

Why Dumbledore Trusted Snape

by sylvanawood

Young Severus Snape wants to leave Voldemort's service. Can Albus Dumbledore help him turn sides and stay alive?

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

Young Severus Snape wants to leave Voldemort's service. Can Albus Dumbledore help him turn sides and stay alive?

Disclaimer: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. Just borrowed. Will be returned. Snape is welcome to stay, though.

A big Thank You goes to my two wonderful beta readers, Maggie and Snarkyroxy, who patiently listen to my whinging, are both helpful and thorough, and always encouraging.

Why Dumbledore Trusted Snape

The only thing that distinguished the quiet street from the neighbouring ones was the tall mill chimney towering over it. The few functioning streetlights cast a dim, flickering light on the worn cobblestones, leaving the areas in between in deep shadows. The hooded figure of a man hurried through these shadows, frequently looking over his shoulder, until he reached the last house, where a light shone through the curtains in a downstairs room. He looked around once more and then strode quickly to the door and knocked. After a few moments, the door opened a crack and a thin, middle-aged woman looked out at him.

"Mother, may I come in?" the man asked in a hushed voice.

"Severus?" The woman hesitated for a second before opening the door wider and pulling the man inside a small living room.

"Mother, I need to talk to you," Severus Snape said, urgency making his voice tremble slightly.

"Merlin, Severus, you haven't been here in years!" Eileen Snape looked at her son, completely bewildered. "I gave up hope of ever seeing you again, boy... Come sit, I'll make you a cup of tea; you look horrible." She led him towards a sofa that stood grouped together with a comfortable-looking armchair and a table. Shelves filled with books covered most of the walls; an electric lamp was casting a cosy light on the corner with the sofa. He sat down, and she touched his face, tracing the deep lines that ran from his nose to the corner of his mouth with her fingers. Her son leaned into her touch and closed his eyes.

"There isn't time for this, Mother. I cannot stay long, but I need your advice. I don't know what to do."

"What is it, Severus? Tell me."

He opened his eyes and looked at her with such an expression of hopelessness and despair that she had to catch her breath and sit down.

"It has to do with those people who ensnared you, doesn't it? Did they threaten you? Are you in danger?"

"No, not yet, but I will be. And your life will be in danger, too. You must flee, Mother." He bit his lip and swallowed. "I have to turn myself in. I will have to go to Azkaban if the Death Eaters don't kill me first. Something has happened... I don't want to do this any more..." He nervously swept his hand through his hair.

"What happened? Have you had second thoughts about them?" She looked hopeful.

"I had second thoughts almost as soon as I took the Vow," he ground out through clenched teeth. "And nothing I can do will make things right again. I put you and Father at risk when I joined and I didn't even think about it at that time. But that isn't the half of it..." He swallowed and looked at her with glittering eyes, breathing hard, jaws working.

His mother took his hands in hers and started to gently pry his clenched fingers apart.

"Now..." His voice was rough and barely audible. "Now Lily will die because of me."

"What?" His mother looked up from their clasped hands, eyes wide. "Why Lily?"

"Because I betrayed her." He stood up from the sofa and started to pace, frequently sweeping both hands through his hair.

"I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but I did it anyway, and now she is lost. She, her husband, and her young son."

His mother pressed her fingers to her mouth and stared at him fearfully. "Merlin! You have to prevent this. What can you do?"

"If I turn myself in, I will go to Azkaban, but that will put you at risk. You are regarded as a blood traitor already, and if I change sides openly... the Death Eaters will seek revenge. I can't... I don't know what to do."

"There has to be another way," Eileen said. She started to pace up and down, just like her son, and the resemblance between them became pronounced. Both were thin to the brink of being scrawny, and both had long, black hair, heavy eyebrows, hooked noses, and identical scowls.

"Dumbledore," Eileen finally said. "Your best bet would be Dumbledore. If anyone can find a solution for this mess, it will be him."

