.

'I have a similar painting,' he explained pointing towards the opposite wall. 'During the day, it is simply a painting among others. Quite small and not much for the world to see. Most people think it to be Muggle painting, since the flame never moves and the wax never melts. But when darkness descends, the painting springs to life, and the flame begins to flicker.'

'When darkness descends?' Snape inquired. 'Darkness... of the mind?'

Dumbledore nodded.

'When Hope lights her candle,' Snape concluded.

'Yes, when Hope lights her candle,' Dumbledore confirmed. 'At first, it was Elisabeth who lit it on my orders. Someone had to watch the girl at night, whisper to her when her nightmares threatened to tear her soul apart. It was meant to be a temporary solution, a tool to be cast aside once it wasn't needed anymore. But then Elisabeth died and Hope kept lighting the candle.'

'What is it she is still afraid of?' Snape asked, his annoyance with Dumbledore all but blown away. This wasn't about Dumbledore. This was about a seventeen-year-old girl who had been scared to a point where she had seen no other way out than to run. And now, half a lifetime later, she was running still.

'Hope, Severus, is afraid of Nadezhda,' Dumbledore answered gravely. 'She is afraid of the things Nadezhda has seen, the things she has learned and the things she is capable of doing. She has locked her away, somewhere in a dark corner of her mind. Locked her away and tried to forget her. But like the night returns once the sun has set, Nadezhda returns with the darkness. And until the day Hope makes peace with her and accepts her with all her flaws and shortcomings, she will not be rid of her demons.'

'She has struggled with those demons for the better part of her adult life,' Snape pointed out. 'Will she ever defeat them? How can she be helped?'

Dumbledore sighed and tilted his head, surveying the dark wizard in front of him with his friendly blue eyes.

'Help can only be given to those who accept it, Severus. This is why I did nothing but watch for fifteen years.'

Snape held the headmaster's gaze steadily and unblinkingly. He understood very well that the old man was not only talking about Hope. Yet he was glad when Dumbledore rose from his chair, for he had no desire to discuss his own demons that evening.

'I think I'll take Fawkes down to the grounds,' Dumbledore announced, already extending his arm towards the phoenix that promptly took flight and landed on its master's arm. 'You may stay here, of course, Severus. For as long as you wish.'

Snape frowned, for a moment at a loss of what Dumbledore was talking about. Why would he want to stay in the headmaster's study? But as he looked after Dumbledore as the headmaster approached the door, Snape's eyes were drawn to the little painting on the opposite wall. A painting of a flickering candle.

He swallowed. For a moment, he contemplated to call Dumbledore back, but during the few seconds that it took him to cross the room, he understood that Dumbledore already knew that Hope had lit her candle. He had seen the flame flicker in the semi-darkness and chosen not to act. For he had decided that Hope was not his to protect any longer.

Hesitantly, Snape extended his hand and let his fingers trail over the wooden frame. He did not know how Dumbledore's charm worked, but as he looked into the tiny flame, he could see the silhouette of a woman. Hope was standing by the window, gazing out over the lake, as she had done so many nights before. Her back was straight, and she held her head high, but Snape sensed clearly that it was nothing but pretence. If Hope were as strong as she looked, she would not be standing by the window. If she were as strong as she wanted the world to believe, she would not have lit the candle. Despite what she had said to him earlier, she wasn't ready to let go, had not yet the strength to forget. Maybe she never would.

With a sigh, Snape lifted the painting off the wall, tucked it under his arm and descended to the dungeon. He would look out for Hope now, whisper to her at night and pray that she would sleep. He knew how it was to lay sleepless, unable to wake up from nightmares that did not only come at night and refused to leave in the morning. He'd do anything to spare her. But when he arrived in his study and mounted the painting on the mantel, the flame was quite still. He could see nothing in it, not even a shadow, and he thought that Hope must have gone to sleep. He could not know, of course, that there had been a knock on her door.

## Sectumsempra

### Chapter 6 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 6: Sectumsempra

'How could this have happened, Severus?'

There was not the faintest tone of accusation in Narcissa's voice. Instead it was feeble, barely more than a whisper, the voice of a desperate woman who feared that the last thing she held dear, her beloved son, was slipping away from her.

'Draco will be fine,' Snape tried to calm her. 'There will barely be any scarring. Madam Pomfrey was quick to apply dittany.'

'It's Professor Snape who saved your son, Madam Malfoy,' the matron pointed out. 'Had he not known the counter-curse...'

She fell quiet as Narcissa once more pressed her hand to her mouth as if to suppress a sob, and Snape turned towards the window, sneering. If any of the two women

knew that he was not only acquainted with the counter-curse but had been the one to invent the actual curse that had almost cost Draco his life, they would be much less grateful.

'Your son is in good hands, Narcissa,' he said, his face still turned away. 'Go home. Rest. Madam Pomfrey will contact you as soon as Draco wakes up.'

'Of course, I will. Right away, Madam Malfoy,' the matron promised, and in the end, Narcissa was persuaded to return to her manor. But it was not for her sake that Snape had sent her home. He was well aware that she would not find any rest but hover in front of the fireplace, waiting for the flames to turn green. But he did not want her at Hogwarts. If she stayed by her son's side, she'd expect Snape to keep her company. She'd want him to be there, to reassure her that no more harm would come to her precious boy. But Snape did not think himself to be in a position where he could give comfort or make promises. After all, this incident was partly his fault. If he hadn't invented that blasted curse...

*Sectumsempra.*

Snape shuddered. He had been proud of this curse once, had thought it would give him power and that it would even bring him glory. Of course, it had done neither, and by the time he had understood what kind of evil he had created, he had sunken too deep into the darkness to care. It had not been until later, many years later, that he had worked out the counter-curse. He had wanted to create something pure and bright in order to redeem himself, but by this time, his soul had been beyond salvation.

'I will send up an elf with another phial of Essence of Dittany,' he promised the matron before he turned to head towards the door.

'Do you want me to inform you when Mr Malfoy regains consciousness?' Madam Pomfrey asked.

'There will be no need for that,' Snape replied. 'I am confident that you will do everything that needs to be done.'

It was not that he didn't care about Draco. He had known the boy since the day he had been born and had always hoped that he would listen more to his mother than his father when it came to political beliefs. He cared deeply for Draco, and it had been a hard blow when Snape had learnt that the Dark Lord had chosen the boy to pay for his father's shortcomings. Of course, Snape would do anything in his power to keep Draco from harm. He would have done so even without the Unbreakable Vow. But tonight, he did not have the peace of mind to stay by the boy's side. He needed to get away, far away, to a place that had never seen magic, neither dark nor white. A place where old sins did not matter and sorrows could be drowned in a glass of Scotch or two.

The pub was quiet, as it so often was in the middle of the week. Edmunds sat with the three fishermen at their usual table, discussing politics and playing cards. An elderly man sat by the window, slurping his soup, and Hope stood behind the bar, sorting out chipped glasses and giving Snape a puzzled look as he sat down opposite her.

'It's not Sunday yet, is it?' she asked jokingly and reached for a beer glass, thinking her dark-clad patron would want a pint. But the look in his eyes and the growl in his voice made her pull back her hand.

'Scotch,' Snape ordered unceremoniously. He didn't say please, and he didn't say thank you, and it wasn't until he had drained the glass that he glanced at Hope, who was looking quite concerned.

'I'd offer you a refill,' she said, 'but I'm not sure if it's a good idea.'

'I'll be the judge of that,' Snape snapped, holding out his glass, regretting his harsh tone already when Hope picked up the bottle to pour him another drink.

'I apologise,' he said, his voice considerably softer. Of all the people in the world, Hope was the last one he had meant to snap at. In fact, he had hoped that his mood would lighten up in her presence.

'No need to apologise,' she replied. 'I've heard worse in here.'

She filled up his glass once more, tilting her head as she did so, her green eyes fixed upon her former Head of House.

'Drink it slowly,' she advised. 'It might do you good after all.'

'Will you keep me company?' Snape asked.

'Soon,' Hope promised. 'I'll just...'

She nodded towards her patrons. The fishermen were about to leave and so was the elderly man. There were empty glasses to be collected and friendly words to be spoken to ensure the men would return another night. Hope would have to wipe the tables and mop the floor, and Snape reminded himself that he was but another lonely soul frequenting this pub. Hope could not just drop everything for him. But still he followed her with his eyes, hoping she would look at him once or twice and that she would soon return to the bar. But instead, it was landlord Edmunds who settled beside him.

'Fancy seeing you here in the middle of the week. Life being rough on you then?' he inquired, pointing at the glass Snape was holding.

'On me and everyone else,' the dark wizard replied.

Edmunds shrugged.

'Oh, I don't know about that. Spring's well under way, flowers are blooming. And some people are blossoming as well.'

He turned his head to tentatively look over his shoulder, leading Snape's gaze towards once more.

'I haven't seen her this balanced in years,' Edmunds explained.

Then he turned to look at Snape again.

'Thank you!'

Snape raised an eyebrow.

'I hardly think there is anything you need to thank me for.'

'Codswallop!' Edmunds interrupted him. 'I have seen the way Hope looks at you. If I didn't know her so well, I'd say she has a crush on you.'

Snape's left eyebrow joined his right, and Edmunds grinned.

'If I didn't know her so well,' he repeated. 'Hope isn't the kind of girl who develops a crush. But I can tell that she likes you. I know she counts the days until Sunday comes around and that she takes extra care with filling your lunch plate. And I know that talking to you is good for her. My bedroom is next to hers, you know. I haven't heard her crying at night for weeks now.'

Snape swallowed. He knew that Hope was doing much better. She still lit her candle when she retired to her room at night and stood by the window, sometimes only for a couple of minutes and sometimes for several hours, but she would go to bed eventually, and when she did, she frequently extinguished the candle nowadays. She wouldn't do that if she were still afraid of the shadows of the night, Snape was quite certain of that, and he had been very pleased with this development. He had, however, not spent

a single thought on the fact that he might be the reason for Hope feeling safer nowadays. Edmunds pointing it out so bluntly now almost made him blush. Almost. He was, after all, Severus Snape.

'Hope, love, do lock up,' Edmunds now called towards his foster daughter. 'I doubt we'll be getting any more patrons tonight.'

'I shall be going then,' Snape said, but Edmunds shook his head.

'You're not moving a muscle,' he commanded. 'Talking to you is good for Hope. But judging by you showing up here in the middle of the week and downing a glass of Scotch without even wincing, I think it's you who needs to talk tonight. She'll listen, trust me. She'll listen gladly.'

He went over to Hope to bid her good night and asked her to count up the till, and Snape stayed seated at the bar, feeling slightly uneasy. What if Hope really was infatuated with him? She was dear to him, very dear, but romantic feelings were far from his mind. How could he let her know without destroying the trust they had built over the last couple of months, the friendship that was blossoming between them? But to his utter relief, Hope had more practical things on her mind when she returned to the bar.

'I haven't eaten anything all day. I think I need a sandwich. Can I interest you in one as well?'

'Are you afraid that I will drink myself into a stupor?' Snape asked, lifting up his second glass of Scotch which he so far had not touched.

Hope smiled shyly.

'I think I could handle you even if you were drunk,' she pointed out. 'I've worked here for quite some time, you know. Would roast beef be alright with you?'

Snape nodded.

'I'll be right back then.'

Once more, Snape followed her with his eyes as she headed towards the kitchen and found it hard to tear his eyes away from the door after it had fallen shut behind her. His head was buzzing with thoughts, thoughts about Draco and Narcissa, Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, Hope and Nadezhda, curses, charms, friendship, love, and many, many other things, and he found himself unable to focus on any of them. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, trying to concentrate and failing miserably, and by the time Hope returned, he had pushed his whisky as far away from him as possible.

'You look horrible,' Hope pointed out, once more looking at him with concern. 'Are you alright?'

Snape sighed.

'It has been a rough day,' he simply replied, and Hope didn't dig around for more. She never did, and neither did Snape. Ever since the fateful Sunday when Albus Dumbledore had appeared out of the mists, they were strictly keeping to the deal they had agreed on earlier that year: none of them asked any questions, and the world beyond the pub's walls did not exist.

'How about we have a seat over there?' Hope suggested. 'In your booth? Much more comfortable, don't you think?'

Snape couldn't help but agree, and Hope sent him ahead, giving him time to take off his coat and stretch out his legs before she joined him, carrying a tray with sandwiches and two cups of tea.

'I figured you didn't want your Scotch anymore.'

She sat down opposite him and produced a box of matches from her apron, lit the tea lights in the table and prompted Snape to eat. But when he brought the sandwich to his mouth, she gasped.

'Is that blood on your hand?' she asked.

Slowly, Snape put down his sandwich and examined the back of his left hand in the faint candle light. There were indeed a couple of crimson stains, clashing violently against his pale skin.

'Not yours, I hope.'

Snape shook his head.

'No. Draco's, Draco Malfoy's,' he said slowly, wondering if he had made a mistake by mentioning the boy's name before the last syllable had left his lips. But Hope didn't flinch, and so he carried on.

'One of his peers cast a dark curse on him.'

'Is he alright?' Hope demanded to know.

'He will be,' Snape replied, absentmindedly rubbing the back of his hand with a paper napkin in order to get the blood off.

'He was lucky,' he continued. 'If I had arrived only minutes later, he would have bled to death. Now there might not even be any scarring.'

'What will happen to the other student?' Hope inquired.

'He will serve detention with me every Saturday until the end of term.'

'Make sure he never uses a dark curse again. Do whatever it takes, I'm begging you.'

Surprised at the pleading tone in her voice, Snape looked up, finding Hope with her fingers tightly wrapped around her tea cup. She had lowered her head, and her hair was obscuring her face.

'Dark curses rip one's soul apart, and the scars never heal,' he heard her whisper. 'You know that. And I know it too.'

Snape frowned. As far as he knew, the woman in front of him had never cast a dark spell. He had told her not to, and she had done everything in her power to obey him. But when Hope finally looked up at him, he could see in her eyes that she knew what she was talking about. She knew the same pain and guilt Snape himself met in the mirror every time he looked into it. She had not only seen the Dark but created it herself.

'I assume you have talked to Dumbledore since he... since he visited,' Hope wondered, and Snape nodded silently.

'Has he told you how Elisabeth Edmunds died?'

To this question, Snape shook his head, and Hope took a deep breath.

'According to the police, Elisabeth was on her way home from the hospital one night when she was attacked by two men. Men from the village. She knew them, so that's

probably why she didn't run. They pulled a knife and demanded her purse. If she wasn't quick enough or if they were disappointed with their bounty, no one knows, but one of them rammed the knife into her stomach. Then they turned on each other, they argued, one slit the other's throat and ran off. The police never found him, and Elisabeth bled to death right there on the pavement.'

'I am sorry,' Snape offered his condolences, not knowing what else to say. But to his surprise, Hope wasn't done with her story.

'According to the police,' she repeated. 'The *Muggle* police. You see, they didn't get everything right. Elisabeth was not alone that night, her attackers did not turn on each other, and the one who survived was found, curled up at the nearest street corner, babbling about the horrible things he had seen.'

Hope paused, picking up her cup to drink, but her hands were shaking, and the tea spilled onto the table. Snape dried it up with his napkin and braced himself for a tale he was not sure he wanted to hear.

'I picked up Elisabeth at the hospital that night,' Hope continued, drying her hands at her apron. 'I did that quite often. It was back then when I couldn't sleep, so I went to pick her up after her nightshift quite frequently. I liked walking with her. She was kind to me. And the two men... We *did* know them. One of them lived down the street and often came to the pub. His name was Robert, I think. They walked with us for a bit, chatted, wondered if the pub was still open and if they could get a drink. Then all of a sudden, Robert pulled a knife and asked for money. They hadn't planned to this, I'm quite sure, because his companion asked him what the hell he was doing. But he was persistent, and Elisabeth handed over her purse, her watch, even her wedding ring. Why he stabbed her, I don't know. He probably didn't either. I remember he looked shocked, terrified. His companion started to panic, called him a murderer, said they'd go to jail... And then they figured they needed to get rid of me, the only witness.'

Once again, Hope paused. Her hands now lay on the table, quite still, and her eyes were fixed on the tips of her fingers.

'I don't know how I did it,' she went on, her voice quiet but steady. 'I didn't know *could* do it. But when Robert came closer, when he drew his knife... All I did was raise my hands. A red line appeared on his neck. He fell to his knees, wheezing and spluttering... I killed him. I killed him with magic, without even a wand.'

'This isn't unheard of,' Snape pointed out, trying to keep a professional tone in his voice. 'Most witches and wizards are able to perform wandless magic when they are in danger. It is a natural reaction, an instinct. We have the means to save our lives, and we use it if the need arises.'

'Of all the spells I could have used... Of all the spells I knew, I chose a dark one. I did not save one single life. I took one.'

She spoke so quietly that Snape could barely make out her words, and when she gazed up at him, he didn't need to see tears in her eyes to imagine how many nights she had spent crying. For Elisabeth, for Robert, for her very soul. And he understood now why she had been pleading for him to make sure that Draco's attacker would never use a dark spell again. She knew how it felt to kill. She knew how it felt to have one's soul ripped apart.

'Hope, please,' he started carefully. 'You cannot blame yourself for this. You mustn't. You were scared. You feared for your life. There was no time to think...'

'I've been trying to convince myself of my innocence for thirteen years,' Hope interrupted him, sadly shaking her head. 'I haven't succeeded yet. And no matter what you say now, the facts remain. I killed a man using a dark spell. All I can do is try to make amends and console the man who lost his wife that night, the wife I did not save.'

Snape swallowed.

'So that is what you meant when you said that you needed to do something good in this world?' he asked.

Hope nodded, and Snape sighed. He knew that there was nothing he could say to convince Hope that she didn't owe Edmunds anything, that she didn't owe herself anything. She would not listen. She would not allow herself to.

'How did you get away with this? Weren't the Aurors alerted by your use of magic?' he asked instead, partly because he was genuinely curious and partly because he desperately wanted to steer their conversation away from guilt and self-blame.

'I ran,' Hope told him. 'At least I think I did. I could just as well have Disapparated. Nothing about that night would surprise me. I was far gone by the time the Aurors arrived. They found two corpses, one of them carrying evidence that magic had been used. But they had no means of tracing it. At one point they even considered that Elisabeth somehow managed to cast a spell. Quite ridiculous, really. She was Squib, after all. But then they found Robert's companion, and he told them that there had been another woman, one that cut his friend's throat without even being close to him.'

'How can you know about this?' Snape asked, bewildered.

'Dumbledore.'

*Of course*, Snape thought. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he was not even surprised.

'He came back here that Sunday evening,' Hope explained. 'You had been gone for hours, but I had not yet left my room. I had lost track of time, and when there a knock on my door, I thought... I kind of hoped that you had come back. Had I known that it was Dumbledore knocking, I might not have opened up. But I did, and once the door was open, I couldn't just slam it in his face.'

*Wouldn't have done any harm* Snape thought to himself. Maybe it would have taught the old meddler to keep his nose out of other people's business. But Dumbledore's behaviour was not important for the time being, and so Snape held his peace.

'The Aurors who found Robert and Elisabeth had no leads to go on, and arranging the crime scene so the Muggle police would draw the right conclusions was their first priority. They made sure that there were two sets of fingerprints on the knife and threw it in a nearby litterbin. Then they took care of Robert's friend, erased his memory and sent him somewhere else to live. It wasn't until the next day that they handed in their report, and luckily, the only one who read it was a friend of Dumbledore's, the same Auror that had brought me to the hospital some years earlier. He knew me, he knew Elisabeth, and he knew Dumbledore's plan. He contacted him, and together they decided to hush everything up. So this unexplained piece of magic was never investigated. Once more, Dumbledore enabled me to stay hidden.'

She picked up her cup with a now steady hand and brought it to her lips but then quickly put it down again, wrinkling her nose.

'The tea turned cold the night Dumbledore visited as well,' she mused. 'He stayed for hours, telling me about all the things I couldn't remember and those I had chosen to forget. He told me about Elisabeth and the way he kept an eye on me for all these years. He's a clever man, Dumbledore. You know the painting up in my room, the one with the candle?'

Snape nodded.

'It has a twin, in Dumbledore's office. Whenever I light my candle, he can see it. Can you imagine how many nights he stayed up, watching over me?'

'Albus Dumbledore is no saint,' Snape pointed out, unable to restrain himself. 'He does not do anything from the goodness of his heart. He always has an ulterior motive.'

'Let him have as many as he wants,' Hope replied calmly. 'I don't care. I really don't. I am just immensely grateful that he gave me this opportunity. I need to be here. Here, in this pub, under Edmunds' roof. For his sake and my own.'

Slowly, Snape nodded. He understood. He truly did. For he, too, was living his life only to redeem his sins. Nothing else mattered. Nothing at all. Or at least, nothing else had mattered for many years. He had done what he had sworn to do. He had stayed alive in order to protect Lily's son. But now there was someone else to protect: the dark-haired woman who was sitting opposite him, the woman with those cold green eyes. Dumbledore had done a fine job so far, but the old man knew that his time had

come and that he would not be able to safeguard his former student for much longer. Thus, he had given the task to Snape, who had gladly accepted it, not because he had to or felt obligated but because he wanted to. Hope deserved having someone watching over her. But Snape knew that with Dumbledore's death, *his* life would change too. How he would manage to look after Hope then, he had no idea.

## Shelter from the Storm

Chapter 7 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 7: Shelter from the Storm

Snape moaned and squeezed his eyes shut. Only moments ago, he had not felt any pain, and now he could not even remember the Hippogriff's razor-sharp claws severing his flesh from the bone. There had been too much adrenaline pumping through his body for him to be able to think about anything else than getting the boy out of harm's way. But now he was safe, for the time being at least, and Snape was able to briefly put his responsibilities aside. All he wanted now, all he needed, was to rest.

'I know this hurts, Severus. I'm so sorry. But those wounds need to be cleaned. Hold still.'

Snape gritted his teeth as a new wave of pain washed over him, followed by a wave of nausea. Narcissa's touch was gentle, but the wounds on his shoulder were deep and the pain excruciating, and it took Snape all his willpower to not simply give in and pass out.

'This will sting a bit. Sorry, Severus.'

He heard himself scream. It felt as if Narcissa were pouring acid into his wounds. His head began to spin, and he felt himself shaking. There was cold sweat running down his back and the taste of vomit in his mouth. But just when he thought that he could not take any more, that he would lose consciousness, the pain stopped. He sank back onto a soft pillow, feeling as if he were being wrapped into warm, fluffy towels. His breathing became slow and regular, and he knew he was about to fall asleep.

'Don't fight it, Severus,' Narcissa whispered, brushing a strand of black hair away from his sweaty forehead. 'Just sleep. You deserve it. Sleep, my friend. Sleep.'

He wanted to. By the gods, he did. He wouldn't even mind if he never woke up again. It didn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter right now. He was too exhausted to care. But a searing pain in his left forearm made him shoot up from the pillow, and he looked around the room, blinking furiously in order to clear his vision.

'My shirt,' he croaked, surprised at the sound of his own voice. He had screamed himself hoarse.

'Severus, no! You are in no condition to Apparate. The Dark Lord will understand.'

'The Dark Lord never understands,' Snape growled, getting up from the bed upon catching sight of his shirt and robes on a chair on the other side of the room. But said room quickly started to spin, and Snape had to hold on to the bedpost in order to stay upright.

'See? You can't go. You'll splinch yourself.'

The tone in Narcissa's voice was pleading, but Snape knew he had no choice. Either he heeded the Dark Lord's call now or would suffer the consequences later, consequences that were far worse than splinching.

'Mother?'

Narcissa whirled around, and Snape, too, turned his head towards the door where Draco suddenly had appeared. The boy was pale and clutching his left forearm.

'I don't want to go,' he said in a feeble voice.

Narcissa rushed over to wrap her trembling son into her arms.

'I know, darling. I know,' she whispered and then gazed back at Snape, who had managed to get across the room. He was now struggling to put on his shirt using only his right hand.

'What can he want now?' Narcissa asked. 'Dumbledore is dead. Can't he leave us alone now?'

*He will never leave you alone. Especially not now after Draco failed to carry out his task* Snape thought but held his peace. Narcissa was desperate enough as it was. But he knew that the Dark Lord had never expected Draco to succeed. He had expected the boy to fail and had enjoyed every tear Narcissa had shed. For the boy's father, Narcissa's husband, had failed him, and the Dark Lord wanted all the Malfoys to pay for Lucius' shortcomings.

He winced as he pulled on his cloak and bit back a curse that would have made a sailor blush. Then he beckoned Draco to approach him.

'I will need your assistance,' he explained. 'As your mother pointed out, I am in no condition to Apparate, so we will have to use Side-Along Apparition. Now go, fetch your cloak and meet me outside.'

When Draco hurried off, Narcissa burst into tears.

'Severus, no! He can't do it. It's too dangerous!'

'Calm yourself, Narcissa. I do, of course, not require Draco's help to Apparate. He, on the other hand, is so flustered that it is a miracle he didn't get splinched on his way here. *I* will be the one guiding *him*, but he does not need to know that.'

'Oh, Severus!' Narcissa exclaimed. 'You're still looking out for him. What would we do without you?'

'What Slytherins do best, Narcissa,' Snape replied. 'Survive. At any cost.'

He would have to try, too.

Apparating was harder than Snape had anticipated. The pain in his left shoulder was distracting him and so was the shaking boy whose arm he was holding on to with his right hand. Hence, Snape was glad that he did not need to concentrate on their destination. The Dark Mark was steering their course, leading them right into Voldemort's open arms.

'Ah, the hero of the hour,' the Dark Lord exclaimed. 'And yet another failed Malfoy. Welcome, both of you.'

Snape fell to his knees to kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes, pulling Draco down along with him. The last thing they needed was Draco acting like a petulant teenager and talking back to the Dark Lord now, even if it was in order to defend his father's honour. The boy would not survive the night if he did, and his death would drive Narcissa over the edge. But thankfully, Draco was quiet, taking all the Dark Lord's verbal abuse without even batting an eyelash. Maybe, Snape thought, the boy wasn't listening. Maybe he was too weary to care.

'Run along home to Mommy now,' Voldemort commanded after a few minutes. 'Tell her that neither of you are to leave the manor and that I will send Bellatrix along in a couple of days with further instructions. Off you go now! And you, Severus, get up. I don't have any use for you crawling in the dust before me.'

Snape rose, venturing a glance over his shoulder. Draco had gone. Hopefully, he'd find his way home.

'You have been injured?' the Dark Lord inquired, pointing at Snape's torn and blood stained robes. 'An Auror?'

'No, my Lord. A Hippogriff.'

'Hagrid's beast, I assume?'

Snape nodded.

'Did you kill it?'

'No, my Lord.'

'Did you kill the half-breed?'

Snape frowned, but the Dark Lord didn't give him any time to answer.

'Of course, you didn't. You kill only if you have to, don't you, Severus.'

To that, Snape simply bowed his head. He did not know what Voldemort was on about, and he was too tired to come up with a witty answer. He only wished to be dismissed as Draco had been.

