

Harry wished he could have the same level of confidence. “Provided we *have* destroyed all his horcruxes by then,” he retorted. “We don’t even know how many are left.”

“As I told you, I suspect Albus knows the answer to that. Or at the very least, he knows someone who might.” Snape had already shared his suspicions of Slughorn with Harry, and Harry had absolutely no idea how he was supposed to make this man like him enough to share such sensitive information. Snape seemed to be confident it would be easy for him.

“That’s the other half of my problem, though,” Harry burst out, “Dumbledore has been trying to get at me all summer, and I’m walking right back into his clutches! He’s going to be making my life hell enough as it is without me trying to suck up to Slughorn right in front of him!”

Snape didn’t look bothered in the slightest. “Albus is dying,” he said bluntly. “He knows his time is limited. The only manipulations he cares about now are the ones that will set his legacy in stone — not with the Wizengamot, or even as headmaster of Hogwarts, but as the mentor of the Boy-Who-Lived, defeater of the Dark Lord. His rumour-mongering in the *Prophet* is all to paint himself as the kindly, concerned guardian trying to pull back a poor young man from the clutches of the Dark. Either he will *succeed* — in that you will kill the Dark Lord — or he will fail, and the public will rally behind him in the face of a new threat; you.”

Harry’s stomach churned at the thought of Dumbledore manipulating the public so thoroughly that they truly believed Harry would turn Dark. Sometimes he felt like they were already halfway to that belief.

“But surely he knows I’m not just going to stand back and let him claim he mentored me?”

“No, he expects you to die in the battle in order to release that horcrux in your skull, remember?” Snape retorted sharply. “Then he can claim whatever the bloody hell he likes before he dies. Worse, if he dies at my hand — which he fully expects to do — he won’t need to claim *anything* because the public will create the story for him.”

“I’m not letting that happen,” Harry retorted automatically, earning a glare.

“Yes, because the story that will come from *you* killing Albus is so much better.”

“No, but the story that comes from me telling the public everything he’s done to me *is*,” Harry insisted, not backing down. He had more optimism than Snape, at least with regards to changing public opinion on Dumbledore. Amelia and Mrs Frobisher were working on it.

“As long as you are careful, Harry,” Snape said, and Harry never knew what to do when the man’s voice softened like that — the same voice he spoke to Draco with.

“I will be,” he promised. “But being careful with Dumbledore won’t get me very far if I can’t defeat Voldemort when the time comes. Duel me again.”

Snape stared at him for a moment, then sighed, but obligingly drew his wand.