

A Christmas Vow

by Alexannah

One Christmas Eve, after a particularly unpleasant Occlumency lesson, Severus is visited by a ghost. Lily is furious over how he has treated her son—and determined to make Severus see just how much Harry needs him. Loosely based on "A Christmas Carol".

Prologue: Planning Ahead

Chapter 1 of 3

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AN: Warning for child abuse (no rape). Compliant with post-OotP canon. Ignores HBP and DH and the backstory revealed in them. One of the "what-if" scenes is based on one of my other fic ideas (not posted yet).

Prologue: Planning Ahead

Darkness had fallen over the white-encrusted grounds. Most of the students had retreated inside from their snowball fights and sled racing. Severus and Lily remained outside, however, having watched the sundown gloved hand in gloved hand. It was a clear, peaceful evening.

"What about you, Severus? What do you want to do after we leave school?"

It was their fifth year; the OWLs were fast approaching. Careers seemed to be on everyone's minds, even at Christmas. Lily had been spending the last few minutes relating her plans to him—she wanted to travel and be a Healer and marry and have a multitude of children.

Severus' best subjects were Potions and Defence; he had a few ideas based on them but nothing solid yet. The only thing he was utterly certain of was that he wanted to be the lucky man in Lily's future.

He didn't tell her that. Nor did he tell her that he had already, for some years, been imagining their future together: the big house with lots of red-headed, flower-named rugrats running around. (Naturally, he wanted them to have Lily's features—he was nothing to write home about.) The thought of lots of screaming kids didn't scare him only because he knew they were hers. He could imagine no-one else in his own future, and he wanted to give her everything she wanted.

"I don't know," he said instead.

"Oh, Severus!" Lily gave a half-exasperated giggle.

"Well, I don't. They can't expect everyone to have mapped out their entire career at the age of fifteen."

"Well then, forget the career bit." Lily squeezed his hand, and despite the cold, Severus wished they weren't wearing gloves. "Do you want to marry? Have kids?"

He gazed into her emerald eyes. "Absolutely," he whispered. *But only with you.*

Lily went slightly pink, as if she could have heard his silent addition. "Well, I definitely do."

"I know," Severus said, amused. "You said that already."

She giggled again. "Severus, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Well ... what with this war and everything ..." The atmosphere suddenly shifted unpleasantly. "You're my best friend, Severus. I trust you more than anyone."

He held his breath, waiting.

"If, once I had kids, if something were to happen to me ... would you take care of them?"

"I—of course I would," Severus said, horrified at the thought of anything happening to her.

"You promise?"

"Yes!" Severus felt odd: a mixture of pleasure at her trusting him, but also getting the distinct feeling that she didn't plan for him to be those aforementioned kids' father—if she had, then there should have been no question about it. "Why ask now?"

Lily shrugged. "I don't know. Just felt like I had to. I don't know why," she replied, sounding melancholy.

An uncomfortable silence fell. Wanting to break the unease, Severus took Lily's hand again, and they began walking slowly up to the school. He was wracking his brain for things to say, but still no-one had spoken by the time they reached the Entrance Hall.

Lily suddenly looked up as they entered, and this time she went really red. "Oh ... mistletoe."

Severus' heart leapt as she looked at him and then, with a small smile, moved in. Though he realised too late she had been aiming for his cheek, he managed to capture her lips in a soft, if slightly clumsy, kiss. To his utter delight, she didn't pull back; she drew closer, and he lost himself in the girl he loved.

Maybe he had a chance at that future after all.

TBC ...

Taking Responsibility

Chapter 2 of 3

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Chapter Two: Taking Responsibility

"Past?" Severus asked, astonished. "As in the past? We've gone back in time?"

"Not exactly," Lily replied. "We're not really here. We're only observing. Like in a Pensieve."

As he looked at her, he realised with a jolt that she no longer resembled a ghost. Lily was in full colour, looking for all the world as if she were still alive at twenty-one, but after a moment, he realised that she was still slightly transparent. When he looked down at their still-clasped hands, he realised he was, as well.

