

I am walking

by Memory

A missing moment in the relationship between Dumbledore and Snape.

I am walking

Chapter 1 of 1

A missing moment in the relationship between Dumbledore and Snape.

Disclaimer: This is a non-profit tribute to the works of JK Rowling, who created and, together with her publishers and licensees, owns the characters and settings elaborated herein.

All my gratitude to my kind previewers, **Duj** and **Tearsofphoenix**, and to my beta **Overhill**. Many thanks to my kind readers and reviewers. And thanks to **Stella**, who is always eager to support my creations ;)

I am walking...

I am walking in the corridors. My mind has been busy with many different thoughts in these last hours: bitter reflections, sad memories, new projects... even excitement, in spite of the gloomy events I have been called to witness. But now I feel a cold irritation in my heart. The boy didn't show up at dinner. Since the moment of my announcement, the boy has systematically avoided any other member of the staff. The boy has even declined to join me in my mission yesterday. I suppose he didn't want to look in the eyes the baby he is convinced to have orphaned. At least, I hope that that is the reason. Until now, he hasn't shown any visible sorrow about him, though I believe he should. I wonder if this could mean something...

Now, where's the end of the damn gallery? I'm getting old and tired, let's admit it... or perhaps these corridors are longer than I remember...

Minerva instead has spent her entire day there, of course, watching the house and trying to be of help; but she doesn't know the truth. She is obviously overwhelmed by an intense compassion for the child. Her maternal ambitions, always frustrated, have found a worthy target in the small one. Yesterday night I was even expecting her to propose me to adopt him and bring him to Hogwarts. But this can't be done: if she had heard the prophecy, she would understand why. Thank Merlin, she hasn't and will not think to question me again. Luckily, nobody has heard the prophecy, apart from me... or better: nobody has heard the prophecy "in its wholeness", not even the unaware seer who has declaimed it while talking in unconsciousness. As always, destiny follows its mysterious course and again invests me with great responsibilities and with an even greater commitment. I know it. I have always known I have been predestined, in spite of my many detractors... and one of them sadly is even in my own family.

It's cold here...

Yes, Abe, I know what you would say. I can't deny that I have made mistakes, and hurtful ones... but my mistakes have taught me that I can't expose myself. People aren't prepared to accept the leadership of a superior mind tending with all its strength to the Greater Good. The Greater Good has its own ways, and they are unknown to the majority of men... Wizards, Muggles, there is no difference. But we, the illuminated, those who have been blessed and cursed by this knowledge, we have the power and the wisdom and the moral obligation to use this knowledge to lead the ignorant masses to salvation... regardless of their reluctance. A hard task. Yet so rewarding... But

let's think of the boy now.

Mmmm, it should be shorter if the stairs help me...

The boy is not behaving the way I expected him to. Evidently, my announcement has crushed him, in spite of his words of acceptance. I wonder if he's thinking of resigning... Of course, there is no need for him to perform his fiction any longer now... though he is a good teacher, despite his age. But, teaching aside, I need him. I can't let him go. He is too much an important pawn in this game. He has been the beginning, the unexpected gift, Voldemort's weak spot, the chink in his armour, and he has played his double role as a spy in a perfect way, gaining both Tom's and my confidence. And he is only a boy!

His role could be invaluable in a future that has still to come, but that my mind can easily envision. That's the great difference between me and these short-sighted individuals happily celebrating the victory. They don't know... And perhaps they are blessed by such pitiful ignorance. But I, Albus Percival Brian Wulfric Dumbledore, I just can't wait and see. I must prepare myself for what will come, because it will certainly come. To a less acute mind, it could easily seem that the prophecy has been fulfilled. But I know that this effortless ending can't be the one envisaged by that demented woman in her astonishing vision. The child hasn't used his power, because the child hasn't got any power... yet. He has been shielded by his mother's sacrifice: that's the true answer to the question that everybody keeps asking in these hours...

Ah, these stairs are so long! I thought I had chosen a shortcut...

Poor fools! A solution so easy, so clear and yet so inaccessible to their simple minds. Everybody seems to think that Harry Potter has a special power. No... No, no, no, no, no. He is only the shell that temporarily hosted something greater... But perhaps this gift will be renewed when the right time comes...