"Never," Severus growled. "Mother, you have no idea what he... Never would I ask Dumbledore to help me, no..."

"Why not? He's the only one Voldemort's afraid of, or so they say..."

He sighed and went to the window, looking outside through a gap in the curtains. "He won't listen to me." He did not look around and kept his gaze fixed on the street outside. "He... there's no way... and I can't... How can I look him in the eyes, after what I have done?"

"Oh, nonsense," Eileen Snape said irritably. "If I know one thing about Dumbledore, it's that he listens to people..." She frowned, then walked over to her son and put a hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

Severus slowly turned to look at her and shook his head. "I don't trust him, Mother. He doesn't care for the likes of us. He would warn Lily, agreed, but I want you safe, too."

"That isn't... Severus, that isn't how I remember Albus Dumbledore. He has always cared... surely he hasn't changed that much over the years?"

"He cares for his favourites, all right. As for the rest..." Severus' voice faded, he swallowed again and looked at his mother with a frown. "I want you safe," he repeated. "I don't trust him to keep you safe. We have to look at other options."

"I don't want you to go to Azkaban, Severus," Eileen Snape pleaded. "I couldn't stand to lose you, too. After your father died... Please!"

Severus shook his head. "I could bargain with the Ministry, give them information about the Death Eaters... But I don't trust the Ministry to keep you safe... And that would make me even more of a traitor than warning Lily already does. I still have a few friends among the Death Eaters, Mother. There's Lucius... he has a young son, too..."

"Then let's flee, Severus. You and me, together. You warn Lily, and then we'll leave the country... There are some relatives of Tobias on the continent; we could go there..."

"No! That's out of the question..."

"But why?" Eileen interrupted. "Just because they're Muggles?"

"No, Mother. Not because of that. It's because you wouldn't be safe. There is no way that I will escape the Dark Lord's revenge. They will find me and they will kill me. And if you are with me, they will kill you, too."

"We'll be careful..."

"Mother! No one... no one has ever left the Death Eaters and survived. And yes, I know that as a certainty." He held up his hand when his mother started to interrupt him. "There was this young man... just out of school... Regulus Black, you wouldn't know him, I think..."

She shook her head.

"He... he tried to leave. I knew him from school; he was in my House, a few years younger. He... I think his illusions were shattered just as soon as mine were when he took the Vow and learned what being a follower of the Dark Lord is all about..." He rasped out a short laugh. "But never mind. He tried to flee..."

Eileen had sat down on the sofa while listening and looked at him questioningly.

"He didn't survive for a week. He was found and killed. Just like that." He snapped his fingers. "It's the Vow. You don't survive for long when you stop serving the Dark Lord..." He took a deep breath, sat down in the armchair and closed his eyes.

His mother looked at him intently. She took his hands in hers again and said, "This brings us back to Dumbledore, Severus. If anyone can find a way for you to survive, it will be him. Don't worry about me. I can go to Tobias' relatives... I will go alone, if I must, but I will know that you live, and you will know that I am safe."

"Oh, Mother... why does everything I do end in my betraying of someone, in putting those close to me in danger?" He buried his face in his hands.

"Severus, please... Please talk to Dumbledore." Her eyes glittered treacherously, and she wiped a few stray tears away. "Do you really think I could go and hide, and feel safe when I know that your life is in danger? Do you really think that I would care about my own safety in that situation? Please, my boy, talk to him. Please, do it for me. I don't want to lose you..."

Severus sat in silence and stared at her. He got up to sit beside her on the sofa and took her in his arms. "It's all right, Mother," he murmured softly after a while. "I will speak to Dumbledore."

Eileen closed her eyes, tears still falling, and nodded.

"Is the owl still in the attic?"

"Yes," she whispered, "but is that safe?"

"I think so," he said calmly. "Owls aren't intercepted often."

"Won't Dumbledore suspect a trap?"

"Perhaps, but he will have means to avoid traps. As you said yourself, he is very powerful."

