

He pursed his lips — indeed, Voldemort would be furious with them for failing to kidnap him, but he would also appreciate six new recruits into his ranks outside the castle. “They couldn’t stay here,” he reasoned. “This is a school, not a stronghold. We don’t have prison cells in the dungeons.” His joke fell flat. “You had the rest of the students to think about.”

McGonagall sipped at her whisky. “I have still condemned those students — those *children* to death, or a fate worse than it. I was supposed to protect them.”

“You can’t save everyone,” Harry said grimly — that was something he knew all too well. “Everyone in this castle has been given a chance to do the right thing. Not all of them are going to take it.”

The Scottish woman was silent for a long time, even after her glass was empty. “You should go and find Mr Malfoy, Potter,” she said eventually. “He will be keen to make sure you are unharmed.”

Harry coloured, amazed she could say that with a straight face after his exchange with Draco on the way up. “I... will you be alright, Professor?” He stood, but hovered in front of the desk. The smile McGonagall gave him was tight, strained, barely lasting a moment.

“I must go and explain to Professor Snape that Slytherin house is now four students smaller,” she declared, standing as well.

That wasn’t an answer, but then Harry shouldn’t have expected much more. She was a professor, after all, and he just a student.

He just hoped she had someone to go to, to lean on after having made the difficult call.

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The word had spread by dinner. Harry forced himself to sit through the meal, even as Sophie Roper cried into her lasagne ten feet down the table, even as half of Slytherin house glared daggers in his direction.

“What’s it turned into, then?” he asked Lavender quietly, knowing there was no way the story had been reported accurately.

“Depends who you hear it from,” she replied, frowning. “Anything from you exposing all six of them with Dark Marks, to you lying to McGonagall just to get them expelled after she caught you duelling them.” Harry snorted. “I... was Fay really working with them?”

There were tears in her eyes. She had been Fay’s dorm mate for nearly six years, after all.

“She was, yeah.” Harry wished he could say for certain whether she’d been threatened into it. He wished it mattered — as he had told McGonagall, they had all had chances, and made choices.

He just hoped desperately that those six teenagers lived long enough to learn from their mistakes.