

“It’s gotten worse, over the summer. I don’t know if it’s to do with whatever happened to his hand, or... he *really* doesn’t like me being friends with Slytherins. Even though none of my Slytherin friends are Death Eaters, or even have family who are Death Eaters.” Not now Theo’s dad was dead, anyway.

“I dunno what happened to his arm, to be honest with yer,” Hagrid said, frowning. “It could be... He’s a great man, Dumbledore. Done some great things in his life. But, well — still human, ain’t he? Still makes mistakes. Maybe he’ll come ‘round, once he realises you’re still the same old Harry as always.”

He sighed again, then forcibly brightened up. “An’ on the subject of you doin’ well in classes — an O, in Care! Made me so proud, you did!” He reached out with a grin, patting Harry on the shoulder with considerable force. Harry smiled back, ignoring the slight pain.

He didn’t have the same faith as Hagrid in Dumbledore’s ability to see the light, but that was fine. Harry wasn’t about to press the subject any further.

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Harry hoped he might be able to spend the evening with Draco, but clearly the universe was against him — before he could even reach dinner, he was accosted by Slughorn with an invite to an evening gathering, and Harry had no decent excuse to say no. So after eating dinner at the Hufflepuff table with a completely unsympathetic Susan, Harry headed up to Slughorn’s quarters, bracing himself for a long and tedious evening.

It was a much larger group than it had been on the train; obviously Slughorn had had time to get to know the students a little better, and choose his prime candidates.

Harry was surprised to see Ginny in the mix, wearing the dangerous sort of smile that meant she was two steps shy of hexing someone. That could have been because Cormac McLaggen seemed to be trying to chat her up. “Harry!” she exclaimed at the sight of him, relief plain on her face. “Good, I was hoping you’d be here tonight!”

McLaggen was clearly still sore about the quidditch decision, as he glared at Harry and disappeared quickly. “Oh, thank Merlin,” Ginny muttered. “He’s spent the last ten minutes telling me every quidditch match he’s ever played with his posh cousins, and how it’s an absolute disgrace that he didn’t make the team.”

“Wanker,” Harry replied, and Ginny snorted. “Why didn’t you go chat with Blaise?” The dark-skinned Slytherin was stood by the buffet table, staring coolly at anyone who dared approach.

“I was trying to, but Slughorn was talking to him up until a minute ago.” The pair of them sidled over to Blaise, and Harry quirked his lips in a rueful grin, reaching for a plate.

“He got you too, did he?”

“Seems to think I’d be willing to introduce him to my mother,” Blaise drawled. “Even if she were looking for husband number nine, I don’t think he’d like being chosen.”