"Yes," Eileen sighed, "that he is."

"Why don't you lie down for a bit, Mother, while I send the owl and deactivate the anti-Apparition spells? You need some rest."

"No. I don't want to be alone now..."

"Just stay here, then. We shall wait for Dumbledore's reply together."

His mother nodded, and Severus left her to send the owl.

When he came back to the living room, he found his mother where he had left her and sat down beside her quietly.

"What will we do if he isn't in Britain?" Eileen interrupted the silence, sitting up straight and looking at him.

"He should be at Hogwarts. The school year hasn't ended yet." He rubbed his chin and considered. "If he doesn't reply, we will have to find another solution... the Dark Lord won't miss me for a day or two; those meetings aren't that frequent."

Mother and son sat silently for a long time, both too agitated and worried to sleep, and too lost in their own thoughts to talk. Suddenly something red appeared before them with a flash and a crackling sound and vanished a moment later with a pop, leaving only a red-golden feather behind.

Eileen jumped up with a start. "What?"

"Dumbledore's familiar," Severus said. "It looks like he received our message." He got to his feet and strode to the small window, cautiously peering outside. He spun around when, a moment later, Albus Dumbledore Apparated into their living room with a soft 'pop', closely followed by his phoenix.

"Eileen, Severus," he said politely, "I apologize for intruding, but it seemed wise not to be seen anywhere near the house. How can I assist you?"

"I want to leave the Dark Lord's service," Severus said matter-of-factly. "But that will put my mother in danger. While my own safety isn't of much importance to me, my mother thinks otherwise. I am asking you to listen to what I have to say, and I beg you to help keep my mother safe." He looked at Dumbledore with a stony face, standing rigid like a statue.

"That comes as a bit of a surprise." Dumbledore studied Severus' face for a while and then went to Eileen, looking her in the eyes. "Will you confirm what your son said?" he asked hesitantly.

Eileen's gaze was firm when her eyes met his. "I do confirm everything Severus said. Please help him... Don't let them take my son away from me..."

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "I apologize for the invasion of your privacy, Eileen. If only my safety were concerned, I would not stoop to such bad manners, but I have to think of others as well." He frowned and looked at Severus. "With Severus' associations, one can never be too careful."

"It's all right," said Eileen. "I trust you."

"And Severus?" Dumbledore asked.

"I don't, and you know why." Severus scowled. "However, I have a bargain for you. Help my mother, and I will tell you everything I know about the Dark Lord's plans. I will be a traitor, whatever I do, so do with that information what you wish. I will turn myself in, but first you must help my mother."

Dumbledore was silent for a long time. He sat down in the armchair and studied his hands. Finally he seemed to come to a decision and looked up at them.

"There are times when trust has to be given, and earned, in unexpected places," he said. "It deeply saddens me that I lost yours so long ago, Severus, although I do understand why. I will help your mother; please do not worry. But the two of us need to talk in more detail. I would like to take both of you to a friend's place now, so your mother can get some rest and be safe. We can talk undisturbed there."

Both Eileen and Severus nodded their consent. Dumbledore called his familiar and whispered something into the bird's ear. With another flash of scarlet, the phoenix disappeared. Dumbledore nodded to himself, looked around and took a small figure of a sphinx from one of the bookshelves.

He pointed his wand at it. *"Portus!"* The figurine glowed briefly in a blue light and then reversed back to normal.

"This will bring us to my friend's house." They touched the Portkey, Dumbledore counting, "One, two, three," and they were swept away.

The room where they landed smelled strongly of cats and cabbages. Looking around, Severus saw a large fireplace, a few mismatched armchairs with crocheted covers, a coffee table, a television set and a small china cabinet. Most of the armchairs were occupied by cats looking lazily at the newcomers.

"Why don't you stay here, Severus? I asked my friend to wait for us in the kitchen; I will introduce Eileen to her, and then we can talk," Dumbledore said.

