

Don't Look Back

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Many thanks to bleddyn and sandlapper for their endless support and ideas.

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Severus stood in front of the destroyed house, paralysed by horror. It had been a beautiful mock-Tudor cottage, but now a great hole had been ripped in the thatched roof, and every single window pane was smashed. Dreading what he was going to find inside, Severus forced himself to cross the threshold. The hallway looked like a bomb had hit it; the door had been blown off its hinges; bricks and timber littered the floor.

Inside, it was even worse than Severus could have imagined. James Potter lay dead on the stairs, his sightless eyes staring at the ceiling. It was only then that Severus heard the child whimpering in the otherwise silent house. The boy wouldn't be crying if there were anyone in the house to comfort him. Severus stumbled along the landing, his head filled with the muffled buzzing he himself usually caused with the *Muffliato* spell. When he ducked his head under the low lintel of the child's bedroom and took in the scene, he staggered and fell against the dresser, feeling he was going to faint. Lily, motionless on the floor. Lily, dead.

Severus dropped to his knees, and crawled through the wreckage of the room. He gathered Lily's lifeless body in his arms and cradled her to him, letting his grief pour out in an agonised howl.

Behind them, in his cot, baby Harry began to cry in earnest.

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Minutes later, although it felt like hours, Severus recovered his wits. Laying Lily back on the floor, he closed her eyes, and kissed her cold lips. Then he ran, as fast as he could, away from this house of horrors, somewhere it was safe to Apparate. Powerful wizard as he was, he needed help, and he had a feeling only Dumbledore could provide it.

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"What is life to me without thee?

What is left if thou art dead?"

The music emanating from Dumbledore's office was heartbreakingly beautiful. The lyrics spoke to Severus' soul; the singer seemed to be articulating his own grief.

'Come in.' Dumbledore's back was to the door as he switched off the gramophone. 'I am trying to expand my musical horizons beyond chamber music. Kathleen Ferrier

really did have the most beautiful voice.' He turned round, surprised at his visitor's silence, then shocked at the look on his face. 'What has happened, Severus?'

In a few halting sentences, Snape explained: how he had been first on the scene, the devastation, how his worst nightmare had come true. "Nagini had been there, Albus! He used the snake to bite her before he... before he killed her. To paralyse her. So she couldn't run! His voice broke, and he looked imploringly up at the Headmaster. 'You have to help me, Dumbledore; you have to bring her back. I'll do anything!'

Dumbledore's face had drained of colour. He stared at Snape for a few seconds, evidently trying to assess his state of mind. Then he spun on his heel and strode to the fireplace, taking down a pot of glittering powder from the mantelpiece. He beckoned Snape over, threw a handful of Floo power into the fire and, as Snape stepped in, shouted, 'The Ministry of Magic!'

Severus had hardly climbed out of the fire in the Atrium when Dumbledore appeared beside him. 'How did...?' His voice trailed off, bewildered.

Dumbledore permitted himself a small, sad smile. 'I am Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. I can enter the Ministry whenever I choose.'

'What are we doing here? We need to be at Godric's Hollow!' The familiar bite of impatience in Snape's voice was tinged with panic.

'We must talk while we walk, Severus. If you mean what you say there is a way, but we have very little time.' He steered Snape past the Fountain of Magical Brethren and headed down the corridor so fast that even Severus with his long legs had to hurry to keep up.

'You have but one chance. The Department of Mysteries.' At Snape's perplexed look, he explained, 'There is a veil in the Department which is the divide between our world and the next. Your only chance is to go through the veil and lead Lily back to this world. I must warn you, Severus; this is not an easy course of action. There will undoubtedly be people, or at least creatures, who will not want you in their world and will almost certainly try to stop you reaching it.'

Without breaking stride, or pausing for breath, he continued urgently, 'There is another condition. You must lead Lily up to our world, but while you do this you must not look at her until you are both back beyond the veil.' He stopped abruptly and grasped Snape by the shoulders. 'Severus, do you understand me? YOU MUST NOT LOOK AT HER.'

