

Loss

by sweetflag

Severus suffers the anguish of losing Lily for the third and last time.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This is in response to a challenge I came across on the forum board, and although I'm not sure if it is still ongoing, I couldn't resist having a stab at it. As per the requirements, which can be found on the forum board, the poem is included within the fan fiction. Thank you, fenrir, for the excellent suggestion and the inspiration it provided me. Thanks again to falcon falmorgan, a wonderful beta, and a generous lady.

When We Two Parted.

When we two parted

In silence and tears,

Half broken-hearted,

To sever for years,

Pale grew thy cheek and cold,

Colder thy kiss;

Truly that hour foretold

Sorrow to this.

The dew of the morning

Sank chill on my brow...

It felt like the warning

Of what I feel now.

Thy vows are all broken,

And light is thy fame:

I hear thy name spoken,
And share in its shame.
They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;
A shudder comes o'er me...
Why wert thou so dear?
They know not I knew thee,
Who knew thee too well...
Long, long shall I rue thee
Too deeply to tell.
In secret we met...
In silence I grieve
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.
If I should meet thee
After long years,
How should I greet thee?...
With silence and tears.
Lord Byron.

He woke, his eyes fixing upon the undisturbed pillow and then glancing down to the smooth and unruffled sheets next to him. It was a sight that had greeted him every morning for the last thirteen years, and that damned pain that sliced through him every time he woke alone had never eased, despite her assurances that he would forget her and move on. He rolled onto his back, his head thick and pounding from the night's excesses, lack of sleep and the echoing thought that he'd let something slip from his grasp and had never found the courage to try and recapture it. He grimaced at the thought; it was as constant as the ache that had settled in his bones the day she had looked at him, her green eyes shimmering with unshed tears, and kissed him goodbye. How that day had hurt!

She had come to him, months after leaving Hogwarts, and declared her indecision, stated her confusion and turmoil, confessed that she had discarded something that she should have fought for. In secret they had met, lived and loved in dark corners and rented rooms. She had said she loved him, even as those lips had assured another of the same, but what had he cared when he could place his nose against her neck and inhale her intoxicating scent? She would slip from his arms, and his bed, and into a life that was a pleasant cover for them...she, the dutiful Gryffindor doing as she should, and he, the callous and brutal Death Eater...who would think them a couple and thus place them at risk? So long as they were careful, their affection and love never discovered, they were safe. Glorious months full of sweet kisses and snatched moments of languid love and hasty coupling; he had soared, but then it had all changed. It had become dangerous, and although she had denied the peril and sought him out, he had drawn away, her face a picture of pained confusion.

They had caught sight of each other over the months, their faces equally tired and pained as they strived alone. He had been amazed that she had seemed to suffer, that her skin was pale and her shoulders slumped, that her eyes no longer glittered and that playful quirk no longer adorned her lips. He had longed to reach out and pull her into some dark recess, to ignite her passions and burn away the lethargy that had gripped her. Had he known that her apathy and sorrow were only manifested in his presence and not her constant state, then he may have been able to incise that damnable love? If he had known that her feelings had resolved, and her heart burned and beat for James, but he hadn't, not until that hateful announcement had caught his eye and inflamed his brain. He had wept; it had surprised him because he thought that he had no heart... that her leaving him had withered that fickle and ironic organ...but it ached, insistently and unquenchably.

He had been furious. So, when she came back and settled herself nervously on his tatty chair, and told him of her concerns about the impending marriage, he'd also been very foolish. When she had sought to determine if their love was indeed dead, his fury and foolishness had conspired, and he had confirmed it... harshly and viciously. Her copper tresses had caught the firelight as she strode out of his room, and that backward glance as her hand gripped the door handle haunted him: that missed chance, the lost opportunity. It was the one moment when he could have changed everything, he could have heeded her silent plea that she was his... all he had to do was what they both knew was right.

He clenched his teeth till his jaw ached and thumped his fist against his forehead, as if to force the recalcitrant and spiteful memories from his head; he had no wish to recall his folly on that day...not on this day, of all days. He would have stayed in bed, had not his bladder been persistent and painful. Flinging the covers from his thin and pale body, he slid out of his cold bed and padded to his bathroom. He cursed as the light stung his eyes and, half-blinded, he lifted the seat and relieved at least one of his aches.