Severus nodded and sat down in one of the empty chairs. He took a book from the coffee table and looked at it; it turned out to be a photo album with pictures of cats. A large tabby stood up, stretched luxuriously, and leapt off his chair. He slunk over to Severus, wound himself once around his legs, jumped up on his lap, and settled down, purring.

A few minutes later, Dumbledore came back into the room, took in the sight before him and smiled. "I see that you and Mr. Tibbles have made each other's acquaintance already?"

"I couldn't prevent it; I wasn't asked," Severus grumbled, absently scratching the cat's chin.

"Cats have a calming effect on humans." Dumbledore smiled. "So perhaps he can help make you feel more at ease." He walked to the chair that had been vacated by the cat and sat down, facing Severus. "Would you care to join me for a cup of tea?" he asked.

"By all means," Severus said impatiently, "and then let's get the pleasantries over with and talk."

Dumbledore nodded, still smiling gently, and tapped the coffee table with his wand. A tea set with two cups appeared on the table with a low 'pop', and he started to pour the tea for both of them. He carefully handed one cup to Severus, being mindful of the cat that still sat purring on his lap. Then he leaned back.

"Your mother will be safe here, for the night," he said. "I think the option that we let the Aurors 'catch' you and pretend that you didn't turn is out of the question, Severus. It

has too many risks. I suggest a different approach. Tomorrow I will go back to the house with your mother and help her get a few of her things. She can tell the neighbours that she will visit your father's relatives on the continent. Then I will take her to Hogwarts with me, and she can stay there indefinitely. We need a new librarian, and your mother always loved books, if I recall correctly. And, as you know, the library is open all year, even through the summer, so she won't have to leave, ever, if she doesn't want to." He paused and took his half-moon glasses off, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Eileen will need a new name and a new identity, I can arrange that with the Ministry. I doubt that anyone will recognize her, it is to our advantage now that she and your father led such a secluded life."

Severus stared thoughtfully at Dumbledore, then frowned. "This sounds all well and good, but what about the Ministry? I don't trust them to keep this a secret. I know that there are Ministry associates and, ah, benefactors, who are close to the Dark Lord..."

Dumbledore nodded. "I know about that, and I don't trust the Ministry in general, either. But there are a few people there whom I would trust with my life, and I will ask one of them to assist us. Be assured, Severus, your mother will be as safe at Hogwarts as is humanly possible."

Severus released a deep breath and nodded. "I admit that this sounds better than one could expect, under the circumstances. If my mother agrees, then so will I. So now I will keep my end of the bargain."

Dumbledore sat up straight and looked at him expectantly. "Please do. I will listen."

"I suppose you remember that I eavesdropped on you and that new Divination teacher of yours last summer?" Severus asked. When Dumbledore affirmed this, he continued, "I didn't think much about what I had heard, but from the way she spoke, I recognized it as a prophecy. And since the prophecy was about the Dark Lord, I told him all I knew. He was very pleased." Severus gripped the armrests of his chair. "You could say that I should have thought of the people this prophecy would affect, but I didn't... I didn't think that far, and I didn't care about hypothetical enemies and victims." He sighed. "The Dark Lord saw it differently. He knew those who had defeated him in the past, naturally, but he did not know who was expecting a child... for a while. Then, late last year, he found out that the Longbottoms and the Potters each had a son born to them in late July. From what he told us, I gather that he had been watching them. And now he's decided who his enemy is likely to be..." He jumped up, unsettling the cat on his lap. Mr. Tibbles let out a hiss of protest and indignantly stalked over to Dumbledore, who gently picked him up.

Severus started to pace. "He chose Lily's son. Don't ask me why, but he did." He wrung his hands. "I haven't seen Lily in years, but she was my best friend at school. She is dear to me like a sister; I never meant her any harm. I couldn't care less about Potter, but I do owe him a life debt, as you may remember." He glared at Dumbledore who listened intently. "I cannot let them be killed. They need to be warned. They need to hide, leave the country, and get protection. The Dark Lord will try to kill their son, and he will kill them, too, when they try to protect the boy." Exhausted, he slumped down on the chair again. "And now you can call the Aurors and have me sent off to Azkaban."

