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A May 2nd Carol

by attackfish

Summary

After Nagini bites him, Severus is visited by the spirits of the Marauders.

Notes

A May 2nd Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Hogwarts

I have lifted dialogue directly from Chapter 33 (The Prince's Tale) and a tiny bit from Chapter 19 (The Silver Doe) of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, the US edition.

The venom coursed through Severus' veins, and the blood poured from the bite, making him lightheaded. The dingy shack greyed out in front of his eyes as they misted over. Absently, he realized that it wasn't the venom that would kill him, but the blood loss. From far away, even though it was May, he heard the first bars of a carol, altered, and sung drunkenly:

God rest you merry hippogriffs
May nothing you dismay

The windows rattled as the shack came back into focus, and Severus heard chains rattling as a specter floated through the walls, wearing the chains draped about himself and trailing behind him like a rat's tail. When Severus looked more closely at it, he saw that it was made of thousands of Dark Marks, strung together, one after another. "Pettegrew," he snapped, "What do you want?"

Severus gritted his teeth and growled to realize that of all people, it would be cowardly grovelling Pettigrew who was there to meet him as he passed over into death. "Much," the balding little man squeaked anxiously.
"You are fettered," he trembled with the exertion of speaking at all. "Tell me why."

"I wear the chain I forged in life," and Severus wondered if in fact he were quite dead yet, or simply hallucinating from the venom and the Muggle classics Lily had pressed him to read.

"I never took you for someone who would like Dickens," he gasped, snarling.

Pettegrew's face flushed with irritation. "You will be haunted by Three Spirits."

A horrible suspicion filled Severus at those words. "Don't tell me you are going to send your wretched gang of friends to follow you!" The breath rattled into and out of his lungs in faint wheezes.

Pettegrew paled, but didn't remind him that James, Sirius, and Remus were no longer his friends, or at least, he wasn't much of a friend to them. "Well, 'bye then," he whispered, "I've done what I came to do."

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The wind whistled in his ears, and Severus wondered how long he had been asleep, because he didn't remember drifting off. He looked for a clock, but when he moved, his neck began to hurt again. He brought his hand up to the wound, and found thin gooey scab beginning to form. The dried blood in the hair underneath flecked off under his nails. "Pssst, Snape!"

That wasn't the wind whistling in his ears then. had he been able, he would have leapt off the bed. Instead, he twisted around on the floor and stared at the shadow over his right shoulder. "Who..."

"Glad to know I made an impression," the figure grinned in the dark, "Lumos."

"Potter!" he rasped. James Potter's grin widened. Severus could see though his teeth to the wall splintered bed frame.

"Good, you're actually awake, then." He seated himself down next to the man and glanced at him sideways. "I suppose I'm supposed to be the Ghost of-" he looked through a grime covered crack in the outside wall, "May Past. Stop glaring, Snape, Lily made me read the same books she made you read."

Severus didn't stop glaring, "Go away."

"Rise and walk with me," Potter quoted, holding a hand out to him. Severus didn't take it. Grumbling under his breath, Potter grabbed his arm and wrenched him up off the floor.

Severus stared down at the floor where he had been lying, only to see that he still was lying there. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he snarled, pointing to it as he floated upward.

Potter didn't answer as the ceiling of the shack melted away and their feet touched down a few inches above the street of Spinner's End back when the mill was still belching coal smoke into the sky. "So, you are the one assigned to shepard me around though my past to, among other things, remind me of precisely where I went wrong with the girl I loved, a girl you," he sneered, "later married."

Potter's eyes narrowed into slits as his grin widened further. "Doesn't it just bugger all?" But then,
Potter's grin vanished. "Oh look, a little boy." Severus watched his ten-year-old self slump on his own house steps, chin in his hands. "And a little girl."

Lily spotted him with a shriek and ran over to him. "Severus!"

He watched his ten year old self flush. "What're you doing here?"

"Tuney said you lived on Spinner's End, I wanted to see you." She folded herself down next to him and smiled radiantly at him.

