

friends moved Neville and Hannah and Luna close to him, the four of them immediately locking their arms around each other, leaning in together as they worked to offer what they could to the school. It was easier, with his fellow heirs beside him.

Harry's entire awareness narrowed down to the Slytherin magic within him, and the foul magic trying to tear a hole in the castle's protections. Nothing else mattered, nothing else even existed.

The headmistress was handling things better than the heirs, though it was clear the strain was on her, too. She hauled herself to a standing position, leaning heavily on Professor Sprout, and hobbled her way over to the four heirs huddled tight together in the middle of the hall. "We need to move them," she said, unsurprised at the solid ring of students shielding the heirs, their wands raised and ready for attack.

"It's You-Know-Who!" Someone came running in — Dennis Creevey, his eyes as wide as dinner plates. No one had even noticed him leave the hall. "There's Death Eaters at the gates!"

Harry had no concept of the panic, sucking the air from the room in an instant. He had no concept of the teachers and the prefects trying to organise their students. He was only vaguely aware of a tiny hand pressing to his back, and the feeling of house elf travel. He remained locked in the embrace with the other three, but the place they arrived was... easier. He strained his neck up, forcing his eyes open, and found himself looking at the Wardstone, its colours swirling angrily. At his side stood Dobby, big eyes round and scared.

"Heirs will hold the wards," the elf said solemnly, "elves will keep Hoggywarts safe."

And then he disappeared.

The castle's magic was strongest in this room, the pressure easing slightly, enough for the heirs to disentangle themselves and look at each other.

"We need to outlast him," Luna said, eyes glowing with ethereal light. "If he breaks the wards, it's over."

That didn't sound like the good kind of over. Harry grit his teeth, stumbling to his feet, moving to the same compass point he'd stood at when he'd claimed the wards so many months ago.

"We have all of Hogwarts at our hands," Harry reminded, looking at his friends as they took their positions. "He's just one man. We hold, or we die."

Across the Wardstone, he met Neville's gaze, giving his best friend one last solemn nod. Then he pressed both hands to the wardstone, and sank.

.-.-.

The siege on the wards lasted almost twenty-four full hours. A whole day of Voldemort standing at the gates of Hogwarts, drawing the magic from all of his Marked followers —