

# Dying To Save

*by sweetflag*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

Snape should have known. Dumbledore had meddled with just about everything else, so why not his death?

He knew the moment was near; Nagini was at her master's side. Dumbledore had prophesied the day when the Dark Lord would seek to protect his precious Nagini. Soon, Snape would have to carry out his most hated and despised task.

The snake was looped within her little sphere of protective magic; he could see her slithering inside, her slender coils sliding over each other as she relished the developing scene between her master and his most devoted servant.

To secure the outcome of the war, he had to do one more thing; there was one more act to ensure before he could dispense with his duty... and possibly, his life: Voldemort had to kill Harry.

Dumbledore had been quite clear about it when they had discussed Harry's role, and despite his protests, Snape had been left with no choice but to trust the mad coot once more. Harry was to be sacrificed. It had been the deepest dagger in his back: Dumbledore had known of the vow he had made to Lily's memory.

So, Severus Snape was now standing in the Shrieking Shack, begging to get the boy who had to die. But something wasn't right! The Dark Lord was talking about wands and masters; he was prattling on, in the middle of a battle, about the Elder Wand and how he should be able to do dazzling things with it. He didn't require the blasted wand! He had the Ministry in his slimy palm; the Wizengamot at his heel; and the Wizarding world, quivering like a whipped dog.

Licking his lips and feeling the desperation bubble up, Snape continued with his pleading; time was running out, and something unpleasant was stirring in his guts. But the thin man before him was still dead-set on discussing the wand; Harry Potter had seemingly lost all interest for him.

The unpleasant thing solidified and threatened to evict the contents of his bowels: *he* was the master of the wand coveted by the Dark Lord. Swallowing past a dry throat, Snape watched as the disputed wand was aimed towards him; as the wizard opposite him cast a spell, he reacted defensively. Nothing seemed to have happened. Then, to his horror, the glimmering ball descended, and Snape suddenly knew something without doubt: *his* time had come.

~X~

The place was white... so very white. It should have hurt his eyes, but it didn't; however, he still surrendered to the habit of squinting. Glancing down, he saw his dirt-streaked robes; down one side, from neck to hip, the material was a deeper black and shimmered slightly. His left hand was covered in thin, red, glistening ribbons.

"My boy!"

The voice snatched his attention away from his bloodied hand, and he looked up to see the image of Dumbledore emerging from the bright background.

"You look a mess," the old coot chided gently.

"You didn't look too tidy when you died either," Snape snapped back. "But," continued Snape in a voice laden with bitterness, "we can dispense with the chat about sartorial distress and discuss something slightly more pressing." He was heartened to see Dumbledore looking uneasy; the man would pay for leaving out useful snippets of information such as the details surrounding ownership of the Elder Wand.

"I agree, Severus," he responded gently. "But we won't be chatting for any length of time for quite a while yet."

"Why?" he snarled out. "Got a pressing engagement which can't wait an eon or two? We're *dead*; we have all the time in the afterlife."

"No, we do not," he said with an infuriating serenity.

"Don't play games with me, old man," Snape hissed out.

"Dear Severus," Dumbledore said as he stepped forward to place his hands on the furious wizard's shoulders. "I plan to have a very similar conversation with Harry very soon, and I wish I could be more helpful, but you can only stay here for a short time." He patted those trembling shoulders. "So you'd best hush."

Snape bit his tongue and gave a terse nod. He cast a baleful glare as he was directed to some nearby chairs and plonked down on the white seat.

"Did you manage to let Harry know what he has to do?"

Snape thought to be recalcitrant, but this was what it had all been about! "I cannot be sure," he replied despondently. "I gave him all the memories relating to what you have told me; all I can do is hope it was enough."

Dumbledore looked concerned, but then, he clapped Snape on the shoulder and grinned. "It will be enough."

"You have too much faith in Potter," Snape muttered spitefully, his death still ranking him.

"Perhaps," he agreed generously. "We shall see very soon whether my faith is misplaced. Many people have warned me about trusting you, and yet my trust and faith in you were well placed and well rewarded."

Snape was about to question Dumbledore's comment, but the old man ploughed on.

"I have asked you to do some terrible things, and it would be fair to accuse me of not considering your feelings in a vast number of those tasks." The voice was quite steady, but Snape suspected a degree of planning, preparation and practice had gone into this speech. "For a very long time, I let myself only see what you had committed, and I unfairly blamed you for what was happening and for what had been done in Voldemort's name. You were *convenient*," he uttered softly, but behind the quiet tones, Snape heard the bitter self-loathing and pain. "I once told you of my disgust, of how you disgusted me...so vicious of me, and I..." the voice faltered into a sob "... I hope you will, at some time in the future, be able to forgive me."

