

He hadn't expected there to be quite so many people.

He and Neville ditched the cloak once they were covered by the trees, circling round to approach from a different angle. A few people were already there, but more were appearing in drips and drabs — the heirs, of course; Ginny, with Michael Corner, Terry Boot and Mandy Brocklehurst; the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team; Cho, with a couple of Ravenclaw friends, closely followed by Cedric's three Hufflepuff dorm-mates; the Creevey brothers; Luna, surprisingly accompanied by a couple of Slytherin fourth-years. More and more people began to arrive, and by the time the flow of students stopped, Harry counted nearly forty of them.

Merlin.

He cleared his throat, suddenly nervous. Beside him, Neville gave a discreet thumbs-up. "Right, then. Thanks for coming, everyone; I promise I'll make it quick. You all know why we're here, I assume."

A crowd of faces grinned back at him. "To show Umbridge who's boss!" one person chirped, earning several whoops.

"To learn to fight You-Know-Who and his followers," Luna called out. A prominent silence followed.

"Yes, to both of those things," Harry said, heart hammering against his ribs. "I won't claim to be an expert, and I honestly don't care if you think I'm mad or not. If you're here for some war stories, you can bugger off."

"Why should we believe you if you won't tell us what happened?"

It took a second for Harry to locate the owner of that voice; one of the three Hufflepuff fifth year boys that Harry didn't really interact with, Zacharias Smith. The blond was sneering at Harry, looking skeptical.

"I never said I won't tell you, I said I'm not here to share stories right now," Harry retorted irritably. "Quite frankly, I don't fancy standing around in this forest any longer than I have to be. The acromantulas don't like me."

There were a few weak giggles from people who thought he was joking, and wary glances at the forest proper from the rest. "Voldemort is back. That's a fact; whether you believe it or not, it won't change. I don't know what he's up to right now, but just because he's been quiet for all of a few months doesn't mean he'll stay that way. War is coming, and we'll need all the capable wands we can get."

He noticed a few wary glances directed at the small cluster of Slytherins in the group, and it made him huff. "If you believe someone's house is an indicator of their moral alignment, leave now. The Slytherins are here on my invitation. I trust them — if that's not good enough for you, that's not my problem." Blaise flashed a smile his way. Harry felt a pang of regret in his chest, that Draco couldn't be stood with him.