

THE APPRENTICE AND THE NECROMANCER

BY JUNOMAGIC

* PART 19 *



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All Hope Abandon, Ye Who Enter Here

"Wait!"

"What?" Severus bit out irritably.

"The cloak. The Invisibility Cloak. I think we should wear it. Just in case Dumbledore was wrong and there's not just another plane of existence ... or ... *uh...non-existence*, I guess, behind that Veil, but also some guy who guards it." Harry was aware that he sounded remarkably stupid, but he still held out the cloak to Severus. Since the Potions Master was the taller man, he'd have to wear the cloak while Harry stayed close enough to his side to be covered as well.

"Very well." Snape grabbed the cloak and threw it over his head. The air shimmered for a moment around him, then he was gone. A second later, Harry heard the faint rustle of fabric and the air split apart, revealing a part of Severus again, namely his left arm and side.

"Great," Harry said. "We'd better get going."

"Nervous?" He could detect a faint note of amusement in Severus' voice.

Harry bit his tongue and took the older man's hand. Snape's long fingers curled around his in an iron grip. His skin was cold and clammy. As Harry ducked under the Invisibility Cloak, huddling next to Severus, he grinned. He was not the only one who was nervous.

"So where does it say '*All hope abandon, ye who enter here*'?" Harry quipped, desperately clinging to some gallows humour. His voice sounded muffled under the cloak. It was quite warm and he noticed a spicy fragrance that seemed to cling to the man next to him. Snape used an *eau de toilette*? But that was impossible – the man was *the greasy git*!

"'A fair request should be followed by the deed in silence'," Snape drawled. "Kindly shut up and follow me."

oooOooo

The Veil was soft around them as they stepped through. For a moment Harry thought there were hands reaching for him, a gentle caress, a silken embrace, and that there were voices whispering into his ears, many voices, both old and young. But if they used words of love or hate, he couldn't tell.

As the frayed seam of the Veil slid across his shoulder, it shimmered just like his Invisibility Cloak. His heart beat heavily. It seemed that Flamel had been right – this must be the same fabric. Was *his cloak* the reason that the Veil in the Death Chamber was so tattered and torn?

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On the other side, they stopped dead.

Harry inhaled a shuddering breath. He was still able to breathe. And his heart was racing. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "I ... *uh*... I don't feel dead. *Umm*... Do you?"

He stared straight ahead and swallowed hard. He wasn't sure if he was ready to face a Severus reduced to the pearly glow of a ghostly existence. A thought struck him – they were still holding hands, and Snape's hand didn't feel any different. Still cool, but firm. Firm. Very tangible.

"Not quite yet," was the sour response. "But if you don't loosen that death grip of yours around my hand, that may happen yet. If you don't mind, refrain from breaking my fingers."

"Right." Harry took another deep breath and forced himself to relax his hand a little. Then he looked to his right. In the dim twilight that surrounded them, Severus loomed at his side like a black shadow. But he did feel the warmth of Severus' body. And he could still smell that *eau de toilette* or whatever that scent was. "Right." They had passed beyond the Veil. And they were not precisely dead. Now what?

Harry dared to glance back at the Veil, looking over his right shoulder – and gasped. "Sev-" He coughed. "Severus, the Veil! It's gone!"

Snape spun around, unceremoniously dragging Harry along with him. Harry stumbled, scrambled, then they stood next to each other again and stared – at a large gate set in an archway of smooth black stone.

Unsurprisingly, the doors of the gate were locked.

"Shit," Snape cursed softly.

"No shit!" exclaimed Harry, when he caught the gleam of metal out of the corner of his eye. "Look at your wands! I think that Sempiternal potion-spell ... connection ... *thing actually worked!*"

oooOooo

Severus stared at his wands – or rather, at his *wand*.

He was holding only one wand now, his right wand, yew with dragon heartstring. His other wand, birch with a sphinx feather at the core, had turned into a large golden skeleton key with an elaborate bow and tooth.

Rebirth. Birch for rebirth and new beginnings. And now, the key to the gates between Life and Death.

"That is certainly unexpected," he said softly.

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"That's fairly awesome, I'd say. Wait until we get to tell Hermione about that!" Relief coloured the youthful enthusiasm of Harry's voice. Strangely, Severus didn't feel annoyed at the young man's reaction. Instead he felt his heart-beat more heavily for a breath or two. *Maybe he would see her again, after all.*

He stood in silence for a moment, studying the key. It was heavy in his hand, the cold metal of its shaft slowly warming in his grasp. He thought he recognised ancient Greek symbols in the pattern of bow and tooth, but now was not the time to examine it more closely. Severus took a deep breath and tucked the key securely into the inner pocket of his frock coat.

"Well, Harry," he said gruffly. "Since you have just demonstrated an astonishing talent for observation and deduction by coming to the accurate conclusion that we are not dead ... *yet*, how would you like to turn around now and set about accomplishing our task?"

Harry's fingers tightened around his. Severus looked down at the young auror. The unruly spikes of Harry's black hair reached just above Severus' shoulder. Harry was a bit taller than Hermione; but not much.

Harry snorted. "Fine with me, sir."

Together, they turned. Empty grey plains stretched out before them until they faded into blurred mists in the distance.

"Now what?" asked Harry.

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Heavy Fields of Scentless Asphodel

They turned around again and stared at the arc once more. Just like in the Chamber of Death, the archway with the Gate between Life and Death stood on its own, unsupported by any walls.

The twilight-plain around them was cloaked in silence. No murmur of voices, no buzzing of bees, no trilling of birds, no whispering winds disturbed the quiet. The only sound was the noise of their own breathing. Heavy and fast, it betrayed their tension.

There was no path and no discernible landmarks, not even trees. The vegetation consisted solely of knee-high, drab herbs and grasses, interspersed with flowering plants that grew roughly up to their hips. No stars and no sun offered guidance in the ashen sky.

"What kind of weed is that stuff?" Harry asked and dragged Severus closer to one of the plants. It was about three feet high and shaped a bit like a sceptre. Its stem and leaves were slate-grey. But the blossoms – clusters of six tapering petals, elegant filaments and proud styles – were white. The flower looked vaguely familiar.

The tug of the cloak around his shoulder made him realise that Severus was shaking his head. "How you passed your herbology OWL with '*Exceeds Expectations*', I'll never understand," Severus commented. "This," he paused, apparently unwilling to forego his penchant for dramatic effects even here, "is an asphodel, an *Asphodelus Ramosus* to be exact. And the rest of this ...*stuff* ... is mint, and a monocotyledonous green plant from the family of the *Gramineae*, more commonly known as '*grass*'."