The light is so low in the Dungeons! I have always wondered how the Slytherins can live in such depressing atmosphere...

However, the Greater Good has its own ways, and only those who have been burnt in its search can recognise it, can feel it. I have been graced, yes, deeply graced. And now I have a mission again... Destiny gives me back what it took me away so many years ago... Redemption... and knowledge... and power... for the Greater Good!

Now, here is his door...

A wrinkled hand closed into a fist and knocked on the black wood of the panels.

"Severus," an old voice called.

No answer came.

"Severus!" the old voice repeated, while impatience vibrated in the forced kindness of the tone.

Again no answer came, and with a frown, Dumbledore pointed his wand at the lock and muttered a spell. The door opened obediently, and the great wizard entered, the brushing sound of his velvet cape following his steps.

The room was dark, except for the light coming from the dying flames in the fireplace. Severus was curled on a chair in a corner, and his forehead was leaned against the frozen glass of a window, as if he were looking at the gardens by night. Or perhaps losing himself in desperate oblivion? The boy's head turned, but his eyes were blank, and he didn't show any sign of recognising the imposing figure that had so carelessly violated his private quarters.

Dumbledore sighed. His nervousness was being ferociously stimulated by such a passive attitude.

So, Severus Snape was suffering, he thought. Of course, but what was that suffering worth, now? He had made a big mistake and somebody else had paid at his place. Unfortunately, those who had lost their lives had been precious members of the Order of the Phoenix, a couple who could have been very helpful in the years to come, to guide and influence a reconstruction. Young, intelligent, healthy, wealthy...

Incidentally, Lily Evans had been hopelessly loved by Severus Snape. His wrong choices had led to her destruction, and now the boy was crushed, facing the consequences of his thoughtless actions. Well, would he have been so crushed if the dead ones had been for instance the Longbottoms? They too had a child who could have fulfilled the prophecy... yet that possibility didn't seem to have worried Severus Snape at the time. And, though loyal followers, the Longbottoms unfortunately weren't as valuable as the Potters, when thinking of a future leadership.

So, the boy was selfish, the old wizard disdainfully considered. Like Dumbledore before him, he had realised his faults only when those faults had struck him in the deep.

And perhaps the boy was actually a whiner, exactly like the other students used to call him. Well, not all the students, just Dumbledore's favourite Gryffindors. And now three of them were dead and the fourth would soon be locked in Azkaban for being a traitor. And such a spiteful traitor!

But Sirius came from a Slytherin family, Dumbledore reflected, perhaps betrayal was implicit in his genes. And the last survivor of that fabulous group was only a reject, a werewolf in disguise, useless to the cause and hateful to the majority of the wizarding world. An annoying inconvenience.

The old wizard felt irritated. No, decidedly the war had exacted a painful toll to the plans of the Greater Good. The fresh forces for a reconstruction were lacking now. And this young man so shamefully crying in a corner had no right to sit and weep, when there was so much that asked to be done.

Furthermore, in the next few days, his life would also be in danger. The trials would start soon, now that Voldemort had so conveniently disappeared. The boy would have better regain his self-control and weigh his debts and his allegiances. Especially with Dumbledore, the one who had the keys for his liberation in his hands. That irritatingly dejected attitude, even more despicable in an ex Death Eater, wouldn't help him before a court.

And yet... why didn't the boy react? Hadn't he noticed that his Headmaster was there in front of him?

"Severus."

This time, the name was whispered.

Slowly, the boy raised his head to look at Dumbledore. His eyes reflected the horror of those who have faced hell and recoiled at the last minute. His devastated face, his trembling lips, his fingers twitching spasmodically in a torturing grip, everything suggested a pain that was going beyond human endurance.

The great wizard stiffened in surprise, and the harsh words he had prepared froze in his mind. What could be opposed to such evident desperation?

"Headmaster..." the boy finally murmured, his eyes dilating in the effort of speaking.

Dumbledore stood still, while a wave of unknown, powerful feelings washed over him. He felt disarmed. And, even more surprising, he felt an overwhelmingly sweet emotion tighten his heart. Something deep and lost in remoteness was aching inside him, a force he had completely forgotten.

