

Despair

The first breakfast at Hogwarts should have been happy. It should have been a sign that things were getting back to normal for the students. It should have been filled with the buzz of chatter, as friends caught up with what had happened to each other over the long summer holidays.

It wasn't.

It was silent.

Still.

There was a feeling that the room was holding its breath, as if not even the ancient and hallowed Hall of Hogwarts dared to break the spell.

"I'm sorry?" Professor Dumbledore asked, frowning a little as he stood at the staff table.

"Enough," Harry whispered again. The word echoed around the room eerily, bouncing off the walls, growing in strength and volume. It was the voice of madness and sanity, life and death. It crawled slowly up the spines of the students and staff unlucky enough to hear it. "No more."

"No more what?" Dumbledore enquired politely.

"No more of your lies and deceit," Harry whispered, softer than before, but his words still reached everyone with ease.

"How dare you interrupt the Headmaster," Severus Snape sneered.

"No more of your childishness and hatred," the boy whispered, slowly rising to his feet, as if the effort was almost beyond him. He fixed his dull green eyes on the Potions professor. "You are a sick, twisted bully who should not be allowed within ten miles of children. You get your thrills from proving how much more powerful an adult is than an eleven-year-old. You hold grudges like a child, and are quite prepared to blame people for things that happened long before they were born. You have my contempt Snivellus, but not my hatred. Your petty life of pain and self-loathing is more than you deserve."

Snape rocketed to his feet, his face going purple with rage.

"Sit down." Harry could have been asking for more milk, his tone was so even. "Sit down and enjoy the rest of your life. It won't last for long."

The Potions professor paused, suddenly appearing scared. "What?"

"Voldemort knows that you are a spy," Harry said simply. With a painful slowness, he moved from the Gryffindor table, till he was standing in the middle of the Great Hall, facing the professors. His head hung low, hiding his eyes from sight. His back was bent and bowed, as if he was carrying a heavy weight, and his posture screamed fatigue and defeat.

"How?" Snape, now white with fear, whispered, slumping back down into his chair.

"Ironically." Harry's whisper took on a faintly amused tone. "It's your own fault. Your inability to put aside your grudges has doomed you, Severus. Voldemort has a very nice punishment ready for you. Your screams will warn the dead you are arriving long before he grants you the clemency of Death."

A horrified gasp echoed around the Hall, as Snape turned a slightly green colour.

"Just think," Harry whispered. "If you had only done what was asked of you, you would have a future." He shifted slightly, so that he was facing dead centre again, straight in front of Dumbledore. He didn't raise his head.

"I think we should talk about this in my office," Dumbledore said slowly, and started to turn away.

"No," Harry said quietly once more. "I said enough."

"You will do as the Headmaster says," Dolores Umbridge thundered. "Detention and one hundred points from Gryffindor."

Another gasp went around the room at the size of the punishment.

"What makes you think you have any power over me, torturer?" Harry's whisper was now amused. "Do you really think I would just let your use of a blood quill go?" Before anyone could react, Harry's wand seemed to appear in his hand. "*Expelliarmus*, *Incarcerous*." The spells were hardly audible, yet the teacher flew backwards through the air, bashing into the solid stone wall behind her.

"Stop!" Dumbledore roared. Some of the students cowered back from the power they could sense radiating from the Headmaster. "That is enough,

Harry!"

"Strange," Harry laughed under his breath. "That's just what I was saying."

"What do you want?" Dumbledore demanded.

"An answer," Harry said, after a moments thought.

"To what question?"

"Why?"

"You will need to be a little more specific, Harry."

"Why should I fight Voldemort?"

Dumbledore blinked. "What?"

Harry's voice took on a vaguely amused tone again. "Give me one good reason why I should fight Voldemort."

Dumbledore's mouth opened for a second, and then shut. He seemed to think for a few moments. "For your friends and family, for the students here, for..."

He was interrupted by Harry's low laughter echoing mockingly around the Hall. "For friends that lie to me?" Harry asked, his head tilting towards Ron and Hermione, who were gaping at him.

"We haven't..."

"So they hold prefect meetings in the second-floor closet now?" Harry interrupted again, still sounding amused. "Did you know that when two people are 'intimate', the Map changes the colour of their dots? You can imagine my surprise when I found that my two friends, who claimed not to be dating, are actually having sex. I can't say I approve of your choice of location, but whatever floats your boat. Ginny's make-out session with Dean was at least in the Room of Requirement. What was interesting was that Draco's changed colour without anyone else being present." He turned to face the blond Slytherin, still not looking up at anyone. "I always knew you were a wanker, Malfoy."