"Ah." Harry leant closer to the flower. "Strange. It doesn't have any scent at all." He turned back to Snape. "Right," Harry said. "So it's an asphodel. Does that actually give us a clue as to where we are? I mean, apart from '*beyond the Veil*'? Or how we're supposed to find Dumbledore?"

"I take it you don't remember any of your lessons in ancient magical history?"

"I *did* have a '*D*' in history of magic in my OWLs," Harry offered helpfully.

"Thankfully I did not," Severus said dryly. "I think we are in the area that the wizards of Ancient Greece called the '*Meadows of Asphodel*' – where the souls of the dead dwell before passing on to their final destiny. The other '*stuff*' on the ground supports this interpretation: Mint is a herb hallowed to Hades, the Greek God of the Underworld. It is supposed to be the metamorphosed form of the nymph Minthe, one of Hades' lovers. Though modern scholars maintain that this story is only the mythical explanation of a botched *Florimagus* attempt."

"Yikes." Harry shifted uncomfortably. "So that means we're exactly where souls would stay who'd want to remain close to the Veil, right? Like, souls still connected to their portraits and such."

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"Yes, I think that is a fair assumption."

"Great." Harry looked around once more. "So, *um...* where *is* everybody? Shouldn't it be sort of busy around here, if that's the case? You know, with lots of souls passing through and hanging around?"

Snape just sighed at his ignorance. "According to Homer only a libation of blood will allow a soul to regain form and the faculty of speech in the Asphodel Meadows. But how it is possible to call upon a specific soul is never mentioned. Even among wizards, this is the *stuff* of legends and not of learning."

"Libation of blood? You mean, like ... a sacrifice?"

"Yes, indeed, a sacrifice. '*The Nekya*' – the Book of the Dead – asks for the blood of a black ram and a barren heifer, as well as several other substances. Though if memory serves, an earlier author claimed that for a proper libation the blood of a virgin should be used."

Harry sighed. His back and hand were beginning to hurt. He was instinctively ducking his head in order to remain underneath the protective cover of the Invisibility Cloak. "Okay, that's a bit of a problem. No ram, heifer or virgin available. I guess we'll just have to make do with what we have – " He reached for Godric Gryffindor's sword and pulled a few inches of the blade from the sheath. He awkwardly clasped it between his right thumb and their joined hands. Then he twisted around and sliced his left arm across the blade, just above the back of his hand.

"*Shite!*" Harry jerked back at the sharp sting of pain. The sword slipped from his grasp and slid back into the sheath.

"Potter, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Severus snapped.

Harry raised his arm. Somehow he'd managed to create a ragged zigzag of a cut, which reminded him uncomfortably of the scar on his forehead. It was also not as shallow as he'd intended. The wound was bleeding profusely. "Providing that libation, of course."

He used their joined hands to hold the cloak a little bit away from their bodies. Then Harry proceeded to shake his left wrist vigorously. Fat drops of blood flew from his arm and sprinkled the nearest asphodel, bright red on its white blossoms. He kept going for a while, until the mint plants and the grass below it, as well as the granite coloured ground were liberally adorned with splotches of red.

We need a guide, he thought desperately. *We need someone to take us to Dumbledore ... Please, let this work ... We need a guide ...* When he couldn't feel his fingers anymore, he stopped. Dizzy, he shook his head and staggered.

"*Damn*," Severus cursed. "Don't you dare and let go."

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"Won't," Harry murmured. "At least not quite yet. Can you heal that?"

A moment later he felt the tip of Severus' wand on his wrist. Warmth flooded his hand and arm. Feeling returned to his fingers. "Cool, at least that wand's still working," Harry breathed. "Thanks."

Suddenly Severus jerked around.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Don't you hear that?"

"What?"

"The sound of wings - something is flying towards us, and it's coming closer quickly."

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Guidance

"It's an –"

"Hedwig!"

Harry lurched forward, tearing off the Invisibility Cloak and nearly wrenching loose from Severus' grasp. Somehow Severus managed to thrust his wand into the bandolier with the Necromantic bells. He lunged and clung with both hands to Harry's arm.

Meanwhile, the white owl circled overhead, before she descended and alit on Harry's left forearm.

"Hedwig! Oh, Hedwig!" Harry cried and slumped down on his knees so suddenly that he dragged Severus with him, almost severing their connection again. The owl ruffled her feathers and opened her beak in a voiceless hoot of comfort. Harry crooned to the bird, meaningless monosyllables of sentimental attachment.

"Bloody hell, *Potter!* What do you think you're doing with that blasted bird?" Severus shouted and recoiled, when the damn soul of an owl pecked at him, silently, but viciously.

Harry glared at him. "If you haven't noticed yet," he said sweetly, "I'm welcoming our guide, *Sev.*"

"I *will* call you '*Potter*' if you act like that hot-headed idiot who spawned you," Severus spat. "How many times did I tell you before we passed beyond the Veil that you **MUST NOT LET GO** of my damn hand while we're here?"

His knees were bruised and throbbed with pain from hitting the ground with no way to break his fall. His arms were shaking due to the twisted position he was forced into to keep a good hold on Harry. He fought the impulse to shove Harry away and storm off. In the end Severus even tightened his hold, while he stared down at the grey mint plants before him, counting his heartbeats until he regained control over his temper.

"Have you realised – *Harry* – that neither Miss Weasley nor Hermione have even attempted to make me promise to bring you back alive?" Severus asked with a dangerous hint of silk in his voice, although the temptation to ultimately give in to his anger had passed.

"What?" Harry managed to tear his eyes away from the owl on his arm. "Why?"

"They do not trust me to be able to protect you from yourself."

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"What?" Now those brilliant green eyes (Why did they have to remind him of Lily again right now, right here?) burned with righteous indignation. Severus winced. That was not how he'd meant his words, that was not what he'd wanted to say, not at all; he only wanted him to understand, to be careful. This was not a bloody *picnic*, after all!

Merlin, Nimuë and Circe, why is it that all my interactions with that boy are cursed from the start?

"What?" Harry repeated. "But they *know* I trust you! They *know* you've protected me at Hogwarts from day one, no matter that you've been downright nasty about it. And I *know* that Hermione loves you!"

