

Distortion

by Darkrivertempest

Is Severus Snape really Dumbledore's man? Dumbledore isn't too sure, and with the future return of Voldemort, he needs to know he has complete control over his greatest weapon in the coming war. What lengths will the Headmaster go to in order to keep his newly appointed Potions master right where he wants him?

One

Chapter 1 of 1

Is Severus Snape really Dumbledore's man? Dumbledore isn't too sure, and with the future return of Voldemort, he needs to know he has complete control over his greatest weapon in the coming war. What lengths will the Headmaster go to in order to keep his newly appointed Potions master right where he wants him?

A/N: I couldn't have finished this without the help of every one of my betas. This one-shot was the result of seeing a piece on DeviantArt that proposed the question, "What if Dumbledore was always there, looking over Severus' shoulder?" This is my answer. Spoilers for Philosopher's Stone and several excerpts from Deathly Hallows are included with italics. Evil!Dumbledore be prepared to 'boo' at him.

~*~*~*~*~*~

October 31st, 1982

He ran his fingertips over the cool surface of the glass, his eyes riveted to the misty form on the other side that stared back at him mournfully.

"I'm sorry," he lamented.

The figure haughtily turned her head from the kneeling man, shifting to the furthest edge of the mirror, away from his touch.

"I'm sorry!" he pleaded fervently, moving to follow the form.

Her lips twisted into a sneer for a brief moment; then she disappeared, leaving the reflection empty.

"No!"

Curling into a foetal position, Severus Snape lay upon the stone floor in a secluded chamber near the library, weeping in quivering gasps as his bitter memories played out once more within the Mirror of Erised, diminishing his psyche even further into feebleness.

"Get up," a voice growled behind him.

Snape coiled further into himself. "Go away, old man," he hissed at the intruder.

"I'll not have you thus, Severus," the voice warned. "You're no good to us if you can't even think straight."

"Let me die then; it's what you all want, isn't it?" A shuddering breath wracked his body as he repeatedly tried to swallow the lump in his throat. "It's what I want."

A mirthless snort echoed in the chamber. "So, you choose the coward's way?" No answer was forthcoming, so the authoritative voice boomed, "Well? Do you?"

"I'm not a coward," Severus countered in a low tone.

"Prove it."

"I'm here, aren't I?" His voice broke. "In honour of her sacrifice, I'm here."

"You're here to save your own skin, boy!" Albus Dumbledore spat with disgust. "Coward," he reiterated.

"I. Am. Not. A. Coward!" Severus declared, turning to eye Albus with contempt.

"Your actions prove otherwise and you know it."

"*I am not a coward!*" he screamed at the older wizard. "A coward would've joined her. A coward would not be here trying to make amends by giving up their own life to serve so that her sacrifice would not have been in vain!"

"A technicality, I'm sure."

Folding in on himself once more, Snape muttered tonelessly, "Go away," as he cupped the back of his head with his wide palm.

Hurried footsteps sounded before Snape felt himself violently jerked up from the floor, his face forcibly pressed against the mirror.

"Look at what you've done!" the Headmaster's voice commanded.

Unable to look away, Severus watched all his transgressions regarding Lily Evans play out before him like a Muggle movie, the last one horribly devastating to behold.

"*Don't kill me!*"

"*That was not my intention.*"

The conversation between Snape and Dumbledore that fated night transpired in slow motion, their words barely audible due to the fierce winds blowing through the trees. There were tears streaming down Severus' face.

"*Hide them all, then! Keep her them safe, please!*" The wind plastered his hair against his wet cheek, whipping him.

"*And what will you give me in return, Severus?*"

"*Anything.*"

Pushing his forehead harder into the mirror, Dumbledore taunted cruelly, "See your hubris come to visit you."

"No!" Snape roared, scratching at the hand gripping the back of his head. "Don't make me watch!" he bellowed.

But it was too late. Severus now watched as Voldemort gained entrance into Lily's home, slowly ascending the stairs to where she stood proud as the Gryffindor that she was clutching an infant Harry to her chest, her back turned from the door to shield the babe.

Staring in wide-eyed horror, he watched as her bravery was tested and she was brutally torn asunder while protecting her child, her once vibrant green, expressive eyes now shuttered in lifelessness. He shrieked her name over and over, until he had no voice to use, his sobs turning to mere gasps as he struggled in Dumbledore's grip.