'As of tonight, you are the most hated and the most hunted man in the Wizarding world, Severus. In fact, I think they might hate you more tonight than they have ever hated me,' Voldemort announced, sounding as if this was something Snape should be proud of.

'In a couple of weeks, the Ministry will have fallen and I will rule,' he continued. 'And on the first of September you will be the new Headmaster of Hogwarts, but until then, I will not be able to reach out a helping hand should an angry mob turn on you to avenge the death of their beloved Albus Dumbledore. Therefore, I advise you to hide, Severus. Do you have anywhere to go?'

'Yes, my Lord,' Snape replied. Any other wizard might have been fooled into believing that the Dark Lord was asking out of concern for his wellbeing. But Snape knew that Voldemort only wanted to ensure that his most loyal servant, his most valued pawn in this giant game of Wizard's chess, would be safely hidden away until he had need of him again.

'Not that shabby place that belonged to your father, I hope,' Voldemort said, shuddering theatrically. 'They will look for you there.'

'I am quite aware of that, my Lord. I can assure you that no witch or wizard alive will ever think of looking for me in the place I have in mind.'

The Dark Lord fixed him with a cold stare, and Snape fortified his mental walls. Voldemort couldn't know where he was planning to hide. He of all people *mustn't* know! But the Dark Lord didn't probe, and as he turned away, Snape gave an inaudible sigh of relief.

'You're a clever man, Severus. Maybe too clever for your own good at times. But it is all right. I do not need to know where you are hiding. For when I am in need of you, all I need to do is call, and you will come to me.'

~~~

Morning was dawning when Snape landed on his feet at the edge of the forest, but the night didn't seem to want to loosen its grip around the world. The sky remained dark with storm clouds, and Snape couldn't help but think it fitting. For there was a storm to break loose the likes of which the Wizarding world had not yet seen.

For a couple of moments, he leaned with his back against a tree, allowing himself to feel for the first time since he had raised his wand on top of the Astronomy Tower. He had hated Albus Dumbledore during the last moments of the old man's life, hated him for what he forced him to do. And he hated himself, for more reasons than he cared to admit. But in the very moment when he had cast the Killing Curse, he had felt nothing at all, and for a second, he had been terrified. Was it to be like this for ever now?

He had killed, and his soul had been split in two. Could damaged souls not feel, he had wondered. Would he be forced to live the rest of his life feeling *nothing*? But then he had come face to face with Potter once more, the boy who resembled his father so much that Snape could barely stand the sight of him. But he also had his mother's eyes.

A sob escaped from Snape's lips. It was when he had looked into Harry Potter's green eyes that he had understood that his marred soul was still able to feel. The green eyes had made him long for forgiveness, for peace and salvation, the very things he knew that he would never achieve in life. First when he was dead, Harry Potter would understand. With any luck, the boy would be able to forgive him. But until then... Until then, the boy's hatred would grow, many more would have to die, and no one could guarantee that he would succeed in the end. And if he failed, everything Dumbledore had worked for, everything that had been sacrificed would have been in vain.

Shaking his head at himself, Snape tried to straighten up. He couldn't think like this. He *mustn't*! He had to believe in the Chosen One! Dumbledore had believed in the boy. The Order believed in him. Snape, too, had to believe. If he lost faith, he'd crumble. But at the moment, he lacked the strength.

The way to the village seemed endlessly long, and when Snape closed in on the pub, he asked himself what the hell he had been thinking. It was barely morning. No one would be awake. It would be hours until the pub opened and he could get inside to warm himself. He should just leave, Apparate to Spinner's End or wherever his tired mind would lead him. He had no business being here. How could he even expect that Hope would take him in? He couldn't tell her why he had to hide, why he had been forced to flee the Wizarding world. Why would she let him stay? But when the door of the pub flew open and he saw Hope hurrying towards him, barefoot and with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing nothing more than her dressing-gown, Snape knew that she would not ask him any questions. He knew she would give him shelter, no matter why he needed it. And when she reached him, he thankfully sank into her arms.

'You're bleeding,' he heard her whisper but didn't have the strength to tell her that his wounds had been taken care of already. He felt too weak to even shake his head.

'And you're freezing. Christ, your lips are turning blue! Come, we need to get you inside where it's warm.'

She took a firm hold around his waist, and Snape laid his right arm on her shoulders, resisting the urge to put his full weight on her. It was only a couple of steps, he told himself, only a few more. But as soon as they had entered the pub, his knees gave way and Hope just barely managed to shove him towards a chair so he wouldn't collapse on the floor.

'What on earth happened to you?' she asked, her hands already busy at his robes, which made Snape remember that she still didn't know that he was in no need of medical attention.

'The wounds have been mended,' he managed to bring forth, taking hold of Hope's wrist with his right hand.

'But you're in pain,' she pointed out.

'And I will be for quite some time,' Snape admitted. 'Dittany may speed up the healing process, but it doesn't take away the pain.'

He gingerly pulled her hand away from his shoulder, and as it came to lay in his, Hope crouched down beside him, gazing up at him. She looked anxious, and Snape couldn't help but wonder why he had ever doubted that she would not take him in. Hope cared for his wellbeing just as much as he cared for hers.

'Why are you up at this hour?' he asked.

'I was hoping you would come,' Hope answered. 'I've been on the lookout for you ever since... since...'

She fell silent and swallowed, and as her lower lip started to tremble, she sank her teeth into it to make it stop.

'I know Dumbledore's dead,' she said in the end, her voice trembling.

'How could you know that?'

Snape felt panic rise in his chest. What if Hope knew? What if she knew that he had been the one who had murdered Albus Dumbledore?

Hope closed her eyes for a moment, and a single tear rolled down her pale cheek.

'Last night... The candle went out. Dumbledore's candle. And I... I just knew.'

Snape nodded, tightening his grip around Hope's tiny hand. So she didn't know anything.

'A couple of Death Eaters made their way into the castle,' he told her, carefully weighing every word that came over his lips. 'Draco let them in. He had been forced to do so by the Dark Lord. Dumbledore was cornered and slain on top of the Astronomy Tower.'

It wasn't the whole truth, of course, and if Hope now asked him who had killed Dumbledore, Snape wouldn't know what to tell her. He didn't want to lie to her, but at the same time, he could not tell her the truth. But to his utter relief, Hope did not ask anything.

'You need to rest,' she established instead. 'You need a hot shower to warm up, and I'll get you something clean to wear. Then you need to sleep. Do you think you can get upstairs?'

Snape nodded. With Hope by his side, he would manage. With her by his side, he would even manage to survive.

She once more slid her arm around his waist and helped him climb the stairs. She showed him the bathroom but Snape turned down her offer for him to take a shower. He doubted that he would be able to stand upright for the time it took for the water to warm him. But he gladly accepted the pyjamas she provided him with and didn't struggle as she helped him get changed.

'Those are Edmunds' pyjamas. Not the latest fashion, I'm afraid,' Hope apologised as she tucked him in in her own bed a few minutes later, but Snape did not care. All he cared about was the look in her eyes, the look in those otherwise so cold, green gems. The look in them had softened, and gazing into them now was almost as soothing as the touch of her hand when she brushed a strand of his hair away from his forehead.

'Sleep now,' she whispered. 'Just sleep.'

'Will you stay with me?' Snape slurred, too tired to make proper use of his tongue.

'For as long as you need me. I promise.'

'Thank you.'

Unable to fight his weariness anymore, Snape let his eyes flutter shut and sank into a deep and healing slumber. And Hope stayed by his side, every now and then wiping off the tears that escaped from underneath his dark lashes.

Coming Home

Chapter 8 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 8: Coming Home

'Severus...'

Snape flinched and tried to look away. He didn't want to see Dumbledore slumped against the wall of the Astronomy Tower. He was so weak, so fragile. But the old man's voice, however feeble, was calling out for him, and Snape had no choice but to face the dying man. Pleading blue eyes met cold black ones, and Snape felt his gaze harden.

'I don't want to do this,' he heard himself whisper.

'You gave your word, Severus.'

It wouldn't be the first promise I break, Snape thought.

He felt his hand twitch and looked down at his wand, the wand that had never killed before. One spell, one single curse, and nothing would ever be the same again.

'Severus... please...'

Snape raised his wand. Slowly, so slowly. His hand was shaking, and for a moment he hoped that he would miss.

'*Avada Kedavra!*

For the second time in his life, a Killing curse ripped Snape's heart in two, and as he stared at the jet of green light that shot from his wand, he saw a pair of bright green eyes look right back at him.

'Lily!' he breathed.

He watched her fall, hit squarely in the chest by Voldemort's curse. She had not even had the time to blink, and her green eyes were staring into nothingness as she lay dead on the floor. Lifeless. Cold. Two emeralds rendered worthless in a heartbeat.

No... NO!

Snape wanted to scream but was unable to utter a single sound. His throat was so tight, he couldn't even breathe. His soul was in agony, and he was ready to die.

'Hush, now. Hush. It's alright. It's but a dream.'

Snape gasped for air, coughing and wheezing. His throat was on fire, and he felt as if his chest had been ripped open.

'Easy now. Easy.'

He felt a small, warm hand on his right shoulder and a tender touch on his left cheek, and as he cautiously drew in breath, he was surprised that it didn't hurt anymore. His heartbeat was slowing down, and he opened his eyes.

'It was but a dream.'

For a moment, Snape felt confused. The green eyes he was looking into, however similar in colour and shape, weren't Lily's. They were framed with dark lashes, and even though the look in them was caring and tender, there was also a hint of a shadow, the lingering ghost of horrors that couldn't be forgotten.

'Hope...' Snape croaked.

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, and for a moment, Snape thought that he saw a faint blush creep onto her otherwise pale cheeks.

'What time is it?' he inquired.

The curtains were drawn and the room only dimly lit by some candles on the nightstand. He had no way of telling.

'It is almost midnight.'

'Midnight?'

Snape frowned. He had Apparated to the edge of the forest at dawn. If it were midnight, that would mean...

'You slept for almost fifteen hours,' Hope confirmed his suspicions. 'I guess you needed it.'

With a noncommittal grunt, Snape let his eyes flutter shut again, feeling his head sink back into the pillow.

'How about you?' he muttered, mostly to keep himself awake for a little while longer. 'Have you been sitting here all day?'

'I promised I would.'

Snape swallowed, thankful that his eyes were closed since he didn't know what to say. A simple thank you seemed inadequate as it wouldn't express the gratitude he felt. Hope had taken him in without any question and watched over him all day. There weren't many people in the Wizarding world who would do that for Severus Snape.

'How is your shoulder?' she now asked in a low voice, almost as if she were afraid to wake him.

Snape carefully rolled it.

'Better,' he said, struggling to open his eyes.

'You can't stay here all night,' he stated quietly, too tired to sound authoritarian. 'You need to rest.'

'So do you,' Hope whispered, brushing Snape's forehead with her fingertips just as carefully as she had done early in the morning. Her touch was both calming and comforting, and as if by reflex, Snape once more closed his eyes.

He slept soundly and dreamlessly until the morning, and when he woke up, feeling more rested than he had done in months, the room was bathing in soft sunlight. The window was open, and he could hear the birds chirping in the trees. There was the sound of cars drifting up from the street, footsteps and voices of the people passing by the pub. It must be late in the morning, Snape concluded and sat up, looking around the room in search for a clock. But instead, his eyes were drawn to the armchair by the window. At first, he thought that it was covered with clothes, thrown carelessly upon it. But after having blinked a couple of times to clear his vision, he realised that Hope had curled up there under a woolly blanket. She was fast asleep.

Careful not to make any sound that would wake her, Snape pulled back his blanket and sat on the edge of the bed, his dark eyes never leaving Hope's face. She looked peaceful in her sleep. Her features were relaxed, her breathing slow and regular, and Snape couldn't help but wonder what she was dreaming. She deserved happy dreams. Dreams of a world where she had never been touched by darkness, where her smile had never faltered and the sparkle in her eyes had never been extinguished. Surely, she had been happy once. Surely, she had known joy.

Or had she? Her father had been a cruel, bitter man and the manor where she had grown up cold and grey. Maybe she had never laughed, never had a reason to smile.

Snape sighed. He had visited the home of Nadezhda McKibben only once, half a lifetime ago, and still he could see the gloomy manor house before his inner eye, feared its shadows and felt its chill creep into his very marrow. And whether he wanted it or not, his thoughts were drawn to a similarly loveless place, a rundown brick house at Spinner's End.

'They will be looking for you there,' the Dark Lord had warned him, and Snape had agreed. Why Voldemort would have assumed that he would go *there* of all places, however, was beyond him. What he needed now was a safe place to stay, a place where he could unwind, both physically and mentally. A place where he could find the strength to carry out the task he had been set. How could he find that in his father's house, where the sounds of muffled cries and leather belts clashing against naked skin still hung in the air?

Snape flinched when Hope stirred in her chair, and his breath caught in his throat when she opened her eyes. Emerald green and almond-shaped, just like Lily's.

Futilely fighting the memories that invaded his mind, Snape blinked. The first time he had seen Lily, he had been hiding from his father on the other side of the river, knowing that Tobias never crossed the bridge. It had been a dark and gloomy day, and the girl that the young Severus had seen at the playground had been like a ray of sunshine. He had adored everything about her from the very first moment he'd laid eyes on her: her laughter, her magic, the smile in her eyes. And suddenly, Snape understood that it was *her* he needed now.

'I... I need to go,' he brought forth, his throat so tight that he was surprised that his voice was steady.

Hope frowned and rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Go where?' she asked.

Her voice was drowsy and her gaze not yet fully focused. But despite her being still half-asleep, she quickly thought better of it.

'Don't... Don't answer that. I shouldn't have asked.'

She hastily got up from her chair, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders before wrapping her arms around herself as if she were freezing.

'I... I'll go fetch your robes,' she announced. 'I... I washed them. They, um, they should be dry by now. But I... I haven't mended them yet. If you... you know, want to wait for a moment, I can... It won't take long.'

'It's alright,' Snape interrupted her stuttering. He had noticed her voice become shaky, and as he looked at Hope now, he noted that she had lowered her head in order to avoid his gaze.

Silently, he rose, closing the distance between them with a few swift strides. For the duration of a heartbeat, he considered cupping her chin to make her look at him. But he discarded the idea almost as quickly as it had come to his mind. Hope didn't want to look at him. She didn't want him to see that she was upset. And he had no right to demand anything of her.

'There is something I need to do,' he explained calmly. 'It shouldn't take long.'

He wasn't ready to reveal where he was about to go, and he figured that Hope didn't want to know. Not really. She had left the Wizarding world behind her for good reasons. What went on there was none of her concern.

Silence settled over the room. Even the street noise and the chirping of the birds seemed to have disappeared, and for some moments, Snape stood quite nonplussed, at a loss as to what to say or do. He couldn't just walk out, as he was still wearing Edmunds' pyjamas, and frankly, he didn't want to leave without saying goodbye.

'You have done more than enough already, and I don't know how to thank you,' he stated in the end, tentatively reaching out his hand to put it on Hope's shoulder. To his relief, she didn't shy away. Instead, she took a deep breath, and as she looked up at him, her green eyes filled with worries and fear, Snape's breath caught in his chest for the second time that morning. No one had ever looked at him that way. No one had ever cared about him that much.

'Take care of yourself,' she pleaded, and Snape promised it gladly. It was the easiest promise he had ever made.

~~~

'Do you think it wise?' had been Hope's last question as she had accompanied Snape to the edge of the forest, and he had told her not to worry. He knew his way around, after all, and as he now walked down the familiar alleys, disguised as an old man with a limp, Snape was glad that he had the skills to disappear into the shadows and to lure people into doubting that they had ever seen him. For every now and then, he caught sight of a person who he knew did not belong in the rundown parts of Cokeworth. They were Aurors and members of the Order of the Phoenix, all set out to hunt down the man who murdered the Headmaster of Hogwarts. If they were there on orders or out of their own accord, Snape did not know. Frankly, he would have preferred if they were all out on a personal vendetta. For no matter what personal feelings he held towards the man, Snape truly believed that Albus Dumbledore deserved being avenged.

There were two men lingering in front of the last house at Spinner's End. They had done a pretty good job disguising themselves as Muggles, but Snape could still tell that they were wizards. He could also tell that they were waiting for him. Him, a cold-blooded murderer, a Death Eater, Voldemort's man through and through. What were they expecting, he wondered. That he would come flying down the alley, throwing hexes and curses to the left and right, striking down anyone in his path in order to get to his father's house? Or did they think that he would be taken by surprise and be so shocked at their presence that they could easily overpower him and drag him to Azkaban where he would pay dearly for his crime?

Snape sneered. Either approach was ludicrous, just as ludicrous as the idea of him even *wanting* to get into the house. There was nothing for him in there, nothing at all. But of course, no one knew that he would not even flinch if the house burst into flames right there and then. Why he had even come to Spinner's End, Snape didn't really know. Out of sheer habit, he assumed. For what he was looking for could not be found there. It never had.

He slunk back into the shadows of one of the narrow alleys and headed for the river. The bank had been strewn with litter already when he had been a child, Snape remembered, but back then he had not cared. Had he had any money to buy sweets back then, he would probably have discarded the wrappers on the riverbank as well. And now, more than twenty years later, Snape found the environments fitting: the dirty river, the crumbling houses. Everything around him was decaying, rotting away like his soul.

The playground was a tragic sight. No one had been playing there for years. The slide was covered with graffiti, and the playhouse had fallen victim to flames. The swing set was so rusty that it might as well collapse at any moment, but still Snape settled on one of the swings, dragging his feet through the dirty sand. Lily had loved the swings, had used to swing higher and higher before letting go and soaring up into the air and then falling gracefully to the ground. She had always loved to fly.

No wonder she had chosen a Quidditch player, a boy who could take her for a ride on his broomstick.

Snape groaned and kicked the sand, annoyed with himself. He had not come here to wallow in bitterness, he reminded himself. He had come to look for memories, happy memories, and a bit of hope. If he couldn't find it here, in the place where he once had found his Lily, he wouldn't know where else to look.

He got off the swing and crossed the playground, coming to a halt in front of a clump of bushes. The remains of them, anyway. They had shrivelled up and died, and where there once had been green leaves, there were now only naked twigs. But Snape remembered the flowers that once had bloomed on those bushes, remembered how Lily had picked up one of them, how she had held it in her hand, making it open and close its petals like a living, breathing organism. He hadn't made a very good first impression on her back then, jumping out from behind the bushes in his shabby, overlarge coat, Snape recalled. But he chose not to think of this now. All he could see in front of his inner eye, all he *wanted* to see, was the joy in Lily's green eyes when she had performed her magic.

*Her* magic, always bright and beautiful, so much unlike his.

How could he ever have thought that they belonged together, Snape wondered now, snapping off a dry twig. How could he even for a minute have hoped that Lily would

be sorted into Slytherin with him, that he could take care of her there, guide her, and show her the magical world he had told her about before they had boarded the train to Hogwarts? How could he have dreamt? How could he have been so naïve?

He broke off another handful of twigs. Everything would have turned out so much better if he and Lily had ended up in the same house, he mused. Things would definitely have turned out differently for *him* if Lily had been sorted into Slytherin. He would have spent all his waking hours trying to impress her, to make her laugh and magic a smile into those green eyes of hers. But fate had decided differently. They had been separated upon their arrival at Hogwarts, Lily being sorted into Gryffindor and Snape into Slytherin. Lily had made friends, and young Severus had done everything in his power to make people in his house to notice him. His need to belong somewhere, to be seen had clouded his judgement, and when he had understood what kind of people he was associating with, it had been too late. He had alienated Lily with his behaviour. And eventually, he had lost her.

Snape shoulders slumped, and one by one, the twigs fell out of his hand that was hanging limp by his side. They fell to the ground and were crushed under his boots, and when Snape walked away, they were picked up by the wind and scattered, just like the dreams he had once had. Turning his back on the playground, he walked away, the charm he had used to disguise himself fading with every step he took along with his memories and dreams. For no matter what he had felt when he had been but a boy, no matter what he had *thought* that he felt, he should have understood that he had been dreaming. He should have understood already as a ten-year-old that Lily would never be his, that she was too good for him, too pure to be sullied, too light to drift into the shadows that had always lingered around *him*. He had been lost from the very start.

At the bank of the river, Snape once more gazed back towards Spinner's End, the house to which he would never return, the house that had never been a home. He saw the ghosts of his parents in the window on the first floor, saw them drift away and fade, and as he Disapparated, Snape knew that he would never again return. For in the town of Cokeworth, he would never find hope.

~~~

He didn't Apparate to his usual spot at the edge of the forest but chose the shore of the lake instead. It had started to rain, and he sought shelter under the slender branches of a willow where he leaned with his back against the tree trunk, watching a pair of swans courting each other not far away from the shore line. They didn't seem to mind the rain. Nor did they seem to mind the sound of cars drifting down from the street or the dog that was barking loudly somewhere further down the shoreline. It was almost as if the world around them didn't exist, and Snape envied them. How he wished to be able to forget all his obligations and worries, just for a little while.

'Swans mate for life. Did you know that?'

Snape shook his head without taking his eyes off the birds. He hadn't heard Hope's footsteps but wasn't surprised at her sudden appearance. And for the time being he didn't even question how she knew that he had returned to the village or why she had come to look for him by the lake.

'Those two have been together for six years,' Hope continued, nodding towards the swan pair. 'They started building their nest about two weeks ago, over there, in the reeds. They are a bit late this year. It's due to the abysmal weather, I guess.'

She shuddered, digging her hands deeper into the pockets of her raincoat, and Snape took a step to the side, making space for Hope to share his shelter. She treaded closer and pulled down her hood, making her black hair spill over her shoulders.

'They had nine eggs in their first year,' she continued. 'They all hatched, but none of the cygnets made it through the summer. They lost most of them during the first week to crows and herons, and the rest of them were snatched away by minks and foxes. They were young back then and didn't know how to protect their babies. But as the years passed by, they learnt from experience. Last year, they had eleven young, and all of them made it.'

Snape turned his head. There was a note of sadness in Hope's voice, a tone of longing that pulled at his heartstrings and made him wonder how many times she had come to the shore of the lake over the years, praying for the cygnets to make it through the summer and mourning her own son whom she had not been able to protect. He would have loved to see her face now and her eyes, those precious emeralds that every now and then offered a glimpse into her very soul. But as Hope lowered her head, her hair fell over her face like a set of black velvet curtains, and Snape returned his gaze towards the swans. He watched them swim towards their nest, saw the female disappear in the reeds and the male stand guard. He'd defend his mate against any danger, no matter how big.

'Thank you,' Hope said after a while.

Snape frowned.

'For what?'

'For keeping your promise,' Hope clarified, slowly lifting her head. 'You seem unscathed.'

'I tend to keep my promises,' Snape pointed out.

'I know that. I've known it for a long time.'

Black eyes locked onto green ones, and Snape couldn't help but brush a strand of hair from Hope's forehead. She didn't flinch, and the miniscule smile that flitted over her lips gifted Snape with more warmth than he ever could have hoped to find on this day.

'I made up a room for you,' Hope said quietly. 'You'll have your own key and may come and go as you like, no questions asked. Just make sure you go on keeping your promise whenever you leave. Look after yourself, alright?'

Then she pulled up her hood, turned and stepped out into the rain, and all Snape could do was gaze after her as she walked back to the village, once more at a loss for words and unable to express the gratitude he felt.

The Summoning

Chapter 9 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

With a content sigh Snape squeezed his eyes shut tight and stretched, conscious of every single muscle in his body. The sun tickled his toes as they emerged from under the sheets, and as he pulled the fabric back, both his legs became exposed to the golden sunlight that was trickling into the room through the gap in the curtains. He rolled to his side, inhaled the scent of summer that was drifting in from the open window and then slowly opened his eyes, feeling rested, relaxed and utterly at peace.

He didn't bother checking what time it was, neither when he sat up nor when he made his way to the bathroom. It didn't matter. He had no obligations, no responsibilities, no duties. There was time aplenty, time for lie-ins and walks by the lake, time to read, time to do nothing at all, and Snape relished every moment of it. Because soon enough, he would be called back to the Wizarding world where quiet moments would be all but a memory. Soon enough, he would have to stand tall in front of people who loathed him for what he had done and crawl in the dust in front of the one who had the means to cast the whole world into darkness. But not yet, Snape reminded himself, shaking his head as to rid himself of his dark thoughts. So far, there was still time. Time to rest and to gather strength for what was about to come.

He showered and dressed, choosing a pair of dark trousers and a black shirt that Hope had provided him with, feeling strangely at ease in Muggle clothes. It might just be the first time ever that he wore Muggle clothes that actually did fit. His mother had never been able to buy him anything new when he had been a boy. He'd always worn hand-me-downs, shapeless, oversized clothes which he never grew into. How Hope had been able to provide him with shirts that fit so well that they almost seemed tailored, Snape had not yet figured out. And every time he had asked her over the last three weeks, she had just tilted her head and whispered the word *magic*, leaving Snape utterly puzzled. If there was one method Hope would never use, it would be magic.

The pub was still closed when Snape came downstairs, which told him that it wasn't eleven o'clock yet. He had not seen Edmunds' car from his window, which probably meant that the landlord had not yet returned from the farmers' market that was held every Thursday in the village on the other side of the lake. Whether or not he had taken Hope along, Snape did not yet know, but when he entered the kitchen, he was happy to see that she had chosen to stay behind. She was wearing a dark blue dress and a white apron, humming to the radio as she was preparing lunch. She had braided her hair and was wearing make-up, and Snape couldn't help but grin. His hostess seemed to have slept just as well as he had.

He offered her a good morning, his voice a bit more croaky than he had anticipated, and she gave him one of her rare, shy smiles.

'Good morning. I'd offer you some coffee, but you sound as if you need some tea.'

Snape cleared his throat.

'Coffee will do just fine,' he replied. 'But I can help myself. Would you like a cup?' he inquired as he approached the coffee maker.

Hope shook her head.

'Thanks, but no,' she answered, lifting up the mug that was standing beside her on the counter. 'I've had my share already.'

'You have been up for a while, of course,' Snape concluded. 'My apologies for keeping you up so late.'

'It's not like you tied me to a chair,' Hope countered. 'Besides, I like talking to you, even if it is until three o'clock in the morning.'

She toasted towards him with her empty mug, and Snape was glad to be able to hide behind his own beverage for a couple of moments. He enjoyed talking to Hope as well, and they had spent many nights sitting in the empty pub, discussing everything from the weather to current Muggle politics. The only topic they avoided was the Wizarding world, but if he were honest, Snape would admit that it didn't matter what they talked about. They could even sit in silence, both of them immersed in their own thoughts, and still Snape didn't want to say goodnight. He had cared for Hope from the very start, but over the last couple of weeks she had become the epitome of peace and quiet. Spending time with her meant relaxing, forgetting about all his worries. The mere thought of having to leave soon, of having to return to the Wizarding world and leaving her behind, made Snape's stomach churn. For surely, once he was back at Hogwarts, once he was headmaster, responsible for the wellbeing of staff and hundreds of students alike, opportunities to escape would be scarce, even if it only was for an hour or two. And already now, on this sunny morning in early July, he found himself missing his new-found friend.

He watched her now as she moved about the kitchen. Her back was straight, and she held her head high. Her footsteps were soundless and her movements fluent. She was a sight to behold, and not for the first time did Snape find his thoughts trail off. Instead of a shabby pub kitchen, he saw Hope striding through the halls of an extravagant manor. He saw her dining with the elite of the Wizarding world, saw her sip expensive elf-made wine and dance in the finest of gowns. This was what she had been born and raised to do, Snape mused. This was what she deserved. But then again, she had managed to create a new life among Muggles, a life of her own. Most probably, she was much happier there than she ever could have been in the Wizarding world, even if the shadows of her past still followed her about. If only he could find a way to help her get rid of them.

With an inaudible sigh, Snape turned to refill his cup. He was well aware of the fact that Hope's problems weren't his to solve and that she wouldn't want him to solve them either. But he still wished that there was something he could do. He wished to see her smile on a daily basis, wished to see a sparkle in her eyes.

He flinched when he heard a plate crash onto the floor but was unable to focus on that broken piece of china. For he had dropped his cup as well, so startled had he been by the sudden pain on his left forearm. He had not expected to be called away, had not been prepared at all, and as he now stared down onto his shaking left hand, he never saw the look of fear in Hope's eyes.

'I am being summoned,' he breathed.

Hope nodded.

'I know. I know.'

He could have asked her how she knew, but for the time being Snape didn't even dare to look at Hope anymore. He did not know why the Dark Lord was calling him, and it did not matter. All that mattered now was Snape being able to empty his mind, to hide every memory of his time in the Muggle world, every memory of Hope, every moment they had spent together and every conversation they'd had. Should Voldemort decide to invade his mind, he mustn't see Hope, Snape reminded himself. It would endanger her, destroy everything they had, and Snape wasn't willing to let that happen.

Fortifying his mental barriers, he turned on his heel and left the kitchen, not once looking back and praying that Hope would forgive him for not saying goodbye.

