Chapter 64

Wandering between the rows of shelves in the library, Harry looked around for a place to study without being gawped at or whispered about. He had a stack of books in his arms all about the process of animate conjuration, and a two-foot Transfiguration essay due in the morning.

Continuing to some of the rows further back, hoping they would be more deserted, Harry froze — sat in a darkened corner, completely alone, was Cassius Warrington. And he looked *awful*.

The seventh year's usually handsome face was pale and waxy, his brown hair hanging into his eyes like it was long overdue a cut. His robes hung loosely off his shoulders; he'd lost weight, this school year.

Carefully, Harry checked there was no one snooping around, then approached the Slytherin and put up a privacy ward to block them from view. Cassius jumped as the magic washed over him, looking up in alarm. "Oh. Potter. It's just you." His shoulders slumped again.

"Are you alright?"

A derisive snort escaped the Slytherin's lips. "Oh, I'm just fine," he replied, sarcasm dripping from his tone. "Positively *wonderful*."

Harry sat down warily. "Cassius," he started, and the boy's aloof Slytherin mask cracked just a fraction.

"I have NEWTs in four months," he said, voice hollow. "And after that I will go home, to my family, where my older brother and my uncles and both my cousins are all waiting for me to *join them* in the ranks of the Dark Lord's *loyal subjects*." His face twisted in disgust. "I know they won't let me use the Ministry as an excuse to keep that foul Mark off my arm. Hell, three of them work there themselves, and it's not been a problem for them." He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even further. "Somehow I have to pass these fucking exams knowing what's waiting for me when they're over. But even if I don't pass them I'll face the same fate, so what's the *fucking* point." He kicked the leg of the table, making it rattle.

"If I could kill him faster for you, I would," Harry remarked wryly. Cassius' eyes widened.

"I didn't— It isn't your fault, Harry," he insisted. "Even if the Dark Lord died tomorrow, that wouldn't stop my family being there. Being awful. Trying to trap me in their twisted net of dark magic." His lips quirked in a cold, bitter grin. "Best I can hope for is all of them getting sent to Azkaban when they fight in their Lord's army. Or killed. I'm not picky." The bravado faltered, and he sighed once more. "I just… the boys in my dorm are all legitimate supporters, and I can tell they're watching me. They know I used to hang out with all sorts