

India with her family. She spoke about places over there with confidence that she would one day be able to show Harry too, and his heart ached with longing.

The Educational Decree that Susan had written to him about seemed to be the only new one that had appeared over the holidays. Harry wondered how long it would take for the next one — surely Umbridge was running out of things to ban?

The day was surprisingly relaxed, right up until dinner, when Harry entered the Great Hall and immediately saw Umbridge glaring at him with that too-sweet smile on her face. He didn't react, heading straight for the Gryffindor table. Her ban of mixing houses at mealtimes was still in place, but all that meant by now was that students ate as quickly as possible and then went elsewhere to socialise.

Across the hall, Harry caught Blaise Zabini's intent stare. He nodded discreetly; he had got the message.

Sure enough, the Slytherin appeared at Harry's side when he was walking away from the Great Hall, and the pair surreptitiously ducked into an alcove, warding it.

"What's the problem?" Harry asked, concern colouring his tone.

"A lot of the neutral Slytherin families were approached over Christmas break. Some Ravenclaws, too," Blaise explained, voice low. "They aren't likely to be allowed to remain neutral for long."

Harry's stomach sank. "How many?"

"At least eight that I know of. Plus Theo — he's not neutral, but he needs an out." Then, Blaise's lips turned down. "I've got a few more in his boat, as well. Though not many are brave enough to come to me. Their parents have them pretty well locked down."

It made Harry's heart ache, to think of how many teenagers would end up with that foul brand on their arm just because they weren't in a position to say no. How many already had?

"Right. But no one needs it more urgently than summer?"

"I don't think so," Blaise assured.

"Good. I'm working on something right now. It should be ready in time." He hadn't heard back from Farlig yet, but he'd told the goblin to send future correspondence through Bill, so it would take a little longer to get a response. "Just... tell them to hold off for as long as they can."

The Slytherin smirked ruefully. "That's been the plan thus far." He reached out, clasp Harry's arm. "We appreciate this, Harry. Truly. No one wants to be in Dumbledore's debt for their own safety."

"They won't be in mine, either," Harry insisted. "Sanctuary is offered freely. As long as they don't intentionally bring Voldemort to the doors, they're welcome."