

Indefensible

by HogwartsHoney

Written for the Paintbrush & Quill project at Phoenix Rising, July 2007 with beautiful accompanying art by _odella_ included at the end. In the hours following Dumbledore's death, Severus Snape is once again at a critical point in his life as he ponders his future, and his past

Chapter 1 of 1

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Prologue

Dark clouds, laden with the portents of summer rain, move slowly across the sky and cast their dull shadows onto the forest below. The heavens open, spilling their contents over the thirsting foliage, but none of the life force in the falling raindrops makes any difference to the man who huddles at the base of a large yew tree, his black cloak gathered around him in useless defence against the elements.

The deluge continues for several minutes, during which time the figure seems to become smaller somehow, winding the cloak more tightly around his body as though trying to disappear altogether. Eventually the heavy shower abates and a thin ray of sunlight bursts through the overcast sky, filtering down amongst the branches of the tallest trees to the small patch of earth whereupon sits the shivering man. The myriad drops of water glitter recklessly, like diamonds on the tips of the leaves, and the area around him is suffused with a gentle golden glow.

The man does not see.

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### **Denial**

"Albus, what have I done?"

The whisper hangs in the still air as Severus huddles against the rough bark of the yew tree. He has forgotten to cast a charm against the rain, and although the deluge appears to have ceased, he is soaked to the skin. Cold rivulets of water run through his hair and down his neck, but he is consumed by grief and hardly notices. He has killed the one person to whom he could always go for help, the only person who trusted him, and who had given him a chance when nobody else in their right mind would have. Albus had always believed the best of Severus and had trusted that his spy wouldn't disappoint him, no matter how difficult the task.

"Surely I've exceeded even *your* expectations, old man?"

Has it been only a few hours since he did the unthinkable? Can the progress of his emotional and mental decline be measured in so little time? He distractedly wonders at the time and speculates that it must be close to noon, but the sunlight that tries to filter through the foliage fails to give him any answer, and he cannot turn to anyone for help.

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"No, Albus, I can't!"

Severus is horrified as he clutches the surface of the sturdy desk, gripping the sides while trying to remain upright, his mind whirling with the implications of what Albus asks of him. Even the walls of the office seem to close in around him, suffocating him and cutting off rational thought.

"You must, my boy. It is imperative that you continue."

"But what you're asking me to do..."

"...must be done if the situation warrants it. Severus, you know as well as I what the prophecy implies. You know that we are only pawns in a great game, and sometimes a pawn must be sacrificed for the good of the other players."

Severus tries to fight the constantly rising horror inside him at Albus' tone of finality, and he struggles to keep his voice rational.

"This is no game, Headmaster."

"Exactly, my boy. The stakes are infinitely higher, which is why we must be infinitely more careful."

"Albus... please...."

Severus hates to beg, abhors not being in control, but as the warm and tired blue eyes meet his own cold, dark ones, their message is implicit and, for only the second time in his life, he closes his eyes and prays silently to a god he knows almost nothing about.

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Anger

Severus has no one. The Order will kill him on sight, and Pettigrew is still at Spinner's End it's not safe there. Seeking out Narcissa is not an option he'd severed that tie once he delivered Draco to her and announced that their Unbreakable Vow was complete. He cannot be seen by anyone at Hogwarts, neither students nor faculty, for to be spotted now means certain death. Lupin... he's a Dark Creature himself; perhaps he might be persuaded to at least ask questions first and hex later. Ordinarily, Arthur Weasley would see reason in almost any situation, but in this instance, Severus knows that the man's loyalty to Dumbledore is absolute. No, he is alone, more so than he has been in sixteen years, and he is furious, ashamed and terrified.

Coward.

He closes his eyes.

Murderer.

He knows. *He knows.*

In a swirl of sickness, Severus realises that he is as much a sacrificial pawn as Albus ever was, and the horror and anger twist together in his gut. It makes him light-headed, and he leans his head against the tree trunk and squeezes his eyes harder against the nausea. The images run around in his head, and he cannot escape them as they threaten to pull him under. His anger finally bursts forth, and he howls his sorrow and rage into the uncaring forest.

"You knew all the time, you old fool! You *knew* that it would come to this. I played the game because you made me. All that talk of pawns and games and other players, when you KNEW that you would play directly into his hands... that you would... die. That I would have to KILL you!"

