"But *why?*" Remus asked plaintively. "What does he have to gain from making Harry rely on him?"

Severus grimaced, glanced at his office door, then pulled up the left sleeve of his robe. Remus flinched. Last time he'd seen it, the Dark Mark had been vivid and black, an ugly mar on the pale skin. Now it was so faint it was barely even there unless you knew what to look for. The barest whisper of skull and snake. "If he were dead, it would be gone completely," he declared bluntly. "As you can see, that is not the case."

Remus felt the blood drain from his face as he met Severus' dark eyes. Deep down, behind that icy facade, he could see fear. "No…"

"The Dark Lord will one day return," Severus told him. "And I believe the Headmaster has plans for Potter when he does. Remind me to tell you what happened at the end of Potter's first year, sometime." He shoved his sleeve back down, shaking his head. "Petunia Evans. Salazar, it's a bloody miracle the boy made it to school alive. No wonder he has so little regard for his own safety."

Stomach turning to lead, Remus reached out and gripped Severus' hand with his own, surprised the Slytherin didn't automatically pull away. "We can't let that happen. Whatever Albus wants, whatever he's planning… we can't let him have Harry." Severus met his gaze, and Remus waited, wondering if he would have an ally in this. He'd had questions about some of Dumbledore's decisions in the past, but this… this was too far.

"I promised to protect the boy, for Lily's sake," Severus said eventually. "The afterlife would not be worth reaching if I failed that task."

Remus relaxed, leaning towards Severus for just a moment before he remembered he wasn't allowed to do that anymore. He let go of the man's hand. "Good," he murmured, gripping the edge of the desk to try and ground himself. "That's— good."

"Lupin… Remus," Severus said, sounding like the name caused him physical pain. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," he insisted, not wanting to get into the specifics of how his heart was shredding itself inside his chest for so many reasons he could barely count them. "I think— I should go. It's late." He slid from the desk, taking an awkward step away from the seated man. "Thank you, Severus. I know we've had our differences, but… Harry needs all the help he can get. Thank you."

"Be careful, Remus," Severus called when Remus had one hand on doorknob. "Changing loyalties is a dangerous game, no matter which side you're on."

Remus grit his teeth. "I can handle it. Goodnight, Severus."

He'd have to handle it. For Harry.

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