"Yes, well," he said flustered, "go away."

"Oh, that's nice," she returned, cocking her head.

"You always had such a winning personality, Snape."

"If you don't shut up," Severus raged, "so help me, I will-"

"You'll do what?" Potter laughed bleakly, "I'm dead."

Severus' hands balled into fists as he turned his gaze back to Lily and his younger self. His ten-year-old self pushed her away and she shot to her feet indignantly. "Well if you really don't want me here," she snipped, "I'll go." A few feet down the street, she turned her head back to him, "And you can forget about coming to my house tomorrow." Young Severus Snape folded his arms and hunched over them.

"You have a strange way of showing friendship, you know," Potter smirked coldly.

"I didn't want her to meet my family," he snarled. "She didn't deserve that." His face took on an echo of the blush on his past self's face. When Potter didn't reply, Severus whirled around to glare at him, to find him staring off into the distance. The ghost recalled the way Sirius never asked him over, and sent him away fearfully the one time after first year he had talked his parents into taking him into London to see his best friend at number twelve Grimmauld Place. "And I apologized to her anyway."

Again, Potter said nothing, grabbing his arm instead as the world dissolved around them. The boy sitting in the Slytherin common room when the world resolidified was a lanky twelve-year-old in patched and fraying Hogwarts robes pouring over a seventh year Defense Against the Dark Arts text. He didn't seem to notice when the pounding on the common room door reverberated through the dungeon room, until it grew steadily louder. The boy at last sprang to his feet and loped to the door, muttering darkly under his breath.

Lily, who had her foot lifted to kick the hidden door again burst into the room as soon as the wall swung open. She waved the list of students staying over the Christmas holidays in his face. "What's you're name doing on this?"

"If you don't put that back soon, you're going to get detention," he told her instead of answering.

"Sev!" she shouted, exasperated, "you're staying with me." She stared down at the top of her head. The year before, Severus remembered, she'd grown until she was almost the same height she would be when she died. He watched his twelve-year-old self gaze at her overwhelmed before he bowed his head. In her exuberance, she kissed his cheek, brushing his hair out of the way. Behind him, Potter made a gagging sound.

"Seen enough?" he snapped.
"More than enough," Potter shot back.

"I went with her too," Severus taunted.

"And Sirius stayed to play the perfect prank on you too."

This time it was Severus, scowling all the while, who grabbed Potter's arm.

It was night time, and the portrait of the Fat Lady peered down avariciously at the pair in front of her. Lily in her dressing gown folded her arms across her chest as Severus, sixteen years old and weedy, spoke. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not interested."

"I'm sorry!"

"Save your breath. I only came out because Mary said you were threatening to sleep here."

"Wow," Potter hissed in his ear, "going for the emotional blackmail?"

"Even if you dragged me along on this wonderful little sojourn into my memories, you don't have to make comments on them!" Severus roared.

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just-" Severus' younger self babbled.

"Slipped out?" she finished for him scornfully. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends- you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"

"I'm supposed to make comments," Potter murmured sardonically as the younger Severus opened his mouth and closed it again, not knowing what to say. "You're supposed to make comments."

"I can't pretend anymore," Lily continued when her former friend couldn't speak, "You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No- listen, I didn't mean-"

"-to call me Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

"She always finished people's sentences when she was angry at them," Potter whispered as Lily stalked back into the dormitory, "She never stopped doing that."

"She got angry at you after you married?" Severus spat, and Potter nodded wryly, "Good." he folded his arms across his chest and gripped his elbows so hard that the blood fled his knuckles and his fingers stood out against the black of his robes.

With something that might have been gentleness, or possibly hesitation, Potter clasped his hand around Severus' shoulder as the school faded away around them. This time, the two found themselves in a plush ornate room, covered in books with a crystal decanter on a nearby table. Severus' knees bent beneath him until he sat in the air, less than a finger above a leather upholstered chair. A creeping sense of dread filled him as he turned around in the chair to face what he knew would be there.
The man enthroned in a high backed chair facing a squat little couch couldn't really be called a man anymore. Severus remembered looking at him and wondering if that bleached skin of his would be hard and smooth like snake scales if he touched it. "So, young Snape, you are here to swear yourself to me and become one of my Death Eaters."