"Severus," he repeated, struggling against those unexpected sensations and blinking to suppress his emotion. Then he recovered his lucidity. The boy hadn't eaten in two days. A quick glance at the bed, and he realised that the boy hadn't slept either. His intransigence vacillated.

Severus' eyes were still fixed on his, begging him with intolerable intensity.

Dumbledore sighed. So young the boy was, so incredibly young! Sometimes he forgot how long the way was that led to what the others would call "wisdom", but that he secretly defined "superiority of judgement".

Sighing again, he sat heavily on a chair.

"Severus," he said for the fourth time, intertwining his fingers in his lap and not really knowing how to go on.

The boy looked at him, waiting. His eyes were glassy with tears, and Dumbledore capitulated.

"Why didn't you come to dinner this evening?" he asked patiently. "You cannot starve yourself to death. It won't be useful to you. And it won't be useful to Lily."

The boy gulped and averted his gaze.

"You should sleep," Dumbledore continued quietly. "Killing yourself isn't going to bring her back."

Severus stiffened and lowered his head, his hands clasping and unclasping relentlessly as if tormenting each other.

"Albus..." he murmured slowly. It was the very first time that the boy dared use Dumbledore's name, and the old wizard felt a pang in his heart.

"Do you think that... that Lily can see me from... from where she is now?"

Those words, whispered haltingly, took Dumbledore by surprise. He was used to deal with a man under the appearance of a boy, and now that man revealed the child he had always carried in his soul.

Severus was looking at him with that immense trust that only youngsters can display without looking ridiculous. Dumbledore felt lost.

"I'm sure she does," he finally replied, and, again, a pang tightened his heart.

Severus' eyes grew even more anxious.

"Do you... do you think that now she knows what I have done for her?"

Dumbledore sighed and nodded sadly. Automatically, he placed his hands on the armrests of his chair, but the boy didn't seem to react to that majestic pose. He kept his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's and whispered, "Then, do you think that..." he gulped his pain and forced himself to complete his question.

"Do you think that she can... forgive me?"

A multitude of memories broke Dumbledore's resistance, a whirl of images and sounds coming from the past.

Two young men were looking at each other, their handsome features distorted in rage while they pronounced words of fury and contempt. A younger boy joined them, in the vain effort to divide them, but they threw him apart with violence, growing more and more savage in their fight. Flashes of light erupted from the wands they both held in their hands, and cries, smoke and falling objects filled the scene, obscuring the sight for an indefinite moment.

And then, in the middle of that confusion, a figure lay still, arms opened in abandon and a sweet, sad smile on her lips: Ariana.

The vision hit Dumbledore like a stab, and for a moment, he inhaled deeply, vibrating in something too similar to horror. Blinking, the old wizard slowly shook his head, trying to free his mind from those cruel memories. Then, eyes still filled with horror, he turned his gaze on Severus, who was staring at him in anguish.

Misinterpreting Albus' gesture, Severus bent vehemently forward and grabbed the armrests of the older man's chair, tightening them in a grip.

"Please don't!" he implored, trembling in pain. "You know the truth! I didn't betray her on purpose!"

His face almost touched Dumbledore's in the effort of begging, and the old wizard lost himself in the depths of those black eyes, so disconcertingly innocent in spite of the many horrors they had witnessed.

Something broke in his soul.

Wordlessly, he opened his arms, welcoming the younger man in an embrace. Severus hesitated, then ceded to his emotions and rested his head on Albus' chest, sobbing in desperation.

With immense tenderness, Dumbledore wrapped his arms around the crying youngster, inhaling the acrid smell of the unwashed body worn out by two days of wake and perceiving the frailty of the skinny structure so trustfully curling against him.

For a long moment, he enjoyed the bittersweet feelings that the contact was awakening in his soul. How many years had passed since he had felt such deep, awesome sensations? For how long had he suppressed his emotions, relegating them in a corner of his heart as if unimportant, even worse, dangerous one? For how long had he denied himself the joy of loving and of being loved?

The only ones he had really loved... no, let's be honest, he chided himself, the only ones he *should* have really loved his brother and his sister had been sacrificed to his ambitions. The friend he had thought of having found, the boy with whom he had shared a part of his soul, had turned into a traitor and an enemy, and perhaps even a murderer.

Ariana... Had the hex that had struck her been cast by Albus or by Gellert Grindelwald?