"Come on."

Lily pulled him into the house—straight through the closed door, as if he were a ghost too. Inside, the house was warm, well kept and decorated just as lavishly as outside. Voices came from the kitchen, where four people were enthusiastically devouring Christmas dinner. Well, three of them were—the fourth, a bony horse-faced woman who looked vaguely familiar, was rather more dignified about it than her overweight companions.

"Petunia." Severus saw Lily was scowling at her now. The other Evans sister showed no sign she had heard; the room's occupants merely ignored them. "Well, Severus?"

"Er ... well, what?"

"Have you noticed what's missing?"

Severus frowned, taking a closer look at the disgusting display: a large walrus-like man, a woman who could only be his sister, a child that looked more like a beach ball in a blond wig.

The Knut dropped. "Where's Po—Harry?"

"Exactly," Lily said quietly.

"I thought he grew up with them?"

"He did."

"So where—"

Lily led him back outside and towards the garden shed. For a moment Severus was flummoxed, but then she entered and pulled him inside as well.

A small child—*much* smaller than his cousin—was sitting on the floor. He was surrounded by gardening equipment, forced to huddle in a small gap between the lawnmower and a stack of crates. He was wrapped up in a very thin blanket and shivering like mad.

Severus stared. That *couldn't* be Harry Potter. But a sob from Lily confirmed he was.

"Oh, Harry," Lily whispered, reaching out a hand to her son—but it just went straight through him without any reaction. "Oh, baby ..."

Footsteps announced one of the Dursleys approaching, and Severus and Lily looked round to see Vernon opening the shed door.

"So, boy, I hope you've learned your lesson about touching Dudley's presents?"

"Y-y-yes, Uncle V-Vernon," Harry stuttered. "P-p-please Unc-cle, it's f-f-freezing in here."

Vernon slammed down the roasting tin he had been carrying. It held the remains of the turkey—which was really only a carcass with a few measly bits of meat still attached—and a few limp vegetables. Harry eyed them with a hungry look in his eyes.

"*No!* I'm not going to have you pulling any more stunts like that. The cupboard's obviously too good for you. You're staying out here till Aunt Marge is gone, and if there's any more *freaky business*, you will be here until school starts again. Is that clear?"

"Y-y-yes, Uncle."

"And if you *ever* contaminate one of Dudley's toys again—"

"I didn't pick it up; it just flew into my hand!"

Lily let out a cry of rage, and Severus felt a rush of anger himself as Vernon struck the boy hard. Harry was knocked backwards into a rack of spades and rakes, which started to fall down on him. He barely made a sound as they all clattered to the floor.

"Think yourself lucky you're getting any Christmas dinner at all," Vernon snarled before retreating and slamming the door shut behind him. Severus heard the lock click.

Once his uncle was gone, Harry crawled out from under the tools and seized the food. He stuffed the vegetables in his mouth and was attacking the turkey bones like an animal before he'd finished swallowing, as if afraid his uncle would change his mind and take the food away.

It was the most pitiful sight Severus had ever seen—and he had seen a lot.

"I can't believe they ..." He couldn't finish his sentence.

"This was the year Harry nearly died of hypothermia," Lily said in a hollow voice, staring sorrowfully at her son.

Severus didn't know how to respond to that. His emotions were in a complete state, his mind struggling to comprehend what he had witnessed. It didn't add up—Potter was supposed to have been spoiled rotten by his relatives; that was what he had always thought ...

He jumped as Lily took his hand again and led him outside.

She was sobbing, her head in her hands. Severus tried awkwardly to put an arm around her shoulders, to comfort her, but she threw it off, temper blazing again. "Get off me! This is *your* fault, Severus!"

"*Mine?*" Severus exclaimed. "How is it *mine*? That brute's responsible for his own actions; it's got nothing to do with me!"

"Of course he's responsible, but you were supposed to *look after* Harry!" Lily cried. "You *promised* me!"

Maybe it was the hot guilt burning in his chest now that caused Severus to continue arguing.