Severus stared at Harry, flummoxed by that outburst. "No. No, strangely, that is not the issue. Not at all," he said softly, bewildered at Harry's reaction. "It's something else entirely. They did not say it, they did not even *have* to say it – but they are afraid that something like what *almost* happened a moment ago *would* happen." Severus raised his eyebrows slightly, then he nodded first at the snow-white owl perched on Harry's arm before raising their hands, miraculously still linked together. Harry's hand was turning hot and sweaty in his grasp. "Your fiancée, my wife, your friends, they are worried that even though you are nearly a full-fledged auror – or *supposed to be*, at least," he sneered, "that you'll *still* act first and –"

Harry frowned. By now not only Severus' knees were throbbing with pain. A pounding headache had settled in his temples. He shook his head in mute frustration.

"– and that, this time around, I won't get the chance to *think* about my rash acts and impulsive behaviour later?" Harry finished Severus' sentence.

Severus nodded weakly. After a moment's consideration he slowly removed his right hand from Harry's arm again and shifted his weight away from his bruised knees. He watched while Harry continued to stroke the apparition of his owl. At least Harry appeared to be contemplating his conclusion of Severus' sentence.

"She's all that was good about my childhood, you know," Harry said suddenly. "Hedwig. Hagrid gave her to me, to make up for all of my birthdays he'd missed before I got my letter. I don't think I ever got a present that meant more to me. Except maybe that broom that Sirius sent to me." Severus couldn't suppress a scowl, but Harry just grinned. Abruptly, Harry asked, "What was the best thing about your childhood, Severus?"

Severus stared at that snowy owl. *Not much of a symbol for a childhood*, he reflected. *But strangely fitting for a boy who hadn't been allowed to have much of a childhood at all.* He wanted to give a scathing reply, something along the line of '*That's none of your business, Potter.*' However, sitting as they were on the Fields of Asphodel beyond the Veil that seemed petty even to him.

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"Lily," he answered at last. "Your mother. She was the best part of my childhood. And for many years, of my life." He was astonished to discover that he smiled when he spoke her name.

"That's great," Harry said. The honest warmth in Harry's voice stunned Severus.

"Maybe ... one day ... you might tell me about ..." Harry trailed off, with a little awkward shrug.

After a long moment of silence, Severus replied, "Maybe one day I could."

"Umm, right." Harry shifted awkwardly. "About my acting rashly, sir – could you maybe use that variety of the *Incarcerous* that you developed to *uh...* tie us together? Just in case I do something stupid again."

"That is actually a good idea." Severus raised his wand. Thin leather thongs slithered from its tip and wound themselves around their joined hands and fingers.

"Very well," he said finally. "Maybe you could ask our guide to show us the way to Albus Dumbledore now?"

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An Interesting Find

It was not difficult to follow Hedwig. She flew only a few feet ahead of them, not very high, at an even, slow speed.

The going was easy. The most demanding aspect of their hike was to avoid getting the Invisibility Cloak snagged on the ubiquitous asphodels. Yet the only indication that they made any progress at all was how the archway with the Gate grew smaller and smaller behind them, until it disappeared into the blur of grey fog between plains and sky.

"The wizards of Ancient Greece thought that owls were the messengers of Hades, the God of the Underworld," Severus said suddenly, startling Harry from his thoughts – uncomfortable thoughts about childhood in general, and his Mum and Severus in particular.

"Oh?" Harry tried not to wince. If he kept coming across like a dunderhead, how should he ever manage to win – *wait a moment*, since when did he care about having or not having Snape's respect?

"Yes," Severus snapped. "A fact which is, *by the way*, part of the curriculum of History of Magic at Hogwarts. Professor Binns covers Ancient Greece in the First Year."

"Right." Harry cleared his throat. "So that's why we use owls as messenger birds? Interesting, that."

Snape shook his head. "The historical reason for that is actually Ascalaphus – the real man, not the orchardist of Hades that mythology turned him into. He was a priest of Pallas Athene and his Animagus form was a screech-owl. He accompanied Greek armies into battle and then turned into his Animagus form to spy and to carry messages for his side. He was naturally much better at these tasks than ordinary owls. But of course that didn't keep wizards from trying to imitate the Greeks, hoping they would find equal success with their common barn and screech owls. That is the grain of truth in the magical and the mundane legends about owls in antiquity."

Harry snorted. "The way you tell the story, it's actually interesting."

He pondered that idea for a while as they walked. At last he glanced at the tall man striding along next to him "You actually like teaching, don't you? We used to think that you hate it. *And* the students. – Well, except the Slytherins, maybe."

The soft huff of Severus' breathing told Harry that his companion was thinking about his comment.

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After a while, the Invisibility Cloak tugged at Harry's shoulders: Severus nodded. "Yes, contrary to your impression I *do* like teaching. I may not be the best teacher there is and I am certainly not a very patient instructor ..."

Their eyes met for a second and Harry caught the hint of grin curling up the corners of Severus' thin mouth. "Teaching was certainly not what I originally aspired to. But I have come to enjoy it over the years."

"You certainly hid that well while I was at Hogwarts," Harry admitted frankly. "And what do you like about it?"

"It may have escaped you, but while you attended Hogwarts I had other things on my mind than the joys of my profession."

"Good point."

For several minutes they walked in silence. Then Snape inhaled contemplatively, long nostrils flaring. "What I like about teaching ... a number of things, in fact. I love my subject – the subtle science and exact art of potion making. And it is rewarding to witness how at least some students develop an understanding of and an appreciation for this subject over the years. It is even quite satisfying to have a hand in preventing the Longbottoms and Crabbes of this world from blowing themselves up before they reach their OWLs." Severus smirked.

Harry chuckled. "Okay, I guess I can see that. – Hey, what's Hedwig doing now?"

The white owl kept circling a spot not far ahead of them.

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Severus narrowed his eyes and frowned. "But there's nothing there ..."

"Oh yes, there is!"

Harry had been the youngest Seeker at Hogwarts in over a century for a reason. He quickly scanned the area next to the huge asphodel on which Hedwig perched precariously. In spite of its small size and its dark colour, which blended in with the grey shades of the surrounding vegetation, Harry's sharp eyes glimpsed the floating black pebble almost instantly. And he would have reached for it just as quickly, if the reflexes of a master duellist hadn't been more than a match for the agility of a Seeker. Severus grabbed Harry across the chest and dragged him backwards.

"Was our recent conversation concerning the dangers of acting with foolish rashness only a hallucination? Wishful thinking on my part?" he hissed.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "*Shite*," he muttered. "Robards would have my head for that stunt. Sorry, sir."