The younger Severus, eighteen and just beginning to leave his half starved look behind, licked his lips to moisten them. "Yes."

Severus leapt from his perch and whirled on Potter, floating nonchalantly next to the decanter and idly examining it. "Is this some sort of joke to you?" he growled, teeth grinding together so hard he was afraid they would shatter. "Taking me through all of my mistakes?"

"Not all of them, surely," Potter put his hand through the decanter and into the warm brown liquid inside. When he drew his hand out again, it came away dry. "At least you already acknowledge that they're mistakes."

Watching his younger self kneel, Severus wanted to call out to him, to scream at him to run away right then, before it was too late. The Dark Lord drew the skull and snake on hs wrist as he hissed, "Morsmordre!" Eighteen-year-old Severus writhed as the Dark Lord clutched his wrist and held it still. The Dark Mark glowed in a green outline against his pale skin. "well, young Snape, welcome to the Death Eaters. I think you'll do well."

"Thank you sir."

"It's 'my lord', now," he smiled cruelly as his new servant stuttered apologies. "Crucio."

Severus shuddered while his younger self bowed himself out of the library. "So," Potter said boldly, "no big ceremony?"

"That's a myth. We didn't even know who most of the others were until his second rise." Potter shivered, and his grip on Severus' shoulder was weak as the world reformed into a forest.

"You knew," Potter muttered before Snape had a chance to get his bearings.

"I knew the ones who told me," he fleered, "and most of them went to Azkaban because of me, though none of them knew." He gloated a bit.

"I suppose that makes up for some of it," he said lightly. When he shifted his feet, the snow remained without blemish.

A Severus Snape only a few months younger then the one gliding sullenly above the snow crouched behind a tree, his body heat melting the snow beneath him, shivering fitfully. "Expecto Patronum," he whispered in the dark.

As the silvery doe burst from the tip of the past Severus' wand and galloped off into the night, Potter snorted weakly. "After sixteen years, that might qualify as obsession, you realize."

Severus' eyes widened as he held out his hand after the doe, but when he heard Potter talk, his eyes narrowed and he twisted around in the air. "You can leave any time now, he thundered, spittle flicking into the snow.

But Potter wasn't paying attention. His eyes were on the dark haired figure in the distance. As the doe made her way back to her creator and the pool nearby, the only slightly younger Severus banished the sword into the nearby pool and cast the charm hardening the surface of the pool like metal. "You need me to get you back to the Shrieking Shack," Potter mumbled at last.
With a last quick look, the Severus of the past darted into the trees and vanished with a muffled crack. Potter continued to ignore him as his son raced closer. For a moment, Severus would have sworn the doe looked right at him as she dissipated, but then he realized she was just looking through him. When he looked back at Potter, the shade had his hand touching and just barely sinking into his son's hair. The boy's wand lit up the darkness and he gazed first to the pool and the sword, then to the trees and back to the ice. "Accio Sword," the boy whispered, but the sword remained motionless within the ice. "Help."

"If you had any conviction, that sword would leap from the pool," Severus grumbled at the unhearing boy. When he moved, his father's hand slipped though the top of his head, and the elder Potter recoiled. Severus slumped against a tree and slid right through it while the boy dithered and then stripped, cracking the ice with a spell. When the boy jumped and began to thrash under the water, Severus smirked at Potter. "You can tell he's your son," he scathed. Just before Ron Weasley fished the boy free of the water, Potter looped his arms around Severus' shoulders and the world broke apart like the ice on the pool.

The cracks healed around th Shrieking Shack as Severus watched his body bleeding on the floor, the blood congealing in the cracks and crevasses in the wood. At last, seeing the life spill out of his own body, Severus' anger pooled and coalesced inside him and he rounded on his old foe. "Why did you come?" he shouted, hearing his ghostly words fall flat in the air. "Are you welcoming me to hell? Is this why you dragged me through the worst parts of my life, to remind me why I deserve it?"

