

He expected the Cruciatus that ripped a scream from his throat. The only mercy was that it came from Rabastan, not the Dark Lord himself. There was a different feel to the magic — just as painful, but not quite as sharp in the aftershocks.

“When my loyal subjects were expelled for their attempt at kidnapping Potter, Severus, you told me the wards had grown stronger. You did not tell me they had grown strong enough to keep me out!”

“My Lord, I did not know,” Severus murmured with the appropriate amount of fear and remorse. “The full extent of the heirs’ capabilities has been a closely guarded secret. I had no idea they could combine together with such strength.” It still amazed him, even now, that the four students had held fast against such a power.

“What use is having a spy within the school if you do not provide me with this *vital* information!” Voldemort snapped, his voice quiet but his fury as strong as ever. “You made my followers look like fools when they were curtailed by the wards. Now you have made *me* look like a fool with the same! One might wonder if you *wanted* to keep me out of Hogwarts! I know how... fond you are of the castle, after all these years.”

“No, My Lord,” Severus said desperately. “I would like nothing more than to see you in charge of that school, turning it into the great academy of Dark Arts it deserves to be. I will do better, My Lord. Minerva is keeping the school open over the summer, a gathering point for the forces of the light. I will stay with them, My Lord, and learn their weaknesses. I will find a way in for you, and if I cannot do that then I will bring you Potter myself.”

When he dared look up, Voldemort was smirking. “You will indeed, Severus — this is your last chance to redeem yourself. With the old fool gone, there are few who trust you within the school; if you have not changed that by the end of the summer, have not given me something *useful*, then you will deliver the brat to my feet or I will kill you myself.” His thin lips sneered dangerously. “And if I hear even a *whisper* that you are no longer loyal to me, your life is forfeit. I do not like it when my plans do not work, Severus. Especially when it is due to information that my *spy* should have provided me!”

“I am sorry, My Lord. Please, forgive me.”

Knowing what was coming didn’t make it any less painful.

“Learn from your punishment, Severus. Lord Voldemort does not suffer incompetence.”

Severus couldn’t answer — he was too busy screaming as Rabastan’s magic tore into his skin, ripping at muscles and burning his very bones.

It might take more than just Remus to piece him back together, after this.