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"One more slip-up like that," Severus said in a silky voice, "and once we're back in the land of the living I shall be absolutely *delighted* to ascertain that the Head of the Auror Office receives a full report of your exploits."

"Yes, sir," Harry said and winced. He could just about imagine Snape's testimony so far. He'd have to count himself lucky if Robards didn't assign him to the Auror Archives permanently as a result. He took a deep breath and followed Snape's lead as they carefully advanced to where the small black stone floated barely a foot above the ground.

"That's definitely the Resurrection Stone," Harry said.

Snape shook his head. "No. It's one *half* of the Resurrection Stone. Observe the sharp edges where the crack used to be."

Harry's stomach cramped. "Then where is the other half?" he asked. "And where is Professor Dumbledore?"

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Careful observation and an even more cautious examination of this half of the Resurrection Stone yielded no information. They only discovered that while they could touch it without dire consequences, they could not move it, remove it or destroy it.

No matter what they did, the stone remained where it was, floating serenely between asphodel and mint, a tiny black spot in a landscape of greys.

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At last Harry and Severus sat down a few feet away from the stone. After some arguing, Severus grudgingly agreed that it was unlikely for something awful to happen if Harry were to remove just his left arm from the Invisibility Cloak so that Hedwig could sit with him. The materialised soul of Harry's owl seemed to feel that she had done her job at the moment and didn't show any inclination to lead them anywhere else. She seemed content to coo at Harry soundlessly and to nip at his fingers affectionately.

"Hedwig seems to think that this is where we wanted to go," Harry said, eyeing the broken Resurrection Stone morosely.

"Maybe the Stone is the key ... or an anchor to a spell," Severus surmised.

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "Believe it or not, but that thought has crossed my mind, too. So what do we do now? The Stone won't budge."

"We could try to Summon another soul. This time preferably someone who could *tell* us what happened to Albus Dumbledore's soul," Snape said with a pointed look at Hedwig. "Not even *I* can bestow speech unto a soul that did not possess this faculty in life."

"Sounds good to me." He rose to his feet and made to reach for the sword. "Would you do the honours or shall I?"

Snape paled and shook his head, the lank strands of his hair flying even under the hood of the Invisibility Cloak. "You don't ever want to see what the blood of a Necromancer can Summon."

"Oh." Harry gulped. "All right."

"However, I suggest that you allow me the honour to wield the blade. Your erstwhile attempt -"

"Uh, I guess you've seen failed suicides that looked prettier?" Harry joked. A flicker of something in the depth of Severus' eyes made Harry draw back. "Shit, you have?"

"Never mind," was the curt reply.

"Right," Harry cleared his throat awkwardly and. "If you would?"

He transferred Hedwig to his shoulder, marvelling at how real, how alive the soul of his childhood companion felt. Then he swallowed hard and held out his left forearm to Severus. "The back of my forearm again, please. Not the tattoo."

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Severus inclined his head and carefully drew the sword from its sheath. Before Harry had a chance to blink, a clean, shallow slash across his arm was bleeding freely. Harry winced at the sudden sting of the cut, but it was far less painful than when he'd cut himself to Summon Hedwig.

Okay. We need someone who can talk, someone who can tell us what happened to Dumbledore. Someone who will help us!

He tried to concentrate on a name. *Who'd be most helpful? Sirius?* His heart skipped a beat at the thought. *Merlin, how he wanted to see Sirius again. But would he be able to help? Scratch that,* Harry thought, taking into account the company he was keeping. *Might be weeks of arguing about why I'm with Snape until we get to that point.*

Who else? Moody? Remus? Fred? His heart grew tight with longing. There were just too many people he would like to see again. *My mother ... Lily ... He would probably like to see her. Or would he? Now that he had Hermione?*

Harry shook himself. *Just the person who'll help us most,* he begged. *Please.*

With a crack like a whip, a small creature appeared before them. Large, bat-like ears were flapping with delight and round, bulging eyes were no longer glassy with death, but glowing brightly with renewed adoration. Dobby gave a silent squeal of joy, before he grabbed the seam of the Invisibility Cloak above Harry's injured arm and pulled on it vigorously. The cloak parted, revealing the two travellers.

Dobby was grinning from ear to fluttering ear, and his mouth opened and closed with an amazing speed, but there was no sound at all. Harry imagined that a goldfish in a bowl of Butterbeer might look like this. Utterly blissful in his silence.

"Severus," Harry hissed, torn between happiness and despair at Dobby's silent but profuse expressions of happiness. "What about that bestowing speech act? That would come in really handy right now!"

"Of course." Snape's fingers ran down the bandolier from the top, caressing each bell in turn, until they stopped at the fourth bell. "This is Dyrin," Severus whispered. "A bell that brings back lost words and silences those that should not be spoken."

He plucked the bell from its sheath and rang it once. The sound was short and sweet, like the first notes of a dancing tune, cut off much too soon.

"Harry Potter! Oh, good sir! To meet you again, here! And you're alive, and grown! Quite the young gentleman Harry Potter now is! Oh sir, what joy!" Dobby squeaked and beamed at Harry.

"Dobby," Harry croaked.

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And it was very good that his hand was tied to Severus, because he couldn't think of anything but hugging Dobby – staying under the Invisibility Cloak, keeping a good hold on Severus' hand, the mystery of the floating half of the Resurrection Stone – all of that fled from his mind.

"Dobby," he repeated, his voice choked with tears.

And just like Hedwig, the materialised soul of Dobby-the-house-elf, felt just as real as the elf would have felt in life. He was small, tiny. Knobbly. A bit like a puppet come alive.

"I never got the chance to thank you," Harry whispered. "You saved our lives. Hermione's, Ron's, mine."

Dobby's luminous emerald orbs took on a solemn shimmer. "Dobby died a free elf. Is no better way for Dobby to go. And besides, Headmaster Professor Dumbledore Sir needs help of house-elf on this side of things."

The small creature gave a sage nod. "Dobby is needed. Dobby serves."

"But where is Professor Dumbledore, Dobby?" Harry asked, fighting down his impatience.

"Why," Dobby said, surprise colouring his high-pitched voice. "Right here."

The house-elf pointed straight at the floating black pebble of the broken Resurrection Stone.

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A Trapped Soul

"What?!" Harry asked. "Dobby, do you mean to say that Professor Dumbledore's soul is lying over there underneath the Resurrection Stone?"

Dobby cocked his head. "That what it is? Wizards came and put it on him. Since then Professor Dumbledore Sir has not been able to move."

