

The Ringing of the Empty Sound

by cmwinters

Written as a response to the HP_remnants challenge on LiveJournal, with the prompt "And the picture frames are staring down, and the ringing of this empty sound, is deafening and keeping you from sleep", a lyric from a Dashboard Confessional song. Although not a song-fic by any means, I did listen to the song repeatedly while writing.

After the war, you have to start picking up the pieces.

Taking Stock

Chapter 1 of 1

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The man leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on the desk and steepling his fingers in front of his face.

Sounds of the construction going on below him rang throughout the castle. He was going to have to spend a great deal of time in this office, even during sleeping hours, since most of the quarters had been destroyed as Voldemort, along with his loyal followers, had rampaged through the castle, before Harry Potter stood before him and vanquished him.

Magic notwithstanding, it was going to take several months, at least, before the house-elves were able to restore Hogwarts to its formal glory. He considered having them put in a better heating system while they were at it.

The destruction that had been wrought, and the look on the boy's face as comprehension had dawned upon him, was what led him to where he was. Of course, that rather well-placed shield he'd thrown in Neville Longbottom's direction as the klutzy boy took out Bellatrix Black Lestrage had startled everyone who saw it, and his own hex at Augustus Rookwood, which had initially appeared to be aimed at an Auror, had helped. But it was Granger stepping forward to complete the Ancient Egyptian soul-banishing curse that had truly sealed his fate, although not in the way it looked at first, especially to the casual, or uneducated, observer. He'd started the chant, been interrupted by Lucius Malfoy, and Granger had finished it, much to his shock. The Dark Lord, having forgotten all his Ancient Egyptian in the fifty years since he'd used it last, demanded to know what she was babbling, and she'd rather defiantly lifted her chin and insisted it was the counter-curse, looking the Dark Lord straight in the eyes. He'd laughed then as the Dark Lord had tried ineffectually to penetrate her brain; she must've studied Occlumency with Potter. There was no counter-curse for soul-banishing, and he'd realised she must have come upon his notes that he'd had to leave on his desk before he'd left his office. Voldemort had lifted his wand to cast a Killing Curse at her, but he'd raised his left hand with a suggestive smirk, imploring the Dark Lord to "leave her to me." He knew her better than anyone else they knew, so he could torment her more efficiently, and teach her her place. No one but one completely confident in his own position in the Dark Lord's ranks would have dared raise his hand to lower the Dark Lord's wand.

And, of course, she hadn't been chanting the counter-curse; she'd obviously studied it and knew it had to be completed. She knew what he was doing, then, and hadn't flinched when he'd effectively asked for her servitude because what he'd really done was ensure her survival. Smart girl, Granger, if pestilential sometimes.

Surprises ran all around. Pettigrew had stabbed his hand into Greyback's heart as the werewolf had lunged for Potter, but had fallen victim to a Sectumsempra thrown by Lucius Malfoy for his trouble, and bled to death as a result.

Nobody was grieving that death, though Lupin had looked mildly disturbed. Disappointed, perhaps.

Flitwick, much to everyone's shock, had turned out to be Voldemort's inner spy. Sinistra, along with whoever the latest Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher had been, who was some witch he didn't know, as well as the Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies teachers, had been killed. McGonagall was at St. Mungo's recovering from a series of serial hexes he was shocked the old biddy had had the fortitude to withstand. Sprout had had to accompany her, with injuries of her own; true to her house traditions, she had defended her students like a mother bear. Vector had fled, suspiciously enough, along with Slughorn, to nobody's shock. Binns was already dead, Filch was a Squib, Hagrid had never even graduated and Pince, Hooch and Pomfrey weren't qualified instructors. Besides, Pomfrey was needed elsewhere. Grubbly-Plank would have been everyone's first choice, except she hadn't the time to devote to it full time, which was why she hadn't been a full-time instructor to begin with. Firenze had gone deep into the forest, dragged there by his herd-mates who were eager to welcome him back into the fold after his predictions had proven right. And Trelawney was passed out in a trance somewhere, and nobody felt she could be relied upon for such a serious position. So that left him.

In any case, he was the only one left standing with any Headmaster experience. Not at Hogwarts, true... but, much to his distress, Durmstrang had been levelled. He winced and rubbed his face over that. That had hurt, a lot. Although not an alumnus of Durmstrang, he had loved that old school, and it had meant a lot to him. His being granted the headmastership there had been one of the crowning joys of his life. One of the few.

Not that being given the deputy headmastership of Hogwarts wasn't something to be proud of. He dearly loved Hogwarts, too... and the honor itself was far greater, on many levels. But he was still reeling from the battle, and it hadn't had a chance to sink in yet.

He glanced at the wall. The occupants of all of the frames were glowering down at him with open hostility, save three. Dumbledore's frame was empty, as was his great-great-grandfather's. Phineas Nigellus, as he had for the last twenty-five years, was regarding him with a VERY odd look.

He inclined his head toward him by way of greeting.