Around the tables, Ginny and Hermione were blushing furiously, while Ron and Dean both looked mad. "Now look here," Dean said, getting to his feet.

Harry pointed his wand without even bothering to look at his roommate, and cast a Stunning spell at the West Ham fan.

"Aren't you going to get to your feet and say something," Harry asked Draco, a dreadful eagerness in his voice.

Draco, showing more sense than people expected, stayed firmly rooted to his chair.

"Chicken shit," Harry mumbled, then slowly turned back to face the pale Dumbledore. "Now, where was I?" he asked rhetorically. "Oh yes, my family. The Dursleys are not family. The rest are dead. I see no one to fight for there. For the students? The same students that wore 'Potter Stinks' badges? Or perhaps the same students who called me insane and a murderer? Maybe you're referring to the students that gave exclusive interviews to the Daily Prophet about me?"

Dumbledore remained silent.

"Tell me, how is Remus these days?"

"We are work--"

--Yes, yes, yes," Harry interrupted. In a mocking tone, he parroted, "We are working to change the laws to get Remus out of prison." He dropped the tone. "I'm sure he's incredibly grateful. Or he would be, if he hadn't died last night. I'm sure Fudge is proud his special order for rounding up all the werewolves and placing them in a prison, surrounded by Barbed Wire made of pure silver has worked wonders."

"How do you know that?" Dumbledore asked, shock on his face.

Harry smiled faintly. "You still haven't answered my question."

"For your parents," Dumbledore whispered sadly.

"My parents are dead," Harry replied. "They no longer care. Sirius is dead. He no longer cares."

"For me," Albus said, almost inaudibly.

"Was that so very hard to say?" Harry asked. "But I'm afraid that I don't know you. I have no wish to know someone that abandons an orphan, and goes eleven years without a single check up. I have no wish to know someone who allows a child to be locked in a cupboard while growing up, to be treated as a slave. And then, even when he does know about all this, forces that young man, still suffering from guilt and anguish over the death of his Godfather, back there."

He slowly looked up, and met the pale-blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore. With trembling fingers, Harry reached up and undid his robes, letting them

fall to the floor.

He was only wearing a pair of very old trousers, held up by a ragged piece of rope.

Gasps of shock and horror echoed around the floor once more.

"Look at me," Harry demanded, his voice still the same intensely frightening whisper. "Do you know that after you don't eat for a few weeks, it actually gets easy? When no one cares, no one checks."

Dumbledore's head slowly moved up, from where it had slumped, and he took in the obscenely thin teenager. Harry's ribs were plainly visible, his arms painfully thin. His colour wasn't right, as if he hadn't had enough vitamins.

"Not a single owl all summer, bar one, from you, telling me I couldn't go to the Weasleys. It was strange," Harry mused. "That was when I started thinking about why I fight. But I was still hopeful. I had friends, and they were worth it.

"But then you sent Tonks to bring me here by Portkey, and she told me what had happened with Remus, showed me the Daily Prophet. Even then, I still had friends, but then those friends lied to me, and I came to a moment's perfect clarity. The only reason I had to fight was hate. Hate takes energy, it takes power. I have neither any more. My magic is all that's keeping me alive." His tone was almost whimsical. "As you said yourself, death is but the next great adventure."

He turned slowly, keeping his head raised as he looked at the confused and horrified expressions on the professors and students faces. "Do you know why I can't hate Voldemort any more?"

Dumbledore didn't respond. His hands gripped the table in front of him, as if it was all that was stopping him from collapsing.

"Because he is honest. He says what he means, and he goes for it. He doesn't lie or cheat. He doesn't say that he is fighting someone, and then allows the Dark Creatures Restraining Act to come into power. He doesn't say that he cares, and then abandons his Death Eaters. He is evil, but strangely, I find him more honest than you." Harry took a deep breath, before continuing inexorably. "He is upfront in his intent to use and abuse you, he doesn't hide behind veneers of civility. So I'm afraid that you will have to come up with another hero to abuse and spit on. Another hero to destroy. Because it won't be me."

He looked around one more time. "I don't hate you," he whispered to no one in particular. "Good luck."

Very slowly, Harry walked out of the Great Hall.

Dumbledore slumped down in his chair, tears dripping down his beard.

The room was silent still, as disbelief filled the air.

The silence was interrupted by a slow hand clap. "Bravo," a voice hissed. A hiss that the Professors recognised.