"Who did this?" Severus asked, joining the conversation for the first time. "Who were those wizards?"

Dobby's ears flapped nervously as he bowed to the Potions Master. "That toad woman it was, Professor Snape, sir. And two others." He ducked his head. "Bad wizards," the elf whispered. "They has swords and curvy knives. And silver pipes and one of them got bells like ..." He looked fearfully at Severus. "Dobby does not know them."

"Umbridge!" Harry exclaimed. "But she's dead! Her death should have broken the curse."

"Unless she did not cast it or it was set up not to depend on an individual's power," Severus said. His black gaze was fixed on the Resurrection Stone.

Harry followed his gaze. It was hard to believe that a *soul* was trapped under the stone. It was harder to believe that it was Professor Dumbledore who lay there. He didn't know what to think. And he felt ... odd. *Choked, somehow.*

Harry glanced at Severus. *How much worse must it be for him? To stand next to the soul of a friend he had to kill?*

Snape looked horrible. His lips were white, pressed tightly together. A tiny blue vein pulsed at his temple. Harry remembered this tell-tale sign of Snape about to lose control. He winced at a memory of how he'd almost enjoyed goading Snape until he had ... well, *snapped.*

"Sir?" Harry asked carefully. "Are there Necromancers among the Death Eaters?"

Severus didn't look at him. When he spoke, his voice sounded very much like Harry felt: choked. "No. No. Of course Voldemort would have loved to have a Raiser in his pocket. But there was only I, the Binder, whom he never quite trusted. And Quirrell – and Quirrell never was a Death Eater as such, merely unfortunate. Though fortunate enough in his timely death." Snape shuddered. It was obvious that he had to force himself to face Harry. When he did, his eyes had a glazed look.

"Before we came here," Severus said softly, "I had a strange suspicion concerning all that has happened. But if Umbridge was *here* –" He shook his head. "If Umbridge was *here*, with *them* ... It just doesn't make sense. I must be missing something."

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He blinked, as if he had to struggle to really *see* Harry. "I suppose it *is* possible that Necromancers have joined that elusive new organization formed by those renegade Death Eaters."

Harry nodded. "Umbridge definitely had the personality to fancy herself the new Dark Lady. She had access to all kinds of resources at the Ministry. And we have no idea who joined that new organization. Or how many. They are too damn good at hiding."

He took a step. A sharp tug at his wrist and a muffled oath reminded him that he was still tied to Severus and that he couldn't just start pacing. "Damn," he muttered. "I'm sorry."

"If you think it will help, I'd be willing to join you in pacing."

Harry rubbed the scar on his forehead. "Probably not." He sighed. "Is there really no way of discovering the nature of this curse and how to break it?"

"Professor Dumbledore Sir says that stones is being used to store magical energy that is being leeches off from somewhere else - *someones* else," Dobby piped up. "Professor Dumbledore Sir says that the magic is not being used," he added. His ears flattened against his skull. "Professor Dumbledore Sir says that the curse will eventually become unstable and collapse," Dobby whispered. "And then ... and then ... bad things will happen ... bad, bad things ..." He dropped on his knees, hid his face in his hands and proceeded to rock back and forth. "Oh, oh, oh!" he moaned. "Oh, oh, oh!" He appeared to be literally scared out of his wits.

"Dobby, STOP THAT!" Harry shouted. He reached for the elf at the same moment as Snape did. For a second they stared at each other. Then Harry picked the distraught elf up and hugged him close. He'd never done this while elf was alive. Holding him for the second time, now, here, made him regret that even more. Finally Dobby stopped sniffing and Harry released him.

"You said that Professor Dumbledore can't move," Harry asked. "If that's the case, how can you *talk* to him?"

Dobby blinked at Harry and shook his head a little. "Harry Potter is not knowing much about souls, is he? I is not needing to speak in order to talk to Professor Dumbledore Sir. We is *dead*. We don't need words anymore."

"What kind of bad things will happen?" Harry pressed.

Dobby only moaned.

"What do you think will happen, when the halves of the Resurrection Stone reach the limit of their capacity?" Snape asked impatiently.

"They might ... *umm* ... explode?"

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"Excellent exercise of logical reasoning," Severus snapped. "Indeed, they *will* explode. Along with everything around them. And I mean *everything*."

Harry gulped. "Are you sure?"

"I can *promise* you that a big bang on both sides of the Veil will do nothing for the continued existence of an orderly space-time continuum." Snape turned to Dobby. "How can the curse be broken? How much time do we have to break it?"

"Professor Dumbledore Sir says that you have to bring the other half of the Stone and put it together again," Dobby replied.

"And that will break the curse? So there will be no explosion and Professor Dumbledore will be able to move again?" Harry asked hopefully.

Dobby's ears drooped even lower, until their pointy tips touched his bony little shoulders. "No, Harry Potter. I is so very sorry. But Professor Dumbledore Sir says it doesn't work quite like that."

oooOooo

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Questions ...

"Then how *does* it work?" Harry demanded.

"Professor Dumbledore Sir says you will have need the Elder Wand. Then one of you must use Elder Wand to make whole Stone. And you must wear the Cloak. Then all –"
"Dobby's voice quavered, "will be well."

"What does he mean with that?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Dumbledore hadn't been precisely forthcoming with information that was in any way complete in life. And the conversation they'd had in the train station that apparently constituted his personal, subjective dimension of Death, well ... he'd wanted *everything* to be over *so much* ... Harry knew he hadn't paid enough attention to what was said. That was something he'd come to regret bitterly in the following months, as he struggled to remember, to understand, to ... *cope*.

Harry glanced at Snape. The sharp crease between his brows indicated that he wasn't happy with Dobby's explanation either. Harry experienced a surprising surge of gratitude. *Snape may be a pain in the arse, he thought, but ... I do trust him.*

Dobby cocked his head and narrowed his eyes to wrinkly, thoughtful slits. Souls might have no need of words, but obviously the concepts Dumbledore wanted to convey were seriously taxing the house-elf's abilities to translate them into complete sentences.

"Professor Dumbledore Sir is making Dobby's head hurt," the house-elf wailed.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "How is that even possible?" he asked. "You're dead."

Dobby's face screwed up. "Dobby is not knowing, Harry Potter, sir. But is. *Is, is, is.*"

Next to Harry, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and silently shook his head. Harry sighed. "Look, just try. We'll figure it out. It doesn't have to be a perfect explanation, okay, Dobby?"