"And how could I have done that? Lily, you know my position, you know I couldn't—"

"That's an excuse and you know it! You just didn't want to! You never *ever* checked up on him! I'd have thought you could *at least* have done *that!*"

With her every word, Severus felt worse, but he continued stubbornly, "And if *had* checked up on him? *Then* what?"

"Don't try to tell me you couldn't have done something if you'd seen what was going on. And you of all people *would* have seen."

"Oh, really. So what would I have done?"

Lily paused. "I can show you."

Severus forgot his anger, confused. "What? What do you mean?"

"I can show you not just what *did* happen, Severus. I can show you different timelines, how things could have been in certain situations; how they *are* in other realities. And I know just which one to show you now."

Different realities? What could have been? Severus' head was spinning.

Lily took his hand again, and the whirlwind came back. The next thing he knew, he was on a different road.

He knew this one. The houses were all three-story Georgian period, and on the corner was a children's park. A sign on the wall read Belfry Road. On the house in front of them, to Severus' astonishment, a wreath had been hung below the number Sixty-Six, and a string of golden lights had been strung over the porch.

"Why are we here?" he asked in a hoarse voice, already afraid he knew the answer.

Lily didn't answer, but took his hand and led him into his own home.

TBC ...

Broken Promises

Chapter 3 of 3

One Christmas Eve, after a particularly unpleasant Occlumency lesson, Severus is visited by a ghost. Lily is furious over how he has treated her son—and determined to make Severus see just how much Harry needs him. Loosely based on "A Christmas Carol".

Chapter One: Broken Promises

Severus was fuming as much as his student as Harry Potter slammed the office door behind him. It was only the thought that it would be incredibly petty that stopped him from re-opening the door to slam it harder.

Instead, Severus strode into his quarters, intent on breaking out the Firewhisky and mentally cursing the brat to hell. He was stopped in his tracks when he saw his friend, mentor and employer sitting on his sofa.

"So," Albus said. "How did the Occlumency lesson go?"

It was only incredible self-restraint that stopped Severus from biting his head off. *'Fine.'*

"So I heard."

"Well, what did you *expect?*" Severus rounded on him. "The boy's even more insufferable now than he was last year! Why couldn't you just teach him yourself?"

"If you recall, I tried during the summer," Albus said calmly. "Voldemort seized the opportunity and nearly ripped his mind open in his effort to get into mine. Harry was lucky not to end up permanently in the closed ward of St Mungo's."

Severus ground his teeth, but the now rather stern look Albus was giving him over his half-moon spectacles seemed to be daring him to argue with that.

"All right, I get it! But Potter's not even *trying!*"

"I think you'll find that's not true, Severus," Albus said, getting to his feet. "Harry is trying very hard; it is you who are making things difficult, as I warned you about last year."

"I'm trying; he just won't co-operate because he blames *me* for the mutt's death."

"That's enough, Severus." Albus didn't shout, but Severus knew he had pushed it too far and shut his mouth. "Look, we will talk about this later; I have to see the elves about the present deliveries." He made his way to the door, then paused before he left. "Merry Christmas."

"Hmph."

Once Albus had gone, Severus searched his cabinet for the strongest Firewhisky he had. He always needed a large dose to get him through Christmas. The most painful memories he had always seemed to surface around now. He was going to need it even more this year, what with Potter giving him such a headache and now Albus—one of the few people on the planet who actually *liked* Severus—angry at him ...

"Severus Snape!"

Severus jumped and dropped the bottle on the floor. Mercifully it didn't smash, but he didn't even notice as he whirled around to see who was angry at him now.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

"How *dare* you!" She strode right up to him, eyes flashing, fury all over her face. She raised her hand to slap him, and Severus automatically flinched, but it only passed through his cheek, like someone had thrown cold water over him. She stopped and stared at her hand.

"L-Lily?" Severus whispered in disbelief.

"You didn't think I'd find a way to come back and haunt you if you hurt my son? You really don't know me at all, Severus!" Lily shouted.

"B-but ..." Severus couldn't process what he was seeing. Lily was silvery and translucent and floating slightly rather than standing. "Y-you're a ghost?"