~~~

Malfoy Manor? Snape frowned as he looked up to see the ivy-clad walls of the elegant manor house. Of all the places he could have been summoned to, the home of Lucius Malfoy was the last one he would have expected. For not only was the lord of the manor still locked away in Azkaban, Lucius had also fallen into disgrace with the Dark Lord. Surely, Voldemort wouldn't want anything to do with the Malfoys for the time being. But Snape would soon learn that the Dark Lord was not yet done with humiliation and torturing the family that had failed him. Far from being done.

No one came as Snape knocked on the door, not even an elf, and as he let himself in, his nose filled with a strange odour, a sourly yet sweet, sickening scent of copper and metal with a hint of rust and salt. The smell of blood that mixed with the stench of unwashed, filthy clothes and that grew more intense the closer Snape came to the drawing room.

What had the Dark Lord done, Snape wondered as he placed his hand on the bronze door handle. He wouldn't put it beyond Voldemort to have slaughtered Narcissa and Draco, to have torn them from limb to limb and sent their heads to Lucius as a present. But why would he have been summoned, Snape wondered. Surely, the Dark Lord could not see any need in reconfirming to *him* what happened to those who disappointed him. Or had he?

Preparing himself for the worst, Snape pushed open the heavy wooden door, lingering for a moment on the threshold, giving his eyes time to adjust to the semi-darkness.

There was a fire burning beneath the marble mantel piece, its heat intensifying the foul odour that was emitting from the ten or so people that were crouching at the Dark Lord's feet. Snape could make out Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrangle, Crabbe and Nott, Mulciber and Dolohov, and as he caught sight of Lucius Malfoy's blond hair, he understood who all those people were. They were the Death Eaters who had failed to obtain the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, the Death Eaters who had been thwarted by Potter and his gang, a handful of mediocre, adolescent witches and wizards. Had they managed to escape Azkaban, Snape wondered, or had their lord been merciful and freed them?

They were a pitiful sight, each and every one of them, mere shadows of their former selves, pale and emaciated. Some of them were bleeding, and others were twitching in a fashion which made Snape wonder if Voldemort had been dishing out Crucios prior to his arrival. This would explain why the men all kept their eyes on the floor, breathing so shallowly that it could hardly be heard. None of them wanted to draw Voldemort's attention to himself.

'Ah, Severus, there you are,' Voldemort exclaimed, waving Snape towards him before commanding Lucius to get up. But the lord of the manor hardly moved, and Snape could see a flash of anger in the Dark Lord's red eyes.

'Get him out of my sight, Severus,' Voldemort snarled. 'Take him to his chamber and have Narcissa wash him up. The least he can do is look presentable.'

'Yes, my Lord,' Snape replied, hurrying towards Lucius and hauling him up by the arm.

'Do you wish me to return here afterwards?'

'Bellatrix will tell you all you need to know,' the Dark Lord replied. 'You will be summoned again when I have need for you.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

Snape bowed deeply, already backing out of the room and pulling Lucius with him. He couldn't believe his luck, almost didn't dare believe that the Dark Lord had not questioned him about where he was hiding out. For Voldemort was in a foul mood, which the men who remained in the drawing room were about to experience. If he had wanted to know the truth today, Snape doubted that he would have been able to withhold it. In the worst case, he would have been forced to give up Hope in order to protect his other secrets, secrets that needed to be kept hidden at any cost.

'Can you walk up the stairs?' Snape wondered as the wooden door had fallen shut behind them, fully expecting a negative answer from Lucius. The man could barely walk as it was. If Snape weren't holding him up, he would probably collapse on the floor.

'I... I will... try,' Lucius replied, his voice hoarse and barely perceptible. He must have been screaming his lungs out on several occasions over the last year, from fear, from pain. Most probably, he had begged for death more than once. And now he was broken, physically and mentally, and knowing the Dark Lord, Snape knew that Lucius' suffering had not yet come to an end. Surely, Lucius knew it, too.

He could have levitated him up the stairs or even carried him, but no matter how long it took, no matter how many times they had to pause in order for Lucius to catch his breath, Snape did nothing more than support him when he swayed, allowing Lucius to regain at least a morsel of pride, and as they finally arrived at the door that led to the master bedroom, Snape took a step back. When Narcissa laid eyes upon her husband for the first time since his imprisonment, Lucius would want to stand tall, even if it only was for the duration of a heartbeat.

'Lucius! Good Merlin! Lucius, my love. What have they done to you?'

As anticipated, Lucius collapsed in his wife's arms the moment she embraced him, and as Snape helped Narcissa carry her husband to the bed, he felt Lucius' body go limp. The walk up the stairs had exhausted him, and now that he was safe in his wife's arms, Lucius had given in.

'Let him rest,' Snape recommended. 'You may bathe him and see to his wounds once he has slept. There is no point in waking him up now.'

'I always knew he was a weaking,' Bellatrix hissed from the other side of the room where she had made herself comfortable on a chaise longue.

'Your husband isn't in much better shape,' Snape pointed out. But whereas Narcissa was now silently sobbing at her husband's side, Bellatrix didn't bat an eyelash. She seemingly couldn't care less about Rodolphus' fate. Most probably, her greatest concern was that her husband's weakness could somehow reflect upon her and make the Dark Lord love her less.

'Where have you been hiding out lately, by the way?' she demanded to know now, eyeing Snape from head to toe and then back up again, wrinkling her nose. 'And where have you dug out those... those *rags*? Gone through your father's old wardrobe, have you?'

Bellatrix was clearly referring to his Muggle clothes, but Snape didn't rise to the bait. Where he was spending his time or where he had obtained his clothes, were none of Bellatrix' concern. And if she believed that he was hiding at Spinner's End, Snape wouldn't go and correct her.

'I believe you have some information for me,' he pointed out instead. 'From our lord.'

'Our lord,' Bellatrix repeated mockingly. 'You're not fooling me, Snape. I know you're following your own agenda. I've told the Dark Lord, over and over again, but he will not listen. He trusts you.'

She spat out her last words as if they tasted foul, and Snape realised that she would not give him the information he needed at such a low cost. Such was the game Bellatrix Lestrangle played, and she played it well.

'The Dark Lord has made our home his headquarters.'

Narcissa's voice was barely more than a whisper, but Snape could still hear the note of disgust in her voice. So did her sister.

'You should be honoured, Cissy!' Bellatrix hissed. 'Honoured! There is no higher pleasure than having the Dark Lord stay in our house!'

'This is not *your* house, Bella,' Narcissa pointed out. 'This is *our* home, mine and Lucius'... It was our home before he defiled it.'

'How dare you?' Bellatrix screeched, jumping up from her chair and looking appalled at her sister.

Snape, too, turned towards Narcissa, but the tone in his voice was much softer than Bellatrix'.

'Be careful with your words, Narcissa,' he advised her. 'You do not want to anger the Dark Lord.'

'What more can he do to us?' Narcissa questioned, but Snape slowly shook his head.

'You are still alive, so are your son and your husband. Don't jeopardise this, Narcissa. Be the graceful hostess I know you can be.'

Then he once more turned back to Bellatrix, unblinkingly meeting her ferocious glare.

'The Dark Lord's orders, if you please,' he asked for the second time.

'You're to keep your ears open concerning Potter,' Bellatrix spat. 'As long as he is at his aunt's house, he cannot be touched. We need to know when to strike against him.'

'You may tell the Dark Lord that I will do my very best,' Snape replied, giving a tiny bow which made Bellatrix hiss at him like an angry cat. But Snape didn't care. Instead,

he stepped over to her sister, gently putting his hand on her shoulder.

'It will be alright, Narcissa,' he promised her. 'Everything will be alright.'

## The Dark Lord's Mark

Chapter 10 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 10: The Dark Lord's Mark

'Was it wise to come here, Severus? You are not headmaster yet.'

Snape glared up at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

'Would you like me to leave again?' he snapped. 'Believe me, I am taking no pleasure whatsoever in being here.'

'Now, now, Severus. Have a seat,' Dumbledore suggested, pointing towards his old chair.

Snape straightened up. He would not sit down at Dumbledore's desk. Not today, not the day he was appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts. This would never be his chair. He would never have neither the right nor the desire to sit in it. And so he remained standing, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

'Why did you come then, Severus?' Dumbledore asked in the end, peering down at Snape over the top of his glasses.

'I have been ordered to keep my ears open concerning Potter. It seems the Dark Lord has learned about the protection that has been cast upon Privet Drive.'

'So he wants to know when Harry will leave his home, when he will be vulnerable,' Dumbledore concluded. 'Does Tom know the protection will cease once the boy turns seventeen?'

Snape shrugged.

'I do not know. The Dark Lord has not spoken to me directly today. He was... otherwise engaged.'

He broke off and frowned, lifting up the copy of the *Daily Prophet* he had brought with him.

'He has freed his servants,' he informed Dumbledore. 'Lucius Malfoy, the Lestrangle brothers, all the Death Eaters that were been imprisoned after the debacle at the Ministry. Yet there is not a word about it in the paper, and no one talked about it at the Three Broomsticks.'

'You've been at the Three Broomsticks as well? Dear Severus, I know you are skilled at the arts of disguise, but venturing into one of the most frequented Wizarding pubs in Britain...'

'There is no better place to obtain current information,' Snape interrupted. 'Also, listening to Hagrid and Filch lamenting how empty Hogwarts is during the summer holidays and then seeing Rosmerta serve them a bottle of Firewhisky with their lunch ensured me that my passage through the grounds and castle would be undisturbed.'

'Clever. Very clever,' Dumbledore commented. 'You would have done well in Ravenclaw, dear Severus. But then again, you would have done well in Gryffindor as well. As for Hufflepuff...'

'May we postpone this discussion and return to more urgent matters?' Snape suggested, his patience running thin. 'A dozen Death Eaters have escaped from Azkaban, and no one seems to know about it. If the Dark Lord has gained enough influence within the Ministry to hush up a mass break-out, it is safe to assume that he will very soon have enough control to observe any Apparition or Floo activity from Privet Drive.'

'The Order will escort Harry to a safe house before the end of the month. You know that, Severus. This was decided months ago.'

'The Death Eaters will be waiting for him,' Snape pointed out. 'Probably even the Dark Lord himself. Potter will be an easy target.'

'What do you suggest?'

'Potter needs to be disguised. If we succeed in confusing the Dark Lord long enough, the boy might just make it out of harm's way.'

Dumbledore nodded.

'I will leave this to you, Severus,' he said gravely. 'You are, as we have established, a clever man. And I trust you.'

Snape clenched his jaw. Dumbledore trusting him was one thing. In the eyes of the Order, however, he was a traitor. He would not be able to just march into Grimmauld Place and suggest a change of plans. He'd have to be cunning, very cunning. Almost as cunning as he would have to be to lure the Dark Lord onto following a false trace.

His mind was racing when he made his way down the stairs from the headmaster's office to his old study in the dungeons where he was planning to fill his pockets with some well selected phials. There was a war ahead, a war in which he was standing with a foot set firmly in each camp. There would be curses fired at him from both sides, and Snape didn't expect to make it out of it unscathed. He knew that there was more than just one witch or wizard who wished to see him dead. When given the chance, they would attempt to kill him. Sooner or later, one of them would most probably succeed. Snape didn't mind dying, but he had a task to fulfil, a task that would enable Potter to save the Wizarding world.

Thoughtfully, Snape looked around his storage room. He had anticipated that he would not be able to brew potions on a regular basis once he had killed Dumbledore and had therefore experimented all year, figuring out how to make the life of potions last longer. Most were perishables. Some lost their strength when they were stored, others even turned foul and dangerous after only a few weeks. But as Snape now picked up one phial after the other, muttering spells that would reveal the potions' qualities, he realised that he had been successful with most.

He considered using a bag, but quickly decided against it. He wouldn't be able to carry a bag around for the rest of his life. He would bring only the most important potions, and they would have to fit in his pockets: Essence of Dittany, Blood-Replenishing Potion, a couple of well-selected antidotes, Polyjuice Potion,...

Polyjuice Potion!

Snape's eyes widened as his hand closed around that particular brew. But of course! If there were several Potters leaving Privet Drive at the same time, the Dark Lord wouldn't know which one to go after. And if all effort were put into keeping the real Potter as inconspicuous as possible, the boy might just get a head start that could save his life. Yes! That was it!

Almost triumphantly, Snape held the Polyjuice Potion aloft as he stepped out of the storage room and into his study. Certainly, the Order would see the brilliancy of his plan. Now there only remained the question of how he could convey it to someone. His first thought was to use Hagrid, to whisper the idea into the gamekeeper's ear while he slept. But the blundering oaf might forget half of it on his way to Grimmauld Place. Also the other members might grow suspicious when such a brilliant idea came from Hagrid of all people. No, he needed to approach someone else, Snape concluded, someone who wasn't necessarily known for their brains but for their slyness. Someone who was often on their own, hanging about dark alleys and shady pubs. Mad-Eye would be a suitable candidate, Snape pondered. He was also mad enough to come up with an idea like this, and the other Order members trusted him. But how he would be able to get close enough to Moody, Snape couldn't figure out, and as his eyes were drawn to the painting that resided on top of the mantle in his study, he no longer cared about any member of the Order of the Phoenix. For within the wooden frame, a little flame had sprung to life, and behind it, Snape could see nothing but shadows.

~~~

Snape was quite out of breath. He had as usual Apparated to the edge of the forest and then hastened towards the Muggle village. But despite him being in good shape, the run had been a struggle. There was a cold wind blowing from the lake, carrying heavy rain that had turned into a hail storm by the time Snape reached the first of the houses. The street lights were out, and he could see candles flickering in some of the windows that he passed. Most probably *hopefully* the storm had damaged a power line somewhere which in its turn had led to a blackout. May that be the reason, Snape prayed. A force of nature, not dark magic. May it be so!

He felt panic rise in his chest as he tried the door of the pub and found it locked. It never occurred to him that Edmunds might have closed his establishment when the power failed, and when he unlocked the door and pushed it open, he was prepared to step into a pool of blood, to see both Hope and the landlord sprawled on the floor, their bodies broken and mangled. But the pub looked just like it always did when it was closed. The chairs had been put up and there was a broom leaning against the wall. The only thing that was a bit off were two empty wine glasses still standing on the counter. Snape remembered vaguely that Hope had placed them there the night before, saying that she would take care of them in the morning. Why were they still there? What had kept her from carrying them to the sink?

Out of sheer habit, Snape drew his wand but lowered it again almost immediately, shaking his head at himself. He was quite certain that he would not need his wand, that nothing he'd encounter in the house would justify the use of magic. For surely, if any dark witch or wizard had entered, if the Dark Lord had hunted down the one that had slipped through his fingers, he would sense it, Snape told himself. He would know. He just would.

He crept up the stairs as silently as possible yet still thought that every single one of his footsteps echoed through the silent house like thunder. Surely, the sound would awaken even the dead. But as he reached the door to the sitting room which was bathing in the faint light of a handful of candles, landlord Edmunds looked quite startled as he shot out from his chair. Obviously, he had not heard Snape coming up the stairs.

'Thank goodness you're back!'

Snape frowned.

'What's going on?' he asked.

'Hope,' Edmunds replied, letting himself fall back into his armchair. 'She's not having a good day today, not at all.'

He rubbed his neck, looking both tired and worried, and Snape decided to just let the landlord talk.

'I haven't seen her like this in years. It's almost like... like when she first came here. I wanted to drive her to the hospital, but she refused, and I know better than to force her. She's been hiding in her room all day.'

He stopped mid-sentence and buried his face in his hands, stifling a sob as he did so, and Snape was torn between wanting to hear more and rushing into Hope's room in order to... Well, to do what, exactly? He didn't even understand what was going on.

'She was fine this morning when I left,' Edmunds continued after a while. 'Good Lord, she has been doing well for so long! But today she... Have you two argued?'

'What?'

Snape stood as if dumbstruck, unable to understand what Edmunds was getting at. Why would the landlord think that he and Hope have argued?

'I'm sorry,' Edmunds said, apologetically raising his hands. 'It's just... She was fine when I left, and when I came home... I caught a glimpse of you heading towards the forest, found a broken plate on the kitchen floor and her apron carelessly thrown onto the counter. I knew something was wrong, felt it in my guts. I found her in her room, standing by the window, staring out at... at nothing at all.'

He broke off, and his eye searched Snape's face.

'She hasn't told you, has she? About... about how she was when... back then, when she first came here, about her time at the hospital?'

Snape shook his head. Hope had never said a word, and he had never asked. Dumbledore had said that she had been in bad shape after she had lost her little boy, and Snape had simply assumed that Dumbledore had wanted to make sure that someone else looked after her while she had been too sad and too tired to do so herself. But now it seemed as if there was more.

'She was very withdrawn,' Edmunds went on. 'She didn't talk to anyone, barely made eye contact, flinched at the tiniest sound. Elisabeth said she didn't sleep at all when she first came to the hospital and refused to take any medicine that would help her. When she came here... She would stand by the window night after night, looking out, keeping watch.'

'Keeping watch for what?' Snape wondered.

'I don't know,' Edmunds said and sighed. 'I never understood, and she never talked to me about it. Elisabeth would sit with her for hours, and every now and then she managed to persuade her to go to sleep. It got better with time. Sure, Hope had a relapse every now and then, especially after Elisabeth's death, but never like this, never that bad. She isn't approachable at. I don't understand!'

He wrung his hands and looked imploringly at Snape.

'She won't talk to me, and I fear I wouldn't be able to understand even if she did. But you, you understand, just like Elisabeth did. I know you do. Please, I'm begging you! Talk to her. Listen to her.'

He nodded into the direction of Hope's room, and Snape swallowed. He had gone to Hope before. She had opened up to him then and he had listened, but tonight he didn't feel confident that she'd talk to him at all. In fact, he feared that her current state had something to do with his sudden disappearance earlier that day.

'Please,' Edmunds pleaded once more. 'I'm scared for her.'

So am I, Snape thought, and as he walked towards Hope's door a few moments later, his heart was racing faster than it had been when he had walked towards Malfoy Manor earlier in the day. Once more, he had no idea what he was about to encounter. Once more, he had no idea what was expected of him.

He decided against knocking and simply pushed open the door. He was met by semidarkness and cold air, the sound of rain and hail smattering onto the windowsill and the wind tearing at the curtains. Hope was standing by the open window with her left hand holding on to the wooden frame. Her knuckles were pure white.

Snape carefully closed the door behind him and quietly spoke Hope's name, but she didn't seem to hear him. She did not even react to his presence as he crossed the room and positioned himself beside her. Instead she kept staring out of the window, out into the stormy night.

'What is it you see?' Snape asked, following her gaze but seeing nothing else than the waves of the lake smashing against the shore and the branches of the trees whipping back and forth in the wind. But Hope appeared to see more, for her eyes seemed to be following something, and her quick breathing suggested that she was terrified by what she saw.

'You will catch a cold if you keep standing here,' Snape pointed out, acutely aware that the cold wind and the rain were minor problems that evening, but he didn't know what else to say. He couldn't see what Hope saw, couldn't understand what scared her.

'Come now,' he urged her. 'Let us close the window, shall we?'

He reached out for her left hand in order to pull it away from the window frame, but the moment he touched her, Hope shrunk away, hugging her hand to her chest. She was backing away until she walked into the wall, her face white and her eyes filled with terror.

'Easy now,' Snape tried to calm her. 'It's I, Severus.'

He slowly closed the window, never letting Hope out of his sight, and she stared back at him, trembling. It almost seemed as if she were now afraid of him.

'Easy now,' Snape repeated, keeping his voice low. 'It's alright. There is nothing to be afraid of.'

Hope winced as he reached out for her, raising her right arm above her head as if she were to shield herself against a blow. Snape heard her whimper, and for a moment, he considered leaving. His presence was obviously doing more harm than good. But what would happen with Hope if he left?

Slowly, he walked towards her, talking reassuringly as he did so, repeating that it was only him and that there was nothing to fear. Hope didn't withdraw as he carefully pulled her arm away from her face, and as he laid his free hand onto her shoulder, she slumped against him, seemingly unable to keep standing any longer.

'It's alright. It's alright,' he whispered as he wrapped his arms around her. She was shaking like a leaf, and Snape could feel her heart hammering against his chest. She wasn't crying, but every now and then, a heart-breaking whimper escaped her lips that made Snape hold her even tighter. She felt tiny in his arms, helpless like a baby bird, and he felt equally helpless, not knowing what to say or do.

'I think you should sit down,' he suggested in the end, and as Hope didn't protest, he guided her towards the bed, kneeling down in front of her. He didn't want to let go of her, fearing that she would collapse, so he slowly let his hands glide down her arms. As he took hold of her hands, Hope once more winced, and Snape noticed that her left hand was hot and swollen.

'Did you hurt your hand?' he asked softly, thinking that she might have cut herself on the broken plate down in the kitchen. But as he took her hand in his, pushing back her sleeve to get a better look, Snape's eyes widened in terror.

'Sweet Merlin!' he exclaimed. 'What did you do to yourself?'

Even in the dim light that was coming from the candle on the nightstand, Snape could see the thin, red line that was running the whole way around Hope's wrist. It was bleeding slightly, and spreading from it was an ugly, bluish discolouration.

'I didn't do anything,' Hope said quietly, rubbing her eyes with her right hand while her left lay limp in her lap. *He* did.'

'He? Who are you talking about? Who did...'

Snape's mouth fell open, and in front of his inner eye, he saw a delicate silver bracelet wrapped around Nadezhda McKibben's left wrist, a silver snake sinking its fangs into the girl's flesh, poisoning her and marking her forever as the Dark Lord's property.

'I thought it would heal,' he brought forth, once more taking her hand into his, holding it as gingerly as if it were made out of glass.

'It did,' Hope confirmed, her voice feeble but steady. 'For years it was nothing but an ugly scar, a reminder of a night I so desperately needed to forget. Then one summer night, it started to bleed. I was terrified, and Edmunds wanted to drive me to the emergency room, thinking I had hurt myself. But I didn't let him. I knew it wouldn't do any good. I knew there was no point.'

'When was that?' Snape enquired, trying to keep his voice calm so it would not betray the terror that was raging inside him.

'Two years ago,' Hope answered quietly.

Snape swallowed drily. He knew exactly on what summer night Hope's scar had started to bleed. It had been the same night that a searing pain in his left forearm had brought him to his knees. It had been the night of the third task of the Triwizard Tournament, the night when the Dark Lord had returned and summoned his followers.

'Is it... always the same?' he asked, gently running his fingers over the swelling, carefully avoiding the wound itself.

Hope shook her head.

'Most of the time it simply looks like a stubborn cut that refuses to heal properly. There's scabbing, sometimes even new tissue. But every now and then, it bursts open, bleeding for a while before it starts festering. Like today.'

'So that is how you knew,' Snape concluded, his eyes still on the wound. 'This is why you knew that I was being summoned this morning. You felt it, too.'

Hope inhaled sharply.

'Promise me that he can't find me. Promise me that he doesn't know where I am.'

There was a note of desperation in her voice, a note of fear and terror, and as Snape looked up at Hope, he saw the same dread reflect in her eyes.

'I can't promise you that,' he answered honestly, ignoring the tears that fell from Hope's green eyes and dripped onto their joined hands. 'But I will do my very best to keep you safe.'

Appeasing the Past

Chapter 11 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 11: Appeasing the Past

'You left her alone,' Edmunds stated as Snape returned to the sitting room. The landlord still looked worried, yet there wasn't an ounce of blame in his voice. In fact, he sounded rather composed, and as he rose from his chair, his whole body language spoke of relief. It was obvious that he was aware that Snape wouldn't have left Hope if he didn't deem her strong enough to be on her own.

'I sent her to take a hot shower. It will help her sleep,' Snape explained calmly, even though he felt anything but calm himself. He had not wanted to leave Hope's side but had deemed it necessary. He could not hover over her like a mother hen. The faster things returned back to normal the better.

Edmunds sighed deeply and poured himself and Snape a healthy measure of Scotch.

'I'm feeling helpless,' he admitted. 'I wish there was something I could do.'

Snape accepted the whisky, sank onto the sofa and drank without any a toast.

'Hope needs to get through this herself, I'm afraid,' he pointed out. 'All we can do is to be there for her when she calls for us.'

'You sound like Elisabeth,' Edmunds noted sadly before he, too, raised his glass to his lips. Silence settled over the room, and after Edmunds had returned to his chair, the two men sat without looking at each other, both of them immersed in their own thoughts. Edmunds' gaze rested on a framed picture of his beloved wife that was hanging on the opposite wall, and Snape stared into his half empty glass, seeing the light of the candles reflect in the amber liquid, deliberating whether he should drink up or not. There was a long night ahead, and he was already tired. The best choice would probably be to settle for a pot of really strong coffee.

He put the glass down as he heard the bathroom door open and close, and as he heard Hope's footsteps in the corridor, he rose.

'I promised Hope she wouldn't have to be alone tonight,' he informed the landlord.

'You better get changed then,' Edmunds said. 'Your trousers are still wet from the rain. You must be freezing.'

Snape looked down at his attire. He could not even remember when and where he had taken off his jacket and had until now been unaware of his wet trousers, socks and shoes. It hadn't mattered. But now there was an uncomfortable cold creeping up his legs and into his very bones. A warm shower seemed tempting, Snape couldn't deny that, but the thought of Hope sitting in her room, waiting for him, made him consider letting his clothes dry on his body. He had promised her that he'd be right there with her.

'She wouldn't want you to catch a cold,' Edmunds pointed out, smiling. It was almost as if he had read Snape's mind, and as the wizard somewhat uncomfortably cleared his throat, the landlord smiled.

'She's such a gentle soul, our Hope,' he said. 'Always caring about others, friendly, kind. You've seen her with our guests. She always makes time for everyone, listens to their problems and complaints...'

He trailed off, and Snape averted his gaze. Edmunds had no idea about exactly why Hope was so kind, why she needed to be kind in order to survive. He did not know about the dark shadow that inhabited Hope's heart and threatened to tear apart her very soul.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed as he entered her room half an hour later. She was wearing her nightgown and a white terrycloth bathrobe. Her hair was still wet and hanging down over her shoulders, its blackness clashing violently with the light colour of her robe. Her back was straight, her breathing slow, and her face was once more turned towards the window.

'What is it you see out there?' Snape asked for the second time that night, as he was approaching the window in order to pull the curtains shut.

'Ghosts and shadows. Faceless wraiths with long black cloaks. They rise from the depths of the lake and hover above the surface, reaching out their scabbed, grey hands, beckoning for me to join them.'

Snape did his best not to shudder. He couldn't see Hope's face as he was now looking out of the window himself, trying to make out any form in the darkness, but he remembered the look of fear he had seen in her green eyes earlier, a look of sheer terror. He might not see anything out there, but Hope certainly had. Or at least, she thought that she had, and it had frightened her.

'There is nothing out there,' Snape said as he resolutely closed the curtains. 'Nothing at all.'

'I know,' Hope replied quietly. 'I do know. But sometimes, it's hard to believe it.'

Slowly, Snape turned around, finding Hope looking up at him. Her features had softened, and the look of fear had vanished from her eyes. Instead she now looked endlessly tired and heartbroken.

'I would like to have another look at your wrist and treat the scar with Essence of Dittany,' Snape announced, acutely aware that Hope's physical scars were not the ones that needed the most attention. 'It might stop the infection and ease the pain.'

He broke off and crouched down, not once breaking eye contact as he took Hope's hand into his.

'I know it is a potion from the Wizarding world, but as this scar is the result of Dark Magic, I doubt that Muggle medicine will do any good. Please, let me use the Dittany.'

He didn't hold on tight, and had Hope withdrawn her hand, Snape would not have tried to persuade her any further. If she did not want the potion, he would not force her. But to his relief, Hope's hand did not even twitch in his. Instead her slender fingers closed around his, and she spoke.

'The scar itself is a painful reminder that I will never be able to outrun magic.'

Snape softly caressed the back of Hope's hand with his thumb.

'Magic can be a marvellous thing. You know it can. Unfortunately, you have seen the evil it can do. You have seen it and experienced it, both at a far too young an age. You shouldn't have had to. Someone should have looked out for you. Someone should have protected you.'

He produced a phial of Dittany from his pocket and let some of the brown liquid trickle onto Hope's scar, lowering his gaze as he did so. He had never told anyone, neither Dumbledore nor Hope, how many nights he had lain awake after the disappearance of Nadezhda McKibben, wondering what more he could have done, what more he should have done. He had promised the girl to protect her and had failed. She had been hurt and slipped away, and he had not been able to do anything for her. Yet Hope seemed to think differently.

'You looked out for me,' she whispered. 'You did more for me than I ever could have asked, more than I had the right to ask. You didn't have to, and still you cared.'

Snape swallowed. Hope's voice was so quiet that the slightest rustle of fabric could have drowned it, and for a heartbeat, he wondered if she had really spoken or if he had heard her voice inside his mind.

'You deserved to be looked after,' he replied, his voice equally low. 'You still do.'

He kept his eyes firmly on Hope's scar, watching the Dittany work its magic. He could see the pus dissolve and the swelling go down, but he knew that the scar would never heal properly, that it would always be there. There would be new tissue, and the pain would go away, but the scar itself would never be gone. For some wounds never heal. Snape knew that all too well himself.

He didn't look at Hope, neither when he carefully pulled down her sleeve nor when he stood up. If he didn't look into her eyes now, their whispered words would remain nothing but a memory, a secret that should never be spoken out aloud, unsullied and precious. Yet it would bind them to each other, until the day their shadows and the wraiths disappeared.

'You should try to get some sleep,' Snape suggested, turning towards the window. 'It has been a long day.'

'Will you stay with me?'

'You know I will.'

He busied himself with the curtains and anything else he could find while Hope crept into bed, gathering both his thoughts and his courage, and first when he heard her breathing become slow and regular, he turned around, confident that Hope was fast asleep. But when he approached the bed to extinguish the candle on the nightstand, she stirred.

'Don't!' she whispered. 'Don't blow it out.'

Snape frowned and looked at the little candle.

'There is no one to see the flame on the other side,' he pointed out.

'It doesn't matter,' Hope replied quietly. 'It never did. That candle burned through many nights before I knew about the magic of the painting behind it. Its light was comforting. It still is.'

Her speech was slurred, and Snape realised that she was half asleep, yet still he promised her to leave the candle burning. If Hope woke in the middle of the night, she would need the little light to understand that the darkness would not last forever.

He pulled up a chair by her bedside and watched her sleep, whispering softly to her when her dreams made her cry and taking her hand when she reached out for him, praying that she would sleep peacefully soon. He watched the candle burn and imagined Dumbledore sitting in his office for countless nights over the years, whispering consolingly just as he himself did now. She might have thought that Dumbledore's voice had been a part of her dreams and whether or not she had ever remembered his voice when she woke up in the morning, Snape did not know. But he knew that the whispers had given her peace and made her sleep. Who would whisper to her in the nights to come, he wondered quietly. Who would comfort her and chase her demons away?

Snape felt his heart sink. He would do his best, of course. He'd watch her through the candlelight and visit as often as he could. But he was aware that busy times were ahead, dangerous times in which free moments would be scarce. He'd be under constant surveillance. Death Eaters, Order members and Hogwarts staff alike would watch his every movement, count his steps and breathes, wait for him to make mistakes, wait for him to lose his touch. He wouldn't be able to come to the Muggle village at his leisure, would always have to take a detour in order to assure that he wasn't followed by anyone. And detours took time, time which he didn't have.

Snape sighed. He wouldn't be able to watch over Hope, not to the extent he would like. She would have to learn to stand on her own two feet, to bravely face wraiths of the lake and chase them away on her own. But how? Where would she find the strength?

Once more, Snape looked upon the candle. Dumbledore had meant well. He had helped Nadezhda to leave the Wizarding world behind, had given her a guardian and stepped in himself when said guardian had disappeared. But had it been the right thing to do? Or had Dumbledore by allowing Nadezhda to flee bereaved Hope of the tools she needed to survive when the war came knocking at her door?

The candle flickered, and Snape shivered as he thought that the air in the room was growing colder. He was imagining things, of course, yet still he double checked the window, made sure it was closed and cast a glance outside. The storm had subsided, and the lake was like a mirror, reflecting the light of the pale moon that was breaking forth between the clouds. It was a peaceful sight, but instead of enjoying it, Snape started wondering how long it would remain so. For surely, the Wizarding war would sooner or later affect the Muggle world, even this little village that had not yet known any magic. And what about the scar on Hope's wrist? So far, it seemed to be a one way channel. Hope sensed it when the Dark Lord called upon his followers, but in contrast to a proper Dark Mark, the scar did not seem to give Voldemort any power over Hope. He couldn't call her personally, had no way of knowing where she was. Or maybe, he was simply unaware of the scar and had therefore not made any move to pull Hope Nadezhda back into the fold. Would he even want her? Or would he, should he ever meet her, strike her down for her disloyalty?

Snape sighed. There was no way for him to know the Dark Lord's mind, and should Voldemort ever set foot into the village, Hope wouldn't stand a chance no matter what. But should someone else happen to show up, a Death eater or a Snatcher, Hope would need to defend herself or at least be able to call for help, and for that, Snape thought, she would need a wand...