The elf sniffled and gave Harry a watery smile. "Harry Potter is such a great wizard, sir. Such a great, great wizard."

Next to Harry, Snape stifled a sound caught somewhere between a snort and laughter. "Thank you, Dobby," Harry said. "Would you try explaining to us what Dumbledore told you now?"

"Yes, Dobby is will try." The house-elf nodded vigorously. "Is merging death with death. Is *abs-* absorbing life. Is ... dissolution. Is ... liberation. The ultimate equation."

"Right," Harry said and tried to fight the mad urge to pound his head on the ground in house-elf-fashion. "I have absolutely no idea what that's supposed to mean."

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Dobby suddenly looked at Snape. "Professor Dumbledore Sir says that Professor Snape Sir will understand. I is supposed to say ..." He screwed up his face again in intense concentration, then rattled off something that sounded like a quotation: *"Like a flame blown out by a strong wind goes to rest and cannot be defined, a mind freed from soul and body goes to rest and cannot be defined. For him who has gone to rest there is no measure and no means to describe him; that is not for him. When all has gone, all signs of recognition have also gone."*

Harry turned to Severus. "Do you understand that, sir?"

Snape stared at the Resurrection Stone. After a while he replied, his voice very soft, "Yes, I ... do understand. You may recall that we - he and I - had an argument pertaining ... souls. What you saw, in that particular memory, was neither the beginning nor the end of the argument. Though certainly a highlight." His thin lips curled into a mirthless smile. "Dumbledore is talking about what certain Muggle religions refer to as '*nirvana*' or '*moksa*'. The dissolution of the immortal soul, the final dispersion of mind, soul and body."

At last he sighed and turned to face Harry. When he spoke again, he sounded incredibly weary, "To put it bluntly - I get to '*kill*' Dumbledore all over again."

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Harry's reaction proved once more how much the young wizard had matured during the last three years. He didn't shout, rant or jerk violently away from him. He *did* flinch and his face went very pale. But apart from that he kept calm, his jaws set.

At last Harry muttered, "Why couldn't she pick someone else? Like Voldemort, for example. Or Grindelwald. I wouldn't have given a rat's arse about their souls. No, it *had* to be Dumbledore."

"I expect Dolores Umbridge was the kind of person to bear a grudge," Severus commented.

Harry snorted. "You can say that again." His gaze strayed to the Resurrection Stone. "*Bloody hell.*"

Severus must have tugged at their joined hands unconsciously.

"If you need to pace ..." Harry echoed Severus' earlier offer.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I would appreciate that. There are numerous questions we have to discuss yet. I *do* need to think."

They marched a few paces, Severus in the lead, Dobby trudging along behind them, then stopped. When they turned, Harry winced. Severus paused, frowning. "Is something the matter?"

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"Well," Harry said with a sheepish expression. "The new cut's quite shallow, sir. But it does sting when my sleeve rubs over it."

"Why didn't you say something?" Severus asked irritably. "Hold out your arm and let me heal that."

"Thanks."

They continued pacing in tense silence, circling the Resurrection Stone repeatedly.

At last Severus began to fire off questions with every step. Step, question, step, question, an incessant rhythm: "Why did Umbridge set up the leeching spell like that? Did she *intend* to destroy the known universe or was she just too damn dim-witted to set up her own curse properly? Who were the Necromancers with her? Where did she find them? How did she make them help her? Or ..." He halted suddenly. "How did *they* force *her* to help them?"

"Last but not least," Harry put in helpfully, "Where are the other half of the Resurrection Stone and the Elder Wand? Oh, and when we're already at it ... *who* is currently the Owner of the Elder Wand?" Then he added dryly, "And once we've answered all of *those* questions, I'd be curious about how you turn stone into gold."

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... And Answers

Later Harry wasn't able to say how much time they'd spent quizzing Dumbledore via Dobby about all of these questions and a score of others. It could have been hours, but he wouldn't be surprised if they'd spent days or even weeks at it. When they were done, Dobby looked as grey as the vegetation of the Asphodel Meadows, and Harry had a headache the size of Hogwarts. *But at least, he figured, they had managed to clear up the most salient questions. Sort of.*

Professor Dumbledore wasn't quite sure, but he believed that when the curse that paralysed him had been set up originally, it was meant to use his immortal soul as a container for the magical energy leeches from the Muggle-born witches and wizards. At that time, the Resurrection Stones had acted as mere valves or conductors. They had only channelled the stolen magical energy. But then the curse had been manipulated, turning the two halves of the Resurrection Stone into *vessels*. For a time, enough of the stored energy had been used to keep the curse stable. But – probably since Umbridge had died – no magic was drained from the Stone anymore. Eventually the Stone would reach the limit of its capacity, and as Dobby put it, '*bad things*' would happen. Though when exactly that would be the case remained everybody's guess. Probably not within days. But they might not have a week to waste.

Dumbledore had no idea who the Necromancers were, or how they had found him. Apparently, time and space had little meaning for souls, which made it difficult for Dumbledore to even keep the sequence of events in order.

He also did not know where the other half of the Resurrection Stone or the Elder Wand was, though he guessed that Umbridge had somehow gained possession of both items.

And he refused to answer Harry's question about how to turn stone into gold or to comment when Harry asked him about how much damage a man's soul might be able to withstand.

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"Well," Harry muttered at last. "I think we're done here for the time being. We should get back to the Gate."

"I certainly have no objections to that suggestion," Snape replied wearily. Deep shadows bruised his eyes and his face was about as pale as the asphodel blossoms.

"Uh, sir? Would you mind bending down a little?"

Severus frowned, but he followed Harry's request. Harry knelt down and hugged Dobby once more. "Thank you for your help, Dobby. We'll be back."

"Oh, Harry Potter, sir," Dobby sniffled. "Such joy! Such happiness!"

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Harry got to his feet again and stared at the Resurrection Stone where it floated almost unnoticeable among the sprawling mint-bushes and the flowering asphodels.

"Good-bye, Professor Dumbledore." He didn't know what else to say. It hurt to realise that if he were able to talk to Dumbledore face to face here and now, he might not be able to forgive him as quickly as he had been in the half-imagined train station of his personal death.

Next to him, Snape looked down his nose at Dobby. To Harry's surprise, Severus looked almost kindly upon the elf. "Thank you for most gracious service."

Dobby glanced up timidly. "Such honour, sir!" he squeaked and positively flattened himself on the ground in an expression of elfish delight. "Such honour!"