Severus nodded, but looked utterly lost. 'I have never heard of this veil. What does it do? How does it work?'

The impatience was in Dumbledore's voice now. 'I discovered its existence in the course of my... research when... when I was young. I attempted to penetrate it myself, but there is a time limit. After an hour, the person is lost forever to the afterlife. I tried to gain access to the Ministry, but in those days I had no authority, and she...'

He stopped and gave his head a little shake, as if waking from a dream. 'No matter. I only meant to emphasise that we must hurry.' He wrenched open the golden grille of the lift and jabbed furiously at the button labelled Nine.

'Why doesn't everyone who has lost someone come here?' Snape asked, hurrying into the lift in Dumbledore's wake.

'There are very specific conditions under which a living person can enter the veil. Conditions which few people meet. And I think you will agree that habitually ripping down the barrier between the worlds is not a good idea.'

'I fulfil these criteria?' Snape's voice had lost its edge of panic now, and was sounding hopeful, albeit desperately so. 'What are they?'

Dumbledore did not look at Snape; he stared straight ahead at the golden grille as he spoke. 'The only person who can retrieve someone from the underworld is a person who bears some responsibility for the death, and who has such a strong emotional attachment to the person, that he would be willing to sacrifice his own life to save her.'

The lift stopped; the grille opened, and Dumbledore strode out into the torch-lit corridor.

Snape, however, did not join him. He stepped out of the lift, then stood stock still, looking stricken. 'James?'

Just momentarily, Severus saw the same look of disgust on Dumbledore's face as he had worn on that windswept hillside three months ago. 'You do not have the emotional bond with James necessary to save him,' Dumbledore said curtly.

Despite Dumbledore's disgust, Severus felt his heart lighten slightly.

They had reached a large, circular room with doors leading off it in all directions. Dumbledore did not hesitate, but marched straight through the door opposite them, Severus trailing in his wake.

The next room resembled an old Roman amphitheatre, and in the centre stood a stone archway hung with a thin black curtain. It looked like a sheet of silk, and was fluttering slightly as though a gentle breeze were playing across it.

Severus ran down the steps to the veil, then looked expectantly back up the steps. 'Go on,' instructed Dumbledore, and sat calmly down on the steps to wait. 'Just remember: DO NOT LOOK BACK.'

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Severus took a deep breath, and then stepped through the veil. He had expected the silk to part to allow him past; instead he simply walked through it. It felt like walking through a sheet of cool water, except that he was perfectly dry. He looked around him. It looked much like the corridor in the Department of Mysteries. The only difference was that the torches here were pale blue, casting a ghostly flickering light over everything.

Severus rounded a corner and came face to face with three of the last people he would have expected to find in the afterlife: Bellatrix Lestrange, Alecto Carrow and Narcissa Malfoy, accompanied by a huge, three-headed dog.

'Well, well, well,' sneered Bellatrix. 'I thought we'd see you down here sooner or later. Come to fetch your little Mudblood, have you?'

Snape stared. How did Bellatrix know? Had Voldemort told her about him asking for Lily to be spared? What was going on?

'I had no idea you were so keen to die, Snape,' Alecto cackled. 'I'd have killed you if you'd asked.'

'No matter, Alecto,' said Narcissa smoothly. 'I have no doubt Fluffy will do the job for us.' She bent to unfasten the monstrous dog's lead.

Severus' brain locked. *Think, Snape, think!* From somewhere in the recesses of his mind came the memory of a story he had been told at his Muggle primary school. Someone (Severus couldn't remember who) had put a three-headed dog to sleep by playing a lyre. But Severus couldn't play an instrument, and his singing voice was truly awful. He racked his brains for something else. Then he got it.

One of the few things his father had approved of was the music of Mozart, particularly his operas. One of the characters, Severus remembered, had charmed the villain's henchmen with an enchanted musical box. He drew his wand out of his sleeve and flicked it. A small, silver box appeared in his palm. As he lifted the lid, and the air was filled with tinkling, unearthly music, Bellatrix, Alecto, Narcissa and the dog's eyes drooped, and they fell to the floor, fast asleep.