Potter didn't bother to remind him that not everything they saw had been the worst parts. "I'm trying to show you how much you did!" he tried not to scream, flushing to the roots of his hair and past his collarbones. "My son's alive because of you, you saved my life, you saved Lily's."

Severus' lip curled as a dozen emotions flashed across his face before he could pin them down. "Are you mad?" he demanded, "You are both dead, and your son walks to his death right now!" and Severus sent him.

"Everyone dies," Potter shook his head and waved away Severus' words impatiently. "When you save someone's life, you don't save it forever, you give a little more time, that's all. You gave us an extra year by going to Dumbledore. You've given Harry most of his life."

Misty, eerie, and forever caught at twenty-one-years old, Potter tossed his head unhappily as Severus stopped himself from reminding them both that he had been the one to tell the Dark Lord about the portion of prophesy in the first place. "I suppose I have it on good authority that there is an afterlife," he breathed, furiously, shaking. "Why does giving someone a few more months have any import?"

Potter shrugged sadly. "When you're dead," he snapped his fingers, "that's it. You can't touch anything, or change anything. There's nothing there, except the people you know, and nothing ever happens, so there's nothing to talk about. There's nothing to do except watch the living, and you can't do anything about what happens!" He shrugged again, "Nothing changes. it's blank."

It sounded wonderful to Severus. No one would seek him out. He could rest. He closed his eyes, but Potter had one more thing to do. Before he vanished back into the dusty gloom of the shack, he took Severus by the elbow and led him gently back to his body and back into it.

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Though it was still night, when Lupin put his hand to Severus' brow, the shack glowed and dust motes shimmered in the air as it swirled in the little bit of breeze leaking in through the cracks in the walls. Ethereal, wavering candles bobbed lazily in the middle of the room and along the walls. Severus couldn't make out their shape until he stood, taking Lupin's hand. They looked like human spines, pale, creamy, with every vertebrae distinct, only the wicks and the thin drippings of wax connecting them. "You died?" Severus said, exhausted.

"You will not pour your heart out to me!" Severus declared, eyes flashing.

"Hardly," Lupin clipped back. "We won, you know, Voldemort's dead."

"Good."

"Harry's not."

Snape stared at him, stunned and speechless, but only for a few moments. "Impossible."

"When Voldemort's Killing Curse hit him tonight, it killed the little piece of himself that was in Harry, but not Harry." Lupin's face split into a huge, disbelieving grin as he spoke, "He's he's sleeping now, he was up all night." When Severus made no reply, Lupin held out his hand, "Come on then."

Severus grasped it reluctantly. "I suppose you're taking me to see the festivities."

"In part," Lupin said with a small smile. The next thing Severus knew, he and Lupin were flying above the shops of Diagon Alley, watching throngs of witches and wizards dancing and drinking in the streets. Every shop door and window was locked, and the shopkeepers that had escaped the Dark Lord's clutches revelled with the rest. Lupin atop the roof of Eeylops Owl Emporium with a sigh. "No one's got around to putting things back together yet. That can wait a bit."

Severus hunched over his knees. "They will wake up tomorrow and realize that the Wizarding World is still in pieces."

"Yes," Lupin gazed at him, unblinking, "but that's in the future." He slipped off the slate roofs and grasped Severus' hand as he glided above the alley and the scene melted beneath them.

Sunlight spilled onto Severus and he looked around himself to find he was in the Gryffindor Tower, in one of the dormitories. Raucous shouting and laughter reverberated through the chamber from the common room below, and from one of the beds came a stream of muffled invectives. When he peaked through the open curtains, he saw that it was Potter, trying and failing to sleep through the celebrations.

Lupin beckoned him away and guided him down the staircase and through the common room as Longbottom ran through him gleefully, a Gryffindor banner tied around his neck and a glass of Firewhiskey in his hand, which sloshed over with every step. Severus winced. "Don't worry," Lupin whispered, "There are stains all over this carpet already."