He remembered the day that he had seen the announcement in the *Daily Prophet*; his hand had trembled, and he had broken out in a cold sweat. He had wondered how she could have done this to him...had their friendship meant nothing to her? His eyes had gone over the neatly printed lines again and again until the words seemed etched into his brain. James Potter and Lily Evans were to be wed! He had seethed as he watched the happy couple embrace, their eyes lost in each other's gaze, and their happiness radiating out from the Announcements section of the paper. She had once looked at him like that; her green eyes deep and devouring, a verdant lure for his soul. Her arms had once held him, her long, slender fingers slipping over his neck and running through his hair. He had crushed the paper in his hands, imagining their looks of horror as their world collapsed around them. It was too much! She knew that James had made his life a hell, had tormented and beaten him, hurt and almost broken him, and here she was, that treacherous harpy, marrying him. Was it some cruel revenge? Some attempt at hammering home his stupidity and fear? It was cruel and vicious! Those lips that had touched his, that body that had ... he growled and slammed a hand against the cracked and stained bathroom tiles. It was pointless to dwell upon it, pointless to go over the old arguments and regrets. She had been lost to him the day he had let her walk out of his house, lost in the arms of another, and now lost to everything.

His bladder as empty as he felt, he turned on the shower and brushed his teeth while the boiler heated the water. He caught his reflection in the mirror: his pale skin, hooked nose, and dark eyes, and felt a flicker of worthlessness. Why wouldn't she have chosen James over him? He was certainly more dashing and handsome, more athletic and healthy looking. He spat out the toothpaste and rinsed his mouth. James had whiter teeth too. The hot water pounded his skin, the steady, tingling jets massaging his aching muscles and easing some of the agitation that had wound through him. He thought back to the times when she had sneaked behind him, her arms snaking around him to lather his chest, and work the suds down to clean him intimately. He shuddered at the memory, partly from how she had affected him, and partly from the terrible knowledge that she would never do it again. Dripping and shivering as he stepped from the warmth of his shower and into the cooler air of the bathroom, he reached for a stiff, coarse towel and roughly towelled himself dry. He knew that it was useless to blame Lily; it had not been her fault that he had made her walk away, nor was she culpable in his inability to have done what she had begged and pleaded him to do. It was hopeless to hate her...he loved her and always would.

He had thought that her invite had been some malicious attempt to hurt him when the white card had fluttered from his numb fingers onto the kitchen table. He had gaped at

it, his eyes widening and his breath hitching. His anger had prompted him to rip the invite into tiny pieces, and then later, his remorse had made him repair the tattered card. Could this be the apology that he had never made, the answer to her questions that he could never bring himself to say out loud? Would his face at her wedding restore her faith in him? He never found out, he had burnt the invite and banished the ashes, his mind replaying the cruel image of the happy couple leaning together and sharing their first kiss as man and wife. He tried to believe that he had done it because he hated the thought of James Potter leeching her life, but he knew that if he had gone he would have screamed out his objection, he would have leapt from his seat and bared his soul.

In his bathroom he scratched at the pale Mark, his fingernails raising welts over the coiled snake and naked skull. He closed his eyes and felt his fingernails dig deeply into the hated brand. He would have condemned them both; they would have been hunted down by both sides. Better that she had been in another man's arms than a corpse. He studied the faded Mark...his nails had left red, weeping crescents...and wondered, bitterly, why he had chosen it over a gold band on his finger. Disgusted and sorrowful, he dressed in his black robes. She had once said that black suited him; she had meant it generously, but now that he saw his life as over, it had also been her prophecy. He mourned his life.

The air was cold, and he shivered on the doorstep as he fumbled with the house key to lock the door. He could hear the early morning traffic rumbling and the soft hum of the streetlights that still burned, waiting to dispatch their duty to the sun. He marched along the street, past the thin terraced houses and the rusty, neglected, parked cars and onto the main road. The cold, November morning seemed apt and sympathetic as the wind moaned and howled over the rooftops and tugged and bullied him, those icy fingers prodding and chilling him. His nose began to run, and he pulled out the only handkerchief he had ever been given...it had been placed in his hand to help staunch the flow of blood from a broken nose... a gift from Sirius Black for being nosy. He looked at it and hesitated. It had been hers. He sniffed and carefully slid it back into his pocket, conjuring another instead.