He had never dared discover it, not even with a Pensieve. That memory was so immensely hurtful, that possibility was so horribly frightening, that he had always recoiled from it with a shiver. Exactly like he was doing now.

He sighed deeply and then turned his gaze again on the boy crying in his arms. Severus' tears had wetted Albus' robes, and his gasping sobs had begun to lessen, but the boy didn't seem to be ready to leave that comforting position.

Again, Dumbledore felt an immense tenderness, followed by an acute remorse. Both he and Severus had betrayed their loved ones, but while Severus had tried with all his strength to make amends, Albus had retreated from his actions in horror, locking them in his mind as in a safe and building a fence to keep himself as distant as possible.

Dumbledore frowned, and his eyes narrowed. Such a sharp, wise mind the great wizard had, and yet he had never been able to act according to the simple but powerful feelings his heart had been able to experience so many years ago. Even in his younger days, everything had to be filtered by... by what? By reason? By logic? But even logic and reason had proved to be so easily gullible! Wasn't love the real, the only force that should be allowed to reign on...

No.

Dumbledore stiffened. Love could be even more dangerous than those cold, rational passions. The quest for a Greater Good had to be put before everything else. Love

must be disciplined. It must be tamed, or it could lead to devastating results in the recklessness of its impetuosity.

But love could also be channelled. It could be the sweetest, the subtlest force to guide a soul through the most difficult and impervious patterns of life.

Yes, love could be the answer. And there was a very simple way to test it.

Dumbledore nodded in silence, and his arms deliberately tightened around Severus' body. Instinctively, the boy sniffled and curled even more in that protective shelter.

Dumbledore smiled knowingly and let Severus enjoy the contact.

Savour the power so paternally holding him.

Feel safe.

Then he abruptly opened his arms, releasing his hold and leaning back.

Disconcerted for a gesture that looked like a rejection, Severus raised his head. His eyes had still the hazy expression of those who have lost themselves in pain. He was unbalanced. Exactly the state in which Dumbledore had hoped to find him.

"Severus," he called, and the boy looked at him with a gaze that revealed his inner vulnerability. Suddenly, Severus seemed to realise where he was and who was the powerful man who had just held him in his arms. His embarrassment rose immediately, and desperation transpired from his eyes again. With a violent effort, he straightened himself, and offered his apologies. "I'm sorry, Headmaster, I didn't...."

"My name is Albus, and you have been allowed to use it since the first day you began your job as a Potions teacher," Dumbledore replied calmly.

The boy blushed sickly, even more embarrassed. The older wizard stared at him, letting his blue gaze sink more and more deeply in Severus's black eyes.

Pain, embarrassment, doubt, hesitation - he could easily detect all those emotions while the boy uncertainly stared back.

"Though surely soothing, crying won't help Lily," Dumbledore admonished him quietly. "Let's face it, Severus. You have made a mistake. A big one. Unwittingly, I know it. But you have understood the real importance of your actions only when Lily was caught in a trap. Now you would like her to forgive you. But how could she possibly do it, knowing that her son is still in danger? Her life has been taken away too early and too abruptly."

Severus cringed at that reproach.

Dumbledore became grave. "I'm glad you recognise your fault. Because in spite of what everybody seems to think now, I, Albus Dumbledore, know that the monster who called himself Lord Voldemort will come back to claim Lily's baby one of these days. Young Harry will be an easy prey for him. And Lily won't be there to protect her son."

The boy paled awfully. "I already agreed to watch over her baby," he murmured with a dull voice.

Calmly, the old wizard straightened his robes, tugging his sleeves over his wrists. Severus watched warily. The round humid marks left by his tears on Dumbledore's chest seemed to stare back at him in accusation. The boy bit his lips and lowered his head. Dumbledore adjusted his half moon glasses over his thin nose and watched Severus piercingly.

"So," he asked, intertwining his fingers. "What do you think to do now?"

Severus widened his eyes, clearly wrong-footed, and suddenly seemed to realise how the atmosphere had cooled in those last seconds.

"I don't know," he replied uneasily.

"You have a commitment with the school. But we both know that that was only a ruse, a trick to allow you to play your double role."

The boy breathed slowly, following the words of the older wizard in painful attention.