The Fat Lady's portrait wasn't closed, and the party spilled out into the hallway. When Severus looked back into the common room, he saw that there were as many Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs mingling within as there were Gryffindors, but the students from his own house were absent.

Lupin meandered his way through the boisterous rabble and Severus kept his hand tight around the worn fabric of his robe. Down into the bowels of the castle they descended, until Lupin
slipped through the stone wall that hid the Slytherin common room and Severus followed.

A few mostly young students sat, pale and forlorn, clustered around the fireplace. The two ghosts leaned forward to catch their mumbled conversations. "What're they going to do to us?" a scrawny stringy-haired girl muttered nervously.

"We didn't do anything," whined a boy with a sheered off house tie.

"They're not going to arrest us, surely," the sandy headed boy next to him assured them weakly, and Severus tried to remember his name.

"Wouldn't we be locked away with Malfoy and Goyle and the rest if we were?" a thick set girl exclaimed, head high.

Lupin leaned against the mantle of the fireplace, his ghostly garments flapping in breezes only he noticed. "They're lost and afraid, you know," he held his hand, palm up to Severus. "It would be good for them to have their head of house back."

Severus' head whipped around so quickly it almost rolled off his head. "It's too late for that!" he screamed, "I'm already dying!"

Lupin stilled. "James didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" his voice lowered so far that all Lupin could hear were the aspirated consonants, but those became stronger, more distinct for the absence of other sounds.

"We're here to offer you a choice," the werewolf told him somberly, "live or die."

"What!" he yelped, staggering backward, falling through an empty chair.

"You can, if you want, cling to life long enough for Harry to Madam Pomfrey to fetch you, or you could let yourself die," Lupin gazed at him, "You choose."

Severus shivered, but didn't, couldn't speak.

"Come, Severus," Lupin took his hand. A few doors down from his old potions classroom stood an old supply closet expanded into a dungeon room. Thirteen separate locks had been transfigured from buttons and nailed onto the door, bolted shut. Lupin pulled him through the wood of the door and down to the floor. "Your old companions," Lupin said wryly.

Severus' hands clenched into fists, "Not for a very long time."

"As long a time ago as Peter was ours," Lupin acknowledged.

"Where is Bellatrix Lestrange?" he asked softly. "Do not tell me she escaped."

"Molly Weasley took objection to her threatening her daughter. She didn't survive to be captured." Severus winced.

Severus' stare narrowed in on the Malfoy family. All three of them curled around each other, asleep, propped up against the two walls of a corner. "How long are they going to stay at Hogwarts?"

"That depends on how long it takes the Ministry to get its act together and reopen Azkaban and begin trials."

"Will there be trials then?" he growled.
Lupin nodded. "Harry will see to it. He knows as well as he can the dangers of sending someone to Azkaban without a trial."

Severus' lip curled. "Indeed, though Black no doubt would have been sent to Azkaban, trial or no trial."

"Well, the point is, there will be trials," Lupin cut him off as quickly as he could. "I can't promise they'll be completely fair, but Harry'll do his best. Hermione too." The werewolf folded his arms, "I'm sure most of the accused will find ways to even the odds."

It was strangely comforting to know that bribery was alive and well in the Wizarding World. "Are you telling me that some of them could go free?"

"A few might, the Malfoys likely will, but the real mystery is what will happen to," Lupin sneered, "the collaborators in the Ministry. Of course, if you live, you could testify against the ones that deserve to go to Azkaban, if you choose."

"And show everyone what a good little boy I am," Severus scorned.

Lupin snorted. "There's that."

Severus followed on his heels as he led him back out of the makeshift cell and out to one of Hogwarts' rarely used guest rooms. Percy Weasley, thin face heavy with sorrow, had his hand around his brother George's shoulders, rubbing his back consolingly. Yet George didn't object. "I thought you told me Bellatrix only managed to threaten Miss. Weasley."

"Ginny didn't die, Fred did, after Percy's sense of humor decided to make itself known at the worst possible moment." At least according to Fred.