"Did you see the look in her eyes during her final moments, Severus?" the older wizard asked coldly. "She trusted you once, and see how you repaid her!"

The horribly thin young man slumped against the smooth surface, his eyes taking on a lifelessness of their own, his voice long gone, as Dumbledore finally released his hold on him and let him slide to the floor in an unceremonious heap. There he lay, unmoving on his right side, staring vacantly into the empty mirror.

"Now, get up. We have work to do."

As if he were a Muggle piece of machinery, Severus obediently, but slowly, rose to his feet after several long moments. Head drooping with greasy strands concealing his features, he rasped out as best he could, "Yes... sir."

~*~

October 31st, 1983

"Why are you here again, Severus?"

It had been a year since Snape had last looked in the mirror two years since Lily's death and still the pain had not abated, not even a fraction.

"I was trying to see her," he admitted quietly. "To see if she'd found "

"There will be no peace for Lily Potter. Not until Riddle is completely vanquished and her son safe from further harm. Not until restitution is made."

Snapping his gaze to the mirror, Severus once again saw the mist forming an image of a young lady with red hair, looking forlornly at him. Watching her intently, he reached out to touch the reflection, only to have her withdraw, backing further into the shadows, a grimace etched on her face.

"Don't go," he entreated the girl. "I'm sorry!"

The woman shook her head and turned her back on him, disappearing altogether.

"Sorry will not suffice," Dumbledore advised, walking behind the kneeling man, studying him.

Severus bowed his head and wept openly, his shoulders shaking with the weight of his soul's burden. "How do I make amends? How do I ensure that she finds peace?"

"You already know your path; it is straightforward. To explain it to you once again would demean both our intellects." The last phrase was uttered with disdain, as if the wizard had just tasted something sour.

Threading a hand through his inky strands, Severus suddenly stopped weeping, his features morphing to those of a taciturn man, belying the bitterness and strife beneath the surface. He then stood and peered deeply into the mirror one last time, seeking her lovely face, though the image remained elusive.

"The boy resembles James in almost every aspect," Dumbledore murmured in his ear, smiling viciously. "Except for the eyes... they are the shape and colour of Lily's."

"Don't!" Severus moaned in agony.

"Don't what? Remind you of what could have never been yours?"

Wrapping his arms around his body as tightly as he could, Severus hunched away from his *othemaster*. "You're a cruel man, Albus."

This stopped the older wizard. "Am I, Severus? Then why did you come to me, seeking my help with your debacle?"

"Because she saw something kind in you, she felt you were trustworthy."

"Unlike you."

Snape pursed his lips. "Yes," he conceded, "unlike me."

Walking towards the chamber's entrance, Dumbledore threw over his shoulder, "Don't dawdle, boy. Your potions will not brew themselves."

With one last look at the void mirror, Snape followed the Headmaster, closing the massive door behind him with a resounding thud.

~*~

October 31st, 1984

"Once again, I find you moping in front of that damn mirror."

"She's not gone not truly if I can see her here."

"Denial, Severus?" Dumbledore snickered low. "She won't even interact with you."

Shaking his head, the dark man scowled. "It doesn't matter, as long as I am able to look upon her."

The misty image of Lily Evans crossed her arms in irritation, glaring at Severus, then relaxed somewhat as someone came to stand beside her. James Potter.

Snape's eyes widened. "No," he breathed, "I don't want you here!"

Dumbledore moved next to him, gazing at the young couple. "What you want is immaterial."

At his words, James embraced Lily from behind, resting his chin on her shoulder, smirking at Severus. He then let his hands start to wander from around her waist to cup her breasts, kneading them as he sucked her earlobe between his teeth.

Feeling wretchedly ill, Snape backed away, but was stopped by Dumbledore's hand keeping him rooted to the spot. "No, you'll watch, because that's what you want to do: to look."

"I refuse!" he snarled, shutting his eyes tightly.

Grabbing the younger man's long hair and twisting it around his hand, Albus whispered, *Aperio*."