"No." Lily paused. "Well, I suppose I am now. At least for the moment." Her eyes narrowed. "You and I have some unfinished business."

Severus swallowed. There were very few people he was actually afraid of. Lily, when she got that expression on her face, was one of them.

"But—how did you even—"

"I've spent the last *fifteen years* looking to find a way to talk to you," Lily said coldly.

Severus blinked, unsure how he should feel about that. "You ... have?"

"Yes! You broke your promise!"

Promise?

"If something were to happen to me ... would you take care of them?"

"Of course I would."

"You promise?"

"Yes!"

Oh, right ... *that* promise.

"Um, Lily," Severus tried, his heart beating very fast with a combination of fear and, well, seeing the woman he loved again, "I didn't—I mean—I *have* been looking after him."

"Sev, taking care of someone doesn't just mean stopping other people from killing them! Not that I'm not grateful for the times you saved his life," Lily said quickly, "but you've been hurting him."

"I never lay a finger on him!" Severus said, outraged.

"You threw a jar at him last year!"

"I—he invaded my privacy! And I wasn't aiming for him, I just threw it at the wall—"

"And those Occlumency lessons? *Don't* lie to me; Harry's already mentally scarred from this summer, and you're only making it worse!"

"What would you have me do, give up trying to teach him?"

"For Merlin's sake, you *know* how fragile the mind is! You've got to stop being so bloody stubborn and *begentle* with him! It's the only way he's going to learn!"

"*All right!*" Severus shouted. "Okay, I'm sorry I threw the jar." And he was, actually; he knew he could well have hit Potter if his aim had been even slightly off. As much as he detested the boy, Severus never intended to *harm* him. "And—maybe I've been a bit too ... harsh with the Occlumency." That took a lot to admit. "But I've never hurt him in any other way!"

"Severus! You of all people know that you don't have to physically harm someone to hurt them!"

He blanched. He'd always known that Lily would far from approve of how he treated her son, but he'd always tried hard not to think about it. It was far easier just to think of him as a Potter. A lot less ... painful.

"I know I might have—crossed the line slightly—once or twice," Severus admitted, cowering at the fresh glare she sent him. "But honestly, Lily, he needs taking down a peg or twelve. With the way everyone else fawns over him, I'm barely making a difference—"

"Oh, you're making a difference all right," Lily said quietly.

"Er ... I am?" That was news to him.

"Yes, you are." From her tone, it was clear she didn't think this a good thing.

Severus paused to catch his breath, his mind whirling. If he had ever imagined seeing Lily again after she died—not that he had ever entertained the thought in the least, knowing all too well it was impossible; no, not at all—he had hoped for a reunion rather more ... friendly. Certainly without all the shouting.

Everything he had ever wanted to say to her seemed to have deserted him in the shock. Assuming this wasn't a hallucination, he had a chance here to finally make amends ... but the words failed him, and he found himself falling back on his old standby: arguing.

"Lily, do you really *want* a pampered, conceited brat for a son?"

"Severus." Her voice was now dangerously quiet. "There's something you have to see."

Lily held out a hand. Severus looked down at it. "Er, Lily ... you're a ghost ... How am I supposed to—"

"Just take it."

He hesitantly took hold of her hand. It didn't feel quite ... solid ... but all the same, somehow he was able to grasp it.

For a moment, all he could think about was the fact that, for many years, he'd never imagined he could ever hold Lily's hand again. Then the wind started, whipping around them both, throwing Severus' hair into his eyes so he couldn't see a thing. Once it had died down, he realised the temperature had dropped. There was still a strong breeze, though not a whirlwind anymore. They were outside.

Severus looked around. They were standing in a frost-ridden residential road filled with identical houses. Muggle Christmas decorations glowed in every window and around every door. The house directly in front of them seemed to be the worst offender, covered in tacky snowmen and Santas, as if the occupants had desired to outdo all their neighbours.

"Where are we?"

"Number Four, Privet Drive," Lily answered. "Christmas past."

TBC ...