"Don't bother," Voldemort said dismissively, as some of the teachers pulled out their wands. He appeared strangely translucent. "I'm not really here. Your spells can't help you."

"What do you want?" McGonagall asked, her face streaked with her own tears.

"I just felt Potter die. I want to find out what is going on, of course. Draco, report."

"Well, My Lord," Draco said, standing up proudly. "I --"

"*Crucio*," Voldemort hissed. Draco fell to the floor, crying in pain. "Such a coward," the Dark Lord muttered. Without releasing the curse, he turned. "Seamus, report."

Seamus stood and dropped to his knees in front of the Dark Lord. The other Gryffindors looked on in complete shock. "My Lord. I did nothing to help in Potter's downfall. I didn't need to. Dumbledore and his friends did it for me."

Voldemort nodded. "Honesty is always the best policy," he said to the kneeling boy.

"My Lord," Seamus said. "May I make a request?"

"You may."

"Potter's relatives, the Muggles. I'd like to... thank them, personally, for their assistance."

Voldemort nodded once, and waved his hand. A small stone appeared before Seamus. "With Potter dead, the blood protection has fallen. This will take you to them."

"Thank you, Master."

"Take that worm with you," Voldemort sighed, finally releasing the curse. "Perhaps you can teach him not to try and lie to me."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Oh, and Seamus?"

"Yes, Master?"

"I expect to be able to hear their screams from here."

Seamus smiled slowly, and bowed deeply. He walked over to the fallen Draco, and kicked him firmly in the stomach. "Come, worm."

Draco looked up at him in shock. "Keep your eyes lowered," Seamus snarled, kicking him again. With a final bow to Voldemort, he grabbed the Portkey, and they both vanished.

"You've come to kill me," Dumbledore said, tiredly regaining his feet.

Voldemort laughed. "Of course not. Why would I do that? I've won. You can do what you like; it makes no difference to me. Don't get me wrong, anyone who stands against me will die eventually, but not today. Today, I just want to say thank you. You took care of a very nasty problem for me. If I treated my servants like you treated Potter, I'd expect them to rebel against me."

The Dark Lord's illusion glided up to the Professors table, and examined Umbridge critically. "You shall spend the rest of your life learning exactly what a blood quill can do," he decided thoughtfully.

"You don't exist," Umbridge said. "You're an illusion, Potter was lying." Tears started to fall down her cheeks as she shook her head repeatedly. "You can't exist, Fudge said so!"

"*Crucio*," Voldemort sighed. "Does the pain seem an illusion to you?" He stopped the curse, "I stopped the curse in gratitude for your help in breaking Potter last year. We are now even. My Death Eaters will be coming for you soon. Don't try and run; it will only make things worse."

"As for the Minister, he has never believed in my existence, and has helped me out immensely because of it."

He moved over to Severus. "My Potions professor," he taunted. "If you had been such a failure at teaching Potter Occlumency for me, you would be the most celebrated of all my Death Eaters, but you did it for yourself."

He shook his head slowly. "Your death will be unpleasant," he commented cheerfully.

The doors to the Hall flew open, and four Death Eaters entered, their masks in place.

"Bring me Potter's body," Voldemort ordered. "We will honour his death."

"My Lord?" One of them queried, surprise in his voice.

"Potter fought me harder than anyone else, even as his strength failed because his caring relatives forgot to feed him, he still fought. He had courage, a quality severely lacking these days. His memory shall be honoured as the last person ever to be a threat to me."

"Yes, My Lord," the Death Eater said, and together, they walked out, pausing only to levitate the dead body of Harry James Potter, and take him with them.

Voldemort looked around the crying faces of the students, and the despairing ones of the teachers, and shook his head softly.

"Tell me," he whispered, his sibilant voice echoing as eerily as Harry's had earlier. "Who is more evil? Me? Or the people that left him alone, struggling with guilt, struggling with depression, with people who locked and imprisoned him in a room, and took away all his means of contact."

"When I finally got through his shields, I was surprised at just how badly he had been taught, and just how hard he had fought."

"I felt it only fair to allow him to come along when I went to free the werewolves, so that they could serve me. Once I got into his mind the first time, it was easier each time after that. When I told him where I was going, he was almost eager for me to invade his mind."

"His devastation at seeing Lupin having impaled himself on the wire in his madness was almost touching."

"All you had to do was give him a reason to continue - a single reason, but you didn't. Is that not true evil?"

Silently, his image wavered, and then vanished, leaving behind a group of students and teachers who still couldn't grasp what had happened.