"Harry..." Dumbledore whispered. At Severus's questioning look, he explained, "That's the name of the Potters' son..." He scratched the cat's head and stared at Severus for a long moment.

"This is so like Tom Riddle... So he is choosing the half-blood over the pureblood, is he? I suppose he's calling it fate?"

"Yes, he keeps talking how fate was on his side... How fate wanted him to hear about the prophecy... Or why else would one of his servants have been present when it was made...? He seemed elated, almost mystical when he told us his plans. He forbade us to kill the boy. He wants to know where to find him, and he wants to be the one who kills him. He is convinced that your side wants to use the boy as a weapon against him and that killing him now will shatter the resistance of your organization."

"How very interesting," Dumbledore murmured, deep in thought. "We will have to take better measures to hide the Potters. They aren't easily found, but that's not good enough. Thank you, Severus, for telling me this."

"You thank me?" Severus asked incredulously. "It's my fault that they are in danger..."

"Maybe," Dumbledore said, "but now it is by your merit that they can be hidden efficiently."

"Aren't you afraid of a trap? Perhaps I want to use you to find out where they are hiding? The Dark Lord would reward me greatly if I brought him that information!"

Dumbledore laughed. "No, Severus. I know that this isn't a trap. I have made my choice. I will trust you."

"Why?"

Dumbledore stroked the cat in his lap. "Well, for one, Mr. Tibbles here isn't just an ordinary cat, he is a Kneazle. And Kneazles are very good judges of character..."

Severus stared at the old man unbelievably.

"Fawkes, my familiar, thinks that you can be trusted, too..." Dumbledore continued, eyes twinkling merrily. "And my own judgement does play a small role in that decision as well..."

"You're... you're mental!" Severus stared at Dumbledore, shook his head and blinked. "You have to be joking... I don't believe this." His lips twitched, then he threw his head back and howled with laughter. When he could speak again, he choked out, "Merlin help me, I'm entrusting the lives of my mother and my best friend to a madman..."

"I have been called that before," Dumbledore chuckled, "but it's not often that I make grave mistakes in judging characters, if I do say so myself."

"Do you, now? I beg to differ, but that's of no consequence when I'm in Azkaban." Severus was still breathing hard, but he was deadly serious again. "Why don't you call the Aurors now and get it over with?"

"I didn't think we were finished just yet," Dumbledore said. "Won't you tell me a bit more about your time as a Death Eater, Severus, and what you did in Tom's employ?"

"What do you want to know? How many I've murdered? How many raids I organized? Who is going to be killed next?"

"Have you murdered, Severus?"

Severus stared at him. "Would you believe me if I said that I hadn't? At least not directly..."

"It does seem unlikely, considering the usual activities of Death Eaters, doesn't it?"

"Yes. But I found out very soon that I don't have a taste for murder... much to Bellatrix Lestrange's amusement. She is one of those who pant in excitement when they see pain and death. Like the Dark Lord. And like some others..." Severus' face screwed up in disgust and he jumped up again, striding to the china cabinet and studying its contents.

"My fascination with the Dark Lord didn't last much longer... I thought he wanted to change wizarding society for the better, you know." He turned and looked at Dumbledore who nodded encouragingly. "I may have killed once or twice when we were attacked, but I was too busy running for cover to pay attention to details. I seldom took part in raids, and when I did, I remained in the shadows. Bellatrix found great pleasure in constantly calling me a coward... The Dark Lord didn't seem to mind much, though. He seems to value my talents at Potions, and at developing new spells. I presume Lily told you about our extracurricular activities?"

Dumbledore nodded again. "Yes, she did; go on, please."