The Potions master's eyelids flew open, unable to even blink as he stared at the horror before him. He watched as Potter caressed his wife lovingly, even parting her robes so that her flesh was on display, his fingers stroking her until she came apart in his arms.

"Sick voyeur," Dumbledore cooed in a pitiless manner. "It's probably a good thing she never forgave you. Think of her reaction if she found out about this little fetish you have, if you'd been in a relationship with her." He released his grip on Snape's black mane.

Unable to hold back any longer, Severus became violently sick, emptying his stomach of its meagre contents. Panting afterwards, he was finally able to close his eyes once he heard Albus end the spell.

"Please... kill me," Snape murmured: his eyes red and watery from heaving.

"No," the older man replied calmly.

"For Merlin's sake, why not?" the dark wizard demanded, nearing hysteria.

"Because it is a kindness you don't deserve."

"You're not the man Lily thought you to be," Severus accused, still in shock over the older wizard's words.

"No," Albus conceded, walking towards the door and waiting for Severus to precede him. "I'm much worse."

~*~

October 31st, 1985

"I'd like to say it's futile, you standing before that mirror waiting for things to change. But you're stubborn that way."

"Bigger off," Severus grunted as he concentrated on assaulting the looking glass.

"Thank you, no. This is my school." He watched as the younger man tried dismantling spells of every calibre, going so far as to use a Muggle glasscutter to rid the thing of its nightmarish visions. "Exactly what do you hope to accomplish?"

Perspiration broke out on Severus' brow. "Trying to remove the spells that adhere to this mirror."

"*Accio Severus' wand*"

The ebony wand flew from its owner's grasp straight to Dumbledore. Snape became incensed.

"*Accio wand!*"

But the wand didn't so much as twitch in the older man's hand.

"*Reverto Volol!*" Snape shrilled, still with no response from his wand.

"Do I need to confiscate this from you, Severus?" Albus asked with a hint of a smirk playing about his mouth.

Mindlessly, the dark man rushed at his tormentor, only to slam into a protective shield thrown by Dumbledore that sent him careening against the mirror's surface. Unable to move, Snape resembled a desolate beggar crucified to the glass, arms outstretched to either side, feet clasped together, making his spine bow inwards.

"So foolish, boy," the white-haired wizard mused, looking him up and down. Using his own wand, he moved Severus' black shirt to the side, taking in his emaciated appearance. "You've been neglecting yourself." He glanced up at the younger man. "If you refuse to eat, I can find ways of ensuring you do."

"Fuck. Off!" Snape seethed between gritted teeth, incapable of moving since he was frozen to the mirror.

Arching his brow, Albus cocked his head and leaned in as close as their faces would allow, given their respective positions. "Need I remind you why you're here? Why you came to me? You're mine to deal with."

"Lil... ly."

"She refused. You know this, accept it."

"No!"

"Thing is, Severus, I *knew* you were outside that door, listening to Trelawney," Dumbledore enlightened him, pacing slowly back and forth in front of him. "How convenient, that you showed up prior to that moment and applied for a teaching position. I also knew you would take this information to Voldemort." He stopped to face the panting man and smiled. "What I didn't know was which child Riddle would choose to fit the Prophecy." He nodded to him. "Thank you for your help in that."

"Bas... tard!"

"I suppose you *could* view it that way." Albus paused. "But we both know *why* she died, do we not?"

Only Severus' whimpers echoed about the room in response as tears slowly made their way down his face, his eyes closed in defeat. "I... hate... you," he ground out many moments later.

Dropping the onyx wand on the floor near the bottom of the gilded frame, Dumbledore released the spell that pinned Snape to the mirror. "Not enough, though," he warned, and exited the room.

~*~

October 31st, 1986

"My life for yours, Lily," Severus begged the translucent replica of his love.

The image sneered at him as she crouched down and slit her palm, smiling maliciously at his gasp and letting the blood flow to the ground to mix with the dirt. *Mudblood*, she mouthed the word at him, scooping up a sizable glob and hurling it at his face, only to have it hit the barrier of the glass instead of striking him.

Startled by her actions, Severus backed up a few paces, looked once more at the edge of the mirror... and frowned. The gilded wooden frame held ornate markings and an inscription.

Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

He knew this was the Mirror of Erised, and that it was intended to show one's innermost desires, but too immersed in his grief to care he'd never taken the time to read the words carved into the top border.