~~~

'Are you tired? Should we go back?'

'No, I'm alright. Besides, I don't want to go inside yet. It's such a beautiful day.'

Hope sat down on one of the benches by the shoreline, closing her eyes and turning her face towards the sun, and Snape couldn't help but agree. It was indeed a beautiful Saturday afternoon, sunny and warm, and here on the far end of the lake, almost an hour's walk away from the village and the country road, the only sounds in the air were the splashing of the waves against the shore and the chirping of the birds in the trees. Certainly, the tranquillity and peacefulness was doing Hope good.

She had slept until after lunch on Friday and kept to her room for the rest of the day. Snape had offered to stay with her in the afternoon, but she had sent him downstairs to the pub. Edmunds needed company as well, she had claimed, and Snape had complied. He knew very well that one needed to be alone at times in order to gather strength and to persuade oneself to carry on for yet another day. Thus, he had kept away from her room the rest of Friday, only once knocking at her door to leave a tray with tea and biscuits outside, and when Hope had come downstairs the next morning, she seemed to have succeeded in achieving inner peace. She had appeared calm and

relaxed, and as Snape looked at her now, he found it impossible to find any signs of the ordeal she had gone through less than forty-eight hours earlier.

He sat down beside her and stretched out his legs, inhaling the warm summer air. It was one of those days one wished would last forever, but Snape knew that it was all but a dream, a glittering bubble that would burst as soon as he opened his mouth to speak. But speak he must. He had done a great deal of thinking while he had been sitting by Hope's side, watching over her, and then again when he had been alone in his room. Summer was coming to an end, he was running out of time, and Hope needed to know. Now all he could do was hope that she was indeed strong enough for what he had to tell her.

'I will not be able to stay for much longer,' he said quietly.

He had been thinking about how he should express himself for the better part of the day. He had even considered not telling Hope at all but just to disappear into the darkness one night. But he couldn't do that. He needed her to know. He needed her to understand. But now that he had told her, it seemed to Snape that his heart had stopped beating. His throat was dry, and he hardly dared to breathe. How would she react?

He was looking at Hope now. Her eyes were still closed and her face still turned towards the sun. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and for a moment, Snape wondered if she had not heard him. Yet when he opened his mouth to speak once more, Hope beat him to it.

'I know,' she said quietly. 'Dumbledore said that you would have...*things* to do, things that would take all your time and attention. He said that there would come a time when you wouldn't be able to come here anymore.'

She inhaled deeply through her nose and opened her eyes, and during the few moments it took for her to turn her head, Snape tried to prepare himself for the look in her eyes, unable to decide what would be worse: tears or the cold, emotionless gaze he had seen far too often. Yet instead, the look in Hope's green eyes was as calm as her voice.

'When?' she asked. 'When do you have to leave?'

'I assume I will be summoned back for good before the end of August,' Snape answered. 'But there are a couple of things that need to be put in order before that. There are tasks I have to have to carry out...'

He broke off and looked deep into Hope's emerald green eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Don't be,' Hope replied. 'We both know that a Muggle village is not where you are supposed to be. You don't belong here. But I'm glad that you came. I'm glad you stayed for a while. And please know that you are welcome here, whenever you decide to come back.'

'I don't know if I will ever be able to come back,' Snape confessed with a heavy heart. 'The Wizarding world is at war. The Light has lost their leader. Hogwarts stands without a headmaster, its students without a protector...'

'And who else is there to protect the innocent other than Severus Snape?'

Hope reached out to take his hand, and as her fingers closed around his, Snape closed his eyes to enjoy one last peaceful moment.

'You will protect them well,' he heard her whisper. 'You always have. Dumbledore knew that, too. He trusted you.'

Snape sighed.

'If I left you a wand,' he started, deeming that there was no point in waiting any longer. 'Would you use it to protect yourself?'

He felt Hope's hand twitch in his but held on, and as he opened his eyes to look at her, he wasn't surprised to see that her cheeks had turned pale.

'I can't,' she whispered.

'Yes, you can!' Snape asserted her, pulling his wand from his pocket with his free hand. 'I know you can.'

He held out his wand towards her, but Hope resolutely shook her head.

'No!'

'What are you afraid of?' Snape asked.

'Everything,' Hope breathed.

There were now tears glittering in her eyes, and Snape held on tightly to her hand lest she would run away.

'Tell me,' he asked.

She lowered her gaze, yet still Snape saw the tears that trickled down her cheeks. He had not meant to make her cry and was endlessly sorry. But what choice had he had?

'Tell me,' he asked her for a second time, now almost pleadingly. He wanted to understand. He needed to.

'I am afraid of the darkness magic holds. The darkness *my* magic holds.'

Snape swallowed. He had expected an answer of that kind, but the cold tone in Hope's voice made a shiver go down his spine. He knew that tone. Detached, unemotional. Hope was raising her barriers, making sure no one and nothing would hurt her.

'Hope, please,' he tried to appease her, but she would not listen anymore. She jerked her hand free and swiftly rose from the bench. With her back straight and her head held high she looked intensely at him for a couple of moments, and Snape thought that she was going to speak.

He was therefore unprepared when she turned and walked away.

'Hope!' he called after her, but she didn't listen. Instead, her steps quickened and not before long, she had broken into a run.

Should he go after her, Snape asked himself. Certainly, he would easily be able to outrun her. But he did not want to chase after her, did not want to grab her by the arm and force her to listen to him. He didn't want to hurt her, couldn't afford to lose her trust.

'Hope!' he called once more, again to no avail, and as he stood up to call after her for a third time, his lips formed another name.

'Nadezhda!'

She froze in mid-step as if petrified, and Snape knew he wouldn't have to run to catch up with her now. She wouldn't go anywhere.

He found her shaking and heard her stifle a whimper as he came to stand behind her, and from far, far away, faint like the wind whispering in the trees, he heard the voice of Albus Dumbledore.

*'Hope is afraid of Nadezhda, Severus. She is afraid of the things Nadezhda has seen, the things she has learned and the things she is capable of doing*

Snape drew breath, steeling himself.

'I have seen Nadezhda's magic,' he whispered reassuringly, once more using the name Hope had left behind half a lifetime ago. 'I know that it is good. White and pure. I should know. I taught her. And I also know that she went to great lengths to keep her magic pure.'

He had seen that, too. He had seen Nadezhda use all her Slytherin cunning to deceive both Barty Crouch and Lucius Malfoy, to an extent even Bellatrix Lestrange. Until the moment he had taken her wand from her in order to extort her latest spell, Snape too had believed that she had succumbed to dark magic. The only one who had seen right through her had been the Dark Lord himself.

Snape put his left hand onto Hope's shoulder, slowly and gently so he wouldn't startle her, and as she didn't shrink away, he extended his wand, bringing it up to the height of her right hand.

'Do not fear Nadezhda, Hope. Call upon her strength instead. Use her courage.'

He prompted her to take hold of his wand, but Hope shook her head.

'Don't make me take it. Please, don't.'

'I won't make you do anything,' Snape promised quietly. He was standing so close to her now that he only needed to whisper, and that tone seemed just right for the situation. For what he was about to tell her was a secret. *His* secret.

'We all have dark magic within us right along with the light,' he went on. 'Magic that can harm, even magic that can kill. But it's not the spells *wean* cast that define us, but the ones we *choose* to cast.'

Once more, he nudged Hope's hand with his wand, and this time, she didn't flinch away.

'I am right here with you,' he whispered reassuringly. 'You have nothing to fear.'

It seemed to take her hours to wrap her trembling fingers around his wand, and as she finally had taken hold of it, Snape moved his hand forward, placing it carefully upon hers.

'See? Nothing happened. Now, together.'

He guided her in lifting the wand with his right hand while his left hand still lay on her shoulder, comforting and encouraging both her and himself. He felt his breathing quicken and his heart beat faster, and as the first syllable of the incantation left his dry lips, Snape closed his eyes.

*'Expecto Patronum.'*

The world came to a hold. The birds stopped chirping, and the waves stopped crashing towards the shore. Even the wind ceased its whispering, and for a terrifying moment, Snape thought that he had failed. But then he heard Hope gasp in amazement, and as he opened his eyes, he saw the silvery doe spring from his wand, saw her prance over the meadow and down to the lake to drink.

'She's beautiful,' Hope breathed.

Snape swallowed and nodded, watching the doe for some moments before he lowered his wand. The Patronus dissolved into golden sunlight, and Snape drew breath.

'A Patronus is the purest magic known to Wizardkind,' he said softly. 'Many witches and wizards never succeed in conjuring a full, corporeal Patronus. And here I am, a Death Eater, a follower of the Dark Lord...'

'You're not a dark wizard,' Hope pointed out.

'I bear the Dark Mark,' Snape argued. 'I took it willingly many years ago.'

'But you realised that it was wrong. You changed your ways.'

Snape smiled.

'Do you understand now?' he asked. 'I *willingly* joined the Dark Lord. I *willingly* took his mark. *Your* mark was forced upon you, just as dark magic was forced upon you.'

Inhaling deeply, he pulled her by the hand in order to turn her around. She didn't fight him, yet she seemed reluctant to take her eyes off the spot where the doe had disappeared. Thus Snape cupped her chin with his free hand and lifted her head, gazing deeply into her emerald green eyes.

'Don't let what was forced upon you define you,' he whispered. 'Remember the girl you once were. The girl who nursed an injured cygnet back to life despite her knowing that her father wouldn't be pleased.'

Hope frowned.

'How can you...?'

'You told me about the cygnet at your father's wake.'

'That was half a lifetime ago,' Hope exclaimed. 'How can you remember that?'

'I remember many things about Nadezhda McKibben,' Snape replied, pleased to see that Hope didn't flinch at the mentioning of her old name. 'I remember that she was clever and cunning, righteous and fair. And I remember that she parted with her dearest friend in a time of great distress in order to keep him from harm. Nadezhda was a strong young girl. Don't even try to tell me that you are anything but.'

# The End of Summer

## Chapter 12 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 12: The End of Summer

The fog hung thick over the little Muggle village on the last night of August, just like it had done most nights that summer. It was an eerie, seemingly impenetrable kind of fog that crept into the very marrow of the Muggles, made them shiver and hide in their houses with the doors firmly locked. They huddled together, arms wrapped around each other, crying and praying for their souls. They had no idea, of course, why the fog made them miserable, why it made them feel as if every ounce of happiness had been sucked from their hearts. But the witch and the wizard who were sitting by the window in the otherwise empty pub knew very well what the mysterious fog was all about. They knew that the fog was the result of Dementors breeding and that the risk of the world plunging into eternal darkness was more imminent than any Muggle could imagine. Yet they didn't speak about it. For even though they knew that the war which was about to begin in the Wizarding world would touch even this sleepy Muggle village, they were keen to keep up the pretence for the night. Here, the Wizarding world did not exist. There was no war, no Dark Lord, no shadows. Not yet, anyway. Not yet.

Absentmindedly, Snape traced the rim of his tea cup with one of his long, slender fingers. He seemed to be looking out of the window, but in fact, he did neither see the fog nor the dim street lights that desperately tried to lighten up the gloom. For his thoughts were miles away, in a place he'd rather not to think upon.

He saw himself crouching on the floor in a dark room, felt his father's belt on his back and heard his mother whimper beside him. But when he looked up, he did neither see his father's dark eyes nor his hooked nose. Instead he saw snakelike features and red eyes that seemed to be glowing in the dark. Once again, he felt pain, yet this time it wasn't his father's belt that tore the flesh from his bones. This time, the pain came from within, tore his heart apart and with it his very soul. He lay on the floor, bleeding, feeling his life trickle from his slashed veins...

'Where are you, Severus?'

Snape blinked fiercely. It took him all his willpower to tear himself away from the scene of doom, and as he looked at Hope, he felt his heart swell with gratitude. She had saved him. Had she not called his name, he would have drowned in his own despair.

'Forgive me,' he begged. 'I am not good company tonight.'

'Don't worry,' Hope replied. 'I am glad you found the time to come and visit.'

Snape had not been to the pub for over a month. He had taken his farewell from Hope at the end of July, and since then, quiet moments had been far and few between. He had been at the Dark Lord's beck and call, had discussed and dismissed plans, given advice and carried out orders, all the while weaving an elaborated web of lies, labouring towards the ultimate goal, the destruction of the Dark Lord. For he mustn't win. Whatever the costs. Whatever the sacrifices. But tonight, Snape had stolen away. He had once again lied and cheated and put himself at risk, but tonight he didn't care. He needed some last hours of peace before he returned to the Wizarding world for good, before he stepped out of the shadows and came to stand in front of the staff and students of Hogwarts. He, the man who had killed their beloved headmaster. He, a cold-blooded killer, the Dark Lord's man through and through.

'Are you sure you don't want anything stronger?' Hope inquired, pointing at Snape's now cold tea.

'No, thank you. I need to keep my head clear. Tomorrow will be a long day.'

He sighed and looked towards the clock that was hanging over the bar. It was a quarter past eleven.

'I should be going,' he said.

'You don't look like you want to go,' Hope pointed out, and Snape nodded.

'There are quite a few things I would rather be doing than returning to Hogwarts.'

'You will do fine,' Hope tried to encourage him. 'Succeeding Albus Dumbledore as headmaster is not an easy task, but if someone can do it, it's you.'

Snape sneered. He had told Hope that he had been appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts, but he had not told her by whom. Neither had he told her how Albus Dumbledore had died. She didn't know that the whole of the Wizarding world thought Severus Snape to be a murderer. She did not know about the hatred that he would encounter the moment he stepped into Albus Dumbledore's place. If he could help it, she would never know.

'Funny,' he said instead, trying to change the subject. 'When I was a boy, I couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts after the holidays. I would have my trunk ready by the beginning of August and count the days until the first of September.'

Hope nodded.

'I know what you mean. Returning to Hogwarts always felt like coming home. At Hogwarts there was happiness. There was freedom and friendship...'

'Freedom and friendship,' Snape mused. He had lost his best friend his only friend at Hogwarts. He had tried to win her back, had tried to apologise and impress her in every way possible, but she had turned away. And he had succumbed to darkness and lost his freedom forever.

'I know you associated with Mr Herrington,' he started, desperately trying to keep his mind from wandering yet again. 'But what about the other members of Slytherin house? Did you have friends?'

'I had to be very careful who I made friends with,' Hope explained. 'Father didn't approve of just anyone. I was used to him being angry with me, but I couldn't risk him getting angry with any of my friends just because they had the wrong last name or too little gold in their vault at Gringott's. For years, I told him that Professor Slughorn had ordered me to tutor Charles and that I actually didn't like him and hated spending times with him. I hardly dare imagine what Father would have done if he found out that my best friend was Muggle-born.'

'Your father... Did he...,' Snape broke off and bit his tongue, wishing that he hadn't said anything. Surely, this wasn't a topic Hope wanted to discuss. But he had opened his mouth, and now she was looking at him, waiting for him to go on.

'I saw your scars. Back then, that night at Malfoy Manor. You father abused you.'

Yet again, Hope nodded.

'My father was an angry, bitter man,' she replied quietly. 'I'd like to think that he hadn't always been that way, that he was happy once. But when my brother died and my mother shortly afterwards...'

She paused and lowered her gaze for a moment as if to gather the strength to carry on and drew a deep, shuddering breath before she looked back up at Snape.

'I have my mother's eyes, you know,' she said. 'Her hair, her nose. I've been told that I smile just like her as well. Father hated it when I smiled and gave me every reason not to. On my eleventh birthday he hit me so hard over the mouth that he knocked out two of my teeth. He cried bitterly afterwards, apologised over and over again. He went out to buy me more presents, a kitten, I think, or a baby owl and a gorgeous new gown covered with fairy dust. He lay on his knees, begging for forgiveness and telling me that I was the apple of his eye and that he loved me more than anything else in the world. And I chose to believe him. Every single time.'

She broke off and bit her lip.

'I don't know what makes me tell you those things. No one knows about this. I never even told Charles.'

Snape shrugged.

'I have been asking myself the same question,' he confessed. 'No person alive knows the form of my Patronus. It has been my most well-guarded secret for many years. But I didn't have to think twice about revealing it to you.'

He paused and extended his hand towards Hope's which was resting on the table. He didn't take it but simply brushed her fingers with his, a gentle gesture which made them both lower their gaze.

'Maybe we both realised that we are in need of a confidant now that the world we know is coming to an end.'

His own words sent shivers down Snape's spine, and as he looked out of the window once more, he thought that the streetlights were flickering and the fog becoming thicker.

'Don't go out there,' he heard Hope say. 'Stay the night.'

Snape closed his eyes. He wanted to stay. By the gods, he did! But he could not. He mustn't. He had to get back to Hogwarts tonight. If he didn't leave now, he might never be able to. He felt Hope's fingers on his, but before she could take his hand, he withdrew it and rose from his chair.

'I have to leave,' he said firmly.

'I know,' Hope said with a sad tone, and Snape steeled himself. He didn't know what to say or do if Hope started to cry now. But she took her time to raise her head and look at him, and by the time her green eyes met his black ones, she had managed to banish every trace of disappointment from her face.

'Don't be a stranger, alright?'

Snape drew breath.

'I don't know when... I shouldn't come back here. It's too dangerous, for both of us.'

He slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out the key Hope had given him at the beginning of summer.

'I should give this back to you,' he said, holding out the key, but Hope firmly shook her head.

'Keep it,' she said. 'As a memory if you want or a reminder that you are always welcome here.'

Reluctantly, Snape took his eyes off Hope and gazed at the key in his hand instead.

'If I keep something of yours,' he said, 'then I want you to keep something of mine.'

He closed his fingers around the key, and with his free hand, he produced a wand from the folds of his robe.

'Larch,' he informed Hope. 'It has a reputation for instilling courage and confidence in its owner. It hasn't been used for years, and I cannot guarantee that it will work well for you, but I know it will do you no harm.'

He held it out towards her, never taking his eyes of the slender piece of wood.

'It was my mother's. I am not asking you to use it on a daily basis. I know you won't. But please, keep it close. If the worst should happen... If someone should find you...'

'Then what?' Hope asked quietly, her eyes, too, resting on the wand in Snape's hand. 'I haven't used magic for half a lifetime. I won't be able to fight off a Death Eater, no matter how much confidence that wand will instil.'

Snape sighed. Hope was right, of course. But he didn't want to leave her without protection.

'You were a gifted witch once,' he argued. 'If nothing else, you might be able to produce enough magic to buy you time to run and hide and alert the Aurors.'

'What Aurors? Have you seen any around here for the last couple of months?'

Snape shook his head. Hope was right again. There hadn't been any Aurors around of late, neither in the pub nor anywhere else in the village. Of course not. The Ministry had bigger problems than keeping this little village free of magic. Most probably, even an Unforgivable curse would go unnoticed nowadays.

He lifted his gaze to find Hope looking at him, and desperately, he made his last proposal.

'Call for me then. There are charms with which two wands can be connected. If you use yours, I will know, and I will come to your aid.'