Then Severus followed Harry's example and turned to the Resurrection Stone. Again Harry noticed how the spidery blue vein at the older man's temple pulsed with barely suppressed agitation.

"Dumbledore," Severus said at last, his voice cracking slightly, the soft-spoken illusion of composure slipping at last. "I have received the Christmas gift you sent me. I ... do appreciate it ... Though now I have to wonder quite how often you expect my soul to rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes you seem so determined to reduce me to." Then he whirled around and snapped at Harry, "Don't stand there, gaping. Send off that damn owl to show us the way back to the Gate."

oooOooo

Harry was weary to the bones when the lone archway of the Gate finally appeared in the distance. He was, pun entirely intended, *tired to death*. And Snape seemed to be in no better shape. Since they'd turned their backs on the Resurrection Stone, he hadn't said another word, while they trudged mile after mile through the silent gloaming of the Asphodel Meadows. Relief mixed with regret surged through him as he watched Hedwig soar into the grey sky above the Gate and disappear. But all in all he was more than ready to return to the lands of the living.

It was probably this mixture of exhaustion and anticipation that distracted him. When Snape stopped abruptly, Harry staggered. "What's the matter? We're nearly there!"

"Don't you hear that?" Severus whispered urgently.

"What?" Then Harry's heart skipped a beat before starting to race with terror.

Apart from the voice bestowed upon Dobby by Snape's Necromancy and the soft swish of Hedwig's wings, Death had been completely and utterly silent so far.

Now it was silent no longer.

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The strange, strangled sound of a hurdy-gurdy flowed over the plains in endless, droning chromatics.

As they approached the Gate, suddenly a figure stepped out of the shadows of the archway. It appeared to be an old man, but Harry couldn't be sure – the haggard features of the person before them remained hidden in the gloom that surrounded them. He was tall and thin, but he stood bent over forwards with a painfully crooked back. His fingers were spidery, long, thin and deathly white, as they danced over the keyboard, pressing down the tangents to produce his weird, sonorous melody. He was dressed in the remains of a ragged black cloak that barely covered his bony shoulders and hunched back.

Suddenly the music stopped, and the figure lowered the instrument.

"You have something that belongs to me," a reedy voice rasped. "And I would like to have it back."

oooOooo

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A Deal With Death

"Either we're both suffering from a very elaborate hallucination, or Dumbledore was wrong about that one, too," Harry said, his voice shaking. "I guess we should have been more careful about not taking off that cloak."

"Harry," Severus said very softly. "Dear. Would you consider doing us a favour?"

Harry gulped. "Yes?"

"Keep your mouth shut!" Severus snarled. "*Now!*" Then he took a step forwards while thrusting his left arm backwards, pushing Harry out of the way and effectively putting himself between Harry and Death.

"Sir." Severus bowed deeply.

"You know each other?" Harry squeaked, his voice a fair imitation of Dobby.

"He's a bit stupid, isn't he?" Death remarked conversationally. "I used to imagine that The-Boy-Who-Lived was a bit smarter."

Strangely enough, Snape didn't agree. Instead he remained silent and shifted his weight unobtrusively, turning just a little, thus ensuring that he stayed right in front of Harry – even though that had to be an extremely uncomfortable position, with his arm wrenched backwards like that. Harry stayed where he was. (There wasn't much else he could do, after all.) But he tried to take a closer look at the figure before them. Although he couldn't see much, Harry imagined that within the shadows of the creature's face a pair of unfathomable, lifeless black eyes were fixed on him.

"Harry Potter," Death whispered. "How *good* to see you again. And I see you've got my cloak with you. How convenient."

Harry shivered. So far he hadn't paid attention to the temperature in this land of death and twilight. But now he was cold. Very, very cold. His breath formed a cloud in front of his face and he noticed white tendrils of frost creeping over Severus' black hair. And there, in the darkness behind Death – what was that? A large, scruffy black dog, or just another shadow? Was that the hell-hound of Trelawney's predictions, the real Grim? Or was it, could it possibly be ... *Sirius*? But if it *was* Snuffles, he'd help them, wouldn't he?

"As for your question," Death continued, his voice an icy breeze. "Why wouldn't I know one of my own? For all he's a wizard, Severus is a Necromancer first. Talking of wizards –" The dark figure moved forwards, and although Snape instantly took a step of his own – backwards – Harry felt a terrible weakness overcome him. He was so cold that his joints were growing stiff. It was hard to manage even that one faltering step backwards. His knees wouldn't last much longer.

"Is he –" Harry gasped, "Is he for real?"

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When Snape replied, he kept his voice so low that it was almost inaudible, "Does it matter if he's a hallucination we happen to share, Death personified or the materialised dregs of the accumulated subconscious of all magical and Muggle souls that have passed through this archway over the course of millennia? He's between us and that Gate!"

"Actually," Death whispered and glided closer still. "This is how a German composer of the 18th and early 19th century envisioned me. One Franz Schubert. He died of typhoid with a dash of mercury poisoning, though even without that, his syphilis would have killed him off shortly. A very ... uncomfortable death. Though he didn't even seem to mind ..."

Death smiled.

Harry slumped down onto the ground. He simply wasn't strong enough to stay on his feet a moment longer. Still Severus shielded him with his body. Though Harry wondered how much help that would be if the figure before them really *was* Death Personified.

"Wizards: the bane of my existence." Death sounded disgusted, and Harry realised that it was getting hard for him to breathe properly. "Philosopher Stones, Resurrection Stones, Hallows, Horcruxes and assorted bits of soul magic ... Contrary to what *some of you* seem to think, this is *not* a train station. Muggles (with rare, *very rare* exceptions) at least have the good sense to stay put, once they have passed. And now hand over my cloak, if you please."

Severus cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and thin, almost like he'd sounded when he first woke from the coma he'd endured following Nagini's attack. "We'd be happy to hand over the cloak – were it not for the minor matter of a curse pertaining to your ... domain, sir."

"Ah, yes. I listened to the old wizard's explanation. It seems you need all three of my Hallows to stave off a cosmic calamity," Death purred. "You want to prevent the untimely demise of a few thousand Muggle-born wizards and witches, men, women and children and two magical explosions of possibly cataclysmic consequences. In other words, you want to answer the question of '*Who is stronger than Death?*' with '*Me, evidently*'. I must confess, I am intrigued."