"Ah."

"I see a baby named Fred in the near future, born to a melancholy red head selling jokes and trouble in Diagon Alley."

"The sort that will make a generation of Hogwarts professors wish their students were a little less creative," Severus grumbled.

Lupin grinned slyly. "Of course."

Time flowed backwards when Lupin took his hand again and they soared over the castle and back to the Shrieking Shack. "I suppose there is no way to convince you to not send the last of your compatriots."

Lupin shook his head with a smile and extinguished the candles with a wave of his hand.

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Never having been a subtle man during life and seeing no reason to change after death, Black woke Severus with a boot to the ribs, rolling his spirit over and out of his body. "Wakey wakey."

Early morning sunlight glowed into the gaps in the walls, hideously too early morning, as far as Severus was concerned. The light was red. He shot to his feet with a glower. "I don't need your
"help in making the decision to live, Black," he spat. "I've already made my choice."

"Ooooh, you listened to Moony, didn't you, chose to live?" Black smiled horribly. "See, I disagree. I want you to die."

"Do you expect me to be surprised?" Severus asked coldly.

"At least you always knew where you stood with me," Black retorted. "So I get to show you what the future will be like if you die," he rubbed the stubble on his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Do you think I should take you to your funeral?"

"I thought you would be jealous," he said, his voice soft, "seeing as you didn't get one at all."

Black breathed hard through his nose to steady himself before he spoke. "Or I could show you Harry's kids. He named one after you."

Severus swallowed so hard he gagged on his own tongue. "Or you could go away and skip this particular spiritual journey."

Snapping his fingers, Black grabbed shoulder. "I know, I'll take you to Hogwarts, next year."

The shack faded away and reformed into one of the long carpeted hallways of Hogwarts. Potter stalked through him, his book bag thrown over his shoulder, past burns and scorch marks on the stone and carpet. Unconscious of the students, and even one professor who parted around him, he kept his eyes on his feet. In the crush of students lining the walls of the hallway and reforming around Potter as he passed stood Draco Malfoy, thinner faced, wearing the same robes he had worn the year before. "Disgusting," Severus proclaimed.

"He's a hero," Black retorted.

Severus snorted. "There are other heroes."

Black raised an eyebrow, gloatingly, "Yes, but he's the hero right now."

"So there is no one to check him, no matter what he does?" he shot back, appalled.

"No one needs to check him," Black rumbled. "He's Harry. He's a good kid."

"He is an arrogant self centered boy, and if someone doesn't stop him, he will become a monster." He chose, at that moment, to forget that that boy had walked to what he thought was his own death for the sake of the rest of the Wizarding World.

Black's eyes flashed. "What did you say about my godson?" he demanded head high, sniffing the air fiercely.

Severus threw his own head back, "he's a brat, and a particularly unintelligent one."

His teeth grinding against each other and bared like an animal's, Black stood ready for a fight. "Yes, well, if you want to teach your Slytherins again, you'll have to teach him too."

Severus smirked. "I'm sure I could make it worse for him than he could for me." His opponent only snatched his arm and forced the world down around them.

They sank into a terrifyingly familiar dungeon court room, facing a bug eyed woman in tattered prison robes chained down to a heavy wooden chair. Funny, Severus had almost expected her to have pink stripes instead of the ordinary black. Her childishly curled hair had been pulled free to
fly around her head in a scraggly mass. In the wavering torchlight, her skin had taken on the grey hue of the stones behind her as if she were a chameleon in fact instead of merely in personality and she no longer looked like a toad, having lost too much weight to maintain her former bulging appearance. Her feet dangled ridiculously above the stone in their manacles and prison shoes.

"Dolores Jane Umbridge," Kingsley Sacklebolt boomed. "You have been brought before the Council of Magical Law-"

"So they re-formed that, did they," Snape muttered as Kingsley kept speaking.