"There is no more need to continue your acting now. Though I believe you did a splendid job as a teacher, I know how much you dislike teaching students. I suppose you would like to resign. School started only two months ago.... It shouldn't be difficult to find a substitute at this stage."

Severus seemed disconcerted but also relieved at that conclusion.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Dumbledore smiled inwardly. No, the boy could not even imagine what the Headmaster had in store for him. He leaned back on his chair to contemplate the ceiling.

"Furthermore, you will need time for yourself to prepare your defence. The trials will start soon, and you will be called to justify your actions."

Ah, this time he had hit home! Severus paled in horror and began to speak agitatedly.

"But... you know what I have done and why. You... I did what you asked me to do!"

"Of course, Severus. I know perfectly well what you did and why. The problem will be convincing the judges, especially Barty Crouch. You must be aware of that, so that you can prepare yourself. I will come to testify for you, as I promised. And you know I always keep my promises."

Dumbledore glanced at the boy and wasn't surprised to see a sparkle of gratitude brighten his pale features. Azkaban was a too frightful prospective even for the most callous of criminals. The Headmaster lowered his voice. What he was going to ask was vital for his future plans.

"But remember: there is a secret we both share and that must be kept hidden to the rest of the wizarding world. I am speaking of the prophecy, Severus. Those words already cost Lily's life, and they can lead other people to perdition."

The old wizard seemed to suddenly blaze.

"They must not be revealed. Never!"

Subjugated, the boy nodded. Dumbledore adjusted his glasses.

"I'm glad you agree. Because, you see, those words are also the most forceful justification and the most crucial charge against you. By revealing those words to our enemy, you've betrayed an entire world that could have fallen mercilessly under the cruelest of dominations. Yet, at the same time, you have been brutally punished for your crime, in a way that no judge would recognise, but that I deem sufficient. I do believe in second chances, Severus, when those to whom they are accorded behave consequently."

Here Dumbledore paused; the boy was evidently beginning to feel reassured. It was time to unsettle him again.

"But, alas! my beliefs aren't shared by the majority of the wizarding world. So, keeping the prophecy secret means that nobody will ever know the real reason of your change. In spite of my guarantees, the day you will leave the school, you will probably be exposed to the hate and the contempt of those who have suffered Death Eaters' attacks. I hope you have a safe place to go."

Severus watched Dumbledore agape.

"I... I haven't got anywhere to stay," he stammered, lowering his head again.

"That's what's happening to little Harry as well," Dumbledore reminded him gently. "He's gone to live with his aunt Petunia. I suppose you remember her. Completely different from her sister. Sun and moon, I would say, the sun being obviously Lily."

He watched Severus writhe on his chair. Then he frowned, as if recalling something from the deepest corner of his mind. "However, you still have your home at Spinner's End."

Severus' lips trembled suspiciously.

"Please," he said, looking at Dumbledore with pleading eyes. "I would like... Couldn't I stay here for a while?"

"A while?" Dumbledore replied with a weirdly amused tone. "I would be happy to have you here forever. But under which capacity? The school will need a reason to justify your presence."

"Then... then I suppose I could resume teaching," Severus conceded with an effort, unable to conceal his reluctance.

Dumbledore sighed, but his heart was laughing in joy. "You must understand, Severus, that I don't want to coerce you. The choice must be yours. Perhaps you are already regretting the decision you made yesterday night. You know, about little Harry. I shouldn't have asked you. Keeping a promise, and such a bonding promise, can be really hard. I'm sure Lily would understand. She--"

"No!" The boy was vibrating again in anger and pain.

"Come on, my boy. We have just survived a tough war. You are young. I'm sure that, day after day, her memory will gently fade in your mind, as it is natural."

"Never!" the boy burst out, clenching his fists. He took a deep breath. "Never," he repeated in a lower tone, yet firmly as if taking a solemn oath. Tears glittered for a moment, and then they were ferociously pushed back.

"Do you understand that you are taking a very serious commitment?" Albus asked softly. "One day you could blame me for that. I must show you what might happen. Again, you are so young!"

"I'm no more a child, Albus!" Severus replied fiercely, using the old wizard's name as in a challenge.

"I never said that, Severus. Merlin knows if I could have done the many things I did without your help! But this is a serious decision. I would like you to make it with greater calm."