Severus slipped the musical box into the pocket of his robes. He might need it again later. When he looked up, he nearly cried out in shock. Each of the three Death Eaters had transformed into ugly winged beings, their hair, arms and waists entwined with snakes. Reminded, horribly, of Nagini and his part in Lily's death, Severus ran. Who were those hideous creatures, and how had they taken on the forms of the Death Eaters?

Not daring to look back, Severus hurtled round the next corner, and nearly cannoned into her. Lily was standing in the middle of the corridor, almost as if she were waiting for him.

Her eyes widened at the sight of him. 'Severus! What are you doing here?' She stared at him for a moment, then her face crumpled in horror. 'You're not dead too, are you? Oh, God, no!'

Severus took hold of her hands, dipping his head to look into her eyes. 'No, Lily, I'm not dead. It's all right; I've come to take you home.'

Lily looked utterly bewildered. 'Take me home? How?'

'It's complicated, Lily. All I can tell you is you need to follow me.'

'And I'll come back to life?' The bewilderment was giving way to hope now.

'So Dumbledore assures me.' Snape moved off down the corridor. 'Follow me. Quickly!'

Lily stood her ground. 'James, Severus! I can't leave him!'

Snape's heart sank. 'You won't be able to go back for him,' he said brusquely. Although she undoubtedly had the emotional bond with James, she was not responsible for his death. That blame lay squarely on Severus' shoulders.

'You do it then; you came back for me.' Lily caught hold of his hand, her tone pleading.

He extricated his hand. 'I can't help your husband.'

'Can't, or won't?' Lily demanded.

Severus closed his eyes. They were wasting time. He *had* to get Lily to follow him *now*. He took a deep breath and steeled his resolve. 'Your son lives.'

'Harry's alive?' Lily now sounded desperately hopeful. 'Oh, God, Severus; take me to him. Please.'

Severus felt an icy hand clench around his heart. She didn't want to return for him; she only had thoughts for her husband and son. Irrationally, he felt betrayed. *He* had come to fetch her; *he* had braved the underworld for her; *he* had defeated those hideous creatures to get to her. Swallowing his disappointment, he reasoned with himself. Lily alive in the world, even with eyes only for her son, was better than being without her at all.

He turned and began to stride up the corridor, with her hurrying behind him.

'Severus?' Lily hurried after him. 'What did I do? Severus, please! Talk to me!'

Severus swallowed and gritted his teeth to prevent himself answering. If he talked to Lily, if he just reached back and took her hand, he wouldn't be able to stop himself looking back at her. And if he looked back at her, he would lose her again, and this time for ever. So he walked on in silence.

Lily felt confused and miserable. Severus had said he had come to rescue her; now he was ignoring her. Was it because she'd asked him to go back for James? She was too scared to ask.

'Severus? Why are you ignoring me? What have I done? Severus, please! We used to be friends. I know I was awful to you, and I'm really sorry! Severus, talk to me!'

Severus' jaw was clenched so hard it was painful. Her pleading was breaking his heart. But there were only a hundred yards to go; the veil was in sight. If he could just hold on until then...

Behind him, Lily screamed. They had just passed the prone figures of the snake-entwined women and the grotesque dog. 'Severus, I'm scared!' She began to sob. 'At school, I thought... I had an idea that... that you loved me. But I was wrong, wasn't I? You don't. If you did, you'd at least look at me.'

A hand reached into his chest and twisted his heart. His resolve was faltering. It was all he could do not to sprint the last fifty yards.

Lily was sobbing brokenly. '*Severus... Please... Look at me!*'

His fists were clenched with the effort of not turning round and clasping her in his arms. Only a few yards and he would be through the veil and out the other side. One step... two... three...four... the sensation of walking through a sheet of water, and he was free. He turned round. 'Lily...'