He looked intensely at her, and Hope held his gaze, her green eyes glittering like the most precious of gems. As she rose, she smiled one of her rare smiles, which lingered on her lips until she wrapped her slender fingers around the wand.

'May I never have to use it,' she whispered as she took it from Snape's hand.

Then the clock struck midnight, and the first of September was upon them.

~~~

'How did it go?'

'How do you think it went?' Snape snarled, glaring up at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore. 'They all loved you, and here I stand in front of them, taking your place as headmaster. I, your murderer. They didn't exactly burst into spontaneous applause.'

'I wouldn't go as far as to say that they *all* loved me, Severus. Slytherin House, for example...'

Snape raised his hand. He wasn't in the mood to discuss the loyalties of Slytherin House. The little snakes were loyal to no one but themselves. They would do just fine this year, sticking together and making sure that their house didn't come to any harm. For the Gryffindors, however, Snape was less hopeful. He had seen the looks in their eyes, the hatred, the determination, the bravery. They wouldn't surrender. They would revenge their beloved headmaster. They would defend their school. They would have to find a new leader as the Potter boy had not returned to Hogwarts, but already during dinner, Snape had seen Neville Longbottom straighten his back. That boy would not sit back quietly but rebel against the new authority. Who would stand behind Longbottom, Snape did not yet know, but he had his suspicions. Ginny Weasley was a given, of course, and so were Seamus Finnigan and Luna Lovegood. For surely, the gang that once had rebelled against Dolores Umbridge would fight. To the death if need be. Dumbledore's Army would not be scared into submission by the likes of the Carrows.

Snape shuddered. He didn't like the idea of two Death Eaters loitering about the castle. They were a danger to the students, the staff and not least to Snape himself. They would keep their eyes on him, monitor his every move, and report his every step. If they as much as believed that he was fraternising with the enemy, they would inform their master. And what would happen to the students of Hogwarts if the Dark Lord decided to remove Snape from his post? Who would protect the innocent then? Who would carry out Albus Dumbledore's elaborately crafted plans?

'This is a suicide mission, Dumbledore,' Snape pointed out, turning towards the window and letting his gaze wander over the dark grounds. 'I know you think that Potter has both the knowledge and the courage it takes to defeat the Dark Lord. But what if you are wrong? What if he can't find the Horcruxes? What if he can't destroy them?'

'He will not fail,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'I believe in Harry.'

Snape closed his eyes and felt his shoulders slump. He was feeling tired and desolate, and for the time being, he found it hard to believe in anything, especially in the abilities of a seventeen-year-old boy. He saw the fog rise from the lake, felt a chill creep into his marrow and wished for nothing else than to be elsewhere and that somebody else would carry out his task.

'Go to bed, Severus,' Dumbledore suggested. 'There will come nights when the staff and students alike will need your protection, but there is no need to keep vigil tonight. Rest instead. Gather strength. We will talk again tomorrow.'

His footsteps echoed eerily through the empty corridors as Snape descended to the dungeons. He met no one, neither staff nor ghost, and he was certain that not a single student would be breaking curfew tonight. Surely they all sat in their common rooms, silently huddled together. Some of the younger students might cry themselves to sleep that night, maybe even some of the older ones if only furtively. For just as Severus Snape himself, they were mourning the dream of Hogwarts, the memory of the brightly decorated Great Hall and the loss of their freedom. No one would be playing Exploding Snap tonight. There would be no exchanging of Chocolate Frog cards and no excited discussions about what kind of wonderful magic they were about to learn. For magic, bright, glorious magic had vanished from Hogwarts, and all that was left were dark spells and curses.

His old chambers didn't provide him with the comfort Snape had hoped for, and after having paced his study for a while, he decided to sit by the fire. Sleep would not come to him in bed, he was certain of that, but maybe the flickering of the flames would hypnotise him enough to at least fall into slumber. Yet the hours went by, and Snape was still wide awake, his mind working feverishly in order to come up with answers to questions that were not even his to ponder. Once or twice, he played with the thought of taking a potion to help him fall asleep, but every time, he dismissed the possibility. He couldn't sleep. He mustn't. What if he was needed that night? What if someone called for him?

The fire in the grate eventually burned down, and the study was wrapped in darkness, and still Snape sat with his eyes wide open, staring into nothingness. What he was looking at, he did not know, and it took him quite some time to react to the tiny light that suddenly erupted in the darkness, a minuscule flame in the worn, wooden frame that resided on the top of the mantle.

'Hope,' Snape whispered and rose from his chair, his eyes unblinkingly staring into the flame. For a moment, he feared that he would once more see shadows, even the wraiths that Hope used to see rising from the depths of the lake. But the scene that unfolded before his eyes was one of utter peacefulness: Hope was sitting on the chair by the window, looking at the wand in her hand, turning it over and over and examining it from every angle. Her fingers traced the magical signs that were engraved in the handle, and as a handful of silvery sparks sprang from the tip of the wand, she did not even flinch. And in the darkness of his study, Severus Snape sat back in his chair once more, already feeling his limbs grow heavy and his eyelids flutter shut. Hope, however, had no idea that the candle she had lit for her own comfort was now giving her former teacher the peace he needed to find some rest.

The Ghosts of Halloween

Chapter 13 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 13: The Ghosts of Halloween

'This is your second detention this week, Longbottom. Your ninth in as many weeks. I always knew you were dim-witted, but even you should have learned by now that insubordination will not be tolerated.'

Snape was keeping his voice low. He had no reason whatsoever to yell at Longbottom. For in fact, he was not angry with the boy at all. Not about him getting a smart mouth with Alecto Carrow anyway and not about the graffiti he had been caught putting on the corridor wall on the second floor either. *Dumbledore's Army, Still Recruiting*. He would never admit it to anyone, of course, but Snape had smiled when he had seen the writing on his early morning patrol. Longbottom deserved every kind of credit for his courage and determination. What Snape was angry about, however, furious even, was the fact that the boy had let himself get caught yet again. Didn't he understand how dangerous the Carrows were? Didn't he understand that he was endangering not only himself but everyone he had ever held dear as well? It was only a matter of time until the Carrows would find out whom he associated with. The Weasley girl, Lovegood. The brother and sister had their eyes on the girls already anyway: Ginny because her brother was on the run with Harry Potter and Luna because her father couldn't keep his mouth shut. Even worse, the blithering idiot put his words in print! Much like Longbottom, Xenophilius Lovegood did not understand that he was endangering the ones he loved. Sooner or later, the Dark Lord's henchmen would go for Luna in order

to shut her father up. Innocent, sweet Luna.

'You will serve your detention with me on Saturday, Mr Longbottom,' Snape continued equally calmly.

'With you?'

Neville gave Snape a surprised look which ever so quickly turned into a look of disgust. It was clear that he would rather be hung by his thumbs in the dungeon and be tortured by Bellatrix Lestrange than spend five minutes, yet alone several hours, in the presence of Severus Snape. He had no idea, of course, that the headmaster was trying to keep him from harm, even if it was only for the duration of a detention. He had no idea that Snape had been protecting him and all the other students of Hogwarts since the start of term, vanishing their graffiti in the early hours of the morning before the Carrows noticed them, casting silencing spells on whispered conversations so the Carrows wouldn't hear them, and first and foremost, doing whatever it took to keep the two Death Eaters away from the seventh floor. So far, neither of them had managed to get there, and both were wondering why all the stairs led from the sixth floor directly to the eighth and vice versa, and Snape was intending to keep it that way. For he knew that Dumbledore's Army had once used the Room of Requirement as their headquarters. Should they have need of the room again, which Snape suspected that they would before long, they wouldn't have to worry about being caught by the Carrows upon entering or exiting. But of course, Neville Longbottom knew nothing of that either.

Snape dismissed the boy and sent him to dinner, and he himself kept standing behind Dumbledore's desk yes, Dumbledore's, *not* his feeling the weight of the world pressing down on his shoulders.

'You are taking great risks, Severus.'

Snape looked up at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore.

'Would you like me to stop?' he asked, his voice weary.

'My comment wasn't meant as a criticism,' Dumbledore answered softly. 'I was merely trying to point out that you are a very brave man. Godric Gryffindor would be proud of you.'

Normally, a comment like that would have earned Dumbledore a sneer and a snide comment, but as neither of it came, the former headmaster tilted his head in concern.

'When was the last time you had a full night's sleep, Severus?' he asked.

'Early July?' Snape replied, failing miserably at sounding sardonic. He didn't possess the energy.

'Your colleagues are brave witches and wizards as well, Severus,' Dumbledore pointed out. 'And they, too, would do anything to keep our students safe. I do believe that they, *if* you decided to rest for just one night, would take good care of the young ones.'

'I doubt neither the abilities nor the loyalty of the staff, Dumbledore. But I don't think that I have to remind you that we have two Death Eaters in our midst.'

'I am very well aware of that, Severus. I am also aware of the fact that the two of them will be having dinner in their chambers tomorrow night. They will be feasting on the finest dishes the kitchen has to offer and wash it down with expensive elf-made wine, laced with lavender, valerian sprigs and Flobberworm Mucus.'

'A Sleeping Draught?' Snape's eyes widened in surprise. 'How?'

'Let us say the elves decided that the students needed some cheering up. Seeing as the Carrows would spoil everyone's mood with their presence, they will *be taken care of*, so to speak. They will be sleeping soundly until the morning, the students will enjoy a nice Halloween meal, and their headmaster will leave the castle for the night.'

'And where exactly will the headmaster be going?' Snape inquired frowning, and Dumbledore smiled as he leaned back in his chair.

'To the one place where he has slept soundly all year, Severus,' he explained. 'To a little pub in a Muggle town by the lake.'

~~~

No one noticed Snape the next evening as he peered into the Great Hall. He had the gift of making himself invisible and could effortlessly vanish into the shadows, but most probably, no one in the Great Hall would even have noticed a fully grown mountain troll. For students, staff and ghosts alike were enjoying the food and the decorations that had appeared half an hour ago seemingly out of thin air. At first, they had been wary, peering over their shoulders and expecting the Carrows or their headmaster to swoop down on them at any moment, but as neither of them had shown up, everyone had started to relax. Now the hall was filled with the sound of laughter and joy. The students were eating with gusto, filling their bellies with sweets and cake and pumpkin pie, and the staff allowed themselves to sip on the wine that had appeared in their goblets. One could almost believe that the good old days had returned to Hogwarts on this Halloween night.

The good old days... Snape remembered them as well. Days when he, too, had been enjoying pumpkin pie and wine. Days when he, too, had been somewhat happy. But he also remembered a Halloween night when food had turned to ashes in his mouth and wine to acid, a Halloween night when the only one he had ever loved had been murdered and his heart had been ripped from his chest. One might think that the years had healed the wounds, but no matter how much Snape tried to think of something else, he was still hurting. So much that he considered retiring to his chambers, open a bottle of Odgen's and drown his sorrows in it. All by himself, in the darkness, where he belonged. But what good would it do? The pain would still be there in the morning, and he would still be unrested and of no good use to anyone. No, he had to heed Dumbledore's advice. He had to get out of the castle that night, far away from both heartache and responsibilities.

With his fingers tightly wrapped around the key in his pocket, Snape swiftly made his way out of the castle and through the grounds. He encountered no one on his way and at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, he Disapparated, his goal clearly in mind: a little run-down pub in a Muggle village, a private booth in the shadows where he could spend some peaceful hours in the company of someone he held very dear. He did, however, not Apparate directly to the pub. Instead he chose his usual spot at the edge of the forest, lingering there for some moments, completely still and barely breathing, in order to make sure that he had neither been followed nor that anyone had noticed his magic. But as no one stirred, neither wizard nor Muggle, Snape started walking towards the village, feeling his heart become lighter with every step. He was looking forward to meeting Hope. He had not visited her for two months, yet still she had given him peace for so many nights. Perhaps it was time that he told her that Dumbledore's charm was still working, in one direction at least. She should know what she had done for him even without her knowing.

As he entered the pub, Snape was greeted by a familiar sight. The drunkard and his son were sitting at a table close to the bar, the boy eating mashed potatoes and pie and the father holding on to a pint. Edmunds was sitting with the fishermen, playing cards, and otherwise, the pub was empty. But there were some empty glasses standing on one table and a plate on another. There seemed to have been some other customers there that night, at least.

Snape acknowledged Edmunds' greeting with a silent nod and then slunk into his booth, merging into the shadows and creating the illusion of him not being there. Yet still he heard her soft footsteps only a few moments later. He had not seen Hope upon entering the pub, but somehow, she seemed to have sensed that he was there.

'I had a feeling that I would be seeing you here tonight of all nights.'

Snape looked up, but it was too dark in the booth for him to make out Hope's face. Apart from that, she was wearing her hair loose, and it was obscuring her features like a curtain of black velvet.

'What do you mean?' Snape asked.

'There is magic in the air tonight,' Hope replied quietly. 'Even the Muggles can feel it.'

She wasn't talking about the carved turnips he had seen in front of some houses in the village, Snape was quite certain of that. Surely, Hope didn't believe in the old stories of sprites and goblins roaming the moors on All Hallows' Eve and from which the Muggles tried to protect themselves. No, Hope was talking about a different kind of magic, their magic, his and hers, and from the soft tremble in her voice, Snape deduced that she was frightened. But before he could utter his concern, Hope changed the subject.

'Would you like some steak pie?' she asked. 'Homemade.'

Snape nodded.

'Some ale to go with it, maybe?'

Again, Snape nodded and added his wish for Hope to keep him company. But she turned him down.

'Maybe later. I, um, have work to do.'

She turned on her heel before Snape could say anything more, and as he didn't want to yell after her, he just followed her with his eyes. She was keeping her back straight and carried her head high as always, but something wasn't quite right. She seemed uneasy and nervous, and more than once, Snape saw her rub her left wrist. But as his own mark wasn't burning, he concluded that she could not be experiencing any pain from her scar. At least, she shouldn't be.

As she returned with his food and drink some minutes later, Snape listened carefully. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, and as she placed his knife and fork in front of him, Snape could see her hands shaking.

'What is wrong?' he asked carefully.

'Nothing,' Hope answered, a little bit too quickly.

'Who are you trying to fool?'

Hope didn't answer but stood as if frozen, and Snape offered her a seat.

'I can't. There is work to do,' she claimed once more, but Snape insisted.

'The dishes will not be going anywhere. And I am sure your father will be more than able to care for five customers. Sit.'

She kept her eyes lowered as she sat down opposite him, and Snape saw her shoulders slump. Not much, barely half an inch. Most probably, no one apart from him would notice.

'What is wrong?' he asked once more.

Hope inhaled through her nose and exhaled through gritted teeth. For a moment, it looked like she was about to bury her face in her hands, but in the last moment, she stopped herself. Instead, her hands turned into fists, and with what looked like an enormous effort, she placed them on the table.

'I hate this night,' she confessed, digging her nails into her palms. 'It is bringing back all those memories I worked so hard to forget.'

Snape nodded. He knew how it was to lie awake all Halloween night with guilt and despair gnawing away at one's heart. By Merlin, he knew!

'I didn't feel a thing when I saw my father's body, you know,' Hope suddenly started. It wasn't what Snape had expected to hear, yet still he listened.

'Absolutely nothing,' Hope carried on. 'I wasn't shocked. I wasn't angry. I wasn't relieved. There was nothing. Nothing at all. And I heard this voice whispering in my head: "This is your father, Nadezhda. The man who raised you. The man who hurt you. React. Feel something." But I couldn't. It was like staring at a blank bit of parchment.'

'You were in shock,' Snape tried, neither sure about what to say nor why Hope was telling him those things. 'People react differently. Some cry, some get furious, others shut off. There is nothing wrong with how you reacted. I know that deep down, you loved your father. I saw you later that night. You had turned him around and closed his eyes. You gave him some dignity.'

'And still I didn't cry for him. I never did. But something died inside my heart that night, in my very soul.'

Hope sighed and relaxed her hands, put them flat on the table and took some deep breaths. Then she straightened and lifted her gaze, looking straight at Snape with those emerald green eyes of hers.

'What do you do when you are feeling desolate?' she inquired. 'What do you do when you feel alone, when there is this icy feeling spreading through your body and you fear that you are going to freeze to death?'

Snape swallowed, unable to look away. He was mesmerised by Hope's eyes, and for some inexplicable reason, he felt that she already knew the answer.

'Do you ever speak to Dumbledore nowadays?'

Snape blinked.

'What?'

'Dumbledore,' Hope repeated quietly. 'Do you ever speak to his portrait?'

Snape nodded. He wasn't able to formulate an answer, so surprised was he by the sudden change of subject and the unsettling feeling that was growing inside him, the feeling that the woman across the table knew far more of his deepest secrets than she was supposed to.

'Go back to Hogwarts,' she now suggested. 'Talk to Dumbledore and tell him you need to use the Pensive. Tell him I sent you. Tell him I'm ready.'

Then she rose, and the look in her eyes was so soft that Snape could almost feel it on his skin. It felt like a tender touch on his cheek, like a lover's kiss on his lips.

'I am sorry, Severus. Unspeakably sorry. And I'll understand if you decide to never come back here. But please know that I never meant to hurt you.'

Snape stared after Hope as she left, his eyes wide and his mouth open. He had no idea what she had been talking about, but he knew that there was no point in going after her. If she had wanted to explain herself, she would have done so. But for some reason, she couldn't or didn't want to, and unless he used force, which he was unwilling to do, she would not divulge her secrets. If he wanted to know, he would have to return to Hogwarts.

~~~

'Back already, Severus?' Dumbledore asked with a frown on his face. 'I meant for you to spend the night at the pub, you know.'

'It seems you forgot to inform Hope about your plans,' Snape replied, closing and warding the door behind him before placing a well-chosen spell on all the portraits in the room apart from the one he was addressing. He didn't want anyone to eavesdrop, neither staff nor student nor deceased headmaster.

'She sent me back here,' he explained. 'She told me to use the Pensive.'

Dumbledore looked taken aback for a moment but then straightened up in his chair, eyeing Snape intensely over the edge of his glasses.

'Has Hope said anything else?' he inquired. 'Has she prepared you?'

Snape shook his head.

'She only said that she is ready and that...'

He paused for a moment, not sure whether or not he wanted to share the rest of Hope's words with Dumbledore. But the old man seemed concerned, and Snape did not dare withhold any information.

'She said she never meant to hurt me.'

Dumbledore nodded.

'No, she did not,' he confirmed. 'You keep that in mind, Severus. For what you are about to see, will not be easy to witness. You might feel offended, even betrayed, but you have to remember that Hope that *Nadezhda* trusted you and looked up to you. Whatever she did, she had her reasons. And one of them was not wanting to burden you any more than she already had.'

He nodded towards the shallow stone basin that was placed on a table on the other side of the room and instructed Snape on where he could find the phial that contained the memories Hope wanted him to see. Snape held the little glass vessel in his hand for some moments, wondering what he was about to witness, but as he could not even guess, he uncorked the vessel and poured its contents into the Pensive. Across the room, Albus Dumbledore rose from his chair and stepped out of his frame. Silence settled over the office, and Snape was all alone, gazing into the swirling contents of the Pensive. Then he inhaled deeply and plunged his face into the shimmering substance. His hands were holding on to the edges of the basin, yet still he was falling, falling, quicker and quicker.

When his feet hit solid ground, a cold, granite floor, it took Snape the duration of several heartbeats to adjust to the darkness that surrounded him. He could see nothing at first, nothing at all, but could only hear a hushed voice coming out of the shadows. His very own voice. He blinked a couple of times, and in the end, he could make out his own frame in the darkness. He was sitting on a chaise longue with his back straight and his head held high, and beside him, shaking with tears, was the seventeen-year-old Nadezhda McKibben.

Snape frowned. Now that his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, he recognised the room Hope's memory had led him to. It was the library of Riddle Manor. A gloomy, dusty place. He knew it well, of course. The Dark Lord had granted him audience there more than once. Yet Snape had no recollection whatsoever of being there with Nadezhda.

'How did Barty find you?' he heard himself ask.

'He was already at the other house,' Nadezhda answered through a flood of tears. 'Some... something had happened there. An explosion. I don't know. He was there and the Lestranges. They were fighting another man, but he Disapparated when he saw Bellatrix.'

Barty, Bellatrix, an abandoned mansion and the mention of an explosion... Snape felt his stomach lurch as he realised in what night he had landed. This must be Halloween, the cursed Halloween of 1981.

He flinched. No wonder that he had no memory whatsoever of him being in the Riddle library that night. It wasn't a night he wanted to remember. How could Dumbledore have sent him there? How could Hope?

No, he wouldn't do this to himself again, Snape decided. He didn't want to go through the pain yet again. Yet when he turned to leave, he heard Nadezhda's voice.

'Don't let go,' she whispered. 'If you let go, I'll freeze to death.'

She was speaking to the man who was sitting beside her, of course, her teacher, her protector, yet her words made even Snape turn around and look at her, at her and himself, his younger self, a despairing young man who was going to pieces that night, a young man who knew all too well what it meant to freeze to death from the inside out, a young man who was experiencing that excruciating pain in this very moment.

Both Snapes were now staring into a pair of emerald green eyes, Nadezhda's eyes. Yet the younger Snape saw only Lily's, and as he leaned forward to kiss away the tears that were hanging on the dark lashes, he drowned in the icy green lake, died and was reborn moments later as he buried himself between the thighs of the young woman in his arms. The heat of her body revived him, and she in her turn drew strength from him as he relentlessly drove into her and came undone in her embrace. And Snape staggered backwards, stumbled and fell, his heart racing in his chest and his eyes wide with shock.

'What... was that?' he brought forth.

He got up on his feet and swirled around, staring up at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, who was just about to re-enter his frame.

'How much have you seen?' asked the former headmaster calmly.

'Enough,' Snape hissed, still appalled by his own actions and now also mortified when he realised that Dumbledore must have seen it all as well.

'What... was this?' he asked once more, his voice now much feebler. His knees were growing weak, and he grabbed on to the edge of a nearby table in order to keep his balance.

'A meeting of two lost and frightened souls that kept each other from dying during one of the coldest, loneliest nights of their lives.'

How romantic that sounded, Snape thought with a sneer, yet he was unable to understand how Dumbledore could remain that calm.

'I... I... Nadezh... She was my student!' he stammered, burying his face in his hands in a desperate yet futile attempt to regain control.

'Not that night, Severus. That night, Nadezhda wasn't your student and you were not her teacher. That night, the both of you were merely human.'

'Human? No. No! *That* was not human,' Snape spat, pointing at the Pensive and at the memory of his younger self he had encountered. 'I took advantage of a student!'

The words tasted foul in his mouth, and for the second time that night, Snape felt his stomach turn. He forced himself to swallow and clenched his jaws.

'You didn't see everything, did you?'

Dumbledore's voice was still calm, and Snape felt his temper rise.

'There cannot possibly be anything else I want to see,' he stated, fighting hard with himself so as not to hex the understanding look off Dumbledore's face.

'You were more than remorseful that night, Severus,' the old man explained. 'Much like you are now, you were convinced that you had taken advantage of Nadezhda, that you had used her...'

'I did use her!' Snape snapped, interrupting whatever Dumbledore had been about to say. For as he was now getting over the first shock, he was starting to question what

he had seen.

'I have no memory whatsoever of this,' he pointed out, wracking his brain. He remembered returning to Riddle Manor after he had learned of Lily's death. He remembered finding Nadezhda standing by her father's body. He remembered leading her away and bringing her back to Hogwarts. After that he had Apparated to Godric's Hollow, had stumbled around in the debris of the Potter home for hours without aim or goal. And later that day, when the rest of the Wizarding world had celebrated the defeat of the Dark Lord, Snape had drunk himself into a stupor that had left him in a haze for two days to come. Maybe that was why he didn't remember, he thought. Maybe his brain had simply chosen not to. Yet Dumbledore had another explanation.

'You were remorseful that night, Severus,' he repeated, acting almost as if Snape had not interrupted him. 'And Nadezhda understood. She knew you would blame yourself for what had happened. She knew that you wouldn't be able to live with yourself. So she did the only thing she could think of at that moment. She used a Memory Charm on you.'

Had Snape not been holding on to the table, he would have collapsed. His breath caught in his chest, and he felt all the blood leave his face. His free hand twitched as he tried to decide whether to cover his mouth, his eyes or his ears or maybe slap himself hard in order to wake up from this nightmare. But he found himself unable to do either. He didn't deserve to be shielded off. Not again.

He stared up at Dumbledore for a while, and the old man looked back down at him, his blue eyes filled with so much compassion and understanding that Snape had to avert his eyes. He had made a mistake, a terrible mistake. He had hurt the one he had meant to protect and eventually lost her. But now, half a lifetime later, he had found her again and had been given a chance to redeem himself. And so, without explaining himself and without saying goodbye, Snape turned on his heel and left, and Albus Dumbledore looked after him, smiling.

At the Dawn of November

Chapter 14 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 14: At the Dawn of November

For the second time that evening, Snape strode through the grounds of Hogwarts, his black cloak billowing behind him. Yet while he had been looking forward to getting away from the castle earlier, to meeting Hope and to spending a couple of quiet hours in her company, he did not know now what to feel. At one moment, he was angry, even furious, both with himself and with Nadezhda, with Dumbledore and the whole damn world and wanted nothing more than to confront Hope and demand an explanation for what she had done to his mind. Then one heart beat later, a wave of shame washed over him and he slowed down his steps, blaming himself for everything. What right did he have to be angry? What right did he have to feel hurt? He should have known better that night. *He* had been the adult. *He* had been Nadezhda's teacher, her guardian, yet still *he* had initiated the physical contact. *He* had kissed her. *He* had forced himself upon her. But from what he had seen in the Pensive, she had not fought back. She had embraced him, had wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips. She had encouraged him with her moans, had kissed him and caressed him. She had not stopped him.

'Don't even try blaming this on anyone other than yourself, Severus!' Snape chided himself. How Nadezhda had reacted to his advances didn't matter. She had been vulnerable that night, alone and scared. She had been his student, and he had been her teacher. It shouldn't have happened. *He* shouldn't have allowed it.

Driven by guilt and the need to beg for forgiveness, Snape Disapparated from the edge of the Forbidden Forest and landed in his usual spot where he for once didn't bother checking if he had been followed. It didn't seem to matter. Nothing mattered except Hope. He needed to see her, needed to hear from her own lips what had happened that night, how *she* had experienced the whole situation. Yet as he hurried towards the village, Snape found himself trembling with an icy chill. What if he found the door to the pub locked? What if Hope was gone? What if she never wanted to see him again? She would have every right to despise him after what he had done. But then again, *she* had known what had happened in the Riddle library all this time. Earlier that night, she had said that *she* was sorry. What was she sorry for?

Snape shook his head. He was growing more confused by the second and unable to think straight, and as he arrived at the pub, out of breath and shivering, he felt his heart stop for a few moments. For there was no light coming from the windows and the door was indeed locked.

Snape's shaking hand lingered on the door handle. He wasn't sure what to do. As part of him wanted to turn around and disappear into the night, leave everything behind him and try to forget. Yet he knew that he would never be able to, that he would always wonder what Hope would have said if he had spoken to her that night, that he would always wonder why he had lost control so many years ago. If he left now, he would never find the courage to return. His questions would never be answered, and he would never find peace. And so he produced his key from his pocket, put it in the keyhole, turned it and pushed open the door, almost surprised at how easily it opened. Then he lingered on the threshold, blinking, trying to make out any shapes in the darkness of the empty pub.

She wasn't much more than a shadow. The tea light that was burning on the counter in front of her was barely emitting enough light to illuminate her hands that were holding on to a glass of gin. Her knuckles were white, so hard was she holding on to the glass. It was still full, however, and the ice in it had long since melted.

She didn't turn around, neither when Snape closed the door nor when he carefully locked it. She just sat there with her back turned towards him and her eyes fixed on her glass.

'It is almost midnight,' Snape pointed out as he sat down on the stool to Hope's left. 'How long were you planning to wait for my return?'

'Until sunrise,' Hope answered quietly.

'And if I hadn't returned by then?'

'Then I would have continued praying that one day you would.'

She tucked a strand of hair behind her left ear and turned her head to look at Snape, and even though it was too dark for them to really see each other, they gazed into each other's eyes, Snape with his hands on the counter and Hope with her fingers once more wrapped firmly around her glass.

'I'm sorry,' she said softly.

There was a muscle twitching at her jaw, but she held Snape's gaze steadily.

'What are you sorry for?' he asked.

'I kept secrets from you. From you of all people.'

Snape shook his head.

'I assume you had your reasons,' he said, trying to sound calm. If he wanted to receive any answers, if he wanted to understand, he mustn't flare up. If he hissed and spat, he might just scare Hope into everlasting silence.

She made an odd sound now, something between a snort and a laugh, and lowered her gaze.

'I guess I did have my reasons,' she said, her voice not much more than a whisper. 'Maybe they were even good ones. Back then...'

She inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled through gritted teeth. She had said that she was ready earlier that night, but she seemed to be losing her courage.

'Why?' Snape asked, trying to help her. 'Why did you take those memories away from me?'

Hope shrugged.

'I've asked myself that question many times over the years and came up with ever so noble reasons. But if I am honest with myself, I'd admit that I panicked. I was scared that night. Scared of the consequences, scared of your reactions, my own... I was scared of losing you.'

'Losing me?'

Snape frowned. He couldn't follow at all.

'If you had remembered,' Hope started to explain, 'would you ever have looked me in the eyes again?'

Now it was Snape's turn to shrug, and Hope answered the question for him.

'You always made sure to draw a distinct line between the professor, the Death Eater, the protector. But that night all the lines were erased, and it would have been impossible to draw them afresh. And so I... I *needed* those lines. I needed *you*. You were the only constant in my world. If you had turned from me, I wouldn't... I couldn't have...'

She gave a frustrated sigh and banged her fist on the counter.

'I have been rehearsing this speech for years, and now I am not making any sense at all.'

As she turned her head away, Snape feared she'd slip off her stool and vanish into the darkness, so he reached out for her, cupped her chin and made her look back at him again.

'What happened that night?' he asked.

'You saw what happened.'

Snape shook his head.

'I saw... I saw what I did,' he said. 'But I want to know what happened inside your head, inside your heart. Why did you allow... Why did you let me...'

He broke off, unable to find the right words. Exactly what had she let him do? Had he made love to her, had he fucked her, raped her? What had he done to her?

They were gazing into each other's eyes again, green emeralds locking on to black obsidians in the darkness of the night. It would have been easy for Snape to penetrate Hope's mind, to forcefully take the information she seemed unable to put into words, but he decided not to. He didn't have the right. He had hurt her enough.

He extended his fingers and brushed her cheek with all the tenderness he could muster. He needed her to trust him, needed her to feel safe in his presence once more.

'Tell me,' he prompted her. 'Tell me everything.'

Hope took a shaky breath.

'I was convinced that I would not live to see another morning,' she started timidly. 'I was cold, so terribly cold. It felt like I was freezing to death from the inside out. And when you kissed me, I... I should have told you no. I should have told you to stop. I am sure you would have backed off and apologised, and we would have agreed to forget all about it. But I didn't. I couldn't. I needed you. I needed to feel alive. I needed to feel... *loved*. I knew all along that you weren't there *with me*, that you weren't making love to *me*. But there was something in your eyes that night, every time you looked at me. I knew it wasn't mine to see, but still I stole it. I took it, I kept it and I hid it away. It made me survive that night.'

Snape swallowed. Just like during the night they were talking about, he was now gazing into Hope's green eyes, was mesmerised by them and drowned in them, and even though he knew that Hope was talking about what *she* had felt all those years ago, the words rang ever so true even for him. He, too, had been close to dying that night. He, too, had needed the closeness of another human soul. And what Nadezhda had seen in his eyes had been his love for Lily, the woman whose death he had been mourning, the woman whose eyes had been just as green as hers. He had been with Lily that night. It had been Lily he had made love to, not Nadezhda. And the girl had known. She always had.

Snape's breath caught in his chest. No matter from which angle one was examining the events of that night ~~he~~ had been the one who had made a mistake. He had succumbed to his grief. He had let his emotions overpower him, and eventually he had lost control.

'I am sorry,' he said quietly.

'I know,' Hope replied. 'You have been from the very start.'

Snape frowned. How could Hope know?

'You didn't see all of it, did you?' she inquired. 'You didn't see the whole memory.'

Snape shook his head.

'To be honest, I was slightly... shocked by what I saw,' he admitted. 'I withdrew.'

'Can't blame you for that,' Hope conceded. 'But I think you should see everything. You need to.'

'Do you want me to return to Hogwarts to use the Pensive once more?' Snape asked incredulously, but Hope shook her head.

'There's no need to return to Hogwarts. It's all here, right inside my mind. All you need to do is take it.'

'No!' Snape burst out. 'I will not use Legilimens on you to satisfy my curiosity.'

'You will have to,' Hope insisted. 'I lack the courage to tell you, but you must know. Please.'

'No,' Snape said once more. 'It is not a pleasant experience to have someone trample around in your mind. I will not...'

'Please,' Hope interrupted him. 'You need to know.'

Her hand was cold and clammy as she reached out for his, but her grip was steady as their fingers entwined. They would help each other through this, just as they had helped each other through a Halloween night half a lifetime ago.

Upon entering her mind as gently as he could, Snape tried to ignore the sight of dishevelled hair and undone robes, tried not to look at Nadezhda who was still lying down. Instead he focused on his younger self, the young man who was sitting at the edge of the chaise with his face buried in his hands. He heard his ragged breaths, his whimpers and dry sobs. The man wouldn't cry, Snape was quite certain of that. For he knew that he didn't deserve the soothing salvation that tears had to offer.

Was this what Hope had wanted him to see? His younger self full of remorse, desperately struggling to regain the control he had lost only minutes ago? Did she think this would be enough for him to absolve himself?

His heart sinking, Snape prepared to withdraw, yet Hope tightened her grip around his hand.

'Stay,' she whispered. 'There is more. So much more.'

There was a rustling of robes, and Snape watched his younger self struggle as Nadezhda put a comforting hand on his shoulder. But very much like Hope now kept holding on to his hand, Nadezhda refused to let go of the man on the chaise, no matter how much he hissed and growled. Instead she bravely moved closer, wrapping her arm around him from behind and resting her chin on his shoulder. She was crying silently now, if for herself or the man she was embracing, Snape could not tell. But when he saw his younger self give in, when he saw the tears trickle down his pale cheeks, one after one, he was ready to forgive himself. And he also forgave Nadezhda for raising her wand and obliterating the last hour of his memory.