"What else should I do?" Severus replied bitterly. "I have nothing worthwhile left, and nobody's waiting for me outside these walls."

Dumbledore relaxed. Now there was only one more step that needed to be taken.

"Once more, please listen carefully, Severus. I can't ask you to stay." He paused for a moment. "Because, if you accepted, I would be forced to ask you to help me. To be prepared to fight. To be ready to face again that demonic monster and risk your life to protect all what remains of Lily Evans: her boy."

Though weighing every word in order to reach his goal, Dumbledore was surprised to feel an intense emotion vibrate in his soul while he stared into Severus' ardent eyes. It took him an effort to continue.

"Today I'm asking you like a friend. Tomorrow, I could ask you like a master. Would you trust me? Would you agree to put your life in my hands without questioning? Or would you think you had been tricked by a cunning will?"

Severus stiffened and considered the older man.

Smiling sadly, Dumbledore shook his head with a sigh. "No," he declared softly. "You don't trust me. And if you don't trust me now, you will trust me even less in the future, when pain has lessened and memories have faded."

Agitated, Severus tried to speak, but Albus stopped him by raising a hand.

"I'll set you free, Severus," he declared, and his voice had a tired, disillusioned tone. "I release you from your oath."

Wearily, the old wizard got up and wrapped his cape around his body. He paused, as if pondering a new thought, then added quietly, "And I release you also from your duty. Enjoy the feast. Enjoy our victory. After all, the credit for this day is mainly yours."

Severus' face altered horribly at that ambiguous allusion, but Albus pretended not to notice.

"I'll see you in the court." The old man tilted his head and finally acknowledged Severus' agony by adding gently, rather condescendingly, "I'll be there, don't worry. Albus Dumbledore always keeps his word."

The wizard turned to the door.

"No!" Severus cried. "Don't go. I am ready to comply. I will do what you ask me to do."

Albus stopped and watched Severus for a long moment.

"Without questioning?" he asked slowly.

Severus seemed to hesitate, and then he replied in a flat tone, "Without questioning."

"Without reservations?"

"Without reservations."

"You will obey my orders even when you don't understand them."

It was a statement, not a question, and Severus lowered his head and whispered, "I will."

Dumbledore frowned and crossed his arms. "Again, please, do reflect, Severus. Are you doing this on your own accord?"

The boy straightened himself. A sudden spark ignited in his eyes and he spoke in a cold, bitter tone. "I have accepted your conditions, Albus. You don't need to ask me anything else."

Wordlessly, the older wizard measured the distance that, in a few seconds, he had created between him and Severus. For a moment, Albus wondered if his scheme had

really been that necessary. An odd, throbbing emotion vibrated again in his chest. He had taken a servant when he could have earned a friend.

Slowly, Albus Dumbledore walked back to his quarters. His mission had been accomplished. His plans had worked perfectly. Yet the great wizard was re-examining his memories in vague uneasiness. Severus had received a new mark, and this time not on his arm, but on his soul. The last remnants of his innocence had definitely been burned in the offer he had made of himself. Something dark seemed to have crystallised inside him, and he had recovered his usual sombre, detached attitude. Incredulous, Albus had witnessed that astonishing transformation, speechless before such sacrifice. And, once more in that strange evening, something intolerably bittersweet had filled his heart, letting him disconcertingly unbalanced.

Before leaving, he would have sincerely liked to embrace the boy and feel the comforting warmth of his body against him. But, though Albus' soul was craving the contact, Severus seemed to have shielded himself into armour.

Desolate, Dumbledore felt an intense regret.

Once more, his reason had prevailed over his sentiment.

Once more, he was left empty, while the boy he had so cunningly manipulated was carrying a treasure in his heart.

Once more, he felt overwhelmingly alone.

He kept walking silently for a while, then he raised his head in cold determination.

Well, he decided, in one way or another, Severus Snape would fulfil that void.

Author's Note:

Just a clarification: in spite of what this story may suggest, I like Dumbledore, and I have always been fascinated by the relationship between him and Snape.

This is just my interpretation of what might have happened, because I think that even too many of us, in the most disparate situations, use this kind of "sweet" persuasion to "convince" friends, relations or colleagues that what WE think is better...