

“Maybe she’s starting to get sick of you,” Neville joked, and Harry managed a weak smile. He should be so lucky.

Ginny, being a fourth year with hardly a fraction of the homework the boys had, returned to the common room barely within curfew. She was smiling, and if Harry wasn’t mistaken there was a love bite on her neck. His stomach gave an uneasy twist when he looked at Neville.

“Better not let your brothers see that,” Harry warned her quietly, tapping his own neck pointedly. She flushed as scarlet as her hair.

“Shit. I told him— shit.” Her brown eyes flicked guiltily to Neville. “I’m gonna go.” She disappeared up to her dorm before either of them could say anything. Eventually, Neville sighed.

“It’s fine,” he said, though his voice was hollow. “She’d tell me if— if things have changed.”

Harry’s heart clenched in sympathy, and he squeezed Neville’s knee. “She’ll come around.” He hoped.

“Whatever.” Neville’s face shuttered, and he raised a privacy ward around them. “We had a study group meeting while you were in detention, by the way. I passed on your notes. You should see the stack Susan has — it’s almost as tall as she is!”

Harry listened intently as Neville relayed the events of the heirs meeting. “We’re going to lay low for now. There’s not much we can do yet, anyway. Even Cassius — his uncle won’t let him take the seat, even though he’s seventeen.” Harry grimaced; he’d only ever heard awful things about Lord Warrington.

“Is he, y’know…” Harry tapped his left forearm pointedly, and Neville shook his head.

“Not yet. After graduation, apparently. If he can’t get out of it by then.”

“I’ll think of a way.” Harry refused to see *any* of his friends forced to let that monster brand them. He knew from Snape how awful it was to have, and how much he regretted the decision. “How are the Slytherins?” The house as a whole had locked up tight, hardly even *looking* at anyone not wearing green and silver.

“Blaise is keeping an ear out for anyone looking to get out of the Dark,” Neville relayed. “The others, too, but I guess Blaise is the figurehead for it. I don’t know — there was a lot of Slytherin double-talk that I didn’t really understand, but Malfoy said they had the in-house stuff covered. We just know not to expect any of them at larger study groups.”

That was a shame, but it was inevitable. “Hopefully we can change things, for the younger years if not our own.”

This made Neville grin. “Parkinson said they’ve been telling the firsties that it’s a mark of Slytherin cunning to manipulate Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs into helping you with your homework,” he told Harry. “Might not be the greatest way to start friendships, but, well.”