

Ashes to Ashes

by Alexannah

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Just a Nightmare

Chapter 1 of 1

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Harry gasped and sat bolt upright, pulling out of the dream.

The dormitory was dark, quiet, and cold. For a moment he sat shivering, before pushing back the blankets and making his way to Ron's bed, not bothering to tiptoe.

It's just a nightmare, he told himself. Ron's fast asleep the other side of those curtains.

But he had to be sure.

Harry ripped back the curtains and his hope shattered. Where Ron should have been was just crumpled blankets and a dented pillow, the way he had left them. Harry knew the pattern of the folds in the bedclothes by heart now. Unable to stand looking at the empty space any more, he pulled the curtains shut again

and sank to his knees, wrapping his arms around himself and his eyes squeezed shut.

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast, it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt water-logged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop -

And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and, panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise ... but something was wrong. Ron and the girl were not waking up, merely floating, pale and still. Harry looked up and saw no less than four people wading out towards him.

"Ron?" Harry spoke to his friend. "You can wake up now."

"Harry!"

Dumbledore, the wizard in front, struck out towards them in a fast front crawl, hampered slightly by his robes. Harry grasped the hostages' own robes and struggled to swim forwards to meet him.

"Professor?" he called, instantly swallowing a lot of lake water.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked as he reached him and began treading water.

"Yeah ... but they're not waking up."

Harry noticed there was no twinkle in Dumbledore's eye at all if anything, he looked sad. Dumbledore touched Ron and the girl gently on the neck in turn, and then grimly turned and started back to shore with Ron and Fleur's sister, Harry following close behind.

"Ron! RON!" Percy, white-faced, was waiting for them with the others who had waded out Ludo Bagman, Professor McGonagall and Snape. Professor McGonagall had been restraining Percy until Dumbledore reached them, at which point he grabbed Ron and yelled at him to wake up. Harry looked at the shore Madame

Maxime was restraining a hysterical Fleur, Professor Sprout was consoling a distraught-looking Cedric, and Krum stood alone, looking somehow blank. Many of the crowd seemed to be confused or upset. Finally, something by the water to the side caught Harry's eye.

Two figures lay on the ground. A couple of wizards were in the process of pulling a cover over one of them.

"Hermione? HERMIONE!"

Harry started swimming in her direction, but a firm arm stopped him. "Harry, I'm sorry. You can't help her."

"Not help Hermione!"

Dumbledore started swimming back to shore, one arm pulling Harry along. Harry struggled to pull away Hermione wasn't dead she couldn't be but Dumbledore's grip was stronger than expected for a man of his age. When the water was shallow enough for them both to stand, Harry tried to make a break for it, but Dumbledore wouldn't let him go.

"I'm so sorry, Harry. She's dead. They all are."

Harry lost it.

"C'mon Harry, come to breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"You need to eat something."

"I said I'm not hungry, Neville."

Harry ignored the stab of guilt for shouting as Neville slowly turned and left the dormitory. Most of Gryffindor House had avoided him after offering their condolences, probably unsure how to act around him. But Neville had stuck with him, and Harry had snapped at him.

Harry slowly pulled on a pair of jeans and made his way to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, he saw a ghost of a face with dark circles under its eyes. He looked away, cleaned his teeth as quickly as he could and left without washing. Since the Second Task, he couldn't bring himself to even drink water.

Ron and Hermione had died five days ago, along with Cho and Gabrielle Delacour. Harry had avoided Percy, Ginny and the twins ever since. He hadn't heard whether the other Weasleys had been contacted or not. He hadn't seen much of the other champions either. Out of the three, it was Fleur he felt the most sorry for. Cedric and Krum hadn't known Cho and Hermione half as long as she'd known her sister. Poor Gabrielle had only been eight. He couldn't imagine what her family was going through.

It wasn't fair. None of them had asked to be in the Tournament. They had only been in that damned lake because they meant something to the champions. They never signed up for it. Harry had never signed up for it either, but he could handle near-death ventures. Losing his two best friends was another thing altogether.