~~~

The sun had not yet risen above the horizon, but the dim light of the street lamps was enough to make out the shapes of the little graveyard; the old stone wall which was crumbling at some places and the ivy that was covering it, sculpted angels and carefully crafted headstones. Yet the dark clad wizard who was standing at the far end of the graveyard, as far away from the chapel one could get without leaving the sacred ground, didn't see any of it. For his gaze was lingering on a simple wooden cross in front of him. There was no inscription, no flowers, yet still the little grave didn't seem neglected. There were no weeds growing at the foot of the cross, and the wood wasn't weathered, even though it had been exposed to the elements for fifteen years.

*So here lies my son*, Snape thought. He was neither feeling sad nor wistful, neither bitter nor aggrieved. In fact, he had not yet come to terms with what he was supposed to feel. No surprise, really. For merely a few hours ago, he had not even known that he had fathered a child.

In hindsight, it was rather embarrassing that it had taken him so long to figure it out. The possibility of Nadezhda's child being his should have sprung to his mind the moment he had been presented with her memory of their intimate encounter in the Riddle library. But right then, back in Dumbledore's old office, Snape had either been too shocked to understand or had simply chosen not to. First some hours later, after he had seen the whole memory and found it in his heart to forgive both himself and the young woman who had erased his memory, he had allowed himself to put two and two together. The truth had hit him like a Stunning Spell, and he had stared at Hope, gasping.

'The child,' he had brought forth, even though it had felt as if all the air had been knocked from his chest. 'Was it mine?'

There had been no need for her to answer. The look in her eyes had said everything, and had she not been holding his hand and squeezing it tightly, Snape would have fallen apart. But she had been giving him strength, much like she had done that night many years ago.

'Why?' he had asked in the end, trying to make sense of everything. 'Why did you not tell me?'

'How could I have told you that you had fathered a child when I had taken the memory of its making away from you?' Hope had replied calmly. 'Besides, by the time I realised that the child had to be yours, I had already made up my mind about leaving the Wizarding world. I couldn't risk you asking me to stay.'

Would he have tried to persuade her, Snape wondered now as he was standing in the graveyard. He had been thinking about different scenarios for the better part of the night, but one seemed as unlikely as the next. He couldn't see himself as a father, but at the same time, he doubted that he would have let Nadezhda take care of her of *their* child all by herself. And the third possibility, him asking her to get rid of the child, seemed the most absurd of them all. For how could he have asked her to end an innocent life?

'What was his name?' he inquired. His eyes were still on the cross, but he could see Hope from the corner of his eye. She was standing some feet away from the grave, refusing to come closer, and Snape couldn't help but wonder if she had ever come close enough to touch the wood of the cross.

'I named him Severus,' she replied quietly. 'He looked so much like you, there wasn't really any other option.'

She drew her coat tighter around herself and buried her hands in her pockets.

'I had planned to tell him all about his namesake once he was older.'

'And what exactly would you have told him?' Snape asked.

'That you looked out for me when I was in danger,' Hope replied without having to think twice. 'That you were kind to me even though you didn't have to.'

Snape closed his eyes, and for some blissful moments, he relished the thought of there being at least one person in the world who would never have known about the horrible things he had done. A person who would never have known that he had lied and deceived, that he had hurt people and that he had killed. That person, his son, his own flesh and blood, would always have believed that he, Severus Snape, had been a good man.

'Did Dumbledore ever meet the boy?' he now wondered.

'Yes, he did,' Hope replied. 'He came to check up on us on the very day the boy was born. In disguise, of course. He told me later that he used a Confundus Charm on the doctor and the nurses at the hospital so they wouldn't keep any records.'

She broke off and gave a dry laugh.

'I should have known that magic had followed me here. Everything went far too smoothly. But I desperately wanted to believe that I had succeeded, that I had built a new life in a new world all on my own. How naïve I was!'

*Who could blame you?* Snape thought silently. She had been young then. Young, inexperienced, scared, confused. And she shouldn't have had to take care of everything herself. Of course, Snape was grateful that Dumbledore had stepped up and taken care of her, but he couldn't help but think that he should have been there for her instead. For her and their child. Maybe this was how things would have been, had he known. Maybe he would have let her go and let her live her life the way she wanted and needed to, and he would have looked out for her from afar, just like Dumbledore had done.

They walked back to the village in silence, much in the same way as they had left it. There wasn't much to say, really, as there was no point in discussing all the what-ifs and should-haves. Bygones were bygones, and what had happened could neither be altered nor undone. There was no point in dwelling upon the past.

At the edge of the village, Snape politely declined Hope's half-hearted offer of tea and toast at the pub, claiming that he needed to return to Hogwarts before daybreak. He wasn't lying, of course. For surely, the Carrows would be up and about soon, most probably in a foul mood, and should the DA have spent the headmaster-free night writing on the walls again, Snape would have to hurry back to the castle if he meant to clean up after them. But most of all, he needed some time on his own in order to think about everything he had heard and seen that night, and he was quite certain that Hope needed to do the same.

'I do not know when I will be able to come back here,' he explained, his heart heavy. 'I do not even know if I will be able to.'

'But you want to come back?' Hope asked, a note of tentative optimism in her voice, and Snape nodded.

'Yes, I very much want to. And should the worst happen, should I never be able to return, please know that it has nothing to do with what I have learned here tonight.'

## On the Darkest of Nights

### Chapter 15 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 15: On the Darkest of Nights

There was darkness all around him. An impenetrable, solid blackness that made Snape fear for a moment that all the light had gone from the world. For surely, he should at least be able to see the moon and the stars in the sky. But he could see nothing, not even the Dog Star, the brightest star in the sky.

He pulled his thick cloak tighter around himself and shivered as he remembered an old tale his mother had told him once, a tale of the land of the fairies. Time ran differently there, and a single night could last for several lifetimes. The light of the moon and the stars never reached the forest ground, and whoever had the misfortune to stumble into that world would get lost forever. They would try to find their way home for a while, but eventually, they would forget who they were and where they had come from. They would forget their loved ones and even the place where they had been born.

Would it be such a bad thing if he had ended up in the land of the fairies, Snape wondered silently. There was little he cared for in the world of men, and every now and then he wished that he could indeed forget all about the life he was leading there. For he was tired. Tired of the war, tired of spying, lying and deceiving, tired of being loathed and mistrusted. If he had ended up in the land of the fairies, he would soon forget who he was. He would forget about Albus Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, Hogwarts and Spinner's End, and Severus Snape and all he had ever been, would cease to exist. Such bliss! But then again, there were some things, some very precious things, that Snape would never want to forget. The feeling of the first rays of the morning sun tickling his skin as he emerged from the shadows of the Forbidden Forest, the smell of bubbling potion, a timid smile that had been carefully hidden away in two emerald green eyes...

Snape blinked, shifting his focus to his surroundings where the vague outlines of the trees were slowly but surely growing more solid and real. He hadn't stumbled into the land of the fairies, of course. The forest around him was tangible, and the reason for him neither seeing moon nor stars was the fact that the heavenly bodies were shrouded in thick grey clouds. It must have been snowing during the day, Snape thought, walking through the fresh dusting of powdery snow. Yet neither his boots nor his cloak left any kind of trace on the ground. For he had been careful and taken measures. There were spells that ensured that no one would know that he had ever been there.

'Severus, the sword! Do not forget that the sword must be taken under conditions of need and valour.'

The grave words of Albus Dumbledore were ringing in Snape's ears as he made his way through the undergrowth. Where should he hide the sword, he wondered. There were no dangerous animals roaming about against which the Potter boy would need to defend himself, and hanging the sword in a tall tree was far too easy. All Potter would have to do was to shout *Accio*. It wouldn't do. Not at all. What should he do? Conjure up a dragon and a fair maiden whom Potter could rescue?

When he came upon a tiny forest pool, Snape gave a sigh of relief. This was exactly what he needed! The pool was deep enough for Potter having to submerge himself completely in order to reach the sword, and as the water was freezing, it would require a great deal of daring and nerve from the boy to actually do so. Good thing he knew how to swim, Snape thought, and hoped that Potter's lung capacity had improved since the Triwizard Tournament. For this time, he wouldn't have any Gillyweed to help him breathe.

Snape produced the Sword of Gryffindor from under his cloak and levitated it towards the middle of the pool where he dropped it. The sharp blade cut through the ice covering the pool as if it were soft butter, and while the sword sank into the depths of the water, Snape cast a spell that sealed the crack in the ice.

'*Lumos*,' he muttered afterwards, and as he held his wand aloft, he could make out the outlines of the sword below the ice, a silver cross waiting to be lifted from the depths by the Chosen One. All the boy needed to do was look.

Now to call him...

Snape extinguished the light of his wand. Dumbledore had kindly reminded him that the Potter boy mustn't see him. Not that Snape had needed to be reminded. He knew very well that Potter wished to see him dead. And didn't the boy have every reason for it? For as much as he knew, Snape was a coldblooded murderer. He had killed Albus Dumbledore. Surely, for such a deed, one deserved to die. But the boy knew nothing of Snape's other crimes. If he did, he would not only want to kill Snape himself but also make sure that he suffered. Potter could not even imagine, of course, how much Snape suffered during every moment of his life.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Snape took a deep breath and slowly exhaled through his nose. He mustn't think of those things now, mustn't think of his sins and wrongdoings, of agony and grief. For if he did, he would fall into darkness and his carefully crafted plan would fail. He needed happy thoughts now, a memory so cheerful that it could brighten up even the darkest of nights.

'Expecto Patronum.'

The doe sprung from his wand in a fluid motion, landed soundlessly on her feet and pranced once around the pool, leaving no hoof prints in the fine powdering of snow. And Snape looked at her, mesmerised by her moon-bright beauty.

'I need your help tonight,' he whispered as the doe returned to him. 'I need your light. *Harry* needs your light in order to find his way. Go find him and bring him here.'

The doe looked up at the dark wizard, a shadow of doubt in her long-lashed eyes.

'The boy will trust you,' Snape assured her and then watched her turn and pick her way into the depths of the forest. Her light vanished, and Snape stepped behind the twin oaks, becoming one with the shadows. He didn't dare leave. He had to see with his own eyes that the boy managed to retrieve the sword, no matter how long it took, no matter how cold he grew while waiting. Yet when the doe returned with the boy in tow, Snape felt his heart sink. He knew that he should be triumphant that his plan had worked and that Harry Potter had followed and trusted the silvery doe. But all he could think about was *why* the boy had trusted her. He must have felt an instant bond, a familiarity. For the boy's Patronus was a stag, just like his father's had been, and Lily's, the doe, had been the stags soul mate.

Snape stayed put, watching the Potter boy dive into the icy water of the pool. He saw Ron Weasley arrive and dive in as well. But as the two boys emerged from the water with the Sword of Gryffindor, Snape felt much colder than any of them ever would. For he had realised that *his* Patronus, *his* light in the dark, belonged much more to Harry Potter than it had ever belonged to him.

~~~

The snow was falling heavily as Snape walked down the empty main street of the quiet Muggle village. It was long past midnight, and his footprints were the only ones in the fresh powdery snow. The lights were still on in one or two of the houses that he passed, but Snape didn't see any of them. For his dark eyes were firmly fixed on one specific light further down the road, a warm, soft glow coming from one of the windows above the village pub. It was a faint light, most probably produced by candles rather than electricity, but in Snape's mind, the light was brighter than the sun. It called for him, beckoned him to come inside, into the warmth where he could take off his wet, heavy cloak and rest. There would be no need for him to be vigilant, no need to watch neither his own back nor somebody else's. He would be able to simply close his eyes and sleep, giving his body and mind the repose that he so desperately needed.

Hope didn't seem surprised to see him as Snape appeared in her living room door. She was sitting in an armchair by the window and most probably, she had seen him walking down the road. That or she had heard him coming up the stairs.

'There's tea,' she said softly, placing her hand on the light blue tea pot that was standing on the table beside her. 'It's still hot. Let me get you a cup.'

She rose and walked towards the cabinet in the corner, and Snape stepped inside the room, unaware that there was water dripping from the hem of his cloak onto the carpet.

'You should take that off,' Hope suggested. 'It's soaking wet.'

She put the cup on the table and moved towards Snape, unbuttoned his cloak with nimble fingers and pulled it off his shoulders.

'I'll hang this up to dry,' she said. 'And you sit down and have some tea. It will do you good.'

The cup was green. Heavy stoneware, slightly chipped at the edge. The saucer was blue and didn't fit the cup at all, but Snape didn't care as he poured himself some tea. Its scent was sweet, and he identified elderflower and violets and a slight hint of honey.

Wrapping both his hands around it, Snape brought the cup close to his chest. He doubted that he would drink the tea as he wasn't feeling thirsty, but its scent was comforting and it was providing some warmth. Not that it was enough. For the chill that had entered his body in the forest refused to release its grip around him, and it was only with great effort that Snape managed to keep his limbs from shaking and his teeth from chattering.

'I almost suspected that the tea would be too sweet for you,' Hope commented as she returned. 'Can I get you something else?'

Wordlessly, Snape shook his head. Being served another beverage would mean that he had to let go of his cup. And if he let go, he'd freeze to death.

'Are you going to say anything tonight?' Hope enquired.

She sat down on her chair opposite Snape, but leaped up again almost immediately.

'Your lips are blue!' she exclaimed.

She grabbed the shawl that had been hanging over the armrest of her chair and wrapped it around Snape's shoulders.

'Goodness, you're freezing cold.'

She took the cup from his hands and started rubbing his arms and back, and Snape stared blankly up at her, feeling his heart hammering in his chest. He was shaking now, from cold or exhaustion, he did not know.

'What have you done to yourself?'

There was a note of anxiety in Hope's voice, but as much as Snape wanted to tell her that he'd be alright, that he needed nothing more than a warm bed and a good night's sleep, he was unable to find the words. Instead he reached out for her, wrapped his arms around her hips and pulled her towards him, resting his head against her chest, and Hope in turn held him close, moving her little hands up and down his back to warm him.

'It's alright,' she breathed, her lips brushing his brow ever so softly. 'I'll take care of you, I promise.'

'I am sorry,' Snape whispered, tightening his grip around her. She was so warm, so soft. If it were up to him, he would never let go of her.

'What are you sorry for this time?' Hope wondered, sounding slightly bewildered.

Snape took a deep breath, inhaling her scent.

'You must think that I only come here on those nights when my world is falling to pieces,' he replied slowly.

There was a moment of silence, and Snape bit his lip. Why had he opened his mouth? Why could he not just keep his peace? Did he really have to make it so plain that he was using her yet again? But as he loosened his embrace, ready to stand and leave, Hope didn't step away from him. Instead she looked down at him, the look in her eyes softer than her touch when she brushed his cheek with her fingers.

'That thought has never occurred to me,' she said honestly. 'And even if it had, it wouldn't matter. I am glad that you come here. I am honoured to be given your trust. And if I can't handle your darkest moments, then what right do I have to share your brightest ones?'

Her fingers didn't linger on his cheek for much more than the duration of a heartbeat, but when she withdrew her hand, Snape promised himself to remember her touch for as long as he lived. Her touch and the look in her emerald green eyes.

'You need to rest,' she now pointed out. 'I didn't dare hope that you'd be coming, so there is no heat on in your room. You will have to settle for mine.'

'No,' Snape replied, shaking his head. 'You shouldn't be giving up your bed for me.'

'I don't mind,' Hope replied. 'I really don't.'

She provided him with a pair of dove grey pyjamas, and once he had crept under the covers, she sat down beside him on the edge of the bed. The room was dark, but the little candle on the nightstand provided just enough light for Snape to see her eyes and how fiercely she was blinking in order to keep them from falling shut.

'You are just as tired as I am,' he noted. 'There is no need for you to stay awake and watch over me. Besides, your bed is wide enough for the both of us. Please, lay down.'

Hope opened her mouth as if to speak, but instead she shook her head and averted her gaze.

'What is it?' Snape asked, fearing that he had been too bold.

'Nothing,' Hope claimed. 'It's just... I, um, ... It's been a while since I shared a bed with someone.'

Had the room been brighter, Snape would have seen a blush creep over Hope's pale cheeks. But it was too dark for him to see it, and luckily, she didn't see his cheeks turn slightly pink either. For whilst it had been a while for her, Severus Snape had never known the pleasure of sharing his bed with anyone, not even for a single night.

'You gave me two blankets,' he tried to persuade her, already pulling one of the covers from his body and holding it up towards her. 'I promise to stay under mine. I won't touch you.'

Hope gave a short laugh.

'That's the last thing I'm afraid of.'

'Then lie down,' Snape insisted. 'Sleep.'

Even with more than three inches of air between them, Snape could tell that Hope was lying beside him as stiff as a board, and the unnatural rhythm of her breathing made him think that she was trying to breathe without making any sound. She didn't want him to hear her.

'How long has it been then?' he asked, quietly enough for Hope to be able to pretend that she hadn't heard him. And for a couple of moments, he thought that she had chosen to do just that, for she had all but stopped breathing and lay so still that Snape almost started to wonder if she had disappeared. He was therefore quite surprised when she answered him with a low yet steady voice.

'Charles,' she said. 'The last time I shared a bed with someone was when I stayed with Charles in his great-aunt's cottage.'

Half a lifetime ago, Snape thought sadly, his heart aching for the woman beside him. He knew how long and cold a night could seem when one yearned for a tender embrace, for the warmth of another body. He had never experienced it himself, yet he longed to fall asleep in someone else's arms far more often than he cared to admit. He could not even imagine how much Hope must miss the feeling of having someone close by at night.

'Has there been no one else since?' he asked.

'Not once,' Hope replied quietly. 'I never wanted to explain to anyone why I am afraid of the dark.'

'Are you still afraid?' Snape asked.

'No. Tonight I am not.'

He felt her shift her weight and heard her blow out the candle on the night stand, and as she lay back down, she seemed more comfortable. Her breathing relaxed, and within minutes, she was fast asleep.

And the Darkest of Days

Chapter 16 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 16: And the Darkest of Days

She barely made any sound as she slipped out of bed, but Snape still woke, due to the shift of weight on the mattress or the sudden coldness, he did not know.

'Go back to sleep,' Hope whispered in response to his drowsy mumbling. 'It's not even six o'clock yet.'

She tiptoed through the room as if she wanted to avoid waking up the man in her bed completely, and indeed Snape drifted off to sleep again. Had it not been for the creaking of the wardrobe and then the closing of the door a few moments later, he would certainly have slept for another hour or two. But by the time he heard Hope's footsteps fade away on the other side of the door, he was wide awake.

Sighing contently, he rolled over to his side and extended his hand. The sheets where Hope had been lying a mere minutes ago were still warm, the scent of her hair still lingering on the pillow, and with a smile Snape remembered the sound of her breathing which he had listened to before falling asleep himself. It had been such a comforting little noise, the sweetest lullaby he could imagine. Now that it was gone, he already missed it and wondered how he would ever be able to fall asleep without it.

He sat up and switched on the bedside lamp as he heard the shower being turned on in the bathroom down the corridor. He found his clothes neatly folded on a chair and his cloak hanging over the wardrobe door. There was also a new set of clothes lying on another chair, a pair of black trousers and a crisp shirt which he didn't recognise from his stay during the summer. When Hope had managed to put them there, was beyond him.

He pulled on the trousers and the shirt. He was in no hurry to be reminded of the Wizarding world and was already planning to stay at the pub for a day or two, maybe even longer. There was nothing for him to do at Hogwarts. Every single student had left the castle for the holidays, and he was not even sure that any of the staff had stayed. Apart from Filch, that was, and Hagrid, of course. But those two would do just fine on their own. Snape was sure of that. Certainly, Rosmerta would take good care of them at the Three Broomsticks. No, he wasn't needed at Hogwarts, Snape concluded. He wouldn't even be missed.

The smell of toast and coffee made his stomach rumble as he walked down the stairs to the pub, and as he came down, he found that there were already two plates and a bread basket standing on the counter.

'Help yourself to coffee,' Hope prompted him. 'Breakfast will be ready in a minute.'

He hardly caught more than a glimpse of her as she slipped through the door that led to the kitchen, but Snape could see that she had braided her hair and that she was wearing a nice black dress. It was simple yet still too fancy to be worn in the kitchen all day. It wasn't Sunday, so she hadn't dressed up for church, and Snape couldn't help but wonder if Hope had made herself pretty for his sake.

'Did you sleep alright?' she asked when she emerged from the kitchen, carrying a frying pan filled with eggs and bacon.

'I slept very well, thank you,' Snape replied, his eyes fixed on Hope's hands as she filled his plate. Her slender fingers, her perfectly manicured nails, so out of place in this shabby, little pub. Those hands should be leafing through old, leather-bound books and holding fine crystal glasses, he thought. They should be guiding delicate quills over exquisite parchment, not carrying cast iron frying pans. They should be nurturing a babe, caressing a lover...

'Did you sleep well?' he asked, clearing his throat and blinking fiercely in order to keep his mind from wandering.

Hope nodded.

'I haven't slept that well in a very long time.'

She filled his plate and then put down the frying pan on a trivet on the counter without having put any food on her own plate. She sat down on Snape's left and watched him eat for some moments before she started playing with a piece of toast, tearing off small morsels which turned to crumbs between her fingers.

'Aren't you eating?' Snape asked.

'I'm not hungry,' Hope replied.

'A shame indeed,' Snape pointed out. 'This is delicious.'

He ate with gusto, as if the simple eggs and bacon really was the most scrumptious dish he'd ever eaten. And Hope kept watching him, still turning her toast to dust.

'Will Edmunds not be joining us?' Snape asked after a while as he picked up his mug.

'No, he won't,' Hope replied quietly, putting down the remains of her toast. 'He passed away a week ago.'

Snape almost choked at his coffee.

'A massive stroke,' Hope continued in a matter-of-fact tone. 'He collapsed upstairs in his room and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital.'

Snape swallowed.

'Why did you not say anything last night?' he enquired.

'Would it have mattered?' Hope countered. 'He is gone, and you were in quite a state as it was.'

His coffee mug still in hand, Snape stared at Hope, entirely at a loss for words. Her detachedness was rendering him speechless, and the look in her eyes was sending chills down his spine. So cold, so impassive. But then again, what else was he to expect? This was the woman who had not even flinched when she, a mere teenager at the time, had looked upon the mangled body of her own father, the woman who had looked the Dark Lord in the eyes without blinking.

'Hope, I... Is there anything I can do?' Snape asked, slowly recuperating from his shock.

'He is being laid to rest today. If you, um...'

Hope broke off and cleared her throat.

'Would you come with me?' she requested timidly.

'Yes. Yes!' Snape replied without having to think twice. 'Of course I will come with you.'

'Thank you.'

Snape saw a muscle twitch at her jaw and caught a glimpse of a tear at the corner of her eye, a little drop of water at the edge of a frozen lake. But when Hope blinked, the little tear disappeared, and Snape hardly dared imagine the flood that would ensue once the ice melted and the water broke free.

