

Harry laughed. “Yeah, okay.” The government takeover was mostly Susan’s brainchild, but Harry was a big part of the driving force. He was the figurehead needed to push for change — and to eventually knock Dumbledore off his pedestal, when they were ready. It wouldn’t be for a while yet, but the heirs wanted to make sure everything was in place and ready as soon as they could strike. The Ministry and the Wizengamot had been left to languish and grow corrupt for far too long.

“Are you about ready for tomorrow?”

Harry knew Remus wasn’t asking about the state of his packing. His chest tightened, anxiety clawing its way up as he thought about being surrounded by people again. Having to slip back into his Golden Boy persona. Having to face Ron and Hermione and Dumbledore, and a bunch of strangers — worse, having them offer their condolences for Dudley like they had any idea how Harry felt about the matter.

Even *Harry* didn’t know how he felt about the matter.

“I think so. As ready as I’ll ever be.” He drew a steadying breath, glancing up at Remus. “I just... What happened to Dudley is my fault. I know, I know — I couldn’t have done anything, blame it on whoever sent the dementor, whatever,” he added before Remus could argue. “But the fact of the matter is, he’s dead because someone wanted me dead. Just like Cedric. And I... I hate that he’s dead, and I hate that I feel responsible. I hate that I feel *sorry* for them, when they were so awful to me for so long, but — they didn’t deserve this. No one deserves this. My aunt and uncle hate me, but they loved Dudley, and I— he was just a kid, y’know? He was only fifteen.”

To his horror, there were tears welling in his eyes. All of a sudden, he was wrapped in Remus’ embrace, head pillowed against the man’s broad chest. “It’s okay, cub,” he soothed. “It’s a complicated situation; you feel whatever you need to feel. Your family are terrible people, but you’re right — they didn’t deserve to lose their son so young, no matter what they’ve done. Dudley didn’t deserve what happened to him. But you are in no way responsible, Harry. You don’t deserve any of what’s happened to you either. And their tragedy doesn’t detract from how they’ve treated you for so long. It doesn’t redeem them.”

“I can’t face them again, Moony,” Harry whispered through his tears. “They might not know what happened, but I do, and this— this will have broken them. I don’t know what they’ll do to me if I see them again.” Even if they had no idea of the truth of Dudley’s death, it wouldn’t stop them from blaming their misfortune on Harry. They’d been doing it his whole life; everything from a bad day at work to an unfortunate turn in the weather was Harry’s fault, and he’d been punished for it.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen in future. I can’t know that,” Remus said, his voice soft. “But I know that Sirius and I would die before we allowed you to be alone with those monsters again. I don’t know what they’ve done to you, cub — I hope one day, you might feel comfortable enough to tell us — but I swear to you, they won’t lay a finger on you again as long as I live. Even if you’re forced to spend time under their roof.”

There was a hint of a growl, a touch of the wolf to his promise, and it settled something deep within Harry’s chest. A promise like that, coming from Remus — Harry believed it.