Snape was rendered mute, but the dissatisfaction and the bitterness were still roiling deep within. At every turn, Dumbledore had used him; an emotive apology and a few tears would not heal the wound: he wouldn't let them. Straightening in the seat, Snape folded his arms and glared straight ahead into the distant brilliance.

"Ah," the old man exclaimed softly at Snape's demeanour. "It was foolish to think I could sway you after so many years of abuse, so I hope I can convince you through the rest of your life."

Snape snorted derisively and turned to glower at the deranged lunatic sitting next to him. "I am dead, and if you think I'm going to spend eternity listening to you spill your regrets and remorse, then you're deluded."

Snape stood and stomped away; there had to be something more than this. He was dismayed by the lack of change in his environment; it was still the same, uniform whiteness. Where were they all? Where were the dead? Shouldn't the place be teeming with them? Sighing, he turned and nearly swallowed his tongue: Dumbledore was sitting right behind him!

"It's a peculiar property of this place," he explained patiently. "No matter where you go, everything here goes with you." Dumbledore smiled, and his blue eyes twinkled. "It was an impressive stalk though. I can see why the students prefer watching your retreating back."

The anger slashed through him; it was hot and violent... and it was totally useless! Sagging and cooling his emotions, he walked back to the chair and collapsed onto it.

"I tried, you know," he said after an expectant pause. "I knew what I had to do, and I tried." He thumped his thighs and let the smallest of angry snarls pass his clenched teeth. "But I couldn't get Potter to Him." He squeezed his eyelids shut; he would not cry! "It was all for nothing!"

"Oh, my boy," crooned Dumbledore. "You have done more than anyone, and through your efforts, we will win!" The steel in the voice caused Snape to look across at him. "Voldemort will get to Harry; no one could have really prevented it for long once he reached seventeen. Please forgive me for keeping so much from you, but I had no choice. I couldn't risk Voldemort's Legilimency surpassing your skill as an Occlumens. I trust you."

Snape gulped as another, unfamiliar emotion snatched hold; was it pride?

"Now listen! We don't have much time." Dumbledore shifted on his seat to face Snape fully and even clutched at Snape's hands, holding them in his own...he'd done as such many decades ago when he had told Snape of his mother's death. Snape stifled his sob.

"I asked you to kill me, Severus," Dumbledore began urgently. "I didn't ask you because I didn't care about your soul; I asked because I care about you. I care about Severus Snape!"

*You bastard!* Snape thought sharply. *You won't make me cry!*

"Despite my hopes, I knew there was a risk you'd be exposed and killed, and I was painfully aware of how I had wronged you so many times even as you risked everything." The hands holding his trembled, and Snape glanced down to the fingers desperately gripping his; it meant he didn't have to look the old man in the eyes. "I knew I was dying, and I knew what would be expected of you. So, I asked you to do the merciful deed." The hands tightened. "Look at me, Severus."

His head felt ridiculously heavy, but he slowly complied with Dumbledore's request. There was something in the depths of the ex-Headmaster's eyes which both elated and disturbed Snape.

"Did you ever stop to wonder why your Killing Curse had such an unexpected consequence?"

"Aside from suddenly finding myself on the run?" Snape couldn't help himself, and he hid behind his wall of indifference.

Dumbledore chuckled. "You may not have noticed something unusual about the way your spell had affected me... You had more pressing issues to consider."

"Yes," agreed Snape softly. "Your Order were hot on my heels and screaming for my blood."

"You have always been a part of the Order," Dumbledore snapped. "I wish you could see how much a part of it you are."

Snape shrugged; it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Timing was essential," Dumbledore muttered, regaining his train of thought. "Have you heard of *giefan-lif*?"

"No."

"To be expected, it's incredibly old magic." He inhaled and seemed to struggle to formulate his thoughts. "It's very similar to the method of creating Horcruxes."

Snape started, his hands almost slipping free from Dumbledore's desperate grip. The face before him was still trapped somewhere between serenity and senility, but Snape felt as though something momentous was lurking behind the conversation. He just hoped his crumbling patience and sanity would cope with it. Too much had gone wrong; too many vows broken; and too much pain and suffering... He just wanted it to end. Death was looking more and more appealing.

"It's quite amazing how clearly you can think when you know the number of days remaining to you." Something seemed to have bothered him mid-speech; Dumbledore was suddenly peering off over his shoulder, and Snape fought the urge to twist around. The bumbling aspect dispersed, and Dumbledore became the stern tactician from old. "It was simple to follow the rite to offer myself up for *giefan-lif*. The process allows the creation of a Horcrux through a voluntary act at the point of a donor's death. It was used thousands of years ago to preserve the lives of those who were considered to be worthy of having such protection. Someone would willingly die to ensure the survival of another."

"Lily," Severus whispered.