"I was sent away to, ah, round out my education, and spent the next three years at Durmstrang, officially as an assistant to the Potions professor there. I also studied the Dark Arts with Igor Karkaroff. Have you heard of him? He's the Dark Arts teacher..."

"Yes, I know about him; continue please..."

"I was called back briefly to help the Dark Lord with a potion. He wanted something like a Boggart in potion form... something that brings out your deepest fears. In the end, we settled on a strong poison mixed with something collected from the Dementors. You need to be aware, Professor, that not all Ministry employees who have the power to control Dementors are loyal to the Ministry."

"I know that, too, Severus. Tell me more about that potion. Do you know what Tom wanted it for?"

"No, he kept it a secret. My best guess would be that he wanted to protect something... something hidden, but the only other person whom I could ask is dead now."

"And who would that be?"

"Sirius Black's brother, Regulus. He worked with Bellatrix Lestrange and the Dark Lord on a secret project at about the same time, and he kept mumbling about something he needed to protect. It must have been something terrible, because Black lost his nerve soon after. He tried to leave the Dark Lord's service and was killed. The Dark Lord was very angry..."

Dumbledore looked sad. "Yes, I remember, Regulus Black was found dead about two years ago. It was such a blow to his father that the man died only a few months later... I wish Regulus had come to me, or to his brother."

"Sirius Black?" Severus sneered, "You don't expect that haughty, righteous Sirius Black would have listened to his ill-guided little Death Eater brother? No, the younger Black was doomed..."

"You may be right, Sirius never talked well of his brother. How very tragic..." Dumbledore sighed, studied his hands for a moment, and then looked up again. "What did you do then, did you go back to Durmstrang after that, Severus?"

"Yes, and I studied there for another year. When I came back, the Dark Lord ordered me to apply for the Defence against the Dark Arts position to spy on you, and soon after that, as you know, I heard the prophecy... I wasn't surprised when you refused my application."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Even I would get a bit suspicious after that scene in the Hog's Head, wouldn't I?"

Severus growled. "Amusing tale, isn't it? Go on and laugh about the foolish man who wanted to be independent and found himself bound to a megalomaniac as a master instead. Laugh about the fool who dismissed his conscience in order to better society..."

The smile remained on Dumbledore's face. "Only you can deal with your own conscience, Severus, that's not for me to do. But you haven't finished yet, have you? What did you do from last summer until now, develop more potions?"

"Poisons and antidotes and a bit of prowling around Hogsmeade to find out about the goings-on in Hogwarts most of the time I worked as a healer for the Death Eaters, though. Counteracting curse damage, reversing spells, healing injuries, things like that. I know that this doesn't sound too plausible, but after my illusions of equality and justice in the wizarding world were shattered, I thought that I should use my resources to learn as much about fighting the Dark Arts as I could. You could call me a bit of an expert, there." A self-congratulatory half-smile had settled on his face.

"Then we should use those skills, don't you think, Severus? Wouldn't it be a shame to let them go to waste in Azkaban?"

The smile disappeared from Severus' face. "What else do you want from me? What else could I do? I've told you everything I know. Please... I beg you; I implore you, please help my mother, help Lily and her family... I will do everything you ask me to..." He clenched his fists, his face was twisted in an ugly grimace, teeth bared, but his eyes were desperate.

"Severus!" Dumbledore jumped up and hurried over to where the younger man still stood. He put both hands on Severus's shoulders and shook him lightly. "Of course I will help your mother; I've started to do that already, haven't I? And I will do for the Potters' safety what is in my power. But I want to help you, too. You have a lot to give, if you want to do so. We need every capable wizard who is willing to oppose Tom Riddle. But you need to trust me. What can I do to make you trust me again?" He shook his head sadly.

Snape shook himself free from Dumbledore's grip and went back to the armchair, sitting down again. "Tell me what you want me to do and I will do it. I will keep my end of the bargain; you keep yours. Trust has very little to do with it. Why would you even want me to trust you? I'm not one of your Gryffindor prodigies..."