"I show not your face, but your heart's desire," a voice rang out behind him.

Snape spun to see Dumbledore standing in the shadows with his arms crossed, smirking. "Then your mirror is broken, for it has *never* shown me my heart's desire," he charged the Headmaster.

"Oh, but I believe it has," Albus suggested, emerging from the darkness. "Your heart's desire is to be forgiven, is it not?"

Receiving neither confirmation nor denial, he continued. "Did you expect you would just say, *I'm sorry*, and all would be well?" Dumbledore shook his head in mock sympathy. "Severus... would that everything was that easy."

"I have never known an easy moment in my life, Albus," Snape scoffed, watching the image of Lily fade then reappear in a different area of the mirror. "Why should now be any different?"

"Oh-ho!" the Headmaster chuckled. "So now we are to pity you because of your childhood? Is that what you want? My pity for your actions?"

"I want *nothing* from you!" the Potions master corrected in a haughty tone.

"Is that so?" Dumbledore looked at the mirror thoughtfully. "I think I shall have this destroyed."

Panic filled Severus' eyes as he placed himself in front of the glass, preventing the older wizard from approaching. "No! You can't!"

"I can do as I please; this is my school," Albus informed him calmly. "You come here, every year, on the anniversary of Lily Potter's death and accomplish nothing. Really, Severus, the gold inlay alone would fund the library for several years."

"I want you to "

"I thought you didn't want anything from me?" queried Dumbledore with a knowing look.

Closing his eyes in frustration, Severus whispered harshly, "I want you to promise me you will not destroy this mirror."

"But you said-"

"I know what I said!" Snape shouted. "I withdraw my request. Promise me you will not dismantle this mirror."

"Why?"

Bowing his head in guilt and shame, he murmured, "Because as long as I can see her in it, I know I can continue on."

Albus snorted in disdain. "It is not enough."

"I am prepared to bleed for you, old man, to lay down my life! What more do you want?"

"A willing servant, Severus," he replied. "One that is not obsessed with the image of his dead lover."

"She was never my lover!"

"Not for lack of trying." He eyed the darker man who was raising his wand. "I'd advise against it, boy. You're a resourceful, resilient, ambitious man, Severus, but I doubt the Dementors of Azkaban would care about such trivialities."

"Ah, but then you'd lose your precious *servant*," Severus mocked, advancing on him.

Albus glanced at the mirror and smiled. "And you would lose your chance at redemption." He nodded to the scene behind him.

Severus turned and watched as Lily was thrown against the glass, the effects of the *Avada Kedavra* curse leaving green misty vapours surrounding her while she slowly slid down to collapse on the ground. As he stared horrified at the image, blood started to seep through her shirt in the form of words.

Severus Snape killed me

It had the effect Dumbledore had been hoping for; the younger wizard shuddered and fell to his knees, dry heaving as he lacked the will to eat much these days. When he was done, Severus dared to look into the mirror, only to see it blessedly empty.

"You have your willing servant... *master*," he hissed.

"I know."

~*~

October 31st, 1987

He wrapped his weariness around him as tight as the black teaching robes he wore during the school term. Knees pressed to his chest, Severus sat in the dark chamber, rocking slowly back and forth, his wand the only source of illumination.

It had been six years since that fateful night. Six years of misery, six years of self-loathing. Six years of serving a taskmaster more demanding than Voldemort could ever have been. Resting his chin on top of his knee, Severus waited for the mists to form the image he knew so well.

When it came, though, it was not the image he'd been waiting for. A dark-haired, older woman stood before him, looking at him as if he were the most precious person in the whole world.

"Mother," he said softly, smiling tremulously.

As he began to rise, he thought that maybe just this once, the mirror got his heart's desire right. But seconds later, just before he touched her form, a meaty set of hands wrapped themselves around her neck, causing her eyes to bulge.

"No!" he screamed, clawing at the glass.

Help me! she mouthed to her son, clutching at the fingers tightening around her throat, her eyes rolling back into her head.

Looking around the desolate chamber, Snape spied a stray mouse and quickly transfigured it into a ball-peen hammer, knowing that to use magic against the mirror was futile and hoping brute force would help. Once he had it in his hands, he slammed the monstrous metal head against the glass surface, trying to crack the barrier in hopes of saving his mother.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded a voice from the doorway.

