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It was like the run-up to the Yule Ball, but worse.

As soon as word got out that Slughorn was having a party and that the invitees were allowed a plus one, suddenly Harry was fending people off all over the damned castle. The only bright spot was that this time it was mostly guys asking him — though a fair few bold girls gave it a shot, too. Some were guys he knew through the HA, or other Gryffindors, but some were total strangers. Every time, Harry apologetically told them he already had a date.

Unfortunately, because he and Draco wanted to keep things secret until the party just to have some modicum of peace, the entire school was eager to know *who* his mystery date was, and until someone could produce a name Harry was considered fair game. His friends were no help — they all knew the truth, but were far too amused by the whole situation, and had a habit of throwing random names into consideration just for fun.

Harry wished he could just ignore it all, but with Draco plotting the murder of every boy who even *thought* about asking Harry to the party, it was hard to avoid the subject even when they were alone. Not that they got many chances to be alone, lately; between classes and quidditch and HA and Harry's detentions with Snape, he and Draco hadn't had time for more than a quick hand-job in an empty classroom in weeks.

Harry was very much looking forward to the holidays.

Still, there was almost two months before that glorious freedom arrived. Almost two months of having to deal with people asking him out, or trying to wheedle the name of his mystery date out of him. Why had Slughorn announced the party so early? Perhaps to guarantee Harry couldn't find an excuse to get out of it — he had seemed awfully delighted when Harry had confirmed his attendance.

It did start to die down after the first couple of weeks, at least. People seemed to realise Harry wasn't just saying he already had a date just to let them down gently; only the truly persistent were still trying. And the rumours about Dumbledore soon became even more interesting than Harry, especially after Dumbledore lost his temper quite spectacularly at some seventh year Slytherins and forcibly checked them for Dark Marks.

So classes continued, and Harry did his best to keep on top of everything he had going on. It was a relief to know that the horcrux hunt was being put on the back-burner — Bill and his Gringotts team had agreed with Snape's theory, after they had apparently spent some time studying the results of the ritual Harry had undergone to estimate the power of the soul fragment in his scar, to give them an idea of just how shattered Voldemort's soul was. Six intentional horcruxes and one accidental one seemed to be the sensible answer for everyone involved. Harry just hoped they weren't being optimistic.

With the first quidditch match of the season drawing ever closer — naturally, against Slytherin, because Merlin forbid they have an easy start — Harry spent more and more time with his team out on the pitch, wanting to make sure they were as ready as he could get them. With so many new members this year, he knew he wasn't going to get the same level of beautiful cohesion he was used to out of the Gryffindor team, but he was damned well going