"Hello. And how are you?" Phineas asked.

"Under the circumstances, I believe that the answer 'alive and relatively unscathed' qualifies as 'smashingly brilliant,' and yourself?"

Phineas grunted by way of reply. After a short silence, he asked, "So what will you do now?"

"Rebuild the school. What else can I do?"

"And Durmstrang?"

He sighed, and propped his face in his hand. "I do not know the answer to that. Although I am not surprised in the least, almost the entire board of governors of Durmstrang was out there with the Dark Lord during the final battle. As I am not on the board of governors, and the school was levelled, I cannot begin to presume what will happen next."

"Hm. Pity. It was a good school. It would be a shame to not rebuild it."

He nodded assent. "That school certainly meant a great deal to me. I would certainly like to see it rebuilt."

"You WOULD!" snapped a dumpy, grey-haired woman, who snorted and turned her back on him in apparent disgust.

He snickered. Apparently, not everyone had gotten the memo.

He gazed at the wall a moment longer, wondering where his portrait would be on the wall, if indeed it ever came to that. The Hogwarts board of governors still had to meet to approve his position as deputy headmaster, but as they were rather short on staff, they were likely to agree, what with Harry Potter particularly championing him for it. The Wizarding World wasn't likely to refuse him much in any case. Not even this one.

"I should probably take stock of the injuries and deaths," he said forlornly. "I have not been here lately, so I will need the school register. Do you know where the Headmistress had been keeping it? I do not wish to rummage through her belongings more than necessary."

"Top left drawer," muttered Phineas, helpfully.

The other occupied portraits still glared at him.

He withdrew the paper and found them helpfully sorted by house. This made it much easier for him, as they did tend to group somewhat together.

He carefully drew straight black lines through the names of those he knew were dead... every one a spear in his side. Although it was thankfully a much shorter list than it could have been, he knew there were names he missed.

He spelled the tip in his quill wide, and the ink a shocking yellow colour, and turned to lining through the names of those he knew were alive. While a much more cheerful endeavour, he knew that sometime soon, he was going to have black lines over some of those names.

The list was, not surprisingly, very incomplete. Noting that Gladys Derwent had stepped out of her frame, he rose gracefully from the chair, and strode to the fireplace. As the newly appointed Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, it was his responsibility to check on the lives of the students in his care. He snorted. Boy, this was going to be... amusing. He knew better than to even begin to hope for a warm reception at St. Mungo's.

Just as he was reaching for the Floo powder, the sallow-faced, black-haired, Everard Prince strolled back into his frame. "Minerva is out of surgery now."

"Thank you, sir," he said, internally amused at the fact that Sirius Black's great-great-grandfather had been Hogwarts' least popular Headmaster, while Sirius himself had been one of its most popular students, yet the opposite was near true for himself and his own great-great-grandfather.

He ducked his head as he folded his body into the fireplace, throwing a handful of Floo powder down, ordered "Saint Mungo's!" and spun off in a whirlwind of green.

The gasping as he became visible warned him at the same time it amused him. Then he heard a growling voice threaten, "Aw, putta sock innit. You want him, yer gonna havta go through me first!"

He turned, eyebrow raised, to his rather unexpected defender. "Alastor. What a surprise. I never thought I would live to see the day when you would defend me."

The old ex-Auror, called out of retirement for the battle, glared at him and shrugged. "I saw whatcha did..."

He nodded gracefully. "Thank you. I wonder if you may be of some assistance to me this evening?"

"Depends on what it is. What do you want?"

He held out the papers in his hand. "As I am sure you are aware, young Mister Potter has, in the absence of anyone equally or more qualified... or trustworthy... seen fit to champion me for the position of Deputy Headmaster. His voice, as you can well imagine, carried quite a bit of weight with those in attendance. As such, I have temporarily assumed the position, until the board of governors can be contacted, and I believe it would be prudent to take an accurate accounting of the injured, dead and survivors. I am quite certain there are Muggle-borns among the injured and recently-deceased, and someone ought to inform their parents, as they are somewhat less likely to have heard about the battle itself than the pure-bloods and half-bloods."

Moody nodded, and took the register, looking it over. "This one's alive - he was discharged about twenty minutes ago," he said, pointing to the unmarked name of Ernie Macmillan, and turned the page. "But this one didn't make it," he said, pointing to Hannah Abbott's name. "There are a bunch of others here that I don't know. You might wanna walk the wards. With your newly acquired position of authority, you'll probably have better luck than I will. Besides, you know more of the students than I do."

"Quite possibly, Alastor, but all the same, I would prefer if you would be so kind as to accompany me. The majority of the portraits in the Headmistress' office were none too willing to cooperate with me; I imagine those capable of throwing hexes and curses at me will not hesitate to do so."

"Alright. You have a point."

"My great-great-grandfather told me the Headmistress is out of surgery now. Do you happen to know if she is awake? Perhaps I should get her approval before proceeding."

