

and several Dark ritual-based sources — trying to force the wards to crack, his followers waiting around him for their chance to claim Hogwarts School for good.

Had the wards been the same as they were when Dumbledore was in charge, they likely wouldn't have lasted more than an hour or two under the onslaught.

Inside the school, the teachers did their best to maintain some semblance of calm. The students were kept in their common rooms, prefects guarding the doors — for Slytherin and Hufflepuff it was torture, trapped in the bowels of the school with no idea what was going on. Up in the towers of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw house, students jostled at the windows, trying to see the crowd of black-clad figures at the very edge of the school grounds. There had to be at least a hundred, perhaps more. Voldemort's army, ready for battle.

No one knew where the four heirs had been taken, just that the school elves had moved them 'somewhere safe'. No one except Draco, who had called Dobby in the privacy of his bathroom and begged for information on his boyfriend. Dobby told him that the heirs were at the Wardstone, though he couldn't tell Draco where that was. That Draco wouldn't be able to go in even if he knew — only the heirs and the heads of school could enter.

So for almost twenty-four hours, they waited. Wondered if this would be it, the beginning of the end. For almost twenty-four hours, four teenagers stood in the heart of the castle, pouring every ounce of strength they had into the wards surrounding them. Channeling all the wild magic of the forest and the ley lines beneath it, the echoed magic from hundreds of years of students growing within these halls, coming of age right here in the castle, leaking magic to be absorbed by the stones and fed back to Hogwarts itself.

Finally, a figure dropped to the floor in a dead faint.

Outside the wards, a hundred or more black-cloaked figures watched in shock as their master crumpled to the ground. For a moment, none of them moved. Then one hurried forward, crouching beside the unconscious Lord Voldemort, gesturing with an arm that ticked like the winding of a clock. "Retreat!" Rabastan Lestrangle shouted, trying not to show his panic. "All of you, out! I will take our Lord to safety!"

The students in the tower windows watched the black-cloaked figures disappear, one by one.

Back in the heart of the castle, four teenagers gasped in unison as the pressure in their heads finally abated. The wards settled down, weak but still in tact. The heirs lifted their hands from the Wardstone, groaning as their stiff limbs protested.

"How long...?" Hannah trailed off as Harry did a wandless Tempus charm, and all four of them swore loudly.

"A whole day!" Neville exclaimed. "No wonder I'm bloody starving!"

Harry laughed, the sound rusty. He wanted to walk away, but he wasn't sure his legs would support him if he moved even an inch. "I hope it fucking destroys him." He could hardly believe how much magical power was at Voldemort's disposal, with so little of his soul left.