"I am well aware that some of my past actions have driven you over the edge, have moved you towards the dark side. I have failed to protect a student under my care, Severus, I have failed to protect you, and that matters greatly to me. If you had died that night in your sixth year... I couldn't have forgiven myself. And yet, I was, and still am, convinced that I did the right thing when I allowed Remus Lupin to attend Hogwarts."

"There is no such thing as a tame werewolf, Professor. Werewolves are vicious, I know them. Many of them work for the Dark Lord..."

"Yes, I know that they do. Don't you see? Our society shuns them; they are isolated and ostracized. They have no alternative other than to join Tom's ranks. I tried to give one of them a choice, a chance at a better life. Maybe others would follow... I don't think that was wrong."

"I repeat, werewolves are vicious and cannot be trusted. Give them a sanctuary if you must, but don't allow them around schoolchildren."

"Remus is human, Severus. He was a child, just like you. I saw no reason to deny him an education, with the right precautions."

"Well, then you didn't have the right precautions, did you?" Snape snarled. "Your golden boys Potter and Black found out about Lupin, and your oh-so-brilliant Sirius Black didn't hesitate to use him as a weapon for attempted murder at the age of sixteen."

"I don't think Sirius really wanted you dead, Severus. His actions were dangerous and foolish, he wanted you scared, harmed... but I doubt that he was aware at the time that his actions could lead to your death..."

"Foolish? Dangerous? I see..." Severus glared at Dumbledore. "After all these years you still protect Black. Black would not have cared in the least if I had died then. He never showed any remorse, the least I would have expected would have been an apology, but I didn't even get that much. I would have been killed, and he was protected. He should have been expelled, together with Lupin, but was he? No, he could continue strutting around the school with his friends. I was the one who was punished. You forbade me to talk about it. The golden boys could bask in the admiration of their followers, while I couldn't even explain to my best friend why I was so angry..."

Dumbledore took his glasses off and rubbed his face vigorously. "Sirius was punished, Severus, he had detention twice a week until the end of the school year..."

Severus laughed harshly. "Some punishment..."

"Severus, I know that nothing I can say will make things better," Dumbledore said sadly, "but at that time, it seemed to be the wisest decision, under the circumstances. After I failed to protect you, I didn't want to fail Remus, too... And I would have, if word had gone out. Even if I had forced Sirius to apologize to you, to do something for you as a punishment. People would have wondered, there would have been gossip, and Remus's secret would have leaked out. And by trying to protect Remus, I failed you twice. I see that now. I should have supported you, I should have explained all this to you in more detail, and I should have included Lily. I knew that you were close friends. I am sorry, Severus. I am very, very sorry," his voice faltered.

Severus looked at him coldly. "There always was favouritism at Hogwarts. You always favoured Gryffindors. I doubt very much that that has changed. So I repeat my question. Why should I trust you, why would you want me to trust you?"

"Because I honestly want to help you, Severus. I want you in our ranks; I want you to work for us... No, let me finish..." He shook his head when Severus tried to interrupt him. "You made a vow to Tom Riddle. If I'm not mistaken, it was an Unbreakable Vow that binds you to him as long as he lives. What words were used exactly, Severus?"

Severus rubbed his left forearm absentmindedly. "When I joined ranks, there were several others who joined at the same time; it was a ceremony. We promised our loyalty, and then we swore the oath to serve. 'I will acknowledge Lord Voldemort as my master and serve him, or die.' He took a deep breath and briefly closed his eyes. "That was the vow; it was made directly on the Dark Lord's wand, without a binder. Green snakes came out of his wand and burned the Dark Mark into our forearms, one after the other. After that, all the other Death Eaters were included in the ceremony. We all performed a ritual of loyalty and kinship. We promised to regard each other as family, above and beyond our blood ties." He stared at Dumbledore with glittering eyes. "There is no way you can get me out of this. You heard what happened to Regulus Black. The same happens to everyone who tries to leave the Dark Lord's ranks."

