

“Sir, this is really, really important,” he said quietly. “When he spoke of the number seven — did he mean seven horcruxes, or seven soul pieces?”

Slughorn gaped at him soundlessly for a moment, then swallowed. “Soul pieces,” he rasped. “He only mentioned soul pieces. I— you truly think he did it, then?”

When Harry nodded, Slughorn let out a gasp like a wounded man. “I know he did, sir. But if he only made six... that’s very good news for us.”

“*Only*,” Slughorn echoed, choking on a laugh. “I suppose six murders were nothing compared to the rest he’s done.” He reached out, gripping the front of Harry’s robe. “Please, Harry, do not think poorly of me for my mistake, terrible though it may have been. I didn’t know. I *couldn’t* know. He was only fifteen!” There was a wildness in Slughorn’s eyes that alarmed Harry, and he put his hands over the man’s pudgy fingers.

“It’s okay, sir.” How long had Slughorn been carrying this weight, this knowledge?

*How long would he have kept it quiet*, a bitter voice muttered in the back of Harry’s mind.

If the Order had had this information back in the first war, when so many capable fighters were alive...

No. He couldn’t think like that. They were still headed by Dumbledore, then, and the old man would have been just as tight-lipped on the subject as he was even now, determined to be the one to save everyone else.

But if Slughorn had taken the knowledge to a curse-breaker, to Gringotts...

Harry could go mad, thinking over the possibilities, the what-ifs. Looking at Slughorn, he wondered if the old professor hadn’t done just that.

“Can you kill him, Harry?” Slughorn breathed, grip tightening. “Knowing what you know, what I’ve told you — can you truly destroy him? Is it... I could rest easier, knowing I may have absolved myself, just a little. Knowing there is a chance for someone to right the deep wrong I began all those years ago.”

“I can do it,” Harry said, not an ounce of doubt within him. “I’m a lot more prepared than Dumbledore ever thought I was. When the time comes, I can kill him.”

Slughorn stared at him for such a long time Harry began to feel uncomfortable, the man’s fingers still tight around his robe. Then, slowly, the professor released his grip. “Your mother was one of my favourite students, you know,” he said softly. Eyes glassy, looking at Harry but not *seeing* him. “You’re so much like her.”

Harry smiled slightly. “So I’ve been told, sir.”

Suddenly, Slughorn pulled back, wringing his hands anxiously. “You mustn’t share what I’ve told you, Harry,” he urged. “This knowledge — this knowledge should die with me. With us. With Tom Riddle. Should any of his followers discover the truth, decide to try their own hand at it... we would never be free.”