

Dumbledore leaned forward, and Harry wished he could scramble away, do anything to defend himself, but he was tied to that *stupid* bed! He was utterly helpless, alone in a room Merlin only knew where, with a madman who had kidnapped him for— what, exactly?

He flinched when Dumbledore's good hand patted him on the arm. "I wish things had gone differently, my boy," the headmaster said mournfully. "Truly, I do. Had you not gotten so... headstrong, perhaps this all could have been avoided."

"Had I not broken all your compulsions, you mean," Harry spat, glaring. "Had I stayed your good little Gryffindor *pet*, ready to sacrifice myself for the greater good — and your own damn glory."

Dumbledore didn't react, merely sighing. "Those compulsions were for your own protection, Harry," he insisted. Harry wondered if he truly believed that, if he had genuinely convinced himself he was still doing the right thing. "There is a great evil within you. Within your scar. I had hoped, when I placed that magic on you, that it would be enough to help you shed that evil. To grow stronger than its influence, to remain firmly within the Light. Sadly, that is not the case. I'm afraid we have no other choice, my boy — you must die, for the evil to truly be vanquished. You must die for Lord Voldemort to be killed. The Prophecy demands it."

Harry goggled at him, but the headmaster didn't notice, continuing his sad stare. "I wish it did not have to be this way. I wish you had been given the chance to face your destiny in battle, as a true Gryffindor should," Dumbledore told him apologetically. "But you have long since proven that your own selfishness — the influence from the evil within you — will win out. I cannot trust you to do the right thing anymore, Harry. I must take that burden upon myself." He gripped Harry's forearm tighter. "Please, forgive me."

"Bullshit!" Harry argued. "I already know about the horcruxes. I know all about the *evil* you think is within me. It's gone, now — the goblins removed it this summer. Just like they removed all your compulsions, and the blocks on my family magic, back before my third year. It's not the *influence of evil* that's pulled me away from you, it's your own damn actions! You're the one who manipulated me, who influenced me — you changed my entire personality to fit your schemes, to turn me into the perfect little pawn — your weapon!" Dumbledore's fingers dug in painfully. "The only selfish one here is you, Dumbledore. Raising a child for slaughter just to make yourself the hero once again."

To his surprise, Dumbledore just chuckled, shaking his head. "You're just like him, you know," he said — Harry doubted he meant James Potter. "He always thought he knew absolutely everything; that only his viewpoint was the truth, and everyone else was just lying, manipulating him. I can see now his soul has tainted yours on a deeper level than I ever imagined possible."

"Tom Riddle's soul is nowhere near mine," Harry snarled. "The only taint on it was yours, and I freed myself from that long ago."

"It saddens me that you think so, Harry," Dumbledore murmured. "But that just proves even further that I must do what is necessary." He finally released Harry's forearm, stroking his beard. "The difficult decisions have often fallen to me — it is a burden that most would not bear, but it is necessary nonetheless. Once I have dealt with you, I can find the remaining