Dumbledore smiled gently. "Then we won't even think about your leaving his ranks."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Become a spy for us, Severus. A double agent or a triple spy, to be precise. And a teacher..."

"What? But..."

"No, let me explain, please. Voldemort asked you to spy on me, didn't he? He wanted you to apply for the Defence against the Dark Arts position. Did he ask you to apply again this year?"

Severus shook his head, "No, and I doubt he will. He wouldn't expect that you believed my waffling about having come to the wrong door, after I was caught by the barman."

"Exactly," Dumbledore smiled. "So even if you tried to spy for us now, you would be prevented from coming to Hogwarts, it would be difficult to get any information from you. Furthermore, you would still be required to partake in raids and attacks, wouldn't you?"

Severus nodded.

"To get around this, we need a different, less straightforward approach. How are your Occlumency skills these days, Severus? I presume that Horace Slughorn has taught you Occlumency, as he always does with interested students from his house?"

"Yes, he did, and I am rather good at it. I'm a fairly strong Legilimens, too."

"Good!" Dumbledore beamed cheerfully.

Understanding slowly brightened Severus' features. "You want me to go and suggest to the Dark Lord to deceive you. To tell him that I can convince you that I have turned. That I will ask for your protection. And imply that you will surely offer me the position as Defence teacher, while, in reality, I spy for the Dark Lord."

"Very good, Severus. Yes, to all of it, except for the Defence position. I will offer you the Potions position instead, because Horace Slughorn wishes to retire. I will tell everyone who asks that I am afraid that giving you the Defence position will bring out the worst in you." Dumbledore's smile widened. "Since you continue to serve Tom Riddle, your vow won't be broken. What he won't be told is that you work for me, too. If I'm not mistaken, nothing in the vow forbids you to work for other people?"

"Of course not, many Death Eaters have normal professions."

"That's what I thought. You will give him information. Two kinds of information. The information he thinks we want him to have, and the information he thinks we want to keep from him. We will carefully choose this information, Severus; you must be believable. And in turn, you will tell us about his plans, together with the fake information he wants to feed us. We will have to be very considerate about how we use that information and how we act on it; we cannot risk betraying you. However, it is no secret that both sides have spies, information does leak out... And the double-triple-quadruple spy business will protect you from Voldemort's other spies, too. Even if they see you associate with me, or my organization, Voldemort will know all about it already. Or he will know as much as we want him to know."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "As an added bonus, you can stay safely at Hogwarts most of the time. Tom will order you to avoid raids and attacks, because you cannot risk being found out as a Death Eater. It would ruin your career as a teacher and spy. Last, but not least, you will be close to your mother."

Severus sat deep in thought for a long moment. Then he smiled at Dumbledore, the first real, open smile. "You know, this could actually work. I do have to brush up on my Occlumency skills, but that shouldn't be too difficult..."

"It could be very dangerous, Severus!"

"Yes." Severus' smile now reached his eyes; he almost looked cheerful. "As it should be. It will be important work, it can make a difference." He took a deep breath. "It gives me a purpose. I..." He looked at Dumbledore again. "How can I ever thank you for this? How can you just sit there and trust me?"

Dumbledore smiled at the ceiling, humming softly.

Severus shook his head. "I will have to re-evaluate my opinion of you, old man. You've thought about everything, haven't you?" He leaned back in his chair and relaxed. "What is required to bind me into your service? Do you want me to make an Unbreakable Vow, to swear that I will always be loyal to you? Name it and I will do it..."

"No!" Dumbledore's smile vanished and he looked at Severus earnestly. "I do not bind people to me through deadly vows, Severus. If people choose to associate with me, it should be out of respect or love. A simple, honest promise to remain loyal and to obey my orders will suffice."

"Very well, then. I will gladly give you that promise."

The End.