Severus breaks, feeling the loss of the man so much more keenly than he had thought possible, and he is laid bare by the sheer volume and force of the emotions. The fabric of his reality is shredding, and he sees images, both past and present, as he holds his head with shaking hands, rocking backwards and forwards. He tries to calm himself and find comfort somewhere because it is vital that he continue. Albus had insisted Severus looks around him wildly yes, they had stood almost on this very spot that day when they had argued and Albus had insisted that Severus continue. Although he had wanted to get out, didn't want to do it anymore, hated the duplicity, the lies it was wearing, and he was tired, so very tired, and stretched so thin, but Albus had refused him.

Severus closes his eyes and scrubs his hand across his face roughly, and even though he wishes only for the end, he knows intellectually that he ~~must~~ must continue, but he cannot see a way when inside him is only darkness: sucking, cloying darkness that threatens and suffocates and kills... and KILLS....

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### Bargaining

"Severus... please...."

*Damn the man! The voice is inside his head and Severus is forced to act; he has no time left to forestall the inevitable. As he raises his wand, he cannot prevent his self-loathing and revulsion from showing on his face, and he doesn't want to. Even as time slows and the tension builds around them, he rages silently against himself and this accursed war; even as he still strives to find a way out of the situation, he summons the will from somewhere and the hatred from everywhere and casts the spell.*

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Of course Albus had been in pain; one needed only look into those eyes to know. He had concealed the truth well, but it was there; Severus hadn't survived those many years by being unobservant.

Albus had waved him into his office late that afternoon, and Severus sat heavily on the chair in front of the large oak desk. He had known then that something terrible was about to happen his gut instincts were usually right but he couldn't have imagined that the Headmaster would ask so much of him. They had discussed their progress with the Horcruxes, and Albus had mentioned that Harry knew almost as much as they did, but Severus had been distracted by the slow and pained movements of Albus' blackened and withered hand. He had known that his potions would only delay the poison's progress, but he was truly alarmed to see the extent of the damage. The fear had truly gripped him then, a solid thing that wrapped around his heart and strangled his thoughts, slowing his rational mind to a mere trickle as the cold certainty enveloped him.

Albus was dying.

Anger arose in Severus as he fought against the knowledge that he was powerless to save the Headmaster, but the grey-haired man had raised his good hand and urged Severus into silence.

"Severus, your Vow must be fulfilled."

The softly spoken words implied that Severus had no choice in the matter.

No, he had glowered, *no bloody choice at all.*

"I will endeavour to protect the boy, Albus. His mother has made it impossible for me to do otherwise."

The thrice-damned blue eyes had twinkled tiredly, and the knot in Severus' stomach had grown bigger and pressed harder, making breathing difficult; swallowing, impossible.

"No, Severus. *Our Vow.*"

With those words, Albus Dumbledore had sealed both their fates.

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Severus mutters to himself and looks around him wildly, as though searching the forest for answers. "What am I going to do? Everything's falling apart... crashing down. Regulus gone. Crouch Kissed. Bella suspects me, the stupid cow. To lose favour with the Dark Lord now is unthinkable. But what if he too suspects? NO! He cannot suspect; he *must not* suspect."

Severus takes a shuddering breath. He knows that he must become a member of the inner circle, be one of Voldemort's most trusted, but how *can* he when his grief is so all-encompassing? Even in his darkest hours, suffering Cruciatus for hours on end, he had still known in the most remote corners of his carefully Occluded mind that Albus still considered him a friend still considered him to be worthy of trust. The Headmaster was someone to whom Severus could take his troubles, someone who would allow him to be his nastiest and still understand him.

Nobody can say that now.

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Depression

He thinks he hears a noise in the near distance, and in a heartbeat he rises and whirls around, crouching in a semi-defensive position as he casts a hasty Disillusionment Charm. His is an untenable position, and he curses the sunlight as it illuminates the area around him. It makes him vulnerable as he peers out into the gloom, for although the treetops still shut out most of the light, the insistent column of brightness does not move.

A large flash of flame erupts nearby, and Severus jumps, wand out and a curse dancing on his tongue. Perched on a low branch above him is the brilliant plumage and familiar presence of Fawkes, and Severus' heart and gut twist horribly as he looks around frantically, expecting to hear noises crashing through the underbrush. He expects to be surrounded by Order members, or Aurors, or both, but after several anxious moments, he realises that he and the bird are alone.