Harry lay helpless on the ground, shivering uncontrollably. For some reason he had to think of the flayed, shuddering baby-soul he had seen in that personal, train-station vision of death he'd visited three years ago. Suddenly he realised that the magical thongs that tethered him securely to Severus were gone. Panic washed over him. *Don't leave me here*, he thought frantically. *Don't just leave me like this*.

When Severus' grasp around his hand tightened almost painfully, he almost sobbed with relief.

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"How about a deal?" Death suggested. "But you must decide quickly. Mortals cannot bear my presence for very long without succumbing to my power. I let you go. I let you come back. You get rid of that little curse. Then you give me all *three* of my Hallows. And *then* – why, I just *might* let you go *again*."

The hurdy-gurdy started playing again now, its strange droning, dissonant melody was grinding into Harry's bones with each turn of the crank.

"We have no choice," Severus whispered.

"Yes," Harry wheezed. "It's a deal. You can have a wand oath if you want."

"Ah," murmured Death. "That won't be necessary. Remember, I have always known when you will return."

oooOooo

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At Death's Door

The night pressed in on Hermione, cold, damp and dark.

Now there was nothing she could do but wait.

She slid down on the ground until she sat cross-legged on the white stone. Her hands rested on her knees, palms turned upwards, fingers lightly curled around her wands. With her eyes closed, she concentrated on the barely discernible pulse of the connection that hummed through her wands. It felt like the distant echo of a heartbeat.

They were still there. Somewhere.

Hermione shivered with cold and weariness. And waited.

oooOooo

"One of the most powerful wizards alive, my arse," muttered Severus and pulled at Harry's hand. Harry lay collapsed on the ground, curled around his right and Severus' left hand, as if that was all that kept him alive. Maybe it was. "Get off your damn arse, Harry, or you won't be alive much longer!" Severus snarled. "Dammit, are you The-Boy-Who-Lived to be an eternal pain in my arse or not? Get UP!"

The melody of the hurdy-gurdy wound itself around his throat, tighter and tighter as Death turned the wheel faster and faster. As the tempo of the tune picked up, Severus began to shake, his muscles seizing up. He wouldn't last much longer.

He thrust his wand into the bandolier with the bells and groped for the key inside his robe. For an endless, frightening second he feared that he had lost it. Then his fingers curled around the shaft of the key. He tugged feebly at it. It was an effort to remove it from the pocket. The song of the hurdy-gurdy seemed to dance around him, sounds similar to a violin and a bagpipe, an incessant see-sawing that was draining his energy and bringing him down on his knees.

"Up, Harry," he rasped. "One last time, get the *fuck* up on your feet!"

This time he jerked at Harry's hand with all his strength. Somehow Harry scrambled to his feet. He staggered, then stumbled into Severus' arms. He clutched at Severus with his left hand, while never letting go with his right.

The impact almost sent both of them sprawling on the ground. Clinging to each other in a desperate embrace they tottered – lurched – reeled – a grotesque dance to the tune Death was grinding out, until they collided with the Gate.

Distantly, Severus realised that the wood of the Gate was made of white poplar. The tree that transcends fear. Black poplar for death and lost hope. White poplar for resurrection and hope assured.

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He fumbled for the key. He could feel that Harry's knees were giving way again. And this time, he didn't have enough strength left to haul the younger man back onto his feet. The melody of the hurdy-gurdy twirled and skipped around them. Severus could have sworn that Death was laughing at them.

There, the keyhole!

His hand was shaking too hard. He missed the hole. Once, twice, three times the key scratched over the fittings.

He pressed his forehead against the Gate. His leg-muscles were quivering with exhaustion, every breath cost him supreme effort. Potter leant against him heavily, dragging him down.

Not quite yet, Severus thought. I'll be damned if I lie down and die right in front of the Gate. If we have to die, we'll do it on the other side, just out of spite.

The key slid into the hole.

With a desperate wrench, he twisted it around.

Severus turned his head for a last glance at Death. Death was looming behind them, still grinding his instrument laboriously, but at a slower pace. Next to Death the silhouette of a large black dog was barely visible in the gloom.

"For heaven's sake, why don't you get a guitar?" Severus rasped.

Then his legs gave out under him, the door opened and they fell through the opening, hitting the ground hard.

oooOooo

When Severus regained consciousness, he lay on a cold, hard surface. Stone, he realised. Granite, from the smell of it. Someone – oh, Merlin – *Harry Potter* lay sprawled across him, still clutching his left hand in a death grip.

But he was not dead. Severus could feel the rise and fall of his breath against his chest. The-Boy-Who-Lived had *lived* up to his nickname all over again.

"Get off me," Severus coughed and shoved weakly at Harry's prone body.

"Nrgh." Harry just tightened his hold.

"I'm not your teddy-bear, boy," Severus growled. He pushed at Harry again and sighed with satisfaction, when the wizard rolled off him and landed with a thump on the floor of the Death Chamber.

The effort made him dizzy, the chamber spun around him in streaks of black and red.

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"We've given them fifteen minutes," a voice floated down to him. "They should be gone now. We should set up a watch, so someone is there if – *when* – they ... Severus? Harry? Why are you still – You're back? Already?" Minerva McGonagall's rolling contralto soared to a squeaky soprano. "Andromeda, get the healers down there! Now! They're back, and they look more dead than alive!"

Severus tried to sit up and to extricate his hand from Potter's – he didn't need healers, he'd had enough of healers to last him three life-times – but he discovered that he was too weak. Steps clattered closer. A moment later he felt how someone lifted him a little, until his head rested on someone's lap. He found himself looking up into Minerva's piercing blue-grey eyes.

"You made it, Severus, you're back! The healers will be here in a jiffy," she murmured almost tenderly. "Don't worry."

He thought he'd only blinked. But his head felt fuzzy as if he'd lost consciousness again.

"Do you hear that, Severus? Harry's already arguing with Poppy over there. Everything will be all right."

Severus wished he had the strength to laugh at that statement. Instead he only coughed, then croaked weakly, "Hermione. She'll be worried."

The witch had the nerve to stroke his hair back gently. "Don't worry, Severus. Hermione's already on the way."

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To Be Continued ...

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P.S.:

Even though this story is finished, I still enjoy hearing what you think about each chapter.

What made you smile? What made you frown? Laugh? Cry? Wonder? Dream?
What's the most memorable line?

Let me know!

My e-mail addy is: juno AT magic DOT ms

And if you have nothing to say about my story, maybe leave a comment for another story? Comments are the only remuneration that fanfic writers receive and all of us cherish them.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy the story so far.

Yours

JunoMagic