

“He wouldn’t take no for an answer. The only reason he let me go is that I’m underage.”

Uncaring that anyone could walk by them, Harry reached out and grabbed Draco’s hand, squeezing tight. “She’ll be okay,” he said, wishing he could promise that. Draco looked down at their interlocked fingers, then back up at Harry. “She’s been through this before. She knows how to blend in with a group like that. She’ll be fine.”

Slowly, Draco nodded.

There was the crack of a twig snapping, and a muffled cry that could only be Ron. Harry let go of Draco’s hand quickly, stepping back. “You alright there, Ron?” he called out.

“There you are, Harry! Yeah, fine, just tripped on a root. No sign of my wand.”

“With feet that big, I’m not surprised,” Draco drawled, his Ice Prince mask firmly back in place. It made something in Harry’s chest twist painfully.

“Malfoy,” Ron growled. “What are you doing here?”

Harry tried to stop the exchange descending into a brawl, taking Draco’s veiled warning and ushering Hermione deeper into the woods, urging Ron to leave Draco alone. “You don’t even have your wand, you can’t hex him,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but you could,” Ron retorted. “Merlin, Mum’s gonna be furious if I can’t find it.”

“I’m sure it’s back in the tent,” Hermione said, though she sounded doubtful.

They kept walking, keeping an eye out for the twins and Ginny, and almost lost Ron to three veela in the woods. When they reached a small clearing, Harry suggested they stop and wait.

That was where everything went wrong.

Soon, he found himself staring up in horror at the enormous skull and snake hovering in the sky; the Dark Mark, in all its glory. They barely managed to make it a few steps away before they were surrounded by Ministry wizards, ducking a barrage of stunning spells. Harry instinctively had his wand in his hand when he got to his feet, though there was no need; Mr Weasley was running through the crowd, yelling for the wizards to leave them alone.

What followed was the most disastrous attempt at an investigation Harry had had the misfortune to witness; in the back of his mind was a voice that sounded awfully like Snape, calling everyone dunderheads and imbeciles as the wizards proceeded to accuse three teenagers — one of whom was *Harry Potter* — of conjuring Voldemort’s sigil, followed by Mr Crouch’s house elf. Harry’s heart broke for the poor elf he’d seen in the top box earlier, watching her sob as her master dismissed her. Sirius had taught him about house elves when he’d asked about Ceri; they needed to be bonded to houses, or their magic would start to go wonky and make them sick. They’d die if they stayed free for too long. Harry wished he’d known that when he’d freed Dobby. Then again, he doubted whatever happened to a free elf could be any worse than working for Lucius Malfoy.