

but everyone was nodding in agreement. Harry wondered how many of them had parents who had followed Voldemort, who had given him their Wizengamot seat.

He was starting to think he'd judged the Slytherins too harshly all these years, then remembered that Dumbledore's compulsion spell was supposed to make him do exactly that. He scowled internally; how many of these people could have been his friends if he'd been allowed to be his natural self? His first two years at Hogwarts, he'd been so caught up with Ron and Hermione, refusing to let anyone else get close. He hadn't even truly befriended Neville until this year. Was that part of Dumbledore's plan? Keep him isolated from the rest of his peers, so he never found out what he was missing?

"Can we wrap this up? I've got an Arithmancy OWL in twelve hours and I am not nearly as prepared as I'd like to be," Warrington said, a furrow forming on his forehead. That seemed to be the cue for everyone to break apart, claiming other places to be, and Harry figured he should probably get back to the common room as well. Ron and Hermione would be wondering where he was. If Hermione hadn't passed out from exhaustion yet.

Neville walked with him to the library to get the Charms book he'd originally left for, and the two of them made their way back up to Gryffindor Tower. "Thanks, Neville," he murmured softly, before they reached the portrait. "It's nice to know I have allies."

"The Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom will always be your ally, Harry," Neville assured him. The words were heavy with magic, like an oath, and Harry's eyes widened. Neville spoke the password before Harry could vow anything in return.

"There you are!" Ron called, looking up with desperate eyes. "I was starting to think you'd never come back. Help me, Harry, she's gone mental!"

Harry looked at Hermione, who seemed to have abandoned her own work in favour of taking a vicious correcting quill to one of Ron's Transfiguration essays. He laughed, shaking his head. "You're on your own with that one, mate."

.-.-.-.

Harry kept his head down as he ticked off his exams one by one, determined to do better than last year — not his best, or Dumbledore would get suspicious, but better. It was a relief to get to his Defence Against the Dark Arts exam; the one subject he was truly allowed to try his hardest in.

"Excellent, Harry!" Lupin enthused when Harry climbed out of the trunk after vanquishing his boggart. "Full marks!" He leaned in close, grinning conspiratorially. "Well done, cub!"

His good mood continued all the way to the steps of the castle, where the sight of a familiar bowler hat had him deflating like a balloon. He tried not to outwardly scowl as the Minister acted like he felt bad about Buckbeak in any way, like he hadn't already decided to kill an innocent creature. It was all he could do to help Hermione drag Ron away before he could do something foolish.