"It's got my mother, Albus!" Snape cried out as a particularly powerful swing resulted in some of the wooden frame chipping off.

"*Accio hammer*," Dumbledore growled, catching the destructive item before Severus could land another blow.

Mindless rage caused Snape to rush towards the Headmaster in a vain effort to retrieve the tool, only to be encased within a translucent sphere that allowed no movement once it closed. No sound escaped, but the frozen man could hear Dumbledore's words.

"You think to halt that which has already come to pass," he told the still form, slowly revolving the bubble so that Snape faced the mirror. "She died three days ago, Severus."

Tears coursed down the sallow man's cheek, yet no whimper was heard as he watched his beloved mother being strangled to death in front of his eyes, his feelings of uselessness increasing tenfold. After several moments, and the disappearance of Eileen Snape's figure, Dumbledore released him to drop to the stone floor.

The wizened older man bent low and whispered in his ear, "Ruthless, violent anger will not serve your purpose."

Panting heavily, his pitch locks tossing about with every short burst of breath, Snape muttered, "Don't you mean *your* purpose?"

"*Our* purpose, Severus," Albus corrected, standing once more. "Now, get up."

Refusing to move, he just turned his gaze towards Dumbledore. "You knew about my mother?"

Withdrawing a Muggle newspaper, Albus flung it down in front of the grieving man's face. "Your father's work, it seems."

Snape grabbed it and read the small article about a murder in the house at Spinner's End, his frame shaking as he hunched over in agony. A piercing wail filled the chamber as he clutched the paper in his fists, sadistic fury consuming him.

"I should have been there!" he thundered, his wrath incendiary enough to cause the paper to catch fire.

"Give me that!" Albus gasped, trying to take the now flaming article from him.

"Mine!" Severus declared, his eyes glinting with madness. "*My* mother, *my* Lily!"

Aguamenti.

Snape and the burning paper were immediately doused in frigid waters, the younger man spluttering to avoid being drowned in the jet of water coming from Dumbledore's wand. Once the stream stopped, however, Snape was beyond infuriated.

"How dare you?" he bellowed, stumbling to his feet, though he slipped several times in the remaining puddles. "This isn't about the girl I loved," he seethed. "This is my mother!"

"How dare I?" Grabbing the front of the struggling man's black frock coat, Dumbledore pulled him closer. "How dare *you!*" He shoved him away. "You had no right to tell a megalomaniac about a defenceless child that could have ended his bid for power." He continued to advance on the retreating form of the young wizard. "You had no right to ask him to spare Lily in exchange for the death of James and Harry!"

In retrospect, hearing his actions out loud disgusted even Snape. "I only wanted "

"Jealous, envious, controlling, manipulative, reckless, wretched man." The Headmaster hurled the words at him with a sneer. "In my opinion, there's no amount of atonement you could garner that would forgive a deal with the Devil."

Mopping the excess water off his face, Severus glared at him. "Then why am I in your service? Why bother to rectify my mistakes if I am already Hell-bound?"

"Why, indeed." He studied the drenched figure. "Do not forget your life debt to James." He smirked when the dark wizard's face twisted into a scowl, the lines so deep they would never disappear. "They say the ninth circle of Hell is reserved for traitors and betrayers alike." Noting that Severus rapidly paled, he smiled fiendishly. "Maybe, if your reparations are enough, they'll let you ascend to the first circle, where you can wander in Limbo for all eternity. It's a far better fate than having snakes gnawing inside your body and pulling out your tongue while burning your mouth."

Severus was now positively green. "I see your point."

"Pragmatic as always," Dumbledore harrumphed. He glanced towards the mirror once again. "The hour grows late and there is nothing more to see."

Looking at the mirror himself, Snape closed his eyes against the image burned into the back of his mind. "Not for the moment."

~*~

July 25th, 1991

Four years passed without incident, without Severus Snape visiting the Mirror of Erised, though not for lack of trying. Each time he'd attempted to find the mirror on the anniversary of Lily's death, Dumbledore had thwarted his efforts by showing up to taunt him mercilessly, until he'd stopped trying altogether only a year earlier. Severus reasoned that Lily would always be there, tormenting him in one form or another from within the mirror. Since he was struggling to hold on to his sanity as it was, he quit seeking out her image for absolution.