"I'm not sure. She wasn't a few minutes ago, but she may be now. We've gotta go that way anyway; we'll check when we get there. Why don't you continue with your job, and we'll see what the Healers say when we get to her. Anyone gives you any grief, you cleared it through me."

"Thank you very much."

They made their way slowly down the corridors, highlighting the names of the currently injured survivors, this time in a lurid pink. It was emotionally exhausting work, made much less pleasant by the fact that they knew they'd have to go to the basement to cross more names off in black, once they were done. About three-quarters of an hour had gone by when they reached Minerva McGonagall's room.

"Is Minerva awake?" Moody asked.

Turning slowly, the Healer began hesitantly. "Yes, she is, and she's been asking about...." She froze, a look of pure venom on her face. "HE ABSOLUTELY CANNOT GO IN THERE!" the Healer shrieked at Moody when she saw his companion.

"He's with me, and he can!" growled Moody, in a tone that brooked no opposition.

"My dear lady. Perhaps you would be more comfortable if I surrendered my wand to you?" he said silkily, proffering its handle to her, his palm facing upward.

"You don't need to do that," protested Moody.

"No... I do not. But I will not need it in that room, and I believe the Healers are emotionally overwrought enough. In any case, I trust you to protect me should I need it," he smirked. Moody scowled, but the Healer carefully took his wand, as if she thought it would burst into flame when she touched it.

"Thank you, dear lady," he said with sincerity, and turned to follow Moody into the private room.

"PROFESS...er...Headmas...er..." stuttered The Boy Who Lived, on his arrival.

He snorted. "Yes, Mister Potter?"

"SEVERUS!" chirped Minerva McGonagall, in a voice entirely too high. "I'm so glad to see you; I was afraid you'd been dragged off."

"No, Headmistress, although I do believe a couple of the Aurors would have preferred it. Mister Potter here, however, was adamant that they not, and nobody was likely to argue with either him or Mister Moody. Mister Potter also insisted I ascend to the position of Deputy Headmaster immediately. Nobody was in any position to argue with him at the time; as such, I have begun checking the rolls against the injured, survivors and deceased. As I told Alastor, someone will need to inform the parents of the Muggle-borns, rather soon. I can, however, desist this if you would prefer I not do so."

"No... no, Severus, you are right. How bad is it?" She sounded bone-weary.

"I have an incomplete accounting Headmistress; I would rather not discuss it until I have something closer to concrete."

The woman on the bed nodded sadly. "Very well."

"Who's gonna tell 'em?" Moody demanded.

"I beg your pardon?" Snape said, utterly confused.

"The Muggles. Who's gonna tell 'em, 'bout their dead and injured kids? You can't do it, Snape, you've gotta stay at the school."

"I'll do it," he heard Harry say. "I grew up a Muggle, I can find my way around."

"I'll help," whispered the red-eyed girl next to him.

Snape considered that for a moment. Most of the Muggle-borns that had been killed at the school were likely to have been students, and at some point, it would get back to the parents that the ones delivering the bad news were war heroes. Any news that reached the parents about himself was likely to primarily contain the fact that he'd been a Death Eater and had arrived with Voldemort's representatives, responsibilities to Hogwarts notwithstanding. It would be far more personal to send school-mates than a Ministry representative. He nodded. "Very well, Miss Granger, Mister Potter. If you could be so kind to meet me in the Headmistress' office in about an hour or two, I believe I will have a preliminary list for you."

"We should get started now, Prof...er..." Granger started, then stopped. She wasn't quite sure WHAT to call him. Under the circumstances, he felt more familiarity was in order.

"Although I am normally quite disinclined to behave in this manner, I remind you that my given name is Severus, and after the events of this past day, I believe you have both earned the right to call me by it."

"Right. Well. Er... anyway, we should get started now, because it's easier to get around London, and there are likely more of them in this area. You can send your Patronus to us to tell us where else to go, as you get the information. I'll write it all down," she said, whipping a quill and scroll out of her pocket as if to demonstrate the point. "Wait, sir... what is your Patronus?" She grabbed the register and started writing down names.

"I know what it is," Harry said, staring intently at Snape. "What I would like to know is... what was it when you were a student?"

Snape narrowed his eyes and looked at the boy shrewdly. "I beg your pardon?" he asked softly.

"Your Patronus... what was it when you were in school?"

"You just told Miss Granger you knew what my Patronus was, Mister Potter," he said, trying to sidestep the question. Granger, he noted, was oblivious to the entire conversation, busy scribbling names for their morbid task.

"I know what it is NOW. I want to know what it was before."

"A king cobra. Why do you ask?"

Harry nodded, and then said thoughtfully, "Yeah. I thought as much."

Granger, it turned out, had not been as entirely oblivious to the conversation as Snape had thought.

"Well, er... Severus," she said, whispering his name very rapidly, as if she expected her to hex him at the very thought "...we'll be looking out for your cobra then."

Harry turned to her and said "No, Hermione... not a cobra. A Phoenix."