"To answer charges that you aided the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort in the imprisonment of Muggle-borns and their families with the intent to murder them, chairing the Muggle-born Registration Commission and using it as a corrupt vehicle for blackmail and terror, as well as the attempted use of the Cruciatius curse on Harry Potter, and the use of two Dementors to assault the same. Do you have anything to say for yourself before we send you back to Azkaban for what remains of your miserable life?"

"Minister," she simpered, "you must understand, my first loyalty has always been to the Ministry! When I was told the Muggle-borns had stolen their magic and we had to stop them, I had to help." Her lip trembled and her eyes looked as if they were about to pop out of her head as they coated with tears.

"Don't you have a brain, woman?" a round, grey haired woman challenged. "Surely you could see what was going on."

Umbridge's eyes blinked rapidly. "But I, but I..."

"No one ordered you to send the Dementors after Mr. Potter, did they? Or to cast the Cruciatius curse on him?" Kingsley's lips thinned after he spoke, as he pressed the blood out of them.

"No, but I did it for the Ministry!" she cried hysterically.

"And by doing so, you nearly destroyed it!" Kingsley waved, and she was dragged away, sobbing piteously down the corridor.

"You do know if you choose to live you won't escape this?" Black smirked. "And trust me, Azkaban is really a lovely cheerful place."

Severus looked at him and saw him for the first time since Black escaped Azkaban as he was instead of cloaked in the memories of what he once had been. The specter in front of him, corpse pale and ragged, eyes sunk deep, skin pulled tight over his features like a ghastly mask, hair long and stringy around his face, grinned at him with yellowed teeth, but Severus answered by letting his lips stretch into a cruel smile. Bled empty of his good looks and charisma, his mercurial brightness, Black was at last his equal in repulsiveness. "If Potter is even close to as good, as noble as you claim, he will speak for me. He knows what I have done and why," and on whose orders.

"Yeah," Black shrugged, unperturbed, "but will they listen to him? Either way," he drawled, "they'll arrest you and haul you off to Azkaban until they parade you in front of a bunch of Ministry flunkies to decide whether or not to lock you away for the rest of your life."

His shoulders jerked up and down. "It's happened to me before."

"And if you go free, you'll either be hailed as a hero or you'll be reviled. People will spit on you in the streets, the Death Eater who got away." As the Ministry court filed out the door, Black leaned against the back of the chair with chains. Severus remembered that Black had never sat chained to
that chair and so it didn't have the horror for him that it had for Severus and the others who had been tried in that room. He probably would have been glad for the chance to face a court. "It would be easier for the Wizarding World to cast you as a hero if you're dead, and not around to remind everyone what a miserable git you really are."

"I am not going to die to make life easier for anyone else," Severus snarled.

"You wouldn't make a good war hero," Black laughed. "You'd hate it anyway."

"I suppose the gaggle of children they celebrate instead are ideal," Severus spoke rapidly.

"We-ell," Black tossed his head, "none of them killed Dumbledore."

Just as he wore spectral garments, so to did he pull a spectral wand out of his sleeve and pointed it straight at Black's heart.

"Go ahead, Snape," Black spread his arms, "I'm already dead."

The wand fell limply from his fingers, so Black picked it up and pressed it into Severus' palm and closed his fingers around it. Still holding his old enemy's fist, he ripped the world asunder and took them back to the Shrieking Shack.

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The world shimmered in and out of Severus' grasp, Madam Pomfrey's voice entwining with shifting colors and fluttering shapes. He could feel a bandage snug against the wound in his throat, and he swallowed as vials and flasks were pressed against his lips. His hands clenched against the crisp hospital wing sheets and he sweated, moaning dully. Slowly, he surfaced from his daze, realizing at last, that he really was going to live.

Springtime afternoon sun dripped into the hospital wing, surrounding Potter like a halo and throwing his eyes into shadow. "Go away," Severus rasped.

"Yes, well, I still don't like you much either," the boy muttered.

"The feeling is mutual," he gasped.

"Oh good," Harry said cheerfully, "I'm glad you're alive, though," he whispered before walking off to tell Madam Pomfrey.

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