But the old feelings of oppression were upon him again, the air thick with a palpable darkness that surrounded the Wizarding community, the same as before when he'd made his weightiest miscalculation. His left arm ached abominably every time he was near that witless wonder, Quirrell who was appointed the upcoming year's Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor and he often wondered what exactly happened to the fool in Albania that he came back stuttering and with a noticeable twitch to his left eye.

He knew Albus would never allow him to fill the D.A.D.A. position too many eggs in the same basket, he'd told him once. Snorting, he pulled his robes tighter around his body, like an embracing lover. Dumbledore was nothing more than a world-class chess master, manipulating and bluffing his way into position until it was convenient for him to strike down his opponent. The unnatural vibes he'd received from Quirrell since the man's return had him questioning the older wizard's strategy of placing the now bumbling man into a position that surrounded him with darker objectives. It left him in the precarious position of watching the professor... closely.

So weighted in self-recrimination due to the looming threat, he made a final attempt to access the mirror without Dumbledore's intrusion. Since it was a different day of the year than his past visits, he hoped to avoid the ruthless Headmaster altogether.

When he couldn't find the mirror in its usual chamber near the library, he searched the lower levels of Hogwarts, finding nothing. Acting on instinct, he ascended to the upper levels. Unable to locate it on the first two floors, he waited until the staircase shifted to the third, then entered the dark corridor. It was long and narrow, barely a body's span in width, and was lit by torches every so many metres. Even though it was the middle of July, the air was dank and chilled, as if he were somewhere near the Dungeons instead of the third floor where he currently prowled.

Over the years, his resilience against Dumbledore's crueler *techniques* became considerable, inasmuch as he was able to keep the probes to his mind at a minimum. While he'd started his lessons in Occlumency and Legilimency just before the supposed demise of the Dark Lord, he'd finally mastered them in the past four years; they were necessities in order to maintain some semblance of normalcy.

Slipping into a musty chamber, cobwebs enveloping every corner, Snape spied a rather large object with a dustcover over it. Studying the dimensions, he knew what lay beneath. He removed the canvas cloth to reveal the mirror he sought, his eyes reading the familiar script across the gilded crest, then scanning the frame, only to stop on the right-hand column.

The fragment he'd chipped off with the hammer four years ago had been repaired, as if it had never happened.

Running his hands over the frame, he tried to detect any magical residue left behind from the mending of the damaged wood, but found none. He quickly determined that the mirror before him was not the same he'd damaged so long ago. Frowning with uncertainty, he walked around the massive object, unsure if the item was the one he sought.

As he returned to the front, he sighed heavily, preparing to return the dustcover to its original spot, pausing when he sensed movement within the glass. Slowly and timidly, a young redhead approached the barrier, smiling hesitantly.

"Lily?" Snape breathed, not believing the sight before him.

She fully smiled at her name and beckoned him closer. Distrustful from past experiences, he hesitated, just staring at her beautiful image and drinking in her spirit until he was quite drunk with relief. When she remained still, watching him as he watched her, he moved forward slightly.

Brows creased in confusion, he noticed his mirror image and hers standing next to each other. That had never happened previously when he'd looked in the glass he'd only ever seen her misty form yet now there she was, almost as if she were alive. When he touched the smooth surface, his fingers tingled, causing a surge of joy that went straight through him.

"Please," he exhaled harshly, unable to hold the tears at bay. "I'm sorry."

Her eyes closed in pain and when she opened them, they too were filled with tears. Taking the hand of the mirror Severus, she laid it against her cheek and nuzzled his palm, pressing a brief kiss on the inside of his wrist.

I'm sorry, too, she mouthed to the real man staring at her.

The hand not touching the mirror clasped over Severus' mouth as he broke down with gut-wrenching sobs. It was several moments before he could compose himself, but once he did, he raised his head and smiled at her lovingly.

"Forgive me?" he implored, clutching the shirt fabric over his heart.

Lifting her hand, Lily laid it on the top of his mirror image's head, and bent low to kiss his forehead. It looked like she was about to say something, but her eyes grew fearful as she stared beyond Severus.