"Not quite the same thing," Dumbledore clarified gently. "Lily died at Voldemort's hands to protect Harry and not at Harry's hand to generate a Horcrux."

Snape blinked and considered Dumbledore's cryptic definition. "You asked me to cast the Killing Curse with the view to generating my Horcrux?"

Dumbledore smiled and squeezed his hands. "The fraction of your soul which was taken from you wasn't lost; it was secreted away and protected."

It was horrid! He wanted to escape; he wanted the strange man with the twisted notions to let him go so he could run and scream. The Dark Lord had done such a thing and look at what it had done to him! Perhaps Dumbledore saw his gathering terror and disgust because he let go of his hands to gently cup his face.

"No, Severus!" he stated sternly. "You are nothing like Voldemort...you have not listened to me!" Sighing, he smiled, and Snape felt lulled by those glimmering eyes and the gentle caresses of thumbs over his cheeks...such a caring gesture. "Now listen carefully, we have so little time. You have to lose a piece of your soul to create a Horcrux; I had no choice but to ask you to end my life if my plan was to work. Riddle may have maimed what was left of his soul, but yours was never ripped like his; consider it more of an exchange. Your soul is not torn or blemished; it separated gently as a result of your mercy. I asked you willingly to end my suffering, and as you are here, then you must have acted mercifully when you cast the curse."

Dumbledore glanced down to his hands, and Snape wondered what had caught his attention so acutely. When the old man slowly lifted a hand, he saw the fingers glistening with what could only be tears. Snape hadn't realised he still had the capacity to weep.

"Your body is in peril, Severus," he said desperately. "But until the piece of soul is cast from your Horcrux, you cannot technically die."

The hands warming his face slipped away, and Severus felt their loss keenly. He wasn't quite following what the old coot was rambling about...it was all too fantastical. It seems ridiculous! What could they do about it? They were here in this strange place, and his body was in the realm of the living, slowly starting the process of putrefaction... What could he do now? It was almost cruel!

"Superb! I can't technically die, but my body will be a rotting corpse," Snape offered morosely.

"I divulged my plan to one other," Dumbledore countered. "They have been told to keep a close eye on you and tend to your wounds. It will be as though the killing blow was never struck." The old wizard seemed remarkably pleased with himself. "Fawkes was always close by, ready to take you to the nearest place of safety. He has been your familiar since my death, only relinquishing his duty to sing at my funeral."

Snape was impressed and dumbfounded. He had been so sure he had meant nothing more to Dumbledore than a pawn would to a Grandmaster, yet the man had worked to use his own death to help him survive. It was staggering. It was wonderful. It was almost beyond him.

"We just have to wait for your wounds to be healed and your Horcrux to release the precious fraction held within. Consider this place merely a holding area," Dumbledore suggested with a smile.

"But how can you be so sure of my Horcrux's imminent destruction?"

Dumbledore looked away and gently smoothed his beard flat. "Because you are here," he muttered hoarsely. "It was a gamble, but it seemed reasonable to me; your death would tie in with Riddle discovering the truth about the Hallows and in turn, lead to the death of your Horcrux."

So simple! Snape almost laughed out...it was hysterical. Perhaps this was a dream or maybe Hell. It was most likely Hell. This was the purgatory he had always expected to dwell in after his death. The prospect of returning and enjoying life was the terrible burden designed to drive him insane. Yes! This was Hell and Dumbledore was actually Mephisto. He was dead and gone; nothing would change the fact.

The thought was rather relaxing. Easing back into the chair, Snape felt a smile tug at his lips; he had suffered serving Dumbledore and Voldemort for over two decades: Mephisto had no chance!

*Pass me the Blood Replenisher!*

Snape jerked as a disembodied voice floated into the odd room. The voice had been remarkably similar to Madam Pomfrey's.

"It seems we've almost run out of time," Dumbledore whispered into Snape's ear.

"What do you mean?"

The mad coot had the audacity to smile at him and pat him on the back of his hand. The brightness level momentarily intensified, and Snape was forced to close his eyes; when he opened them, Dumbledore and the chairs had lost some of their definition.

"What's happening?" he demanded. Another thought erupted through the sudden panic. "What did you use as my Horcrux?" For some reason, the answer was suddenly excruciatingly important. *What had been close enough to Dumbledore at his time of death? What had he been in contact with just prior... Oh no!*

His eyes were assaulted again; it bordered on being painful. On opening his eyes, Dumbledore was almost indistinguishable from the background; the hand touching the back of his was like the barest caress of a summer breeze.

"You said 'death of your Horcrux', Albus," he shouted desperately. "Who did you use?" Suffused with dread, Snape was almost manic. "For Merlin's sake!" he sobbed out. "Who has to die for this?"

