

Chapter 20

Harry should have known Ron and Hermione wouldn't stay oblivious forever.

Strolling into the common room after a quick meeting with Draco after dinner — one of their rare pre-curfew meetings — Harry was surprised to see Ron and Hermione sitting on the sofa by the fire. Hermione wasn't doing homework, which was a novelty in itself. "Where have you been?" she asked suspiciously. Harry shrugged.

"Library," he replied, his usual response to excuse his absences. Whether it was meeting with Draco or the other heirs — they'd started their own study group early, because it turned out there were quite a few intelligent people in the group, and between them they had just about every subject covered. Sullivan said his grades had never been better.

"No you weren't. I was in the library and I didn't see you there," Hermione argued. Harry bit back a sigh.

"It's a big library, Hermione. But I was there, and then I finished my Potions essay, so I went for a walk. If you must know." He sank down into the armchair, dropping his bag on the floor. "What does it matter where I was, anyway?"

"You're always disappearing on us these days, mate," Ron accused. "Feels like we barely see you anymore."

He wasn't wrong there, but Harry didn't feel entirely bad about it. There were so many parts of his life he just *couldn't* share with them, but a lot of them he just didn't want to. If he'd tried hard, he could have told them about his inter-house study group without saying a thing about them being heirs. Hermione was oblivious to all of that politics, and Ron actively hated anything that might give him something in common with Malfoy, so he wasn't knowledgeable enough to put the pieces together either. But Harry liked having people in his life that weren't them. Ron and Hermione wanted to know *everything*. He thought about his first two years of school, when they acted like it was a personal offence if he didn't share every secret with them, and he went with it because he didn't know how else friendship was supposed to go. Even now they were constantly asking him if he'd heard from Sirius, as if it was any of their business. Harry was just glad they didn't know anything about the dream he'd had in the summer.

And there was still that small voice in the back of his mind that said he couldn't trust them. The voice that said they were more loyal to Dumbledore than him. That voice had never been wrong yet.

"I just like having a little time to myself these days, is all."

"Hermione was wondering if you'd got a girlfriend you weren't telling us about," Ron teased, wiggling his eyebrows at Harry. The dark-haired boy went bright red.

"What— why would you say that? I don't have a girlfriend!" he spluttered. Ron laughed.