He walked up the road, past the park where he had first seen her, past the swings where they had sat and shared their fears and dreams. Past the fish and chip shop from where she bought his tea when his mother had been unable to cook and his father had shouted him out of the house. Up past the now derelict cinema where he had dared to drape his arm over her shoulder and she oh-so-naturally had rested her head against his shoulder. He slipped into a side-street, a shortcut to her house, and there his pace slowed; up ahead was the confirmation that his nightmare had happened, his terrible prophecy realised, and the bitter truth that it wasn't the association with him that had killed her, but the child that she had nurtured. His breathing grew laboured, and he stumbled, his hip banging painfully into a garden wall. He had cast her aside to keep her safe, and it had been for nothing! A sob burst from between his white and trembling lips, his eyelids squeezed shut and his nails cut into his palm.

Gathering himself together, he continued, his feet carrying him onwards along a familiar and once eagerly walked route. He emerged from the side-street and into a wider, cleaner road, the houses grander and better kept, and in the distance the house was easy to spot, the two hearses and the black entourage a dreadful marker. He bit down on his tongue to stop the whimper, inhaled slowly to keep control and waited on the corner, watching intently. The wind was freezing, but he was already ice; his fingers were numb, but what did he care? His eyes stung and watered from the bitter chill, but his eyes had issued tears for days. His stomach growled selfishly, and his legs ached from standing, but he kept his vigil. After what felt like an hour, the front door opened, and, stumbling forth, the black-clad mourners walked slowly to the waiting hearses. How pathetically few of them, he thought as he watched them slip into the black car. The world should have stopped; the mourners should have poured from the door in droves, the street should have been lined with weeping adorners. The birds should have fallen from the skies, and the grass withered.

He saw Petunia leaning heavily upon her sturdy husband as a blond-haired brat kicked at the piles of wreaths by the front step; and in the doorway a younger woman with pale skin stood, cradling a bundle against her chest. His heart leapt...that was the boy, Lily's child, the reason for all this; how dare he be so content and still! He heard the car doors slam and the engines start; he licked his lips and his eyes widened as he watched the hearses slowly pass. Which coffin held her? Which of the black, wooden boxes should he look at and wish that it wasn't so? One of the coffins was surrounded by white lilies, and he couldn't stop the sharp pang of pain dragging out a desperate howl as his eyes latched onto the pale and beautiful flowers. He stood, a solitary figure as the entourage passed, and then, when the cars turned and disappeared from view, he was a flurry of movement as he pounded back into the side-street and to a Disapparition point.

The lichgate was made of stone, and lichen latched onto it, mottling its surface so that it looked as mouldering as the occupants beyond it; shuddering and revolted, he slipped through and into the graveyard. He could see the gathered mourners; more had joined the immediate family...wizards and witches standing a respectful and solemn distance, Muggles and wizards, alike, sharing the same inescapable pain. He weaved through the headstones and stopped behind a yew tree, the thick trunk hiding him as he listened in on the priest's words, sharing secretly in the ceremony. Most of the faculty of Hogwarts was there, Minerva openly weeping next to a solemn and gaunt Dumbledore, Professors Flitwick and Sprout looking dazed, and Hagrid sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve. Sirius Black was there too, his face gaunt and his blue eyes fixed on nothing, his body trembling and swaying. Lupin was staring at the coffins laid side-by-side on the green grass, his expression unreadable.

He sneered, and his hands gripped the rough bark. He had known her and loved her better than anyone standing there; they had no right to stand there and mourn so desperately the fraction of her that they had been privileged to know. He could tell them about Lily, divulge her to them so that their current grief was nothing compared to the sense of loss at what they had never known and now would never discover. He felt tears stream down his face; he knew her and couldn't share, he grieved and couldn't display it, he hated and couldn't direct it, he hurt and he couldn't heal it.