*Good! He's stabilising. Two Phoenix tears... Well get the bird over here, then! Two Phoenix tears over the worst areas and dab on the Essence of Dittany until the wound is closed.*

"Wait!" he cried out, his hands darting towards the diminishing figure, and his fingers scrabbling manically for purchase.

"No one," Dumbledore soothed; his voice was thick with emotion. "Goodbye, my boy."

~X~

"I'm surprised you chose not to reveal yourself."

The woman remained silent, staring at the place where her son had stood just moments before. It had been easier for her to watch whilst hidden. The two recent visitors hadn't truly died; therefore, they could only see what was allowed to be seen. The vast multitude hunted down by Severus had been milling around him throughout his stay, only a hairsbreadth away, but always just beyond his reach. And the few who had been desperately sought by her son had elected to refrain from disturbing Dumbledore as he conveyed his last lesson to Harry.

Dumbledore watched her for a few moments; he saw the grief etched onto her delicate features. "I suppose it was for the best," he said tactfully.

"What will happen?" she asked tentatively.

"I cannot be specific," he answered solemnly. "But if everything goes as planned," he continued more jovially, "then Severus will escape into a world which he considers to be better, and Harry will help create a better world for Wizards everywhere."

Lily's lips curved up into a smile, and she looked across at him. "Sounds perfect," she said, the slightest hint of irony marring her words.

"I stopped aiming for perfection a long time ago," he uttered with a degree of dark humour. "It's far easier on your morale to aim for simplicity."

"Maybe," she mumbled. Her mood had quickly slipped from one of wonder at seeing her once best friend and son and into one of her darkest to date. Even ghosts wept. "They seem so alone." Her voice broke, and silvery trails ran down her cheeks. "I wish I could be there for them."

Dumbledore inhaled deeply. "As far as they're concerned," he said sadly, "you have always been there."

The silence stretched, and just when he was about to say his farewells and join the others, she reached out and gently touched his arm.

"Why didn't you tell him about the significance of the *giefan-lif*?"

Surprised by the perspicacity of her question, Dumbledore blinked and had to look away. "He will find out about it in due time."

She nodded; Severus would scour the old texts to find out just what had been done for him; the thought plucked at her heart...how often as a student had he feverishly devoured the contents of a book to solve a problem? But it seemed such an effort when all Dumbledore had had to do was tell Severus the truth of it. Lily sighed and linked his arm, smiling up at him as he placed his hand over hers.

Ahead of them, the afterlife opened up, and figures began to emerge from the light. But before they rejoined the multitude, Dumbledore paused and turned to her.

"I couldn't tell him," he admitted hastily. "I feared burdening him with it."

She thought to soothe him, but she understood Dumbledore's fears. Severus would have seen it as some sort of obligation. He treasured love in a way she had never seen in either life or afterlife. Tears stung her eyes. He would have found it difficult to be at peace with the knowledge of Dumbledore's affection. A sob erupted from her quivering lips.

"I told Poppy to give Severus something to help him forget what happened here. He will have nothing but the vaguest of recollections."

From his tone, she knew any further discussion would be futile, and Lily was left with no choice but to accept his decision. His reticence to divulge the details of *giefan-lif*...giving life, as was its rough translation...didn't matter. She knew the importance of it, and she would tell Severus when it was his time to return. She would tell him the truth about *giefan-lif*: it required the donor to accept their death as an act of love. Dumbledore loved him.

~X~

"Lie still," the voice demanded.

Snape didn't have the energy to disagree; aside from his intense fatigue, his head was also filled with strange images and bizarre conversations. Nothing made sense, but there *was* something....

"Potter!" he yelled out, causing Madam Pomfrey to jump and nearly drop the empty bottle of Lesser Lethe Water.

"Potter is fine," she scolded, trying to gently encourage Snape back into bed by pushing on his shoulder. "Some say Vol... Voldemort actually killed him, but he seemed well enough a few minutes ago when he discharged himself." She huffed at the boy's apparent impertinence and then turned back to Snape with a gentler expression. "No one else knows you're here. Albus told me to tell no one about all of this. I've Obliviated the others," she added breathlessly.

Puzzled, Snape had just enough strength to nod and then collapse against the cool sheets.

"Now, you sleep," she commanded as she tucked him in. "And don't think of asking for any kind of stimulant; I've already had quite enough of you wittering on about some strange 'Duddikins' character."

Sleep sounded divine, and his eyelids fell closed as though weighted with lead. From the fading waking world, he vaguely heard the rattle of glass phials clinking against each other and the swish of the matron's skirts as she walked around his bed. Just as sleep gathered him up, he caught the creak of hinges, and when the lights were snuffed out, he thought he heard Pomfrey mutter something about hard work leading to delusions. *She must be working too hard*, he mused, agreeing with her. *I've never heard of anything called a duddikins.*