

The dark-skinned Slytherin's head snapped up. "Does that mean...?"

"Yup."

Neville groaned quietly. "Just when I thought I was rid of him," he said in despair. Harry chuckled.

"He's not all bad."

"You have to say that, you're dating his godson," Ginny retorted mutinously. "Well, have fun at your *lunch date*, boys." She kissed Neville, then shoved him to his feet.

Harry very much did not want to go, but he had promised Snape he would try and get on Slughorn's good side. So he pecked Draco on the lips, and the three of them left the safety and peace of their compartment, heading into the train corridor.

Harry had expected the staring. The whispering, the not-quiet-enough comments about his sanity or him going Dark or his supposed feud with Dumbledore.

He had not expected the giggles.

"Looks like you've still got fangirls, mate," Neville teased as a group of fourth year Gryffindor girls giggled and fluttered their lashes at him.

"Hello, Harry," one girl said boldly, her friends giggling even harder. "I'm Romilda Vane. You should come sit with us."

"Sorry, places to be," Harry replied breezily, hurrying past the compartment. He glared at Blaise and Neville when they snickered.

They weren't the only ones in Slughorn's compartment when they reached it; Marcus Belby from the Slytherin quidditch team was also there, as well as — much to Harry's dismay — Cormac McLaggen. Perhaps he was about to hear some of the bragging about Tiberius Ogden that Vicky had complained about.

"Ah, Harry, my boy!" Slughorn greeted jovially, as if they were old friends. He was a portly man, mostly bald and flushed in the cheeks, though surprisingly sprightly considering how old he must be to have taught Tom Riddle. But wizards aged differently, Harry supposed. "Delighted to finally meet you, I've heard so much about you!" He shook Harry's hand enthusiastically. "Come in, come in. Ah, and you must be Mr Zabini — you look just like your mother — and Mr Longbottom, of course! Glad you could all make it to my little party!"

The only one who looked even remotely happy to be there was McLaggen, which did not bode well. Harry shuffled in, taking a seat between Blaise and Neville. It seemed Slughorn had come prepared; there was a small buffet lunch laid out, and the new professor urged them all to take plates and napkins. "Please, help yourselves! I don't know if you know these fine gentlemen joining us—" Slughorn introduced Belby and McLaggen, neither of whom was particularly impressed by Harry or his friends.