

Harry picked at the food while Slughorn continued his conversation with Belby; though it ended quite abruptly when Belby confessed he didn't have much contact with his apparently famous uncle. There was one person who likely wouldn't be getting an invite to the next gathering.

If only Harry could be so lucky.

McLaggen was happy to brag about some hunting trip he'd taken with his Uncle Tiberius, though it went south soon after he mentioned that Rufus Scrimgeour had also been on the trip. An awkward silence followed, until Slughorn cleared his throat.

"Well, then. You, my lad, need no introduction!" he announced as he turned to Harry, chuckling to himself. "The Chosen One, they're calling you now. Well, some of the time, at least. Seems the *Prophet* can't quite make their minds up about you!"

Harry gave a false smile, stabbing a little too hard at a piece of pheasant. "Of course, the *Prophet* has been known to print mistakes in the past," Slughorn continued. "But after what you and your little friends got up to at the Ministry, well—you just have to see how quiet they kept that to know there's a real story behind it!" He looked hopeful, like Harry might tell him that story. Harry cleared his throat.

"We stopped the Ministry getting taken. It's just a shame they tried again," he said, watching Slughorn's smile falter.

"Yes, yes. Terrible business, truly terrible. But the rest of the stories about you; so sensationalised! Truly, I do wonder about them sometimes. But I asked Albus about you, of course, when I realised I'd be teaching you! Very fond of you, the headmaster — he believes with the right guiding hand you'll go very far indeed!"

Harry gritted his teeth, still smiling. Dumbledore had said that, had he? Well, he was mistaken if he thought Harry would ever let him *or* Slughorn be that *guiding hand*.

Luckily, Slughorn seemed to realise he wasn't going to get much out of Harry, then; he moved on to Blaise, asking about the Italian boy's mother with keen eyes.

It was an excruciating way to spend an afternoon, made only slightly better by Blaise's quiet snarky commentary whenever Slughorn wasn't paying attention. Harry had almost cursed the man when he'd started pestering Neville about his parents, despite how clearly uncomfortable the blond boy was with the subject. At last, when the setting sun began to stream through the train windows, Slughorn blinked owlishly.

"Goodness me, look at the time! You had all better go change into your robes!" He ushered them out with a genial smile, promising to lend McLaggen a book and assuring Harry and Blaise that his office door was open to them any time. It seemed Harry had passed the first test — and Neville had not, which seemed just fine by him if the look of relief on his face was anything to go by.

"Thank Merlin I'm not doing Potions anymore," Neville remarked, and Harry groaned quietly.