

A Breath Before Falling

by Deathofme

Passing from one world to the next is almost like falling.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N Oneshot. Thanks to my beta.

Severus opened his eyes, and then quickly closed them shut again. This was not supposed to be happening. This must be some sort of joke.

"Damn."

He softly cursed under his breath, before allowing his eyes to open once again. He felt like he was in some sort of vast, clear womb, suspended, but held by nothing. His legs had folded into his chest, his arms encircling them. He lifted his head to see nothing but blank whiteness, and mist. He felt something like a slow descent through molasses and the languorous unfurling of his limbs. As his arms slowly uncurled and his legs straightened to support him, he was standing in the blankness.

The mists began to form a clearing. A clearing in a small ravine, by a sunny river with the shadows of the young trees creating a green, leafy glade. Severus winced. He knew this must be coming from his mind, his will shaping the mist around him. Before his thoughts could protest that he *should have no mind* now that he was dead, the mist had completely vanished and the glade around him focused into sharp clarity. Real as anything.

Severus' tall, lanky form surveyed his surroundings. He realized he was disrobed, and as the thought occurred he noticed an overcoat hanging on the branch of one of the young trees. Walking over, he recognized it immediately and held it in his hands for a moment, ruminating, before slipping it around his shoulders. It was his father's. His mother had given it to him to wear on cold days, smuggling it from the wardrobe. It used to engulf him. Now, it was rather short in the sleeve.

This shouldn't be happening.

Severus gritted his teeth and sat down heavily on the grass. Wasn't there supposed to be oblivion? A perpetual state of paralysis? Sans sight, sans touch, sans thought? An eternity of no thought... ah, what bliss...

And it seemed it had been robbed from him.

Severus looked to the sunny river, leaning over the bank to look at the clear water. His fingers had instinctively flown up to his neck, his rippling reflection showed him there were no marks. His fingers felt nothing under the smooth, coarse porcelain of his skin. Nagini's bite marks had not come with him.

Severus leaned back to the bank and shuffled up so he could rest his back against the trunk of a tree. He knew where he was, the small ravine behind Spinner's End, the one where Lily Evans had come to find him when they were ten years old, to ask him more about magic. He felt a horrible constriction in his chest, as if an iron band had been placed across his lungs. Did this setting anticipate the guest he was to expect? That would be horrible... horrible...

He did not want to see her, could not bear it if she came. Shouldn't she be in her own paradise with Potter somewhere? If she came, would he have ripped her inconveniently from it? Or would she come of her own will, out of pity? Both were too terrible to contemplate.

Before he could banish the thought, he heard something snap in the underbrush nearby. He straightened himself against the trunk, trying to find the direction the noise was coming from. Sure enough, he could see a figure making its way through the trees, and Severus' heart soared and constricted sickeningly. He almost gasped out in pain. The figure, still obscured by shadow, hesitated and then stepped out into the sunlight.

"Remus?"

"Hello, Severus."

"I..."

Surprisingly, Severus could feel no bitterness with no ire or dark sarcasm at his disposal. He felt no joy in this place, no glee or excitement, but it seemed what had stripped him of such lighter passions had also quelled the acid that used to burn within him. He just felt... weary. Like nothing mattered, and truthfully, nothing really did matter anymore, did it? It brought an odd sense of calm, that nothing would provoke any passion or fury from him anymore.

"I confess I expected someone else."

"Do you mean Lily?"

Severus nodded slowly. The werewolf, Remus, planted a hand against the tree trunk to steady himself as he sat beside Severus on the ravine bank. All harsh lines of worry had softened on his face, and he looked the younger for it, but Severus could see in Remus' eyes that they displayed the same curious dispassion.

"She won't come."

Severus nodded again. He felt no regret.

"I'm glad. Truly."

"She's already passed on; there's no coming back from that."

Severus quirked an eyebrow, curiosity written over his features. If he had been given a mirror, he would have seen the first frank expression on his face in a long time. His features had softened as well, in that his emotions would display themselves nakedly without thought of disguise.

"Why are you here?"

The forest seemed to ripple. Severus could hear the roar of the rushing river beside him, and it seemed the sky had darkened. Remus, the werewolf, didn't look at him. He looked at a spot on the grass, somewhere between them, and his hand went into his robes pocket.

"I have not passed on yet. They wanted me to find you."

"Who?"

Here, a shadow darkened Remus' features. He tried to remember, but he obviously could not articulate the phenomenon that had sent him to find Severus, both in their curious limbos. He withdrew a flat, grey stone from his pocket and placed it on the forest floor. The presence of the stone tugged at something inside Severus, and from the reaction on Remus' face, he must have felt it too. It seemed, though, once the stone had touched the grass, the river beside them quieted and the sky lightened once more.