"No!" Albus Dumbledore roared from where he stood in the doorway to the chamber.

Whipping around, Severus immediately blocked a hex aimed at the mirror that originated from the Headmaster. "What are you doing?"

Instead of answering his question, Dumbledore threw another spell, a much stronger one, towards the image of Lily, but Snape stepped in front of it, taking the brunt of the curse. Stinging needles covered his body, causing him to collapse to his knees in an effort to withstand the effects of the hex.

Dumbledore approached the disabled man, glancing briefly at the distressed woman in the mirror. "This is a lie," he told the dark wizard kneeling in front of him, pointing his wand at the looking glass.

"Is it?" Snape huffed, raising his head a fraction, his teeth gritted in pain.

"You know it is," Dumbledore jeered, poised to issue another spell at the mirror.

"*Stupefyt!*" Severus' use of the charm hit the unsuspecting Headmaster square in the chest, making him fly back several metres to land prone near an archway.

Struggling to his feet, Snape allowed no opportunity for him to escape. "*Incarcerous!*"

Thin, snake-like cords wrapped themselves around Dumbledore's still body, spelled to tighten if he tried to move even a millimetre. Levitating the bound form to an upright position, Severus secured his master's wand within his robes and reversed the stunning charm. "*Rennervate.*"

"Release me at once, you pathetic excuse for a "

"*Silencio!*"

The older wizard's mouth suddenly clapped shut, his nostrils flaring with angry pants.

"Now, you will listen to me, Albus, and you will tell me the truth," Snape forewarned, holding in front of his eyes a tiny bottle, filled with a clear liquid. Originally, he'd brewed the difficult and time-consuming Veritaserum to use on Quirrell if and when the time came, but this served his purpose as well. "*Finite.*"

"I should've let him kill you," Dumbledore spat once the binding spell on his lips had disappeared.

Raising his eyebrows in mock agreement, Severus nodded. "You probably should have." Uncapping the bottle, he grabbed Albus' jaw and forced it down, pressing the opening of the jar against his lips and upending it until most of its contents slid down the Headmaster's throat. The enraged man spluttered the rest onto his chin.

"You ungrateful malcontent!" Albus said with scorn. "I saved your cowardly arse and this is how you repay me?"

Severus shifted his gaze to Lily, who shook her head *no* in response to his unasked question on whether he was a coward. She then turned and watched the man she'd previously trusted turn vicious and hateful before her eyes, which were wide with obvious astonishment.

"You will answer my questions," Severus directed.

"I. Will. Not..." The effects of the Veritaserum were almost immediate with as much as he'd swallowed; the more Albus fought against the compulsion, the shallower his breathing became.

"Is this mirror the same as the one I visited each year after Lily's death?" A subtle movement caught his attention and he glanced at his first love the expression on her face one of bewilderment, confirming his suspicions that the object before him was completely different.

"Go... to No," Dumbledore gnashed between clenched teeth.

"Where is *that* mirror located then?"

"Same... place." Refusing to expound on any answers, he gave short responses, hoping to irritate Snape.

Transfiguring a candleholder into a folding chair, Severus sat down and crossed his right leg over the left, waiting. "I'm a patient man, Albus. You know this." His fingers idly caressed the cool surface of the glass, delighting in the slight surges every time he passed Lily's figure. "I can stay here for as long as I need to."

Albus regarded the redheaded woman and grimaced when she narrowed her eyes at him. "It's still in the same place, I told you."

Snape shook his head. "I looked there earlier and found nothing." Arching a brow, he thought it pathetic that the older wizard was still trying to subvert the effects of the serum by giving minimalist answers. He switched tactics and started asking open-ended questions. "Explain."

"It's charmed to only appear on Halloween. Therefore, it would not be visible in July."

The Potions masters' eyes widened. "This whole time..."

"Had you sought it out beforehand, you would not have found it."

"Is it the Mirror of Erised?" Severus asked fervently, praying the old wizard would tell him nay.

Pursing his lips, Dumbledore made a visible effort to resist spilling the truth from his mouth, though it lasted only momentarily. "No."

Severus closed his eyes in abject relief. "Where is the true mirror?"