Who was going to sit and snigger with him in Divination? Who was going to lecture him until the cows came home about not leaving homework till the last minute? Who was going to calm him down and convince him he'd be fine before every Quidditch match? Who was going to stay up late with him talking about completely mundane and random topics? Who was going to be there, always beside him, for the rest of his life, however long or short that would be?

Harry swallowed painfully. He had yet to cry over his friends' deaths. For some reason the tears wouldn't come. He had barely spoken in the last few days, just existing in a kind of haze while pain tugged frequently at his heart whenever he remembered. Lessons had all been cancelled for the time being, which Harry wasn't grateful for. He wanted distractions. He would even welcome hours of Potions. Snape wouldn't treat him any differently. He would act his usual sardonic self, making things easier. Harry felt another pang as he imagined himself in the dungeon, cauldron in front of him, and a space either side. Then he saw Snape sweep down on him and make him concentrate on the bubbling potion no room for a wandering mind.

Suddenly deciding, Harry pulled on a t-shirt and left the dormitory. He couldn't stand it any longer. He would find the git and make him give him detention. Hopefully permanent.

The school was quiet. Harry avoided everyone's eyes, just making his way down to the dungeons as fast as he could. On the first staircase, he stumbled and fell down the last few steps.

"Ouch!"

"Well, look who it is." Harry's head shot up as he recognised Malfoy's voice. "Precious Potter. Surprised to see him out and about; I'd have thought he'd be up in his bedroom bawling."

Hot anger surged through Harry, and he was grateful for it. The first emotion besides guilt, pain and numbness he'd felt in days. He clenched his wand. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"Ooh!" Malfoy mocked. "I'm so scared! ... *Not*." He smirked as he looked round at the group of Slytherins with him. "Ah ... something's missing ... Can you think what's missing?" he addressed Goyle, who just stared at him blankly. "Oh! I know!" He turned back to Harry. "Where are Potter's groupies?"

A split second later, Malfoy let out a howl as he was blasted backwards into the wall with the strongest Expelliarmus Harry had ever performed. He landed in a crumpled heap just as Professor McGonagall rounded the corner.

"P-Potter attacked me, Professor!"

"I do have eyes, Mr Malfoy. Potter, come with me."

Harry followed her, wondering if he was going to be punished. She hadn't sounded at all like her normal strict self.

"Come in, Harry."

His insides clenched as he entered her office and stood in front of her desk. She was being nice. Under any other circumstances, he would have made the most of it, but right now he couldn't stand it. Why was everyone that actually cared somewhat about him treating him so differently?

"Why did you attack Mr Malfoy?" she asked gently.

Harry briefly considered replying "because I felt like it", but as much as he wanted to get into trouble, he didn't want to be rude to his Head of House. "Um. I don't know, Professor. But I'm ready to face my punishment."

Professor McGonagall sighed and sat down. "Harry, you've just lost two very close friends. It's only natural that you will be feeling rather fragile right now, and"

"Are you going to give me detention or not?" Harry cut her short.

She paused. "No. But, Harry, you're not the only one affected by what happened. If you ever want to talk, my office door is always open ..."

Malfoy and company had vanished as Harry resumed his trail down to the dungeons, wondering how best to piss Snape off. He was so deep in thought, he nearly ran into Cedric.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Sorry," Harry mumbled.

Cedric didn't look quite as bad as he did, but the smile he gave Harry was very strained. "It's okay." There was a pause. "So ... how are you?"

Harry met his eyes. Here was a person who actually knew something of what he was going through. "Crap."

"Yeah, I got that feeling."

"You?"

"I don't know. I seem to be switching from feeling nothing and feeling everything at once."

Harry nodded understandingly. "You want a distraction?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Pissing Snape off."

Cedric looked impressed. "That's a good idea. Oh! I know the perfect thing."

"Yeah?"

"I dunno if you have anything like this in Gryffindor ..." Cedric dropped his voice. "In Hufflepuff we've created a list."

"What sort of list?"

"An alphabet of insults we wish we dared call Snape to his face."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. That's ... twenty-six ... thirteen each."

Harry finally gave a shade of a smile. His mouth hurt doing it. "I reckon that's enough to get us both detention for the rest of the year."

TBC ...