~~~

Snape recognised most of the people who had come to take their final farewell of Edmunds. The three fishermen, the blond boy and his father, an elderly lady and her spinster daughter who would visit the pub every Thursday to sample Hope's delicious Shepard's pie. Even the other mourners were customers or people with whom Edmunds had done business: the butcher down the street, the grocer. Even the barber had come to pay his respect. It was a small party, all more or less close to the landlord, and after he had been laid to rest, they all came to the pub to have a drink in his honour.

'He has been such a wonderful man. So kind and generous. We will miss him dearly.'

'I will miss him, too.'

Hope shook the butcher's hand, and the stout man drew her into a cordial embrace.

'If there is anything you need, anything at all, let me know.'

'Will you keep the pub open?' wondered the little old lady as it was her turn to speak to Hope.

'I see no reason to close,' Hope replied. 'Not just yet anyway.'

'Anything you need,' repeated the butcher. 'I can give you a loan if you need money.'

'Thank you. To all of you, thank you.'

Once more, the butcher wrapped his arms around Hope, and even the old lady joined in.

'Poor child,' she cooed. 'How will you cope all on your own?'

'I have managed before,' Hope replied quietly. 'I will be alright.'

She most probably would, Snape thought quietly as he watched her shake hands and accept hugs and pats on the back. As she said, she had managed before. But the people gathered in the pub had no idea just how strong the landlord's ward was. They had no idea about what she had seen and what she had been through already at an age where most youngsters barely had left school. But how much more would she be able to carry? How much sorrow would she be able to live through before she broke?

Sinking into the shadows of his usual booth, Snape kept a close eye on Hope. She was putting up a brave face, keeping her back straight and her head held high, just like she had done half a lifetime ago, on the day her father had been laid to rest. She had been perfect that day: self-controlled, poised. She had played the part of the grieving daughter well. But whereas she had held no love for Duncan McKibben, Snape knew that she meant it now when she said that she would miss Edmunds. She had cared a great deal for her foster father, and Snape was quite certain that she would have stayed with him even if she'd had somewhere else to go.

She carried herself well all afternoon, caring for her guests as she always did, refilling glasses and plates and every now and then stopping for a friendly word. But as the hours went by, Snape noticed her shoulders slump. By the time the last guest left the pub, she seemed to have become several inches shorter.

'How about you have a seat and I will make you a sandwich and a cup of tea?' Snape offered.

His voice was soft, yet the look in his eyes made it clear that he would not take no for an answer, and Hope in her turn didn't look like she had the strength to protest. She sat down at the bar, closing her eyes for a moment, and Snape made for the kitchen, taking far longer than necessary to make a sandwich. He wanted to give Hope time to collect herself. He didn't want her to think that she needed to be strong for him.

'Will you manage?' he asked as he served her a simple cheese sandwich and a cup of strong, black tea a few minutes later. 'With the pub, I mean?'

Hope took a small bite of her sandwich, put it back on the plate and then slowly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Hopefully,' she replied quietly. 'Business has been alright for the last couple of months. All the bills are paid, and Edmunds managed to put away some savings. I'll get by. Unless the customers stop coming, that is.'

'Why would they stop coming?' Snape enquired. 'They seemed sincere enough today. I am quite sure that they very much appreciate both your service and your food. Much more than you appreciate mine, anyway.'

For a moment, Hope seemed at a loss to what Snape was referring, but as her eyes followed his to the sandwich that she had barely touched, she gave a short laugh.

'I'm sorry,' she started. 'I didn't mean to...'

'Don't worry about it,' Snape interrupted her. 'I know that there are days when food is the last thing on one's mind. Food, drink, sleep. I know there are days when even breathing seems unnecessary and irrelevant.'

He pushed the plate to the side so she wouldn't feel obligated to eat just to make him happy, and then he looked at Hope, once more with that look that suggested that he was about to give an order rather than make a request.

'The dishes can wait until tomorrow. I think you should take a long, hot shower and then do not much more than drink a cup of tea and go to bed. It has been a long day.'

Hope nodded.

'Indeed it has,' she agreed. 'But... if you don't mind, I'd like to go for a walk. Alone. Just to clear my head.'

'I understand,' Snape replied. 'Take all the time you need.'

'Will you be here when I come back?'

'Of course, I will.'

'Thank you,' Hope whispered, gifting Snape with a sad little smile. 'For everything.'

Snape shook his head, but Hope insisted.

'This is the second time you attend a wake for my sake. Surely you must have better things to do.'

'It might have been my duty as your Head of House to attend your father's wake,' Snape agreed. 'But I am not your teacher anymore and you are not my student. The only reason for me to be here today was because I wanted to.'

He watched after her from the window by the door as she headed down the wintery road that led to the lake. She had undone her braid, and her black hair was now hanging down her back. Snowflakes got caught in it, for some moments resembling stars in the velvety black sky before they melted and vanished. She would catch a cold, Snape thought, and considered for a moment going after Hope with a hat or an umbrella.

'Mother hen,' he muttered under his breath and turned to pick up some dishes and carry them to the kitchen. Hope was a grown-up woman, more than capable of taking care of herself. But as the snowfall grew heavier and she hadn't returned after over an hour, Snape grew worried anyway. She wouldn't be doing something stupid, would she, he wondered, almost immediately shaking his head at himself. But then again, even Edmunds had feared for Hope's wellbeing at times. She had promised him that she would never hurt herself, but now Edmunds was gone and along with him the promise Hope had given him.

As the clock struck ten, Snape put down the rag he'd been holding and headed for the front door. He never even went upstairs to fetch his cloak, and had someone asked him later if he had locked the door, he wouldn't even have been able to answer that simple question. For it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing at all, except Hope.

The snow was wet and heavy, and despite there only lying an inch or two on the road, Snape found it strenuous to walk through it. It seemed to take him hours to get to the lake, whereas it normally only took about ten minutes, and the night seemed to become darker by the second. The moon and the stars were hidden behind heavy clouds, and Snape shuddered, for the second time in less than twenty-four hours remembering his mother's tale of the land of the fairies. But while he wouldn't have minded losing his way the previous night, while he indeed would have welcomed a chance to slip away, he was now fighting the darkness with all his mental power. He couldn't get lost. He mustn't. He had to get to the lake. He had to get to Hope.

Had she wandered into the darkness as well, he wondered. Was she trapped in limbo already, still trying to find her way back but already forgetting where she was supposed to go and where she came from? What if he couldn't find her?

'Get a hold of yourself man!' Snape chided himself. It was but a fairy tale. The road under his feet was real, and it would lead him to the lake without any detours. And the darkness, as impenetrable as it seemed, was but a creation of his own mind.

By the time the lake came into view, the snowfall had ceased, and the moon was breaking forth from between the clouds. Its light was pale but bright enough for Snape to make out the footprints that were leading down to the water and onto the frozen lake. He could perceive a crack in the ice a few yards from the shore and heard the water lap over the surface. Coming to a halt, he opened his mouth to call for Hope, but no sound left his lips, and for some moments, he stood rooted to the spot, his mouth still

open and his heart hammering in his chest. Surely, after having lived by the lake for more than fifteen winters, Hope would know that the ice was still thin at the end of December, too thin to carry the weight of an adult. Surely, she wouldn't venture onto it... Or had her knowledge of the ice made her do just that? Had she expected the ice to break under her weight and had therefore deliberately walked out onto it?

Without any plan, Snape broke into a run. He was well aware that there was no chance for him to find Hope if she really was under the ice. And even if he did find her, it would be too late. But the voice of reason was silenced by panic and terror, and Snape had come all the way to the very edge of the lake when Hope called out for him.

'Severus, don't! The ice won't hold your weight!'

Snape spun around, straining his eyes to make out her form in the darkness. She was standing mere feet away from him, at the edge of the water. How he could not have seen her earlier was beyond him, but as he laid eyes upon her now, he was so relieved that he almost sank to his knees.

'The footprints,' he brought forth, panting. 'The crack in the ice. I thought... I feared...'

Hope came closer, her steps so silent that she could have been floating above the ground. The moonlight gave her pale face an eerie glow, and had it not been for her red-rimmed eyes, Snape would have wondered if he was gazing upon a ghost.

'I know this ice. I know it doesn't carry an adult before mid-January.'

'I was afraid that you were aware of just that,' Snape admitted. 'I feared you might...'

He broke off, unable to put his fears into words. They seemed silly now. Hope was strong, Snape knew that, but he also knew that even the strongest of persons could be consumed by their grief. He knew it only too well. How many times had he not played with the thought of putting an end to his miserable existence? As Potions master, he had all the possibilities in the world. It would be only too easy. His passing would be swift and painless. But every time he as much as approached a bottle of poison, he saw a pair of green eyes in front of him and remembered why he had to struggle on, for whom he stayed alive. But Hope, whom did she have? Who gave her the strength and a reason to carry on?

'There have been many nights when I stayed awake, staring into the darkness, convinced that I did not want to see the sun rise again. But there was always a reason to get up in the morning. Charles, our son, Edmunds...'

Hope's voice was so feeble that Snape reached out for her, fearing that she would collapse. Charles was out of reach, in a world she had fled and without any memory of her, and little Severus and Edmunds were both gone. How forlorn she must feel, how terribly alone. But Hope stood tall, and what Snape saw glittering in her eyes was the reflection of the moon and the stars, not tears.

'What is going on in the Wizarding world, Severus?'

'Why would you want to know now, tonight of all nights?' Snape asked, slightly taken aback. Hope had made it clear many months ago that she did not want to know anything about the Wizarding world or the war that was shaking its very foundation. And he had been glad not to tell her. Not telling her had always meant being able to forget everything for some blissful hours, even days. Not telling her had meant being free.

'I need to know where this war leaves you,' Hope explained. 'I need to know whether or not there is a chance that you will come back to me once you've left. I need to know if there is hope.'

Snape swallowed drily. What was he supposed to tell her? That he was standing with a foot in each camp and that his chances of surviving the war were less than slim? It was the truth, of course, but was the truth what she needed to hear now? Would the truth not bereave her of the very last scrap of hope she was holding in her hand and leave her standing with nothing?

Brushing a strand of wet hair from her cheek and carefully tucking it behind her ear, Snape looked deeply into her emerald green eyes.

'There will always be hope,' he said quietly, and for the duration of a heartbeat, he managed to believe it himself.

He laid his arm around her shoulder to lead her away from the water and back to the village, and as they walked, he felt her shiver.

'You are cold,' he pointed out and pulled her closer, relishing the feeling of her slender body against his. It felt good to hold her, to protect and shelter her, and as she later asked him to share her bed once again, Snape didn't need to think twice.

~~~

Once again time seemed to run slower than usual, and the clock on the wall seemed to have all but stopped ticking. But this time, Snape did not mind. For as much as he cared, this night could last for ever. Hope was lying beside him, drifting in and out of sleep, but while she had been stiff as a board the previous night, perched on the edge of the mattress and pretending that she wasn't there, she lay now relaxed on her side, curled up under her blanket like a kitten. Whenever she woke up, she looked at Snape, a ghost of a smile flitting over her face, and he stayed awake to watch over her and to make sure that he didn't miss a single one of those rare smiles.

'How do you know?' she suddenly asked. The church bells had just struck three.

'Know what?' Snape asked, his voice just about as sleepy as hers.

'You said earlier that you knew that there are days when nothing matters. Days when even eating and sleeping seem irrelevant. Days when you have to force yourself to keep breathing. How do you know? What did you lose?'

Snape drew a long, steadying breath. He saw Hope struggle to keep her eyes open and knew that she would very soon drift off to sleep once more. When she woke up again, she might have forgotten her question and he wouldn't need to answer. For he knew that the answer would hurt. Himself and maybe even her. But looking into her green eyes, he took a chance, praying that answering her question would be redemptive.

'I had a friend once,' he began, carefully weighing every word before he spoke it. 'She was my everything, my strength, my salvation. When I lost her, my world was shattered. My very soul was split in half, any reason to go on vanished into nothingness. I was desperate and willingly leaped into the abyss that was opening up before me.'

'You lost her on Halloween, didn't you? All those years ago.'

Snape swallowed.

'She died that night,' he replied, feeling the old scars in his heart once more opening up and starting to bleed. 'But I lost her many years before that, on a sunny afternoon by the Black Lake.'

He broke off, suddenly finding it hard to breathe and wishing that Hope would have never asked, that he would never have answered. It hurt so much, even after all those years.

Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, he tried to shut everything out. The memories, the pain, everything that he had been so careful to lock away for so many years. But he failed. One after another, treacherous tears escaped from under his dark lashes, ran down his pale cheeks and trickled onto the pillow, and he didn't have the strength to neither hide them or dry them off. Had it not been for Hope's tender touch, he might have drowned in them.

'It is alright to mourn,' she said, gingerly slipping her little hand into his and then holding on tight. And Snape squeezed her hand in return, silently pleading that she would not let go.

'I loved her,' he brought forth, every syllable a great effort. 'I loved her more than life itself.'

'I know,' Hope whispered, bringing his hand to her chest and cradling it like a little child. 'I know you've loved. And I pray that you haven't forgotten how to.'

Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot

Chapter 17 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Chapter 17: Should Old Acquaintance Be Forgot

Standing by the window, holding the steaming cup in her hand, Hope watched the snow fall, every now and then craning her neck to see the children that were building snowmen in a front yard a bit further down the road. Snape observed her from across the room where he himself was having a cup of tea at the bar. It had taken him quite a while to persuade her to have a break before the first guests arrived for their New Year's Eve dinner. There were still things to do, Hope had argued, and when she had finally accepted the cup he had held under her nose, Snape had been satisfied with his small victory. To try to persuade Hope to sit down with him now would be a waste of time. She would keep standing and check up on her work as soon as she had finished her tea. Not that it was necessary, for she hadn't missed anything. She had cleaned the tables so thoroughly that the wood shone with polish and had decorated them with white roses and tiny silver stars. There were glasses standing on every table, both for wine, beer and spirits. There were plates and cutlery and neatly folded napkins. The counters in the kitchen were laid with plates that waited to be filled, and from the pots on the stove came the promising scent of a delicious feast. Whoever came to the pub that night would dine like a king and most certainly be treated like one as well. Hope would make sure of that. And Snape was confident that he would enjoy the New Year's party in this little Muggle pub much more than he had ever enjoyed a fancy New Year's gathering at Malfoy manor.

'What are you smiling at?' Hope asked as she turned away from the window.

'This,' Snape replied, making a sweeping motion with his hand to include the whole of the pub. 'Everything looks perfect, and you will be the perfect hostess tonight. I was just thinking that Narcissa Malfoy could learn a trick or two from you.'

'How is Narcissa?' Hope enquired, a tiny frown appearing on her brow.

'She is getting by,' Snape replied slowly, wishing that he hadn't mentioned the lady of Malfoy manor. He wasn't keen to talk about the war and the effects it had on people, and surely, Hope wasn't keen to listen either. But now she had asked, and it would have been rude not to answer.

'The war is hard on everyone,' he declared. 'But Narcissa is tough. And she is a Slytherin. She will make it through it. I am quite confident of that.'

'Narcissa has been kind to me,' Hope said softly. 'I would hate to see her come to harm.'

Then she put down her cup on the nearest table.

'You never gave me an answer the other night. About the war.'

Her voice was still soft and so was the look in her eyes, and had he wanted to, Snape could have denied her an answer even now. She wouldn't insist on him answering, he was certain about that. Most probably, she wouldn't ask a third time either. But would it be fair to leave her in the dark? Soon he would leave her and return to the world she knew so little about. Should the worst happen, should he never be able to come back, wouldn't she have the right to know what had happened to him?

'The dark powers are becoming stronger and more numerous by the day,' he began in a grave tone. 'The resistance lacks a leader, someone who will lead them into battle and who they can follow without any doubts. Dumbledore put all his hope in Harry Potter, the Chosen One. But no one has seen the boy for months, and hope is fading. The light is fading.'

'And you?' Hope asked. 'What is your role in all of this?'

'I cannot tell you,' Snape answered, sadly shaking his head. 'No one must know.'

Sinking her teeth into her bottom lip, Hope nodded. The muscles at the back of her neck tightened, and from one moment to the other, her eyes came to resemble those cold, lifeless emeralds Snape both hated and feared. He couldn't bear to look at them and turned his head. His heart grew heavy, and it seemed to him as if the air around him was becoming colder. It almost felt as if a Dementor was approaching. The only thing missing was the sound of its rattling breath. Yet instead Snape heard footsteps behind him, soft and light, and felt a small, warm hand being laid upon his shoulder.

'I know you can't tell me,' Hope whispered. 'I know you mustn't. And I know that I have no right to ask, just as I know that there is no point in asking you to stay here.'

Snape swallowed and turned around, his black eyes locking onto her green ones. The look in them had once more become soft, and Snape did his best not to blink, wishing that he could look into those peaceful pools for the rest of his days.

'I would love to stay,' he said honestly. 'There is, in fact, no place on earth where I would rather be than here with you. You give me peace. You give me hope. And I refuse to give up on either of them.'

'There will always be hope. You said so yourself.'

Snape gave a weary smile. He wanted to believe it. By Merlin, he did.

'Your key, do you have it?' Hope asked, and Snape nodded, producing the little piece of metal from the pocket of his trousers and holding it out in the palm of his hand.

'Keep it close,' Hope prompted him, closing her fingers around Snape's which in their turn closed around the key. 'Remember that you are welcome here whenever you wish to return. Always.'

Time seemed to stand still for a moment as they both gazed upon their entwined hands. Snape felt a tingling in his fingers, faint enough for him to forget all about it in a heartbeat. But when Hope let go of his hand and he opened his fist, the key felt warm on his palm.

'What was that?' he asked. His voice was but a whisper. He hardly dared breathe.

'Magic,' Hope replied with a smile that made her green eyes sparkle like emeralds in the sunlight. Then she turned and crossed the room to unlock the door. The first dinner guests were about to arrive.

~~~

The evening was a success. There was food and drink aplenty, the diners laughed and sang, everyone feeling warm and fuzzy on the inside, a feeling that did not come from the food and drink alone. For there was something hanging in the air, a notion of joy and happiness that no one could really explain. But it made them forget the mists that had hung over the village for the better part of the year and the feeling of gloom that had inhabited all their hearts for far too long. Every now and then, someone proposed a toast, and more than once, it was dedicated to their hostess.

'To Hope!' rang the voices through the pub.

The ambiguity of the wording couldn't have been more obvious. Certainly, everyone was cheering for the landlady who made everyone feel like royalty that New Year's Eve. But no one could deny that there was indeed a feeling of hope and optimism in the air, bathing them all in a soft, silvery light. Even Snape managed to forget his worries for a while. He was sitting in his usual booth, not really feeling like mixing with the other patrons but still enjoying the atmosphere. And while everyone else was occupied with their meal and drink, his eyes were on Hope. She was manoeuvring smoothly between tables and chairs, carrying plates and glasses, never too busy to stop and exchange some friendly words with her patrons. She was the perfect hostess, just as Snape had predicted. In fact, not even Narcissa Malfoy could have lived up to Hope's standards. For Hope had something Narcissa sorely lacked, an honest, heartfelt cordiality that made people smile and feel at ease. And she herself seemed entirely unaware of her gift.

'Is this how you normally spend your New Year's Eve? Hiding in the shadows?'

Snape looked up. He had been so absorbed in his musing that he had not noticed Hope approaching him.

'I am not hiding,' he replied. 'I am observing.'

'You might have to explain that to George. He wants you to come over to their table and have a pint with him and the lads.'

Snape turned his head to look past Hope and saw one of the old fishermen holding up his glass towards him.

'They don't bite,' Hope said. 'Come on, make an old man happy.'

For a moment, Snape hesitated. He wasn't normally of the social kind. But the old fisherman seemed to be very keen to have some new company. It surely wouldn't hurt. And indeed, they turned out to be kind men, George being the most talkative of them all. He was also the one who drank the most.

'When are you going to take our darling Hope out for a date?' he slurred out after his third pint in Snape's company.

Snape looked at him, puzzled.

'Hope and I are friends,' he explained. 'I doubt that a date would be an appropriate pastime.'

'Friends my foot!' George exclaimed. 'I've known Hope since she was a wee lass...'

'No, you haven't,' one of his companions interrupted him. 'She was almost twenty when she came here.'

'She was a wee lass,' George insisted, trying to focus on Snape again. 'Just a wee lass. I know her well. And I know that she wouldn't look at you the way she does if you were just friends.'

'And how exactly am I looking at Severus, if I may ask?'

George chuckled and accepted the cup of strong black coffee that Hope was offering him before he kindly patted her hand.

'You smile at him, poppet. Don't you try and deny it.'

'Don't embarrass the girl, George! If you can't keep quiet, we'll have to take you home,' his companions warned him, and George started laughing and telling tall tales about his latest catch of fish. Soon it almost seemed as if he had all but forgotten about his statement. But Snape hadn't forgotten, and by the looks of it, neither had Hope. For she now barely met his gaze, and when she did, she quickly turned away again.

A drunk mind speaks a sober heart, Snape thought as he watched George sway out of the pub, supported by his two companions. Could it be that the old man had seen something he hadn't? Did the little rare smile on Hope's lips mean more than he understood?

With a slight frown on his face, Snape made to return to his booth to gather his thoughts and analyse the situation at hand, but all of a sudden, the whole pub seemed to be on their feet. Coats were being grabbed and flutes filled with sparkling wine, and soon everyone was on their way out to hear the church bells ring in the New Year and to admire the fireworks the mayor had promised. The only ones staying inside were Snape and Hope.

Snape cleared his throat.

'You have dazzled them all,' he pointed out. 'They will talk about this feast until midsummer.'

'It has been my pleasure,' Hope replied, filling two glasses with sparkling wine. 'It has been lovely to see so many smiling faces.'

She handed Snape a glass, but instead of accepting it, he tilted his head to look at her, narrowing his black eyes.

'You do not look very happy,' he stated.

Forcing herself to smile but failing miserably, Hope drew a breath through her nose.

'It is almost midnight, and the New Year is less than five minutes away,' she said. 'This means you will be leaving soon.'

Snape's mouth fell open.

'I wasn't planning to leave tonight.'

In fact, he had not been planning anything. During the course of the evening, he had even managed to ignore the fact that he would have to leave at all. But it was true. The first of the students would return to Hogwarts in time for dinner on the first of January. As headmaster, Snape would be expected to be there.

'What's the point of delaying your departure?' Hope asked, lowering her eyes. 'It won't hurt any less if you wait until the morning. On the contrary.'

She had been speaking quietly enough for Snape to pretend that he had not heard her, and he was grateful for it. For he did not know what to tell her, and the more he thought about it, the clearer it became that she was right. Him leaving would hurt. It would hurt immensely.

Hope set the glasses on the counter and took her shawl and a worn winter jacket from a hook on the wall.

'It belonged to Edmunds,' she explained, handing the jacket to Snape, still avoiding his gaze. 'Will you come outside and watch the fireworks with me?'

She didn't join the crowd that had gathered on the street outside the pub but lingered on the doorstep, her shawl tightly wrapped around her shoulders, and Snape came to stand behind her, close enough to smell the scent of her hair, close enough to see the muscles at her neck tense up each time she took a shuddering breath. She was holding back tears, and Snape, too, felt a lump form in his throat. He did not want to leave. Not now, not the next morning, not ever. He wanted to stay at the pub, close to the woman who had been nothing but kind to him, who had accepted him with all his flaws and shortcomings without asking for anything in return. But he knew that he could not stay, knew that he mustn't, and he realised that Hope had been right: him leaving would hurt even more if he stayed another night.