Severus' heart stopped as he remembered, too late, the exact wording of Dumbledore's warning: "You must not look at her until you are ~~both~~ back beyond the veil."

Before his horrified eyes, Lily fell slowly backwards, beyond the veil, her hands reaching desperately out towards him. The stone arch cracked, the gauzy curtain ripped into shreds, and Lily was gone.

'LILY!' Severus yelled. 'LILY!' He tried to reach into the archway to pull Lily back, but Dumbledore *grabbed him around the chest, holding him back*.

'Let me go!' Severus bellowed, fighting with every ounce of strength he possessed. 'I have to go back; I have to save her!'

Dumbledore *dragged him away from the dais*, clearly using every ounce of his strength too. '*There's nothing you can do, Severus.... Nothing... she's gone.*'

Severus wouldn't accept it; couldn't accept it. He wrenched himself out of Dumbledore's grip, and, just as he had in the Potters' house, fell to his knees and crawled across the room.

Holding onto the arch for support, he stared at the softly rippling curtain. 'What am I supposed to do without you?' he asked, brokenly. Silence. Severus began to plead, sobbing. 'Lily? Lily, answer me, please!' Putting his lips as close to the tattered veil as he dared, he whispered, 'There was only ever you. And there always will be. *Always.*'

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Someone had their arms around him, was lifting him up, leading him out of the room.

Dumbledore pushed open the door to his office in the Wizengamot Administration Services, and lowered Snape into a chair beside the desk.

After a moment or two, Snape raised his face, and he looked like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery even since he entered the Ministry.

'I failed her. I couldn't save her. How am I supposed to live without her?'

Dumbledore stared out of the window, struggling with his own grief. 'She was lost to you years ago, Severus,' he said coldly. 'You were never with her.'

Snape's breathing was shallow. 'But she was alive! I could face the world knowing she was in it.' He took a shuddering breath. 'What do I do now? Where do I go?'

Everything reminds me of her.' He slumped forward, folding his arms on the desk and banging his forehead down onto them. *'I've had enough; I've seen enough; I want it to end. I don't care any more.'*

'You do care,' said Dumbledore.

'I don't care what happens to me,' Severus said bleakly. 'I failed her. I deserve this.'

'If you truly loved her...'

'IF?'

'Because you truly loved her, your way forward is clear. Help me protect Lily's son.'

Severus stared around her room, his eyes haunted, unseeing. Eventually, he rose and crossed the room to a gramophone which stood on a small side table. As though in a dream, he flicked through the pile of records, putting one on the turntable: the only one which could make this moment bearable.

At last he said, 'Very well. But never never tell, Dumbledore! I want your word!'

'My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?'

'Not the best of me. The worst of me. That I failed her.'

Beautiful, anguished music filled the air:

"What is life to me without thee?

What is left if thou art dead?"

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A/N: My response to Levanna Lovegood's 'Greek Myths' challenge. "Create a fanfic in the style of one of the Greek myths. The plot-line is to be the same, and you must have a reference to the myth you are using at one point in the story."

I have taken inspiration from both the myth and Gluck's opera. Orfeo's aria 'What is life?' (which he sings after failing to save Euridice) has always reminded me of Snape, and those who know the song will recognise that many of Snape's lines are a modern translation.*

I have used the film version of Lily's death, which was necessary, but for which I apologise!

*For those who don't, this is a literal translation of the Italian; the most famous English translation - by Kathleen Ferrier herself - is the version on Dumbledore's record.

Alas! Where am I?

Where has the madness of love thrown me?

Eurydice! Wife!

Ah, she is dead; I call her in vain.

Wretched me I've lost her again, and this time forever.

Oh judgement! Oh death! Oh cruel memory!

There's no one to turn to

There's no one to comfort me!

I must bear the sad outcome of my horrible ordeal alone.

Be satisfied, wicked fate: I am in despair!

What will I do without Eurydice?

Where will I go without my beloved?

Eurydice, oh God, answer me!

I will always belong to you.

There's no-one to help me,

No hope any more,

Neither from this world, nor from heaven.