

the time this curse gets the better of me, I will have destroyed all but the one in Harry's scar."

Severus sneered at him. "So you wish me to end your life, and the Potter boy's?" he presumed drolly. "Anyone else you would like to add to the list, while you're at it?" Any other acts to truly damn his soul in the eyes of the world.

"I would not ask this of you if I had any other choice, Severus," Albus insisted apologetically. "And I may not need you to end Harry's life. I feel a certain level of responsibility for him — if the time comes when the influence of the horcrux within him becomes too dangerous to ignore, I shall bear that burden myself, if I am still able. I only wanted you to know in case this curse strikes me down before that chance arises."

To hear Albus so casually talk about killing a student made Severus' gut churn. "If the boy is to die before the Dark Lord, who shall strike the final blow? The Prophecy..."

"Prophecies are tricky things, Severus," Albus replied. "Not always interpreted the way you might expect. I believe the power to defeat the Dark Lord spoken of within the Prophecy is, in a sense, the horcrux; Voldemort cannot be defeated until that is dealt with, so truly that power lies with Harry."

Severus doubted Albus honestly believed that — surely he hadn't convinced himself that the full Prophecy meant Harry needed to die in order for the Dark Lord to be killed?

"I understand," he confirmed solemnly. "So once the boy is gone, once these horcruxes are gone — then anyone can defeat the Dark Lord?"

Albus' eyes twinkled, a pale imitation of his usual brightness. "I daresay even you yourself could commit the act, so to speak."

A forced smirk, as if that was all he could ever ask for. As if he would welcome the death of a *child* just to get the final revenge on one of his hated masters. "Perhaps," he agreed.

"Thank you, Severus. You are the only one I trust with this knowledge." Albus leaned forward, eyeing him imploringly. "The only one I know who is strong enough to do what needs to be done."

More like the only one whose soul was already damned enough.

Nonetheless, Severus acted like he appreciated the headmaster's faith in him, and waited to be dismissed. On the walk back to his quarters, he mentally rearranged his evening plans to spend an hour or two back home — Remus and Sirius would need to hear of this.

If Albus decided he needed to make sure Harry was killed before he himself died, they would need to protect him.

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If the first term of the school year had found Dumbledore hardly present in the castle at all, the second term found him *everywhere*.