Severus falls back against the foot of the tree, stretching his legs which are shaky from long hours of inactivity. He leans back against the rough bark and regards the bird with equal amounts of suspicion and wariness, but the phoenix merely looks at him, and the black eyes appear to twinkle, or perhaps it's a trick of the light. He feels oddly off-centre and unbalanced, as though his mind is trying to explain to his heart precisely what has happened.

"I cannot do it. I don't have the strength anymore; I have done the unpardonable," he whispers, and his voice sounds harsh in the stillness of the forest. The grinding self-loathing is as destructive as his spell had been; but the death he summons now is his own.

Fawkes drops to ground near his feet and croons softly as the beam of sunlight gets brighter. Severus notices that the phoenix carries a parcel in its claw, and he stiffens as the bird extends a leg and drops a carefully wrapped item into his lap. He retrieves it slowly, and his hands shake as he breaks Albus' wax seal and unties the string. Albus' presence surrounds the package, and Severus reluctantly dismantles the all-too-familiar wards, stripping away both the paper wrapping and soft cloth underneath until he holds the item in his hands.

A hand mirror.

A small piece of parchment flutters into his lap, and he recognises Albus' careful handwriting.

Severus,

If Fawkes has brought this to you, then circumstances have indeed taken a turn for the worse. Forgive me, my boy, for what I have made you do, but know that there was no other way. I truly believe that you are the only one who can see our plan to its fruition.

When you speak my name, only one person will appear in this two-way mirror, and whereas they are unconventional, rest assured that they have my complete trust, as do you.

Fondly,

Albus

Severus finds it difficult to breathe properly, and for a fleeting moment he hopes that somehow, impossibly, Albus will be on the other side of the mirror, but he savagely crushes the hope almost immediately. He holds the bronze inlaid mirror in his hand and sees all too familiar features therein: dark hair and pale skin, sallow and dirty with haunted eyes. Gripping the handle firmly, he tries to quiet the shaking of his entire body and clears his throat.

"Albus," he whispers, but the reflection remains the same, and he curses softly.

When you speak my name....

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

The face of the mirror swirls into life like memories in a Pensieve, silvery-grey mists that move and spin. Severus' heart pounds in his chest as the shimmering strands slowly morph into long grey hair and an unkempt beard. Bespectacled blue eyes meet his, but these do not twinkle; instead they are hooded with deepest concern.

"Snape?"

Aberforth.

This is whom Albus trusted implicitly? Severus shudders at the prospect.

"Snape, is that you? Albus said that if you ever appeared in this mirror, then something terrible had happened."

Severus closes his eyes and tries to change reality by sheer force of will, but to no avail. The face in the mirror is still Aberforth, and the man that he has killed was still his brother.

"I've killed him, Aberforth."

"You've what?"

"I've killed Albus."

The silence stretches into what feels like an eternity and the blue eyes dim.

"I had hoped it wouldn't come to this."

Severus is taken aback by the matter-of-fact way in which Aberforth speaks, and he shakes his head as if to clear his mind as he struggles to make the man understand. "I begged him, *begged him* to reconsider, that there must have been some other way, but he wouldn't hear of it. My position my situation is untenable at best, I'm sure you know this."

A powerful flood of grief washes through Severus. He feels as though he is being swept away by the force of the tide, and he grips the handle of the mirror fiercely as though it will somehow anchor him. The face in the mirror nods, and the eyes are still saddened, but their gaze is sharp upon him, and the voice is firm and commanding.

"You must continue with the plan, Snape. Albus deemed it necessary that you do so, and he gave his life so that you and young Harry may reach that goal."

Severus closes his eyes at the mention of Potter, gritting his teeth to prevent himself from screaming at the man in the mirror. His stomach roils every time he thinks that a wizard of Albus' capabilities had sacrificed his own life in the hopes that a single, insufferable brat will be able to defeat the Dark Lord.

"Potter," he snorts, his voice laced with derision. "Albus always had entirely too much faith in that boy."

Aberforth's grave face and hard eyes hold his gaze, and the words die on Severus' lips.

"Albus had the utmost faith in *you*, Snape, and in your ability to turn the fate of this war. You must act in accordance with those instructions, and see to it that the boy survives to rid our world of the scourge of Tom Riddle."

"He was my mentor, Aberforth, my sounding board, my threshold of sanity in times when I wished only the worst for myself and for others. I am adrift without him."

"As am I, young man, but Albus always walked his own path, and he believed in the greater good."

