

But they were all trying their best to get into the holiday spirit. Especially for the younger years, who knew enough to be scared but not enough to properly understand why. The castle was decorated as cheerfully as ever, and Slughorn was pleased to assure everyone that his party would bring just the jolt of festive cheer they all needed.

“It’ll be a bit quieter than I had hoped, of course,” he added apologetically during one Potions class. “I originally wanted to invite some friends of mine from outside the castle — ex-students, you know, who have an interest in helping the next generation find their feet — but of course, with safety concerns being what they are, that hasn’t been possible. But not to worry! I’m sure we’ll all still have a smashing time!”

Harry wasn’t so sure about that, but he’d committed to the thing now. At least he was dragging Draco with him; he wouldn’t have to suffer alone.

It was quite impressive, how many people cared about who Harry was taking to the party, despite how few of them would be attending as well. He knew why, of course — he’d made it pretty clear that his date was a boyfriend, not just a friend the way he’d taken Susan to the Yule Ball — but it still baffled him to have so many people interested in his love life. People who just a few months ago had been hissing insults at him in the corridors, accusing him of going Dark.

There were dozens of eyes on him at dinner. As if he was going to reveal his secret now, an hour before the party, in front of the whole school. Harry kept his head down and focused on his meal, ignoring Ginny’s quiet cackling at his side.

“I can’t *wait* to see everyone’s faces,” she muttered, making him glare at her.

“Surely it won’t be that much of a shocker?” he remarked. Across the table, Lavender giggled.

“Sorry, Harry, but if it’s who I think it is, it will be,” she told him. He sighed.

“It’s probably exactly who you think it is,” he said mournfully, watching her eyes dart across to the Slytherin table. The brunette girl let out a quiet squeal of delight.

“God, that’s hot,” she said, then blushed. Far from being offended, Harry laughed.

“He is,” he agreed, well aware of how ridiculously attractive his boyfriend was.

“She meant both of you,” Ginny told him, elbowing him in the side. “And she’s right.” When Harry raised an eyebrow, she just winked. Lavender giggled again.

They headed up to Gryffindor Tower to go and get ready for the party, Harry loudly declaring in the common room that he was meeting his date at the party so there was no reason for people to linger.

Neville was Ginny’s date, so the two boys put on their dress robes together, ignoring Ron scowling at them as he did the same — Neville in a chocolate brown set that made his eyes look extremely bright, and Harry in deep purple robes that had been a present from Narcissa,