

Snape's face twisted in a scowl. "Unfortunately, that is the least of my problems." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "After the staff meeting, Albus bid me to speak with him privately. It seems he has had enough time since his *incident* with that damned ring to make plans — he knows he is dying, and he knows the Dark Lord wants him dead, and he has decided to tie the two neatly together." He turned back to Remus with haunted black eyes. "He has made me take a vow to kill him, should the opportunity arise, in order to secure my position at the Dark Lord's side."

Harry's blood went cold. "He what?"

"Quite," Snape murmured, glancing Harry's way. "It seems all my fantasies of permanently wiping that damned twinkle from his eyes have been offered to me. Only at the price of my soul."

If Snape killed Dumbledore, even if they could prove it was at the headmaster's instruction, the man would be vilified forever. There would be no redeeming him in the eyes of the general public. *Nothing* Harry could say or reveal about Dumbledore would make such an act in any way forgivable by the wizarding world at large, not from a man like Severus Snape.

"I won't let that happen," he declared, and Snape snorted.

"I know you manage to pull miracles from thin air on a regular basis, Potter, but even you might struggle to turn this one around. He has forced me into an Unbreakable Vow. Should Death Eaters attack the school by the end of this year — and he seems alarmingly confident that they will — I am magically obliged to murder him in front of as many people as possible, once the opportunity arises. Thus my employment will be terminated, fulfilling the curse on the position — and convincing the Dark Lord that I am loyal to no one but him."

"And perhaps if you were truly loyal to Albus Dumbledore, that might have worked," Harry countered. "But you're forgetting something — there is no way in *hell* I'm letting Dumbledore control the school for another full year." He smirked, green eyes flashing. "He's dying regardless. If I have enough people publicly losing faith in him while he's trying to secure his legacy, he'll get angry — he'll start making mistakes. He's already started doing that; his work in the *Prophet* has been sloppy at best, giving me something I can actually take legal action on. He doesn't care about Voldemort right now, he just wants me back under his control before he pops his clogs so that when I off the Dark bastard, everyone chalks it up to Dumbledore's fine mentorship of me," he said with a roll of his eyes.

"Harry, it's not that simple," Remus started, but Harry shook his head.

"I'll kill the headmaster myself before I let him force you into it, Snape," he insisted, watching surprise flicker across that dour face. He gave his best innocent, Golden Boy grin. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived, after all."

"And if Albus has done his level best to make the public think you're the next Dark Lord?" Snape retorted pointedly. Harry just shrugged.

"Then I bring out the evidence of him turning me into his little magical puppet, bring out the Sad Orphan Face, and do my best. By that point, I'm fairly confident I can destroy his