Severus' knuckles are white now, white and bloodless, and he stares at them unseeingly for a long moment, before he relaxes his hold on the mirror's handle, flexing them gingerly and wincing at the ache of his joints. In the mirror, Aberforth glances away and then is back, meeting Severus' gaze with urgency.

"I must go I have customers, and it won't do to raise suspicion. If you need me again, just speak his name. I may not always be able to answer immediately, but I will do my very best to help you. Be careful, Snape, and good luck."

Aberforth's face fades, and the lines of his beard and hair begin to swirl outwards, filling the face of the mirror once more with grey clouds; then the reflection is once more nothing but a haunted face with dark hair and shadowed eyes.

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## Acceptance

Severus allows his body to lean back against the tree trunk and fiercely blinks back tears. He squints against the intruding light as he looks at the bird, remembering all the times it had been in the office when he had visited Albus. With a sinking feeling, he realises that, next to the Headmaster, the phoenix is possibly the single greatest constant in his life. He, in turn, has seen it in all stages of its life: burning, growth and rebirth.

Severus groans softly as he stands gingerly, his legs and back stiff from hours of inactivity. With a final glance at the mirror's shining surface he tucks it carefully into the folds of his robes, and as he moves around the area cautiously, limping slightly as blood returns to his legs, he still feels adrift and empty, but perhaps not quite as desperate.

The single shard of light becomes brighter still, and the phoenix spreads his massive wings and flies onto Severus' shoulder. He looks up as the considerable weight settles comfortably there, and for the briefest of moments, he feels as though it is Albus' hand on his shoulder, firm and comforting, as it had always been whenever support was needed. The gesture is so intimately familiar that his heart constricts, but somehow, after speaking with Aberforth, the sinking, bottomless grief does not seem like such an impossible burden.

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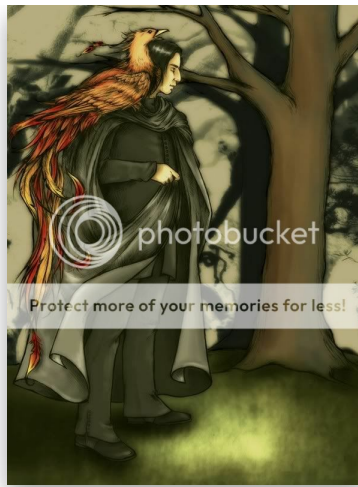
With a rustling of feathers, the phoenix lifts his beautiful head and begins to sing, a haunting, plaintive cry that sends shivers down Severus' spine and conjures up images from his youth. He sees Albus at the Welcoming Feast, and the same benevolent smile, years later, when the Headmaster welcomed Severus back to Hogwarts in a teaching position. Images of nights spent planning and discussing their roles in this war as they sipped tea and Albus offered those accursed lemon drops, the worry as they had searched the school together for Sirius Black, the pained, knowing look when he'd asked Severus to do the unthinkable....

"*Severus... please....*"

Severus' distress is oddly assuaged by these memories, and he is comforted by the music around him, as the plaintive sound seems to lift him up and infuses him with the will to live, the will to try, and the courage to fight.

The phoenix's song gets stronger still, and the notes flow around them as the sounds gather their two spirits together. The tones reach out into the forest and touch the magic therein. Severus feels the gentle glow of the warmth from the bird, and the soul-stirring phoenix song chases away the darkness in his soul. He had been leaning against the tree for support, but finds that, despite the weight of the bird on his shoulder, he feels stronger and braver, his thoughts clearer now and more structured. As he pushes himself away from the tree, he stands tall and resolutely sets his jaw, ready once more to continue down the path they had agreed upon so many years ago.

~ fin ~



Notes

The yew tree is associated with immortality, renewal, regeneration, everlasting life, rebirth, transformation and access to our ancestors. The yew is considered to be the most potent tree for protection against evil, a means of connecting to your ancestors, a bringer of dreams and a symbol of the old magic. It can help us overcome our fear of our own death and, by freeing us from this fear, bring us a greater stillness in our lives. Death heralds the ending of something. Sometimes the old things need to end or die before the new can begin, and understanding rebirth always requires seeing beyond our limitations. (source: www.whitedragon.org.uk)

The Kübler-Ross model describes, in five discrete stages, the process by which people deal with grief and tragedy. The model was introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The stages have become well known, and are called the **Five Stages of Grief**.