"I... I can't say..."

Severus nodded, somehow he understood implicitly.

"Why did you need to find me?"

"Before you pass on, there is one thing you have left unresolved in the waking world."

No worry, no fear, no stricken look of panic crossed Severus' features, though they would have in a normal situation. He only looked thoughtful now, his fingers caressing the material of his father's old overcoat. It still smelled faintly of the pipe tobacco he used to smoke.

"You have left behind a blank portrait in the Headmaster or Headmistress' office at Hogwarts. There is no resemblance of you that has come. It remains an empty frame."

A soft smile twisted on Severus' mouth, and one corner of his lips twitched into a half-smirk. It seemed this peaceful death could not take away every irony that was his.

"Let them take it down, no shade of mine will remain. I was never a true Headmaster of Hogwarts, as it was."

Remus' tone was gentle.

"There are those who would disagree."

"I will not remain."

It was the first of any tension that broken out in the peaceful glade. It seemed an eternity as the two entities regarded each other, Remus, looking fathomlessly at him, Severus, his eyes narrowed and challenging. Remus looked away, and then with a happy exhale he stretched his arms in the sunlight.

"That stone you returned... that river... "

Severus looked over. The river had grown, widened and the water was treacherously deep. It had changed from the innocent little ravine he and Lily had once sat by. He was no longer in his dream, but in a place that was legend to the living.

"Is this Death's door?"

Remus refrained from speaking, but another one of his curious grins hovered around his mouth. He nodded his head to a point nearby them, and Severus noticed a bridge he had not seen before.

"Not yet, but it is time for our exit, I think."

Remus stood up and extended a hand towards Severus to help him up. Severus regarded it, but then ignored it, holding onto the tree trunk as he pulled himself to his feet. If it bothered Remus, he made no sign. They walked up to the bridge, and Severus hesitated once before stepping across it. The glade around them became insubstantial and gradually faded back to the mist it had been born from. Severus suddenly felt a chill, his overcoat had left him, and Remus stood a small distance away, similarly bare.

Severus hugged his arms across his chest and passed his fingers under his nose for any hint of perfume. Any last musk lingering from the old coat.

"What's it like?"

Remus looked up, startled. Severus grimaced.

"It's an insipid question, I know. But still, Remus, we must agree that I'm here in a most extraordinary situation with a person I had never thought would come deliver me. I must be permitted some maudlin sentiments."

Remus remained silent, but with a ghost of a smile on his features. Severus' eyebrows twitched in something less desperate than despair.

"Do we stop... being? Or is there some consciousness after? Are we alone? Are there others? Is there some communal paradise, or is it a private one? Could I..."

Severus grew silent, his eyes sinking.

"... could I see others who have passed on as well?"

Remus gave an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders.

"I have no clue, Severus; I will be just as new to this as you."

There was a grin playing around his features, as if it didn't bother him one bit that he had no clue as to their next, great mystery. He almost looked like one watching a present unravel, the surprise just as valuable as the gift itself. Remus began to unfurl his arms, outstretched on either side of him as if ready to embrace something. Severus began to envy the ease with which it all came to Remus, his own arms uncertain around his chest.

"Why you?"

It took forever for Remus' neck to incline all the way to face him.

"Why is it you?"

Two eyes bore into his, curiously blank, as opaque as polished stones. Conveying... nothing. Reading... nothing.

"Was there no one else to come? No one else who would have wanted... to come? Is it only you who could do this kindness for me, Remus? Why is it you? Of all my acquaintances, I feel like you are among those I have offended most. Surely...surely one from my House would have taken this burden in your stead..."

Remus' smile crept back, enigmatic and betraying nothing.

"I came because I said I would."

Remus looked back to a point in front of him, and Severus felt it unwise to continue asking him anything. Remus closed his eyes, tilted his head backwards and as his back arched, he wavered and then vanished from sight, the entire surroundings seeming to ripple with his passing.

"It's just like falling..."

Severus looked to the spot Remus had been, but there was only blankness and mist. Just like falling. Severus closed his eyes, wondering if he had a heartbeat, wondering if his tear ducts would still produce moisture.

He felt himself wavering, as if he stood at the end of a very tall cliff. And at the bottom was a passing, the slow transition from one plane to another. The slow falling of passage. He teetered, a part of himself still wanting to stay, another wanting to pitch forward.

It was in that one glorious moment between looking down and feeling the suggestion of force launching him that Severus found it within him to smile. And he left. A breath, before falling.

END