He sobbed and collapsed against the yew; he knew how she had burned, knew how she had laughed. Had any of them seen the little dimple on her cheek when she pursed her lips angrily? Had they been able to discern her mood from the way she angled her head, or that she fiddled with her hair when nervous? Had they noticed her smell and how it changed over the month, had they seen the slight puffiness under her chin when she was due? Had they been able to give her what she needed without her ever needing to ask, read her mood in a glance and thrill her, comfort her, please her? He sneered and gritted his teeth...they barely knew her! They stood round the gaping, greedy hole in the ground and watched her coffin being lowered as if they had earned the right merely because they grieved, while he, who had more right than any, was left to cower behind a tree.

He caught the priest's voice, saying her name with the hated amendment, Lily Potter, and calling her a devoted wife; he hugged himself and fought the urge to empty his stomach. She had loved him, she had loved James, and he should have felt shame that he had made her lie, but he only felt shame that he had squandered his chance with her. Her name, spoken so softly, should have been alien in this place, but it echoed undeniably around the tiny graveyard. He retched and spat out burning bile, she couldn't be cold in the ground; her life snuffed out and snatched from his grip. It all became too viciously real. He could no longer consider this to be a nightmare; the priest had said her name! It was done; she was dead and buried.

His own sobs were smothered by the outpouring from the gathered mourners as they stepped forward to throw handfuls of dirt on the coffin; he felt his heart clench that he couldn't show his respect or the depth of his feeling, couldn't scream out that she had loved him and that he hurt. He felt eyes upon him and lifted his head to be caught in Dumbledore's sombre and gentle gaze. He watched as the old man threw dirt and then, while his blue eyes were fixed purposefully on him, moved to take another handful and cast it to mingle with the others. Snape gasped and shuddered; he nodded gratefully and blinked away his tears, and then slid down the trunk, his knees pressing into the cold, damp earth. He had thought that the day she had walked away had hurt... this was an agony! He couldn't bear it!

There was nothing left for him; the priest had gone on to extol the virtues of the glorious James Potter, and with that reviled name ringing in his ears he had fled through the lichgate. What hurt him the most, he wondered? Was it that he had known her? Was it that he had fallen in love with her? Was this regret that burned and scratched at his insides born of his missed chance, or that someone so unworthy had captured her for his wife? Would he be half as resentful if some other man had taken her to his bed, would it sting less knowing that he had let her go? The depth of his regret was unfathomable; he knew that the rest of his life would be too short a time to explore just how terribly he had ruined their lives. He regretted that he lived to bear the weight of it.

He survived; he had a duty of a sort, and he honoured it because he had never stopped loving her. He spent the years teaching...it wasn't a career that would have leapt up as the one he was most suited for, but it turned out that he was satisfactory. He was grateful for the work, the home and the focus that the role afforded him, it helped distract him from the thoughts that roiled beneath his veneer. And he did have moments of happiness, moments where he could believe that he had a future. He still woke to a smooth pillow and unruffled sheets, and that ache still flared, but he had accepted it.

He settled himself down on his chair in the Great Hall, greeted Quirrell and poured himself some pumpkin juice. It was comforting to have his identity, to know his purpose and concentrate on it. He took a sip of the cool drink and looked over the dazed and excited children milling in the central aisle. Quirrell distracted him with a question about the syllabus, and while Minerva called out the students' names, he quickly and disdainfully answered the man. He felt that he was being watched, a sensation that he had learnt to respect and respond to; turning his head slowly, his gaze swept over the Great Hall. And there, amongst the throng of children, a verdant gaze froze his soul!

His breath had caught in his throat, his chest constricting painfully as he looked into her eyes. He had felt overwhelmed at the memories that her son's curious and innocent

eyes had stirred up. His only defence had been to take in the black hair and the round glasses, to concentrate and reinforce the knowledge that the boy was Potter's son. It had been such a demanding and painful thing to do, to force himself to look upon those eyes and hate! The things that he would have told the boy, the wonder of his mother, her power, her glory, her soul, how she smiled and laughed, how her arms were the sweetest sanctuary and how her heart had toppled him. He had no choice, however; his silence was demanded and irrevocable, and his tears would be shed later when, in the dark of his room, his hand would reach out and, yet again, be greeted by emptiness.