Chapter 48

As everyone began to make their way out of the Great Hall, the number of people trying to get a glimpse of *Harry Potter* increased — as did the number of people making snide remarks about his sanity. The one saving grace was that Hufflepuff House was mostly silent on the matter; they knew he and Cedric had been friends, and they (hopefully) knew that he wouldn't have lied about the older boy's death for attention.

"Come on, Harry. I know the password, let's get out of here," Neville urged, nudging him gently. "Don't listen to them. It's just because we're new back — once they settle in and remember they like you and the *Prophet*'s a bunch of crap, it'll be fine."

Harry wished he could have Neville's optimism, but he was no stranger to the school at large hating him. He just hoped he had enough friends spread throughout the houses to stop things getting too bad — and hoped that, regardless of what they thought about him and about Voldemort, the students would be offended by the very concept of the Ministry interfering at the school.

Ginny appeared at his side just as they reached the doors, and she was scowling. "Did you hear what that Umbridge woman was saying?" she hissed angrily, but Harry cut her off with a sharp look.

"Not here," he warned under his breath, tapping his ear and then looking at the crowd around them, hoping she got the picture; there were far too many people listening.

Her shoulders tensed, then she nodded sharply, and they were silent for the rest of the walk up to Gryffindor Tower. Neville gave the password — explaining delightedly how it was the name of a species of rare plant he'd gotten for his birthday, so he was sure to remember it — and Harry couldn't help the way his heart eased at the sight of the Gryffindor common room. His first real home.

Not many people had made it up thus far — the three of them had squeezed past the crowd and taken a few shortcuts, not wanting to be gawked at. "We can talk things over properly at the weekend," Harry said, keeping his voice low as he looked at Ginny. "Best to just observe for now."

She didn't look happy about it, but she nodded all the same. "I'm going to bed, then. Goodnight, boys." Seemingly without thinking, she leaned up on her toes and gave Neville a kiss on the cheek. When she pulled back, they were both blushing furiously, and Ginny disappeared with a squeak, practically sprinting to her dorm. Harry watched her go, then looked back at his dazed friend.

"It's been far too long a day to get into that," he decided, shaking his head and dragging Neville towards the stairs up to the boys' dorms.

"It's… complicated," Neville agreed, sounding wistful.