

Beside him, Harry nodded along obediently, while inside he seethed. Imagine if he had never broken the compulsion; he would have allowed Dumbledore to lead him by the nose away from Remus Lupin and all that he entailed — all the memories he could share with Harry, all the support he could offer, everything.

Dumbledore wanted Harry alone. He wanted him with no one to rely on — save those Dumbledore had picked himself. The thought made him uneasy; who in his life could he trust, and who was only there to be another player in the headmaster's game?

More importantly, *why*? What was so special about Harry, that the man had started playing the game so early in his life?

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Scowling to himself, Severus started the journey back to his quarters, shaking his head at Sybil Trelawney's ridiculous declaration. Why Albus insisted he attend the small Christmas lunch, Severus didn't know; he would have much preferred dining in his own rooms, alone. The only person in the Great Hall he even remotely enjoyed the company of was Minerva. Especially with Lupin—

He shut that thought down before it could finish itself. He refused to think about Remus *bloody* Lupin at Christmas. It was bad enough remembering the sad, regretful look in those honey-brown eyes when he'd realised the full moon was Christmas Eve night, and he'd be missing out on all the festivities.

Severus' scowl deepened.

Muttering the password to his private quarters, he slunk inside and shed his cloak, tossing it to hang itself on the hook in the wall. All he wanted for Christmas was a glass of brandy, a good book, and at least twelve hours without having to see any students, or Albus Dumbledore. The old headmaster was even further from Severus' good graces than he had been at the start of the year.

The embrace of his preferred armchair was a welcome one, and Severus closed his eyes for a moment, letting out a long breath. When he opened them, he paused. There, on his coffee table, was a brown paper wrapped package. It definitely hadn't been there when he'd left for lunch.

He reached for it with trepidation, knowing without needing to look where it had come from. That sodding wolf.

Sure enough, the handwriting across the top was familiar.

*Severus,*

*I know you weren't expecting anything. I highly doubt you've got me anything. Don't worry — I just couldn't resist.*