

Reckoning

by shefa

Truth, lies, and bravery. Who can say where they may be found? Written for the Severus Big Bang Birthday Bash.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The palms of his hands glow in the aftermath, and for the second time that day, he is afraid.

"I didn't mean to," he whispers, but the overturned swing set pays no mind to his remorse. Neither do the small thugs who've scattered homeward to relay tall tales.

Still, the white-hot magic burns, and he clutches it even as he shivers.

"*Not* scared—" Unwelcome tears fall, and he bites his cheek. He's big, he thinks. Four years old, and very brave.

They'd taunted him. Called him 'baby.'

"*Want* 'em to be sorry," he whispers, but he knows he lies.

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He never *means* for it to happen, but it hardly matters.

Not when magic erupts, fuelled by unspent rage, crushing everything in its path.

The Ministry might not punish underage wizards for spontaneous magic, but Severus' father has no such compunctions.

Words—like blows—linger as he paces broken cobblestone streets.

Freak!

Big man? Not so brave, are you?

Severus might not be a big man—*wizard*—yet, but he feels his power growing until it fills him with something resembling courage.

When he tells himself he'd never use magic—like fists—as a weapon, he knows it's a lie.

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He loves that she's fearless and hates it just the same.

Mostly, he doesn't understand her uninhibited displays of magic, vitality and joy bursting from her like a flower blooming in the wild.

Severus knows better; knows magic is meant to besecret.

Subtle.

Displaying it has made him a more tempting target, so he's learnt to savour the sweet taste of hidden power.

He'll help her understand. Once he reveals himself. Explain that she must be wary of those who'd harm her for possessing enchanted blood—

Severus pledges himself her protector.

I'm brave, he thinks, afraid it's a lie.

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Even at Hogwarts he cloaks himself, slipping through the cracks like water finding its level. He wishes he understood what he seeks in the nooks and crannies of the castle. All he knows is that it was lost long before crossing the threshold.

So he hovers in the shadows where hurts go to fester, where bursts of light only sharpen pain's edge. He lingers there until the day darkness spills from him as if were magic, obliterating the last bit of light.

I'll show them, he says later.

It's for the best, he thinks, but he knows he lies.

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The world outside is unchanged from the one he'd left seven years before. The thugs are taller, magical, too, but just as brutal as Muggle boys at the playground.

This time, though, they want him—need him—for his fierce determination as much as for his skills. They tell him he's valiant; that *their* army fights for what's right.

Severus understands the power implicit in the will to define who belongs and waits to feel bravery in the face of cruelty, especially his own.

His eyes slide past their reflection in the glass—*coward*—lest the mirror know he lies.

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The brand on his arm binds him, a searing reminder of promises he's forgotten how to keep. Only earning a place—proving his value—matters, pressing forward until he's hollowed out a refuge for himself where he can safely hide.

So he pretends at bravery, terror growing as prophecy and his own arrogance collide.

Helplessness strangles him, and he pleads to every deity he can conjure until desperation leads him to Dumbledore.

The ancient wizard compels him with bonds that cut deeper than even the Dark Lord's.

Guilt

Self-loathing

Atonement

And a promise that he hopes is no lie.

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Desolate years stretch before him. He thinks of them as "The Years in Waiting".

Waiting for the Dark Lord to rise again, for *him* to finally arrive, for the barren weight of obligation to replace gnawing fear. Severus doesn't know what comes after, only that it must be void of the Headmaster's voice and free from the idiocy of children.

Why Hell should be more soothing than Hogwarts, he never questions.

So he stalks endless hallways, sinking beneath their inky shadows.

For a decade—*longer*—he tells himself he—and her boy—will be safe, but he knows he lies.

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The day he dreads arrives in a chaotic rush.

No matter he's prepared himself for this moment over countless days and sleepless nights, no matter he tells himself *he* is no coward—still, his stomach twists into a knot belying the glimmer in his sooty eyes.

His day of reckoning.

Both better and worse than imagined.

Returning to Hogwarts the Dark Lord's plaything and Dumbledore's mole, he's hard pressed to say which is better, and which, worse.

More than even before, he paces.

Terrified.

Vigilant.

He may tell himself he watches over Potter by obligation, but he knows he lies.

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The Dark Mark throws its sickly glow over the figures locked in their mortal dance atop the tower.

From where is he meant to muster the hatred—*courage*—to kill the only living person to have seen—*but never understand*—his heart?

Dark eyes meet Albus's blue ones. Albus, in whose eyes he never *could* find his own reflection, only the warped image of a man twisted by fear.

"Severus, please..." *And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?*

"Don't," he screams from the depths of that soul, "call me coward."

Not even a desperate wish, he thinks, can wrest truth from a lie.

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Weeks tumble over one another, months falling away as the endgame nears. Cloaked in tattered shadow, the border between truth and illusion blurs nearly beyond recognition.

He can't remember who he might have once been. He's not sure anymore who he has become.

All he knows is the razor's edge between truth and deception, its icy blade drawing his lifeblood.

But in his dreams, it's not scarlet spilling from his veins, but the luminous silver light of his Patronus.

Watching it move silently across the snow, he grieves the man he nearly forgot, the man whose truths overpower his lies.

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This is, he thinks, a suitable place for a man such as himself to die.

Fitting that it should happen in a ramshackle room so like his soul, both desolate with neglect and failed promise.

The remnants of old hope flee until only blood and yawning pain remain—his legacy from years hiding the truth, a lifetime hiding—*from*—truth.

But when terrified green eyes find his, for once Severus doesn't look past them, instead seeking only what he finds reflected there.

His heart, unmasked.

At last.

"Look... at... me," he begs.

It is, after all, where the truth lies.

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