'Happy New Year,' he whispered into her ear as the church bell struck twelve and the fireworks started to go off. His left hand was resting on Hope's shoulder, and it took all his willpower not to lean in and brush her cheek with his lips. For he knew that a peck on the cheek would not be enough. If he kissed her on the cheek now, he would come to claim her lips, her body and eventually her very soul. She would willingly surrender to him, and he would offer himself to her in return, and when he left in the morning, he wouldn't be able to do so without breaking both her heart and his own. And so Snape withdrew, pulling his wand from the back pocket of his trousers, and with a crack which everyone except Hope believed to be part of the fireworks, he Disapparated.

## All Men Must Die

*Chapter 18 of 19*

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

### Chapter 18: All Men Must Die

Looking up at the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, Snape did his best to look indifferent.

'Your tomb has been raided,' he informed his predecessor, his voice cold and detached.

'By your master, I presume?' Dumbledore asked.

'By the Dark Lord, yes,' Snape confirmed.

'What has been taken?'

'Nothing but your wand.'

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, stroking his long white beard. He seemed neither upset nor surprised. In fact, he looked almost satisfied, as if a carefully crafted plan had finally born fruit. Snape, however, did not yet understand.

'May I ask why the Dark Lord has need of your wand?'

Dumbledore smiled benignly.

'What is Voldemort's greatest desire, Severus? What is it he longs for the most?'

'Immortality,' Snape answered quickly. Most witches and wizards would have said that Lord Voldemort's ultimate goal was to take over the Wizarding world, but Snape knew better. Becoming the greatest wizard in the world was a mere bonus. What the Dark Lord really desired was to live forever.

Dumbledore nodded.

'And what, Severus, stands between him and his ultimate goal?'

'Harry Potter,' Snape answered, parts of Sybill Trelawney's first prophecy ringing in his ears.

*... neither can live while the other survives...*

Once more, Dumbledore nodded.

'And he himself must be the one to kill the boy,' he said.

'I am very much aware of that already,' Snape interrupted. He did not need to be reminded of the fact that he had protected the boy, Lily's son, for all those years just to see him being led to slaughter like a lamb.

'I am also aware that the Dark Lord has failed to kill the boy on several occasions,' he carried on. 'Are you implying that he intends to use your wand now? That he thinks that your wand will do the trick?'

Dumbledore nodded a third time.

'He is quite convinced of it, for a matter of fact.'

'Why?' Snape asked, his tone a tad sharper than he had intended for it to be. Dumbledore was once more driving him insane. The old man knew all the answers but insisted on beating about the bush.

Obviously sensing the dark wizard's impatience, Dumbledore leaned slightly forwards in his chair, gazing down at Snape.

'The wand I carried, Severus, was not just any wand. It is the Elder Wand.'

'I beg your pardon?' Snape narrowed his eyes. 'The Elder Wand? The Unbeatable Wand? That is an old wife's tale. Such a wand never existed.'

'Has it not?' Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes twinkling behind his spectacles. 'Can you be sure?'

Snape drew breath as if to speak but thought better of it. There were many mysteries in the Wizarding world he did not understand, many myths that had turned out to be true. Who was he to deny the existence of the Deathly Hallows?

'The Elder Wand is the most powerful wand known to wizardkind,' Dumbledore continued, 'Voldemort believes that it will make him undefeatable. He believes that the Elder Wand will enable him to finally kill Harry Potter and that he, consequently, will become the Master of Death.'

'But he will fail,' Snape pointed out. 'When he kills the boy...'

'... he will destroy the part of his own soul that lives inside Harry,' Dumbledore finished Snape's sentence. 'It will be the end of him.'

'Then there is nothing to worry about, is there?' Snape exclaimed sardonically.

'Voldemort will vanish, and the Wizarding world will be saved,' Dumbledore continued calmly. 'But I am afraid, Severus, that I have put you in grave danger.'

'Me?' Snape asked.

'Yes, my boy. You see, according to legend, to gain the allegiance of the Elder Wand, a wizard must defeat its previous owner. But as I was ready to be defeated, according to our plan, I assumed the powers of the Elder Wand would be nullified.'

'And you were wrong?' Snape wondered.

'Partly,' Dumbledore started to explain. 'You see, technically you did not defeat me. I was, prior to your arrival, disarmed by Draco Malfoy.'

Snape frowned.

'So now Draco is the master of the Elder Wand?'

'Most probably, yes,' Dumbledore replied. 'But Voldemort must never know. The boy is still innocent, his soul untarnished. We must protect him. For as soon as Voldemort suspects that the Elder Wand's loyalty does not lie with him, he will set out to kill its true master. Will he not, Severus?'

Any other man would have paled or at least gasped in terror. After all, the portrait of Albus Dumbledore had just read out his death sentence. But Severus Snape stood tall, seemingly unmoved.

'He will indeed,' he concurred, his voice impassive.

'And when that time comes, Severus, you will have to be ready. You will need to make sure that Harry learns everything he needs to know.'

'I will be ready.'

Snape's face was an inscrutable mask. There was no way of telling what he was feeling. In fact, he did not allow himself to feel anything for the time being. It wasn't until later, in the privacy of his study, that he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. His shoulders slumped, and as he held on to the back of his chair, his knuckles turned pure white. So this was it then. He was to be sacrificed for the greater good. He could understand Dumbledore's reasoning, of course. As the old man had said, Draco was still innocent and his soul not yet damaged. He could still be saved. Severus Snape, on the other hand, the Dark Lord's most trusted servant, a liar, a spy, a murderer... He was beyond salvation. Certainly, he had been innocent once as well, and his soul had been pure. But all this was so long ago that Snape could not remember how it had felt.

Maybe death would be a relief, he mused. To slip away, to be freed of all the pain and be absolved of all sins. But what would come afterwards? Snape believed neither in heaven nor hell, and purgatory was a concept he was unable to grasp. Would there be anything at all, he wondered. Or would there be nothing, just vast, eternal blackness with neither beginning nor end? The mere thought made Snape whimper. He had been alone for most of his life, and at times this had been so painful that he had wished to die. Was he now destined to spend eternity in the same miserable state without any hope of ever escaping it?

'Please, no,' he whispered into the darkness, acutely aware that no one would hear him. There had to be something! Some light, some hope, a tiny flame that burned in the depths of darkness, not unlike the one that was burning in the worn wooden frame above the fireplace.

Snape looked at it now, mesmerised. Hope had lit the candle in her room every night since he had left on New Year's Eve, and while Snape had been worried for her at first, while he had feared that she had once more grown afraid of the dark, he had soon understood that Hope wasn't lighting the candle for her own sake alone. For she rarely seemed fearful when he watched her in the flame. Instead he often saw her standing by the window, longingly looking out over the lake. And on some nights, when the darkness seemed impenetrable, Snape dared believe that she was waiting for his return.

He longed to go to her now. He longed to lie beside her, to listen to her breathing and feel the warmth of her body. He longed to feel her comforting touch, to see the precious glimmer in her emerald green eyes, a rare smile dedicated only to him. But he dared not go. He dared not look at her and tell her that all hope was lost. And so he settled on the chair in front of the empty grate, his eyes firmly locked on the tiny flickering flame, hoping that it would give him peace once again.

~~~

How many nights had he spent sitting there, Snape wondered as he stood in front of the fireplace, ready to leave his study for the very last time. How many nights had he wished he were able to Apparate right into the wooden frame, into Hope's comforting embrace? How many nights had he dreamed about escaping the Wizarding world, the war and his certain death? Too many to count, most probably, Snape concluded, but it did not matter now. For he knew that tonight he would be gazing into the candle light for the very last time. Harry Potter had returned to Hogwarts, and the Dark Lord was approaching, called by Alecto Carrow. By the time the sun rose in the morning, everything would be over. Either the Light would have triumphed or Darkness would have started its everlasting reign. And he, Severus Snape, would be dead.

Should he be afraid, he mused. Should he be angry or sad? Disappointed? A bit of each, maybe, and he had gone through all of these stages over the last weeks, but now he felt nothing. Nothing at all. For emotions were a luxury he could not allow himself that night. He had to stay focused. He had one more task to fulfil, one more message to convey. If he failed, Potter would fail. And if Potter failed... No! He mustn't even consider that possibility! Dumbledore had believed in the boy. Dumbledore had believed in him, Snape. He still did! It could work. It just might. It had to.

Now to get close to the boy...

One last time, Snape checked his pockets. In his right, he carried three phials: Blood-Replenishing Potion, Essence of Dittany and Phoenix Tears. In his left, he carried a Bezoar and the key to a shabby little pub in a tiny Muggle village. Just when he would use any of those items, he did not know. Surely, when the Dark Lord decided to kill him, he would use the Killing Curse. Swift and merciless. No potion would save him then, Snape was aware of that, but maybe he would be able to save someone else. For the Bezoar, he would most probably not have any use. It was highly improbable that someone would get poisoned during the battle. But he would keep it in his pocket for good luck, for the same reason that he carried the key Hope had given him last summer. For luck, he would need. He would need plenty of it.

~~~

His first attempt to get to Potter had failed. He had hoped to get the boy on his own, up in Ravenclaw Tower, where Alecto had apprehended him. But unfortunately,

Minerva McGonagall had gotten to him faster and as could be expected of the Head of Gryffindor House she had protected her student. Fiercely, like the lioness she was! Then Flitwick and Sprout had appeared, followed by Slughorn, and Snape had realised that they would not let him anywhere near Potter. In fact, had he even made the tiniest of moves towards the boy, they would have torn him to pieces and Potter would have gladly joined in. For the boy hated him, so passionately that the air around him seemed to vibrate. And so Snape had been forced to make a run for it, hoping against hope that he would get a second chance to encounter Potter on his own. But now he did not even know where the boy was.

The battle was in full rage: giants and Acromantula had joined in, spells and curses were cast and found their mark, followers of Potter and the Dark Lord alike were injured, maimed and slain. The walls of Hogwarts were crumbling, and the ground was turning red with blood.

Concealed by a Disillusionment Charm, Snape moved carefully across the battlefield. He helped where he could, stunning Death Eaters and shielding students whenever possible, but his main goal was to find Potter. The boy needed to know! He needed to understand before he came face to face with the Dark Lord. He needed to know that he had to die.

'Lucius! Lucius! Have you found him? Have you found Draco?'

Snape came to a halt. Some feet to his left, protected by the shadows of a crumbling wall, stood Narcissa Malfoy, reaching out for her husband, who was hurrying towards her.

'I haven't,' Lucius replied, panting. 'The Dark Lord, he doesn't want me to... He sent me to find Severus.'

'I don't care what the Dark Lord wants,' Narcissa cried. 'We need to find our son. We need to bring him home.'

'I can't, Cissy,' Lucius replied, his voice breaking. 'The Dark Lord... I have orders... I must find Severus.'

'You have found me.'

Against his better judgement, Snape cast off the charm that had been veiling him and joined the Malfoys in the shadows.

'Severus!' Narcissa exclaimed, sinking to her knees and clasping his hand. 'Have you seen Draco? Have you seen my boy?'

'I have not,' Snape replied, pulling Narcissa up onto her feet. 'Where is the Dark Lord?' he enquired, turning towards Lucius.

'The Shrieking Shack,' Lucius replied. 'He wants you.'

'I know.'

It's over, Snape thought, his heart sinking. Voldemort had connected the dots. He thought that he had understood the secrets of the Elder Wand and had therefore called for its master, the master he would have to slay in order to gain the wand's allegiance. Severus Snape would die without having fulfilled his last task. He had not found Potter, and the boy would be unprepared when he met his nemesis. The Dark Lord would be victorious.

'Find Draco,' Snape told the Malfoys. 'Find him and get as far away from here as you can. Lucius, you have kin in France. Go there. Disappear.'

'He will find us,' Lucius replied, desperation ringing in his voice as he held out his left arm. 'No matter where we go.'

'You have to try,' Snape insisted. 'Now go. Find your son. Save him.'

They ran right out into the battle. Blinded by fear, neither Lucius nor Narcissa knew where they were heading, and Snape understood that they would never succeed. In fact, they might die before they even came close to finding their son. They needed protection. They needed guidance.

Snape looked down at his wand. It might be useless to even try, he thought. Darkness and desperation was spreading inside his heart, and he doubted that he would be able to cast the spell. And even if he did, he did neither know if the Malfoys would follow his Patronus nor where it would lead them. But they were his friends. He had promised Narcissa to help protect her son. He had to try.

*'Expecto Patronum!'*

At first, nothing happened, but still Snape kept his wand aloft. He wasn't about to accept defeat just yet. It might be too late for him to help Potter, but he would at least try to save Draco, one last innocent life.

His wand arm started to tremble, but Snape stood tall, searching deep in his mind for a happy memory. He saw a candle flicker, heard the sound of slow, regular breathing. He looked down and saw a little hand lying in his, fingers entwined. Then the candle went out, and Snape feared that he had failed. But instead of darkness, there suddenly was a light, a bright silvery light. A swan shot from the tip of Snape's wand, spread its wings and rose into the air. It dived down over the Malfoys, flew ahead of them, leaving a silvery trail for them to follow, and Snape stared after the majestic bird, his mouth open. Was he dreaming, he wondered. This couldn't be. His Patronus had always been a doe. Always. His blessing and his curse. But now it had changed form, and as Snape watched the swan glide through the open gates of Hogwarts castle, he felt his heart grow warm. There was still hope, he thought. There would always be hope.

~~~

'Let me find the boy. Let me bring you Potter. I know I can find him, my Lord. Please.'

Snape refused to give up. There was still hope. There bloody well must be! He would be given another chance to approach Potter. Even better, if he were to bring Harry Potter into Voldemort's presence now, the boy armed with knowledge the Dark Lord had not, they might be able to bring the monster down together. It could work. It could! If only Voldemort let him go. But the Dark Lord seemed for the time being not interested in Potter. Instead, his eyes and his mind were on his wand. The Elder Wand. The Death Stick. He was concerned that once he met Potter, the wand would fail him, just like his old wand had failed him, just like Lucius' wand had.

'My Lord, let me get the boy,' Snape pleaded once again, trying to win time. But Voldemort would have none of it.

'The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner,' he explained. 'You killed Albus Dumbledore. While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot be truly mine.'

No! NO! It mustn't be this way, Snape thought, gritting his teeth. He wasn't ready. Potter wasn't ready! He must get to the boy! He must tell him! He could not die now. He mustn't! But the Dark Lord swiped the air with the Elder Wand, and seconds later, Snape screamed as Nagini's fangs pierced his neck. But he didn't scream from pain. He was screaming out his desperation, his hopelessness. He had failed after all.

His knees gave way, and he fell to the floor. Desperately he tried to staunch the wound in his neck with his right hand while trying to get his left hand into his pocket. He mustn't die. Not now. He wasn't ready. The boy was not yet prepared. He had to try the potions. He must at least try. The Phoenix tears, they would help. They would keep him alive. But when he thrust his hand into his pocket, all he could feel was a cold stone and realised that his phials, the vessels that held his salvation, were in his other pocket. He coughed and spluttered and tried to move his hand. But his arm was heavy as lead, and he understood that it was too late. The blood loss and Nagini's poison had weakened him. It would only be a matter of minutes until his organs would stop functioning, only a matter of minutes until he perished.

Then he heard footsteps. Out of nowhere, the Potter boy appeared. He was approaching him, bending over him, and Snape's heart once more filled with hope. It could still work. There could still be time.

'Take it,' he managed to bring forth, seizing the boy by his robes. 'Take it.'

He could feel the memories leave his mind. Those memories which he had harboured so carefully and protected from the Dark Lord for so many years. They left him and left behind a coldness that chilled Snape to the bones.

'Look at me,' he whispered, pulling the boy close. He wanted to tell him what to do with the memories he had just been given, wanted to tell him how to use them. But he felt his mouth fill with blood, his throat, his nose. He was drowning, unable to utter one single more sound.

Staring into the boy's emerald green eyes, Snape let go of Harry, and his hand thudded to the floor, limp and lifeless. He had nothing more to give, was empty even of emotions. He was tired now and wanted to sleep, slip into well-deserved rest. From far away, he heard the Dark Lord's voice. It reverberated from the walls and the floor, and as Harry Potter jumped to his feet, Snape felt an urge to once more grab the boy by his robes. But he was unable to. He could neither move his hand nor speak, and as he heard the boy leave the room with his companions, he felt the coldness devour his heart. He should have known, he thought, blankly staring into the darkness. He should have foreseen that he would die like he had lived. Alone. All alone.

A spasm went through his body, made him convulse and involuntarily close his hands to fists, and in his left pocket, his fingers closed around a little piece of metal.

'Hope!' he croaked as his eyes suddenly locked onto a pair of green emeralds.

He was delirious now, Snape was sure of it. He couldn't be looking into Hope's eyes. He was lying on the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, and his dying mind was playing tricks on him. He had looked into Potter's eyes before everything had become dark. Lily's eyes, almond shaped and emerald green. Hope's eyes, framed with dark lashes, holding the promise of a smile that was destined for nobody but him. What he was seeing now was but a memory, the last he'd ever have. His last and his most precious.

One last time, he tried to draw breath but found that he could not. There were iron bands tightening around his chest, pressing the last air out of his lungs. The green eyes vanished from his sight, and as darkness drew in over him, becoming denser by the moment, Severus Snape felt himself fall into nothingness.

Epilogue

Chapter 19 of 19

After Snape has been told that Lily's son has only been kept alive so that he can die at the right moment, he leaves Hogwarts for a little Muggle town where he once spent a happy weekend with his father. Walking down memory lane he finds a shabby little pub, a memory and hope. (Sequel to *His First*)

Epilogue

'And what happens when I flip this switch?' the blonde girl asked.

'The lights will go off,' the boy answered. His hair was mousy brown.

'Without magic? Wow! How do you know all that stuff, Dennis?' the girl asked, obviously in awe.

'I'm Muggle-born, remember?' The boy was positively beaming. 'Do you want me to show you how it works?'

'Mr. Creevey! Get away from that light switch! You know the rules, don't you?'

Quickly, the boy withdrew the hand he had extended towards the light switch, looking slightly guilty, and his teacher looked around, worrying that someone might have overheard the somewhat odd conversation. But even though the landlady was looking in their direction, she didn't seem to find anything to be out of the ordinary. Thankfully she seemed neither to have heard the words magic and Muggle-born nor had her attention been drawn to the fact that a seventeen-year-old girl did not know how to work a light switch.

Thank Merlin, Professor Khasan thought, making a mental note to speak to the Headmaster once he returned to Hogwarts with his students. It didn't matter that they were in their last year. Having them running around in a Muggle village was just too dangerous. They were too distracted, couldn't behave themselves! It was a miracle that nothing serious had happened yet. Really, the excursion had to be taken out of the curriculum! The children could learn about Muggles from books and by asking their Muggle-born classmates. There was no need whatsoever to visit a Muggle village and risk the exposure of the Wizarding world once a year!

'Lemonade and apples are being served in the backyard now. And you look like you need a cup of tea.'

Professor Khasan turned around, looking at the landlady who was holding out a steaming cup towards him. Her fingers were slender, her nails perfectly manicured, and her black hair was pulled into a neat bun at her neck. She seemed to be out of place in the little pub somehow, Khasan thought. But what exactly it was that gave him that feeling, he did not know.

'I would offer you something stronger, but I guess you are not allowed to drink when on duty.'

'I might get back to you about that,' Khasan replied, sighing. 'If they keep behaving like this!'

'I find you have a very well-behaved class there,' the landlady pointed out, and Khasan sent a prayer to the heavens that she would not have any reason to change her mind during the next few minutes. Merlin forbid that any of the children performed magic! Khasan did not know, of course, that the village pub was one of the safest places in the village to bring his Muggle Studies class and that the landlady would be more than forgiving should anything magical happen in her backyard. For he did not know that the landlady of the little pub was, indeed, a witch.

With the tiniest of smiles playing around her lips, Hope now looked after Professor Khasan as he nervously checked up on his students, making sure no one was levitating their apples or turning their glasses into mice. Why the professor was so nervous, Hope didn't understand. He and his students had been in the village for almost three hours now, and none of the children had done anything forbidden. They were indeed well-behaved and blended in just nicely with their Muggle clothes. In fact, had it not been for the faint tingling on her skin, Hope would not even have noticed that Wizarding folk had come to her pub.

She would always sense magic, she thought to herself now as she stood in the doorway, watching the Hogwarts students eat their apples and drink their lemonade and their teacher sip his tea. Always, even though she herself had not done any magic for almost three years. Not since the day she had saved Severus Snape.

How she had done it, she could still not fully understand. She had, after all, not performed any magic for half a lifetime. But maybe doing magic was indeed like riding a broom. Once you've mastered it, you'll never forget how to do it. But still, she was to this very day amazed by what she had done.

When she had bewitched his key on New Year's Eve, when she had linked it to hers to ensure that Severus would always be able to return to her pub, she had not been too confident that it would work. And when her key had started to glow that night in the beginning of May three years ago, she had thought that she was imagining things. But when she had heard a thud downstairs in the pub, the sound of something soft and heavy hitting the floor, she had understood that her charm had worked. She had also understood that something had happened, something terrible that had made Severus flee the Wizarding world. She had hurried downstairs, her heart hammering in her chest, and had found him by the door, lying in a puddle of blood. So much blood! And he had been so pale, so terribly pale and still, and for some moments, Hope had been convinced that he was dead. He couldn't be alive, she had thought, not with that wound at his neck. But when she had bent over him, when she had looked into his beetle black eyes, he had called her name.

At first, all she had been able to think of was that he would die in her arms and with her name on his lips, just like Elisabeth had. She had felt her heart break in two and wished that she could die with him. What would she have to live for if Severus died? How would she be able to go on? She would be left with nothing. No future, no hope, nothing at all. Then she had come to her senses. Grabbing on to his blood-stained robes with one hand, she had pulled her wand his mother's wand with her free hand, had closed her eyes and concentrated hard on her destination. She hadn't allowed herself to feel anything, neither fear nor sadness, and when she had opened her eyes again, she had not even allowed herself to feel triumphant over the fact that she had managed to Apparate. There hadn't been time.

The healer at St. Mungo's had been marvellous. He had not asked any questions, neither about how his patient had been injured nor his name but taken charge immediately, respecting Hope's wish to not call any nurses. He had been worried at first that it was too late, that there was nothing he could do, but then he had found the phials in Severus' robes. They had been carefully labelled and contained just what he had needed. When he had found the Bezoar, he had almost levitated with happiness.

He had administered the Phoenix Tears first and shoved the Bezoar into his patient's mouth. Then he had made him swallow the Blood-Replenishing Potion, and by the time he had applied Essence of Dittany to Severus' neck, the sweat on his brow had all but dried.

'I think we've done it,' he had said, a note of relief in his voice. 'He needs to rest now to regain his strength. There will be scarring, and I cannot yet say if there will be any damage to his vocal cords or any of his organs, but he'll live. He will live!'

Then he had looked up at Hope, and the last he saw before his memory had been erased were her emerald green eyes.

Hopefully, she had not done any permanent damage, Hope thought now. She had been thinking of the healer many times over the years, had wanted to thank him and apologise for her actions, but she had never gotten in touch. In fact, she had kept away from the Wizarding world altogether. Any contact would have jeopardised not only her secrets but also Severus Snape's.

She stayed at the pub until Professor Khasan and his students had left and then put up a sign on the front door saying Closed. It was in the middle of the week, and there would be no guests until it was time for tea. No one would mind if she spent the afternoon down by the lake.

She let her hair down, and it fell over her shoulders like curtains of black velvet. The soft spring breeze tucked at her skirt, and the sun warmed her face, and by the time Hope came to the lake, her cheeks were all rosy. Her heart felt light, and had it not been unladylike, she might even have taken off her shoes and wandered barefoot through the grass.

She paused a few yards away from the shore, her eyes on the two swans that soundlessly glided through the water, side by side, every now and then lovingly rubbing their heads together. It was the third year the two nested together. The first year, only one of their young had survived until the end of summer. The rest had been taken by foxes and owls. The next year, two more had made it. How many there would be this year, remained to be seen. It was still early spring, and the pen had not even laid her eggs yet.

Seemingly aimlessly, Hope walked along the shore, looking back over her shoulder every now and then to watch the swans. They were beautiful, majestic, and as they took flight, heading for the sun, Hope could but gasp. She loved those birds and would never get enough of them.

'Swans mate for life. Did you know that?'

A smile tugging at the corners of her lips, Hope came to a hold, squinting. The willow's branches hung low, and had she not heard his voice, she would probably not have noticed the man who was leaning with his back against the tree trunk. But then again, she had been quite sure that she would find him there.

'As a matter of fact, I did know,' she replied and then tilted her head, looking at the man under the willow. Black clothes, black eyes and black hair streaked with strands of silver.

'The children have gone now, you know,' she informed him. 'You can come home.'

Home. Severus Snape smiled. He had called the pub his home for almost three years now, but still it seemed unreal at times. He had a home. A real home. A place where he was safe. A place where he was welcome. A place he longed for when he was away.

'I'd rather stay here for a little while longer,' he replied. 'And I wouldn't mind some company.'

The sunlight was reflecting in Hope's eyes as she approached him, and as so often, Severus was mesmerised by those two sparkling emeralds and the smile that lay hidden within them, visible for no one else but him.

'Will you ever reveal yourself?' Hope asked as she came to stand beside him, so close that her left shoulder was touching his right.

'One day, maybe,' Severus answered. But for the time being, he had no intentions whatsoever to let the Wizarding world know that he was still alive. He was content with his life as it was now. For the first time ever, he was his own master. He could come and go as he pleased without having to answer to anyone, and the only duty he had was to lock the front door in the evening while Hope counted up the till. She never asked anything of him, never had and probably never would, and Snape hoped that one day, he would find the right words to express his gratitude. For a simple thank you would never be enough.

She had taken good care of him. During the first couple of weeks after the war, he had rarely been awake but slipped in and out of consciousness as both his body and mind had struggled to heal. But every time he had awoken, no matter the hour, Hope had been there by his side, wiping the sweat off his brow or cleaning his wounds, never too tired to gift him with a smile. She had fed him, washed him, nurtured him, and when the nightmares had come, when he had dreamed of snakes and gleaming red eyes and woken up screaming, she had held his hand.

He still had those dreams, every now and then. Most probably, they would never vanish completely, and there were nights when he feared that his demons would one day devour him. But he didn't need to explain. Hope understood. She always had. For her scars were as deep as his, her demons just as powerful. But her gentle touch was all it took for Severus to go back to sleep, just like his touch was all she needed to find the strength to chase her wraiths away. On those nights, the white candle on her nightstand burned for both of them, and they both knew that there was light to be found on even the darkest of nights. They both knew that there would always be hope.

THE END

A/N: A big THANK YOU to my lovely beta, my readers and reviewers. Some of you have become very dear to me over the last year. Thank you for all your support, your criticism and your love. You make writing worthwhile.

I'll be leaving the fandom for a while now in order to concentrate on my original work. My first novel is to be released in a month, the second one is in the making. PM me if you're interested.

Take care out there, wherever you are. I am sure we will see each other again one day.