Shifting his gaze to the girl in the frame, Dumbledore nodded towards her. "Before you."

Turning his head, Severus studied his Lily. "All those years." He stood and traced her face, enjoying her shy smile. "What did I look upon each year?" he asked, his gaze never leaving her form.

"A phantasm."

Fists clenched to stem his rising anger, Snape moved away from Lily and glared hard at the bound man. "Explain."

Beads of perspiration broke out on the older man's forehead, as he once again tried and failed to withhold the information. "A ghost."

Snape roughly pulled on Dumbledore's long beard. "I know what a ghost is, Albus. Explain why I saw it in a mirror that is supposed to reflect my heart's desire!"

"Because I conjured it there."

The silence was deafening while Severus tried to rationalize why the Headmaster was using spirits against him. Looking back, he remembered every interaction with the dark mirror involving Dumbledore, his intrusions maddening under the best of circumstances. "You were always there, weren't you?"

"Yes," he said almost proudly, as if it wasn't something to be ashamed of.

"What kind of object held the spirit?"

"It's called the *Nox Somnus*, quite rare and malleable to the owner's will."

Coming close to Dumbledore's face, Severus snarled, "You fashioned a nightmarish spirit to torment me?" His only answer was a quirk of one eyebrow from the older man. "For Merlin's sake, why?"

A feral grin spread across his lips. "To keep you at heel."

"What?" Severus gasped in horror. "Am I some dog to be at your beck and call?"

"Yes," Albus answered with certainty. "I didn't believe for one moment that you'd remain faithful and loyal in memory of her." A mask of indifference schooled his features. "Your loyalties were an incalculable risk; I just couldn't accept assurances that you'd stay devoted to a woman that was never yours to begin with."

"You're wrong," Snape said quietly, looking at Lily whose image was pacing fretfully. "I've loved her since the first moment I laid eyes on her, and I will love her until I die, regardless if it is reciprocated or not." Pressing two fingers to his lips, he then placed them against hers, giving her a hesitant smile. "Always."

Dumbledore snorted at the sight of their affection for one another, trying once more to goad him. "Harry starts school this coming term." His smirk grew smug when he saw Severus flinch. "I've never seen any child resemble his father as much he does James."

Lily, seeing that she'd placed her trust in the wrong man, refused to let the Headmaster antagonize Severus further. Securing her best friend's attention once more, she bent until she was eye level with him, her palm pressed against the glass.

"For me?" she mouthed, pleading with him to protect her child.

Severus laid his forehead against the smooth surface, his eyes closed in agony as an aching hollowness resounded in his heart. "For you," he murmured, laying his hand parallel to hers.

"How touching," Dumbledore ridiculed.

"*Silencio.*"

Having ensured he wouldn't hear another disparaging word from the old man, Severus returned his focus to the woman before him. "I promise to keep Harry as safe as I can, Lily," he assured. "But I can't be soft on him."

She heaved a long-suffering sigh and nodded, resigned, but understanding. Summoning him closer, she breathed on the glass until it fogged on her side then wrote in reverse with her index finger so he could read her message.

Thank you, Sev. Love you.

Tears filled his eyes as he smiled with pure joy at her. "My life for his," he pledged.

Dumbledore's thrashing and muffled snarls of pain from the tightening of his bindings brought them both back to reality.

"I must go, love," Severus said in a soft and urgent tone, caressing the mirror image's cheek. "I'll see you after all is said and done."

He watched her lovely form fade from view and the mirror become empty, no terrifying scenes or shadows replacing the happiness that had just passed. Drawing in a shuddering breath, he replaced the dustcover over the mirror then stood before his *master*.

"I am not, and never will be, your mongrel to order about," Snape avowed threateningly. "But I will do as you ask because it will help the boy."

"I will also move the real Mirror of Erised back to its proper place, and you will tell me how to dismantle the *Nox Somnus*, so that no student especially Mister Potter ever happens across it. Are we clear?"

Unable to speak, Dumbledore just nodded, though his eyes said something different.

Snape sighed in resignation, realizing what he'd have to resort to in order to maintain his cover to both Dumbledore *and* Voldemort. Raising the wand that was as jet-black as his hair, he set about to end the Dark Lord's reign.

"*Obliviate!*"