

Several sets of eyes turned to Harry, who resolutely did not react.

“Luckily, the rather... independent nature of the school means we can continue as normal despite the interference at the Ministry, though I will ask that you all please do not fight any restrictions your professors or prefects may impose on you — we are doing it for your benefit, even if it may seem unfair at the time. And please, if you notice anything suspicious or unusual, do not hesitate to notify a member of staff as soon as possible.” He smiled warmly. “The staff and I will endeavour to keep you all as safe as possible, but that requires your cooperation. I trust you will all conduct yourselves appropriately, as I know you are all capable of.”

Harry grit his teeth — it was utterly galling, that the man could stand there and smile and assure the students he’d keep them safe, and not even *offer* for students who were in danger of falling under Voldemort’s thumb to speak to a teacher if they felt threatened or worried. Was he expecting the heads of houses to cover that? Or did he just truly not care which students he lost, as long as the *right* students did what he expected of them?

How many students would not have been sat in this hall if not for Harry or Narcissa offering sanctuary?

That seemed to be all Dumbledore had to say; he bid them a cheerful goodnight and stepped back from his podium, the cue for the prefects to begin herding first years. Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table, where Draco and Pansy were directing the new fifth year prefects to do their duties.

Ginny hooked an arm through his, dragging his gaze away. “Come on, loverboy,” she murmured under her breath, smirking. “Let’s get upstairs.”

Harry sighed, but did as bid. His bed in Gryffindor Tower was going to feel even colder than usual, tonight.

They went up to the tower within a larger huddle of Gryffindors, all sleepy and full of food and most of them too tired to care about whether Harry was secretly evil or not. In the common room, Harry smiled to himself; despite everything, it was good to be back. It felt weird, though, with all his older friends except Katie gone.

Even weirder, to look around and see how small the younger years seemed, how many there were that Harry hardly recognised. He was a sixth year, now; almost top of the pecking order. It made him feel ancient, looking at all those wide-eyed first and second years staring at him.

Stifling a yawn, he turned to head up to the dorm and get an early night — and almost walked right into Ron Weasley.

“You’ve got some nerve, y’know,” the redhead declared. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Do I?”

Ron scowled at him. “Coming back to school, after hiding all summer like a *coward*.”